

“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”
 – George Gissing’s *Commonplace Book*.

Volume II, Number 2

April, 1966

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Gissing’s Tragic Thought

by Jack Zucker
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At his best moments George Gissing saw life as a set of irreconcilable antinomies, not as a well-ordered whole. But a consistent way of looking at man in relation to the universe lay behind his seemingly contradictory beliefs. Since it would be foolish to consider him an existentialist and meaningless to name him a pre-existentialist, it might be said, perhaps a bit over-simply, that he was a tragic pessimist whose conservatism was founded on frustrated utopianism.

Perhaps the truly important contradiction is not between Gissing’s ideas, but between his emotions and his intellect. Like many late nineteenth century thinkers, Gissing believed that Darwin’s formula for the evolution of species also applied to man and his social world, that life was a constant struggle and only the strongest survived. But like Marx he was aware of a discrepancy between his two strongest visions: the ideal world of brotherhood, the real world of strife. Unlike Marx, Gissing could never devise a system to reconcile his visions. He could not identify the strong with the good. In addition, he distrusted notions of progress, which he considered naïve in Dickens, and thought society to be a projection of the universe, whose law is constant friction. A true agnostic, he believed the universe to be indifferent to human desires. Gissing, Mr. Korg writes in his biography, felt that “the social order, with all the evils it produced, (was) the expression of a cosmic necessity, too powerful for human resources to resist.” Like Hardy Gissing felt that the indifference of the universe and the collective weight of circumstance made human beings mere pawns in the hands of giant forces. Gissing, however, does not stress the indifference of nature as scenery, but of nature as society, its extension in the world of men.

But Gissing could not live happily with the notion of an indifferent cosmic order. Some men invent purposes; Gissing could not. He was strong enough to resist belief, but not strong enough to bear the emotional implications of agnosticism. Because he loved idealism (though he knew no celestial sanction existed for it, that it did not even bring earthly happiness), he felt that the “order of the universe (was) intrinsically evil and that human idealism can do little to change that fact.” As Morley Roberts reports, Gissing was particularly fond of such phrases as “damn the nature of things” and “the native malignity of matter.”

In addition, Gissing believed in an almost strict determinism, and the belief did not make him happy. To Gissing “everything was circumstance,” writes Roberts; “for nine hundred ninety nine in one thousand circumstance was truly too much, as it had been for him.” When H. G. Wells wrote that Gissing had introduced a new structural concept into the English novel, “the grouping of characters and incidents, no longer about a lost will, a hidden murder, or a mislaid child, but about some social influence,” he might also have mentioned that such a structure was

not merely a result of Gissing's admiration of the continental novelists, but an expression of his prime insight, that of a monolithic society crushing men's aspirations in an almost systematic manner without reference to will. Hardy's vision is similar, but Hardy accepts necessity, however grimly. Gissing does not.

Gissing was also a rather strict environmentalist. Society and chance were the gods in his world, and were, perhaps, almost identical. But his environmentalism, unlike that of the socialists, tended to be pessimistic. Society might flaw man's nature, but it could not easily repair its own damage. Through Gissing, in commenting on Dickens' vulgar females, states that their condition is caused by lack of education, his real conviction is represented by the assertion that English faults are not to be overcome by a few years of popular education or even prosperity, that perhaps they are almost ineradicable. Given Gissing's hostile feelings toward such creatures, we can see that his own environmentalism must have been distressing to him. Professor Korg sees a contradiction between Gissing the liberal and Gissing the conservative. Gissing was neither; he was something else. Given his belief that social amelioration may not be efficacious or that it might move at so dull a pace as to be almost indiscernible, his position is philosophically, if not politically, clear. When Henry Ryecroft, an autobiographical character, states that war is inevitable because of man's nature, we sense the depth and consistency of Gissing's tragic pessimism. Though man has made society, he cannot change it until he changes himself, for society is simply a mirror of his own nature, and is even more resistant to change. Gissing's semi-autobiographical hero, Godwin Peak, expresses similar sentiments in relation to the lower classes; they are "dammed by the beastly conditions of their lives." This damnation is so intense that no amount of reform can remove, at least in one lifetime, the spiritual ugliness of the vulgar.

