

SCRITTURE D'OLTREMANICA

16

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## SCRITTURE D'OLTREMANICA

Questa collana di studi inglesi comprende sia saggi critici, sia edizioni critiche di testi in traduzione italiana, con o senza originale a fronte, preceduti da un'introduzione e corredate di un apparato di note. Si selezioneranno, nel primo caso, scrittori e scrittrici, opere e tematiche di carattere letterario che risultino di sicuro interesse culturale e di attualità; nel secondo caso, testi appartenenti a generi letterari diversi, composti in un ampio arco di tempo — dalla prima età moderna alla contemporaneità, ma con un'attenzione particolare ai secoli XIX e XX —, poco o affatto noti nel nostro Paese e per la prima volta tradotti in italiano. I curatori e/o gli autori sono docenti, ricercatori universitari, dottori di ricerca con specifiche competenze nelle aree entro cui si opererà la scelta dei testi e degli argomenti. Il titolo della collana intende indicare sia l'area geografico-culturale alla quale si riferiscono i lavori qui ospitati, sia la direzione dello sguardo dei loro autori: dall'Italia alla Gran Bretagna. I testi pubblicati all'interno della collana sono sottoposti a una procedura anonima di referaggio.

Questo volume è stato realizzato con il contributo del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne, Università degli Studi “G. d’Annunzio” di Chieti–Pescara e del Laboratoire CECILLE (EA 4074), Université de Lille 3.

# A World within the World

George Gissing's Vision of Art and Literature

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ISBN 978-88-255-1587-9

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1<sup>st</sup> edition: June 2018

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## Acknowledgements

The editors wish, first, to record their grateful thanks to Dr Nicky Losseff, for gracefully accepting to host the Fourth International George Gissing Conference at the University of York, 28–30 March 2011. We feel greatly indebted to her for her support, most unstintingly given, in organising the event. We are also grateful to Tony Petyt (The Gissing Trust, Wakefield) for his hospitality and generosity. Tony not only shared his thorough knowledge of Gissing's life with the conference delegates during the fascinating tour of Gissing's Wakefield he had organised, he also treated them to a unique experience — a memorable picnic in the house where the novelist was born, now the Gissing Museum.

We wish to express our deep gratitude, next, to CECILLE (EA 4074), the Research Centre of the University of Lille for the study of Foreign Languages and Cultures, for providing support for the conference and the publication of the conference proceedings, as well as to the Department of Languages, Literatures and Modern Cultures, University “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti–Pescara, for providing support for the present publication.

Other warm thanks are due to M.D. Allen (University of Wisconsin–Fox Valley), Pierre Coustillas (University of Lille), Constance Harsh (Colgate University), Simon J. James (Durham University) and Bouwe Postmus (University of Amsterdam) for kindly accepting to join the conference advisory committee. Further thanks are due to Malcolm Allen, whose input in the initial stages of the publication has been indispensable, and to Prof William Greenslade (University of the West of England,

Bristol), for his most kind support and guidance through part of the editing process.

We thank the museums and art galleries for image licences of the paintings reproduced here: the Russell–Cotes Art Gallery and Museum (Bournemouth, UK), the Tate (London), the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), and Musée d’Orsay (Paris). Our special thanks to Mrs. Heide Van Doren Betz for a courtesy reproduction of Domenico Tojetti’s *Elaine*.

Our next debt is to the many scholars from England, Canada, Japan, the United States, France and Italy who gave papers at the conference and have trusted us with their essays. For their enthusiasm and expertise, we are deeply grateful.

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*Paris and his Ongoing French Connections* (Peter Lang, 2015), and Stanley Makower's *Contribution to the 'Woman Composer Question': A Reading of The Mirror of Music* (1895), «New Directions», 33 (2015).