Originally a radical and utopian, and still one at heart, despite his pessimism, Gissing must then, in his novels, transfer his sympathy from those who are hopeless almost by definition to the sensitive and idealistic who are crushed by society. The most intense tragedy occurs in one of Gissing's novels when a member of the potentially elect is defeated by the same forces which doom the vulgar. Again and again, in *New Grub Street* the following refrain is repeated, most strongly by Marian, who has been defeated despite her sincerity and high hopes: "there's no such thing as deserving. Happiness or misery come to us by fate." The problem is, according to Gissing, that human beings cannot cheerfully accept the alien nature of the universe if they are to maintain their richest moral heritage. Roberts tell us that

The few beautiful flowers for (Gissing) were those who hated their surroundings and desired vainly to grow out of them. Such he pitied, hopeless though he believed their position, and vain though he knew their aspirations to be.... Almost every sympathetic character in all of his best books was for him like the starling in the cage of Sterne – the starling that cried, "I can't get out! I can't get out!"

Roberts' picture is consistent with the Gissing of the novels, a radical if pessimistic utopian who grimly weeps because the nature of reality will not support his dream: a world in which men no longer wish to hurt each other, in which they no longer need to wear armor.

Gissing's mournful attitude may not be tough-minded, and may, in its extremes, resemble self-pity; but there are few who have not at any time felt that the order of the universe did not

correspond to the moral order, that a profound gulf exists between the real and the ideal. Gissing is at once a romantic and a realist: he is a romantic because the nature of the empirical world cannot convince him to relinquish dreams not based on practical expectation; he is a realist because, at his best moments, he refuses to look away from the soiled and solid world, will not paint its stripes and scars even though they frustrate his deepest desires.

If Gissing is a subjective novelist, it is not that he, like Dickens, has other purposes than strict realism, but that his inner division colors his material. Though Gissing excuses Dickens because the older writer could not be aware of later strictures, he criticizes him for creating a wish-fulfillment dream in portraying the poor. Hostile critics might argue that Gissing's novels are reverse wish-fulfillment fantasies, evidence of a strong death wish in his temperament, that Gissing had a tendency to see the evil as the probable. They might quote his remark that a deeper moral is taught if the bad succeed, and mention Gissing's preference for Hogarth's view of reality. But the discussion is merely academic. Whether Dickens' or Hogarth's realism is the true one will never be decided. Suffice it to say that Hogarth's art exists as a particular *genre* of realism, and that Gissing, true to his own spirit, preferred it.

Gissing's most significant lapse can be seen in the analysis of *tone*. He can rarely be bravely ironic like Hardy or defiant like Beethoven. His irony is not so much grim as mournful. His awareness that idealism will not get its proper rewards is consistent philosophically and acceptable artistically; his contention that modern commercialism makes that event more likely is echoed by the most distinguished modern writers. But Gissing feels so deeply for his defeated idealists, identifies himself so closely at times, that he occasionally falls into the disturbing tone of self-vindication. In *New Grub Street* he must at one point break the consistency of his point-of-view in order to defend Reardon and Biffen against the presumably materialistic reader. He must lash out at Jasper Milvain with excess irony even though he understands that he is not malevolent, but simply behaves as a cat does when confronted with a mouse. Gissing at his weakest cannot help wishing the cat would become humane, melancholy, and read Greek, even though he appreciates the absurdity involved.