## Introduction\*

### The Place of the Artist in Gissing's Poetics

MARIA TERESA CHIALANT, EMANUELA ETTORRE  
CHRISTINE HUGUET\*\*

The essays collected in this volume began life as presentations given at an international George Gissing Conference, which convened in March 2011 at the University of York. The event alone, the fourth of its kind, would be evidence enough of the remarkable upsurge of academic interest in Gissing over the past six decades or so, were we to omit mentioning the mass of publications of and about the man and his work in the same period (which, as Pierre Coustillas correctly notes, «now surpasses in bulk the amount devoted to most other Victorian novelists, with the sole exceptions of Dickens and Hardy»<sup>1</sup>), or again the enviable vitality of the «Gissing Journal», formerly «Gissing Newsletter». The York Conference did not only serve to highlight the novelist's regained pre-eminence, it also made possible a better appreciation of the current state of Gissing studies and of the sheer variety of critical approaches his work seems to be attracting. The Conference topic — Gis-

\* The editors have used Merriam–Webster Dictionary online for hyphenization.

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1. P. COUSTILLAS, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing, Part I: 1857–1888*, Pickering & Chatto, London 2011, p. 1.

sing's Vision of Art and Literature — thus purposely called for multidisciplinary approaches and proposed to extend the focus to all aspects of Gissing as an artist, notably his engagement with late Victorian aesthetics.

The choice was a logical one, given the novelist's lifelong self-reflexive stance. If *New Grub Street* immediately comes to mind as Gissing's most famous experiment with the conventions of the *Künstlerroman*, fascinating portraits of the artist are to be found disseminated in the rest of the corpus. Gissing's fiction is full of internal metalanguage, constantly reaffirming tenets by which he is now remembered and reassessing contemporary literary orthodoxies. Many of his letters and personal writings similarly show him (re)inventing himself as a unique voice, raising interpretative interrogations upon the medium used by fellow writers (including his own brother Algernon, the would-be novelist upon whom he patiently lavished "professional" advice for the best part of his life), by contemporary artists and himself. To the critic, such comments scattered throughout Gissing's writing career have now become invaluable language wondering about language, providing fresh evidence that, with the storyteller, "consciousness" invariably becomes "conscientiousness"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the definition Gissing gave of himself as artist as early as 1883 forcefully illuminates his lifelong determination to offer more than enticing period-piece reading experiences:

I am by degrees getting a certain confidence in myself, & beginning to find my right place in the world. [...] My attitude henceforth is that of the artist pure & simple. The world is for me a collection of phenomena, which are to be studied & reproduced artistically. In the midst of the more serious complications of life, I find myself suddenly possessed with a great calm, withdrawn, as it were, from the immediate interests of the moment, & able to regard everything as a picture. I watch & observe myself just as much as others. The

2. G. GISSING, "To Rev. George Bainton", 30 Sept. 1888, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, vol. 3, Ohio University Press, Athens 1992, p. 251.

impulse to regard every juncture as a “situation” becomes stronger & stronger. In the midst of desperate misfortune I can pause to make note for future use, & the afflictions of others are to me materials for observation.<sup>3</sup>

Gissing the consummate artist awakening to the infinite potentialities of the world’s “phenomena” was also an avid reader, studious and concentrated<sup>4</sup>. His «prodigious appetite», Pierre Coustillas reminds us,

embraced not only books in English but in French, German, Italian and Spanish literature, which he could all read in the original, let alone the Russian works with which he became acquainted through French and German translations, and the same can be said of the Scandinavian plays and novels to which he had access thanks to the brave but not invariably brilliant efforts of a few pioneering linguists.<sup>5</sup>

As has been amply demonstrated by, notably, Pierre Coustillas and David Grylls, what further coloured the novelist’s self-fashioning was his astounding erudition in many fields. He was in particular — this is a remarkable idiosyncratic trait — a knowledgeable classicist<sup>6</sup>. The passionate student in him of so many disciplines including the languages and cultures of antiquity again and again addressed the gap (and indeed, “paradox”, as Grylls sees it) between the marked hopelessness of some of his scenarios and his own intimate belief in individual tenacity and will power. Arguably, *Workers in the Dawn* remains Gissing’s most striking record of indestructible, infinitely attractive ideals

3. Ivi, “To Algernon”, 18 July 1883, vol. 2 (1991), p. 146.

4. See notably his invaluable list of favourite novels, ivi, “To the Editor of *Pearsons’s Weekly*”, 28 Dec. 1893, vol. 5 (1994), pp. 169–70.

5. P. COUSTILLAS, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

6. See S.V. GAPP, *George Gissing, Classicist*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1936; F. SWINNERTON, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, Kennicat Press, Port Washington, N.Y. 1966 [third ed.], pp. 154–67; and, more recently, J. KORG, “Gissing and Ancient Rome”, *A Garland for Gissing*, ed. B. Postmus, Rodopi, Amsterdam–New York 2001, pp. 225–33.

in the very act of plaguing the hero with an acute awareness of nothingness, and then consigning him to Schopenhauerian “non-existence”.

Inevitably, the paradox of Gissing also fashions his self-definition both as realist, reform-minded novelist and as intellectual with the privilege of a real, solid culture<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps, it also accounts for his uneasy, dichotomous relation to beauty, both contemplated at a personal level and fictionalised. Indeed, in most of Gissing’s work there is a tension between a pragmatic, almost sociological urge and the expression of artistic leanings, of an inward turning — again, *Workers in the Dawn* with its memorable aestheticisation of Niagara Falls in the ending chapter provides early evidence of the novelist’s mystical striving for the beautiful and the sublime.

One begins to feel that, in a Gissing text, the contention which this split allegiance between “a realist-engagé poetics”<sup>8</sup> and the worship of art as escape from others foregrounds is over the place of mimesis itself. The storyteller’s poetics of the descriptive cannot be alone understood in terms of his reputed embeddedness in the culture of his day or of the earnestness with which he strove to achieve reality effects (as his working notes would abundantly prove), since Gissing saw himself primarily as a more detached devotee of art “pure & simple”. In a famous letter to his brother Algernon, he observed that the artist should «keep apart, & preserve [his] soul alive» because the natural environment of the artist is «the shade [where he]

7. On this, see A. POOLE, *Gissing in Context*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke 1975 (Poole underlines Carlyle’s influence on Gissing as regards the notion of “integrity”, that «plays such a central role in the life and work of Gissing and other late-Victorian writers», p. 105), and M. RYLE, “‘To show a man of letters’: Gissing, Cultural Authority and Literary Modernism”, *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed*, ed. M. Ryle and J. Bourne Taylor, Ashgate, Aldershot 2005, pp. 119–132.

8. L. VILLA, “Writing in the Dawn”, *Writing Otherness. The Pathways of George Gissing’s Imagination*, ed. C. Huguet, Equilibris, Haren (NB), The Netherlands 2010, p. 169. See also, on his realistic aesthetics in *Workers in the Dawn*, G. GISSING, “To Algernon”, 25 Jan. 1880, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, cit., vol. 1 (1990), pp. 235–36.

can make a world within the world»<sup>9</sup>. Thus, although Gissing was from the first especially designated as a novelist of slums and prostitution, in whose work one might confidently trust to find all the minutiae of life, recent criticism has made a point of foregrounding his nuanced, ambivalent use of familiar realist strategies in the representation of the boroughs east of London, upending, in particular, the commonly accepted notion that he was intimately acquainted with the criminal East End of Whitechapel slums<sup>10</sup>. What implicitly results from such reassessments of the Gissing corpus is the idea of a superimposition of an imagined, metaphorical topography of the city on a journalistic mapping of its meanders. Gissing thus emerges as a major practitioner of what theoreticians of realist discourse have recently analysed as forms of intermittent realism. Philippe Hamon, for instance, convincingly identifies two opposed, but possibly complementary, functions of the “realist attitude” — «a ‘horizontal’, encyclopaedic realism [...] striving for an exhaustive inventory of surfaces [...], and a ‘vertical’ realism which sees the real as hidden below the surface and needing to be decrypted in order to be brought to light»<sup>11</sup>.