Quite relevant here is Gissing's morality, which in part stems from his philosophy and in part from his humanitarian feelings. Mr. Korg summarizes an unpublished essay of Gissing's entitled "The Hope of Pessimism" in the following manner: "Gissing argues...that an awareness of...tragic facts can serve as the basis for a new conception of virtue. Men must realize 'the pathos of the human lot', must face each other with 'compassion,' must make mutual sympathy a duty. 'We are shipmates tossed on the ocean of eternity,' he says, 'and one fate awaits us all.'" To Gissing the tragic hero best embodies these ideas and reflects Gissing's favorite virtue, nobility. Though Wells, commenting on the "curious frequency of (the) word 'noble' throughout all (Gissing's) works," finds that nobility is merely the "hopeless ideal of scholarly refinement," in Gissing nobility is that quality of mind which motivates the individual toward fraternity *because* of the agnostic dilemma. Though Marian Yule, for instance, has been

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exposed painfully, in both her father and her lover, to selfishness and naked need, she maintains her personal dignity, her adherence to humane values. In Gissing at his worst, however, nobility is merely passiveness and retreat, the abnegation of the will to live. Ultimately, it leads in *The Whirlpool* and *Ryecroft* to a position akin to traditional English rural conservatism, though different in source: but the conservatism of Gissing is not that of the individual who would keep an established order that is beneficial to him, but that of the disillusioned radical who realizes that dreams will not come to fruition. Typically, Gissing does not love the country for itself, as witnessed by the weakness of the Wordsworthian passages in *Ryecroft*, but for its removal from the city, the dynamo center of modern competitiveness, the principal cause of the ignoble.

Our Italian Journey

Part I

by Hélène Coustillas

Italy began for us, early in the morning of August 17th, at the Stazione Porta Garibaldi, in Milan, where the train “auto-couchettes” had brought us from Paris. Shortly after our arrival, we had collected our car and started looking for the “autostrada del Sole,” through the busy streets packed with cars, buses and trams, lined with tall, balconied houses along the tree-planted corsos and flowered “Piazze.” Once on the autostrada we drove smoothly on through, or rather past—since the auto-strada by-passes all towns— Piacenza, Parma, Reggio nell’Emilia, Modena, to Bologna, through the rich plain of the Po. For miles we went past huge green meadows, squarely planted with the famous Lombardy poplars. Indian corn fields, orchards, with large farms in their midst and numerous outbuildings. The wide bed of the Po was mainly sand and a mere trickle in the middle. From Bologna to Florence, the landscape changed. We were crossing the Apennines through numberless tunnels and over wide-arched bridges. The fields were smaller, reaching as far up the slopes as possible, and gray and yellow had replaced the bright green of Lombardy. We couldn’t see Florence from the autostrada, which we left about there for Siena. 70 km of winding, narrow, dusty road through yellow hills planted with olives and vines took us through Poggibonsi to Siena where we arrived, with rain, at the beginning of the afternoon. We wandered the whole evening round the marvellous mediæval town, with its narrow, tortuous, pavement-less streets, its old houses, palaces and churches, spires and towers of all sizes and heights, St. Catherine’s house, the shell-shaped, pigeon-haunted Piazza del Campo, all of the well-known ochre colour, except for the Duomo, zebra-like, all striped black and white marble. We found the two houses where G. had lived, one in the Via Sapienza (18, via delle Belle Arti in his day—the Istituto delle Belle Arti is nearly opposite) and at 8 Via Franciosa, and on this, our first day in Italy, going into a library near the Piazza del Campo we found the first edition of the Italian translation of *By The Ionian Sea*. The very thing to start us on our pilgrimage!

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Next morning we left for Castellammare di Stabia, 30 km further on from Naples. Unfortunately it rained steadily the best part of the way. From Siena to Rome we missed almost all of the landscape, and saw nothing of Rome, lost in the rain and haze, from the autostrada which goes round past it. We caught sight of Monte Cassino on its height and decided we would try and visit it on the way back. The weather improved slightly as we neared Naples, but as we crossed the crowded and often slummy towns of Portici, Ercolano, Torre del Greco, Torro Annunziata, we were getting nervous, wondering whether our choice of Castellammare for a week’s stay had been a wise one. These towns are the industrial suburbs of Naples, and the foul smell from their works is added to the general dirt and slovenliness of houses, streets, and people (mainly children and women, who most often go bare-footed). However, our hotel, at the end of a small Promenade, right by the sea, with the waves washing sand ceaselessly with a tremendous noise, under our balcony, proved quite respectable. The bay stretched to the right towards Naples, and Vesuvius in the background, and to the left towards Sorrento. In front was Capri, but we rarely could see it from our room either because of the bad weather, or the haze. On the beach below, we could watch bare-legged and bare-chested fishermen hauling in their nets, looking much the same as those G. used to watch years ago. And in the evening the lights that dotted the shore showed off the shape of the bay in a very attractive way.