9. Ivi, “To Algernon”, 22 Sept. 1888, vol. 3 (1992), pp. 349–50.

10. See in particular R. DENNIS (“George Gissing and the ‘Other’ East End”, *Writing Otherness. The Pathways of George Gissing’s Imagination*, cit., pp. 35–48); P. D’ERCOLE (“Alien Territories: Gissing’s Cartography of *The Nether World*”, ivi, pp. 49–58); L.D. MOORE (“Certainties and Contingencies: George Gissing and the Break-Up of the Centre”, ivi, pp. 255–66); L. VILLA, *op. cit.*, among others. For instance, Dennis has offered convincing evidence that, prior to the late 1880s, Gissing was uncomfortable aestheticising the squalid streets and rookeries marked in black and dark-blue on Charles Booth’s poverty maps of 1889 and 1899. It took him over a decade (in fact, until the 1895 revision of *The Unclassed*) to reroute several of the protagonists’ walks and relocate the action “down east”, although he had visited the East End as early as February 1883, while he was working on this novel.

11. «un réalisme ‘horizontal’ encyclopédique [...] qui vise à l’inventaire exhaustif des surfaces [...], et un réalisme ‘vertical’ qui pense que le réel est caché sous la surface, est à décrypter pour être mis à jour» (translation ours). “Entretien avec Philippe Hamon par Guillaume Bellon”, “Le Descriptif, ‘ce délaissé de l’impérialisme narratologique...”, «Recto/Verso» N° 7-Du Descriptif, Oct. 2011. <http://www.revuerectoverso.com/spip.php?article205>.

Gissing's fractured and unresolved artistic polarities are apprehended in two different ways in this volume. While some of the contributors explore aesthetic inheritances and anticipations, interrogate affinities and situate the novelist's fictional constructs within the broader context of Victorian cultural history, others address Gissing's taxonomy of the artist more directly. Always a particularly complex and ambivalent figure, Gissing's artist is the perturbing element in the midst of a community whose melioration he feels it his duty to encourage somehow, through his own art. However, even though Gissing wanted, like Ruskin, to believe in the redeeming, ennobling power of art, he felt increasingly that it «offered one transcendence only so long as one refrained from trying to influence others with it or convert others to it», Diana Maltz correctly notes<sup>12</sup>. As a consequence, Gissing's artist faces an absolute deadlock: because he cannot live unconcernedly, he shares the life of others vicariously, through art; because he cannot feel in any way undifferentiated from those whose plight his art mediates, he is condemned to permanent diffidence and self-interrogation. Spanning the corpus in order to examine Gissing's multifaceted absorption of non-verbal aesthetics into his fictional constructs, the present volume describes an aesthetic grammar both refusing to condone an ideal of depoliticised art and confronting the possibility of art for an intellectual elite — often a foreign one too, naively enough<sup>13</sup>.

In the last analysis, what the contributors to this volume variously evidence is Gissing's scrupulous, original artistry and increasingly subtle (self-)interrogations: on visual art, on music, on the purpose and purposelessness of fiction, on linguistic and extra-linguistic renderings of the mysterious beauty of

12. "Gissing as Thwarted Aesthete", *A Garland for Gissing*, cit., p. 212.

13. As in the following comment on «the superiority of the French over the English public as a whole. The French are instinctively artists; the mass of English understand nothing in literature save the matter», in G. GISSING, "To Algernon", 8 April 1888, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, cit., vol. 3 (1992), p. 199.

the world, on the “art of authorship” — topics all forcefully addressed in the personal writings (and sometimes lyrically so, in the late letters<sup>14</sup>).

Gissing’s relation to visual art is the main topic of the first three essays. Christine Huguet’s “Gissing and ‘Elaine’: Early Thoughts on the Mimetic” analyzes the writer’s first piece of journalism in America and sole contribution to art criticism, *Art Notes*. “*Elaine*” — *Rosenthal and Tojetti*, written a few weeks after he landed at Boston and published in the Boston weekly «Commonwealth» for 28 October 1876. In this article Gissing compares two paintings, by Tobias Rosenthal and Domenico Tojetti, exhibited at Brainard’s Gallery and bearing the same title *Elaine*, after Tennyson’s poem in the *Idylls of the King*. In looking at the links between the two sister arts, painting and writing, Gissing also stages himself as artist-to-be; interestingly, he does not only strive here for an insight into others’ creative minds, but also briefly meditates on his own imaginative power to re-create «those sweet legends of old times». Huguet discusses the reasons why the young Gissing lingers on some of the paintings’ visual details at the expense of others, and examines the future writer’s definition of mimesis and emerging aesthetic credo.

A focus on Gissing’s interest in Victorian painting is also at the centre of “The Visual World of Gissing’s *The Unclassed* (1884)” by Paul Delany, who identifies in the first edition text of that novel the influence of three visual schemes — physiognomy and criminology, the Pre-Raphaelite *femme fatale*, and the importance of visual mythology — which converged in Gissing’s early ideas about female beauty, the determinants of personal morality and social mythology. This convergence of different discourses is revealed by the representation of Ida Starr at the Café Royal, which conforms both to the Pre-Raphaelite

14. “The Art of Authorship” is a recently reprinted essay (G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, ed. P. Coustillas, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2015, pp. 126–27), originally a letter to Rev George Bainton, *op. cit.*

norm of beauty and practice of appropriating working-class girls as models and lovers. In the revised edition of 1895 Gissing largely removed the evidence of his commitment to these images and types, but when writing his text he was still immersed in Victorian iconography, before the more *fin-de-siècle* sensibility of subsequent work. Delany's reading of the 1884 *The Unclassed* is accompanied by some images of Pre-Raphaelite paintings which appear to have influenced Gissing in his views on the "fallen woman".

Richard Dennis, in "The Place of Art", explores the subject in *Workers in the Dawn* and *Isabel Clarendon*. Both novels feature art and artists, but the art is of different kinds and is experienced in different settings. Dennis considers "the place of art" in these texts in three distinct ways: the role it plays in the development of the plot, and its iconography we are expected to interpret; the places it depicts and the truthfulness of their representation, whether picturesque landscapes or gritty streetscapes; and the places where art is encountered, whether the public space of the shop window, in an art gallery or the pages of a magazine, or in the private space of the studio, or the imagination. Dennis shows how some passages from both novels seem to reproduce the scenes of *Saturday Night*, which the illustrator Frederick Barnard had exhibited in the 1876 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, and which most probably inspired the staging of George Sims's play, *The Lights o' London*, at the Princess's Theatre in the autumn of 1881 — both of which Gissing might have seen.

In contrast with the lively, vitalistic presence of art and artists in *Workers in the Dawn* and *Isabel Clarendon*, Emanuela Ettorre demonstrates, in "Beyond the Aesthetics of Existence: *The Nether World* and the Negation of Art", how one of Gissing's darker novels, *The Nether World*, features a very pessimistic view of the condition of aesthetically talented characters who are absorbed by the consumer society with which they are obliged to come to terms. By describing the figures of Sidney Kirkwood the jeweller and Bob Hewett the forger, Gissing shows

how an artist's ingenuity can either be converted into passive resignation or degenerate into a vulgar and punishable form of falsification. Ettorre maintains that the social context of the nether world negates much that is intrinsic or necessary to the work of the artist: the aspiration to solitude, the prospect of hope and the creative function of imagination. In the nether world, both Sidney and Bob evolve and become two unconscious mechanisms: their inventiveness is withered and they inevitably progress towards anonymity.