Our first visit was to Sorrento and Amalfi; from Castellammare to Sorrento, and even more so from Sorrento to Amalfi, the mountains fall directly into the sea, and the road, all hairpin twists, is most beautiful. Whether you look towards the sea, or towards the land with its small or large towns clinging to the rock in brightly coloured clusters of houses, with lemon and orange groves about them, and vines and olives on dangerously sited terraces, cicadas chirping away in their branches, everywhere light, colours and shapes blend to provide the most pleasant sight. We stopped at Sorrento to eat our mid-day grapes and peaches, wandering through peaceful streets, between villas and gardens, and from the terrace of a public garden, looked down, yards below, to the wooden jetty and cabins (the Lido) reached by many steps, at the foot or the cliff, which act as beach here as in various other places. We then went on to Massa Lubrense, and enquired about the Villa Cozzolino, hoping to find some trace of Shortridge. But at the Villa identified by that name, in a large garden overhanging the sea, the young woman we roused from her siesta knew nothing whatever about Shortridge or his family. Of course our knowledge of Italian amounts to very little, and even when we summoned French, English and Spanish to help us out, we often had an awful time trying to make ourselves understood. And even wonderful southern signs and gesticulations don't go very far when you are looking up places where foreign, and forgotten, people used to live over sixty years ago. Then on again, through Positano, to Amalfi, along a quite crazy and dangerous road, stopping every so often to look at the marvelous views. Amalfi is really wonderful in its setting of quaintly shaped mountains, with its tiny harbour where graceful yachts ride at anchor by fishermen's boats, and its green and yellow tiled Cathedral. Unfortunately, a violent storm shortened our visit of the town, and spoiled the rest of our excursion. We had to give up going any further, and went back to Castellammare through driving rain, under a pitch-black sky.

To be continued in the next number—

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Gissing References

Mr. James E. Grabitz, of Burlington, New Jersey, has compiled the following list of books in his library which contain allusions to Gissing.

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In addition, the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library and the *Bulletin* of the library, which have special interests in Gissing material, have been on our mailing list from the first issue. It is therefore likely that back numbers of the *Newsletter* may be consulted there.

Gissing and Butler Clarke

by Pierre Coustillas.

At the turn of the century there still used to be in Saint-Jean-de-Luz as in Pau, in the lower Pyrenees, an English colony of some importance. It mainly consisted of invalids to whom the climate of the place had been recommended for its beneficent effect on the lungs. Though on the whole he dodged rather than sought acquaintanceship with his fellow-countrymen (he had good reasons to do so), Gissing was soon in the public eye when he settled with Gabrielle and her mother in the suburb of the seaside town. Indeed, even at Arcachon – his previous stage in his pathetic quest for a suitable climate – local newspapermen had tracked him down. *L'Avenir*, in the number for December 15, 1901, had hailed his arrival at the Villa Souvenir in a flattering paragraph which mentioned his contributions to two important Paris journals, the *Revue de Paris* and the *Journal des Débats*. On Christmas Eve as he came from a walk he had found on his table a “magnificent bouquet of roses and white lilac,” a present from Charles N. and Alice Muriel Williamson, the authors of a series of novels relating their trips in an automobile.