Pessimism is certainly a trait that characterizes some of Gissing's novels, and that has been unjustly attributed to his whole work, especially by a few hostile Victorian critics. In *The Hope of Pessimism: Philosophy and Fiction*, Roger Milbrandt proposes to balance the common view according to which the "novel of ideas" is typical of Gissing's fiction, by identifying the fictional elements of one of his most sustained and thoughtful pieces of discursive writing: *The Hope of Pessimism*. This early essay (written in 1882), which remained unpublished in Gissing's lifetime, examines what its author considers to be "the last stronghold" of philosophic optimism: the Religion of Humanity; it concludes with a rejection of this stronghold and an endorsement of Schopenhauerian pessimism. Milbrandt argues that, although the subject matter of this essay is philosophical, the hand of the novelist is always evident: Gissing transforms ideas into characters while shrewdly and almost imperceptively reconfiguring argumentation as narrative. It is by means of the rhetorical strategies of fiction, not through an analysis of the two world-views he considers, that Gissing valorizes his Schopenhauerian conclusion.

A quite different area of discourse is explored by Randy Jasmine in "The Land Beyond the City: The Natural World and the Feminine in the Work of George Gissing", which examines the seemingly tangential but often intensely revealing role that nature and the natural landscape play in much of Gissing's work, and notes an intriguing connection between his conception of nature and his often idealized conception of certain types of women.

Throughout his vast body of work, Gissing uses the natural landscape purposefully to contrast it with, but also to intensify, the oppressively narrow views of the world invariably held by the urban denizens who populate his novels. In doing so, he often utilizes predictable patterns that connect these natural landscapes with idealized women. By giving examples from *The Nether World*, *Born in Exile* and *New Grub Street*, Jasmine contends that even the most realistic and literal of Gissing's protagonists find themselves confusing the natural and the feminine, the real and the romanticized, when they depart from the confines of the city and make for the country.

The feminine is also at the centre of Akemi Yoshida's "Women Singers in Gissing's Novels: Thyrza Trent and Beatrice Redwing", which looks at a further declination of art in Gissing's fiction. This essay focuses on the comparative analysis of two musically talented female protagonists in his novels, the eponymous heroine of *Thyrza* and Beatrice Redwing in *A Life's Morning*, and attempts to explore the sources of literary inspiration of these novels. The two characters are shown to be very different from each other as regards their musical talent. Beatrice's exceptional musical gift is associated with her noble nature: her genius is a civilizing power which improves herself and others through aesthetic experience. Thyrza, by contrast, seems to show more revolutionary aspects of an artist of genius, which might question and subvert the existing moral values and social system, and possibly rank her among *fin-de-siècle* "New Women". In the second part of her essay, Yoshida traces possible influences on these characters in George Sand's *Consuelo* and George Meredith's *Sandra Belloni*.

The last three essays of the volume also look at Gissing's connections with other contemporary writers: Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens and Alfred Tennyson, one of his favourite poets, as already shown in Huguet's essay.

Constance Harsh, in "'Entirely to My Taste': Gissing's Reception of Charlotte Brontë", offers some observations about

the ways in which Brontë at once did and did not serve as a useful model for Gissing's own fictional practice. She focuses on a few specific artistic achievements for which Gissing expressed great admiration: the "Vashti" chapter of *Villette* which clearly had some influence on the writing of *The Nether World*, and the characterization of Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* which provides a useful point of comparison with Thyrsa Trent. There are real affinities between these writers, but no simple equivalences. Gissing had a strong fellow-feeling for the sensibility that Brontë revealed in both life and art: it is a fellow-feeling that transcends the boundary of gender; it may be part of the remarkable sympathy with women of which he is capable in so many of his works. Harsh suggests that this shared sensibility may be clearly seen in Gissing's *Isabel Clarendon*, in which there are echoes of *Jane Eyre* as regards the story of Ada Warren, the unattractive orphan foisted on a reluctant widow by her late husband's order.