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Among the English people with whom Gissing became acquainted in Saint-Jean-de-Luz was one Henry Butler Clarke, who, with the possible exception of Stuart Menteth, the geologist, was perhaps the person who was closer to him during his stay at Ciboure. Little enough is known about him. Born at Marchinton, Staffordshire, on November 9, 1863, he was consequently Gissing's junior by six years. He had been educated at various schools at Whorlton, near Rokeby and at Richmond, Yorkshire, and finally at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, where his father was British chaplain for a couple of years in the early 1880's. Henry had had to leave England because of his delicate health. Thus it was that, living on the Spanish border, he had a lasting interest in Spanish history and literature. From 1890 to 1892 he was Taylorian teacher of Spanish at Oxford and in 1894 was elected to a fellowship at St. John's College.

From then on he usually resided for a term every year in college and spent the rest of his time at Saint-Jean-de-Luz where he had had a house built in 1891. When Gissing came to know him in 1902, he had published *A Spanish Grammar*, *A History of Spanish Literature* and a

historical study of the Cid Campeador. His intellectual attainments also included a thorough knowledge of Arabic.

It was doubtless through his personal influence that Gissing started learning Spanish at the end of his life and thus gratified his old wish to read *Don Quixote* in the original. They soon became friends; Clarke, who invited Gissing to use his personal library as his own, led a lonely life likely to please the author of the *Ryecroft Papers*. Besides, according to William Hutton, he was strikingly handsome and had remarkable personal charm, a thing which must have mattered to Gissing who had so often been disappointed in the physical appearance of his literary acquaintances.

The present letter – the property of Mme Le Mallier to whom I am indebted for kind permission to publish – shows that Gissing consulted him on various material details he needed to know for his historical novel *Veranilda* – in particular, the colour of monks' vestments at the time of Theodoric. It testifies to his praiseworthy concern for accuracy as well as it reveals the degree of friendship extant between the two men. The Mr. Webster twice referred to at whose house Clarke was staying at Sare was Wentworth Webster, the Basque scholar. As for the date, November 1903 seems highly probable.

Sare Wednesday

My dear Gissing,

S. Benedicti— Opera. Migne 1851. column 445. Tertia Patrum Regula ad Monachos. III. Vestimenta vero fratribus necessaria ita abbas omnibus ordinare debet, quae monachos deceant; non diversis coloribus tincta, exceptis cucullis, quae comparantur, si fuerint nigrae, uti eas debere censemus.

It seems to me corrupt but the *Observatio Critica* prefaced says “*Denique novitatem sapit praescriptus niger cuculli color, cum ante saeculum septimum, imo tardius, vix reperiri possit aliquis determinatus color monachis designatus fuisse.*”

With regard to the Arians, their name comes first in the list of those excluded from right of bequeathing and inheriting.

I am not able to find certain information as to the difference of their ritual from that of the Catholics. They certainly had separate churches which seems to imply differences. Webster says that their doxologies must have been distinct.

I fear now I shall not see you until after my return from England. I leave St. Jean de Luz about Dec. 15, and shall be absent two months.

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What of you? Does St. Jean Pied-de-Port continue to suit you? Is there any chance of seeing you nearer here? There is now a nice little house to let in the village; the smaller of the doctor's houses. I think Mrs. Gissing knows it. Please remember me very kindly to her and believe me.

Yours ever truly,
H. Butler Clarke.

P.S. — Webster sends all kind messages.

They were never to meet again. A fortnight after Butler Clarke's projected departure Gissing died at Ispoure. When Gabrielle left Saint-Jean-de-Luz, it was Clarke who saw to it that the tomb was made according to her wishes. On June 5, 1904, she wrote to Clara Collet: “I had a note from Mr. Butler Clarke saying that the grave is finished and the result very satisfactory indeed.” Shortly afterwards, he himself was taken ill and left for England. While he was

recuperating at Torquay his brain gave way and he shot himself on September 10 of the same year. He was buried in the local cemetery. Like Gissing's *Veranilda*, his *Modern Spain 1815-1898*, was issued posthumously, with a memoir.

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