Tennyson's influence on Gissing is explored by Rebecca Hutcheon in "The Dangers of the Palace of Art: The Irony of Retirement in Gissing's Tennysonian Allusions". From the several references in his letters and diary, the novelist can be seen to understand and value the Victorian poet on two levels: as well as espousing the picturesque language of his verse, Gissing's narratives also appear inspired by his themes and characterization. Many of his protagonists, like Tennysonian speakers, are alienated, artistic figures. Referring to the concept of intertextuality, Hutcheon argues that a distinctive and recurrent trope in Gissing's characterization is a sense of looking at the world through the figurative lens of art, and describing it through quotations from literature. The numerous allusions to Tennyson in *Workers in the Dawn*, *A Life's Morning*, *The Odd Women*, *In the Year of Jubilee* and *New Grub Street* reveal how Gissing's narratives, in part, derive their meanings by evoking this poet.

Gissing's engagement in literary criticism and his tribute to one of the greatest nineteenth-century writers are discussed

by Maria Teresa Chialant in “The Writer as Literary Critic: Gissing’s Monograph on Dickens”. This essay focuses on *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* with the aim to verify to what extent Gissing’s opinions on “the Inimitable” are consistent with his own writing practice, and to identify similarities and differences between the two authors through a reading of the late Victorian writer’s main critical contribution on his predecessor. She argues that, in this monograph, Gissing enters into a dialogue with Dickens at both a public and personal level. Well aware that the subject has already been vastly tackled, Chialant tries to add some further suggestions as regards Gissing’s ideas on the art of fiction in a crucial period of passage from classic Realism to Naturalism and beyond, gives examples from both authors’ novels, and draws the attention on their different treatment of such issues as “the untouched social strata”, the use of “sensation” in fiction and the relationship with the reading public.

A closing remark is required on the international character of this volume to which authors from six different countries have contributed: England, Canada, Japan, the United States, France and Italy. A circumstance which would have been appreciated by Gissing, who had strong, though different, connections with the last three (as well as with Greece) throughout his life.

# Gissing and “Elaine”

Early Thoughts on the Mimetic

CHRISTINE HUGUET\*

To Mrs. Heide Van Doren Betz,  
with grateful thanks

“*Elaine*” — *Rosenthal and Tojetti* is Gissing’s very first contribution to the American press, his first short story, *The Sins of the Fathers*, being accepted by the «Chicago Tribune» a few months later, in March 1877. In this short review, which also happens to be his sole “professional” contribution to art criticism, Gissing sets out to compare two paintings, by Tobias Edward Rosenthal and Domenico Tojetti, both exhibited in Boston, depicting the same subject and bearing the same title *Elaine* (after Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem in the *Idylls of the King*). This piece of juvenilia was published in the third page of the Boston weekly «Commonwealth» for 28 October 1876 — the year which marked the end of Gissing’s scholarly career, dramatically ruined by youthful folly. He was now staying at a boarding house, 71 Bartlett Street, Boston, where he had landed on 10 September, only three months and a half after getting his discharge from prison. As Pierre Coustillas correctly notes in his introduction to *An Art Exhibition in Boston* (2004), the handsome Tragara Press reprint of Gissing’s sole piece of art criticism, this text does not only bring further proof, if needed,

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of his “strong artistic leanings” from an early age, placing him, possibly, in the interesting position of “art critic manqué”, it also attests to his «extraordinary capacity for self-detachment in emotionally disturbing circumstances»<sup>1</sup>. If only for biographical reasons, then, this modest piece, barely over a thousand words long, deserves close critical attention. It is worth examining, too, for the light it sheds on Gissing’s receptiveness to the poetry of Tennyson as well as for the notion of artistic fidelity it unambiguously foregrounds — a point already cogently made by Coustillas<sup>2</sup>. However, the Gissing scholar may find further food for thought in this unique review of the Boston exhibition of 1876. Indeed, pondering over the twofold artistic perspective presented to the American public, the young Gissing seems eager to place the notion of interpretative discourse as ostensible object of his discussion. Positing Tennyson’s poetic interpretation of Elaine against Rosenthal’s and Tojetti’s visual renderings of the same figure, he clearly formulates his own “Ut Pictura Poesis”. The purpose of this essay is therefore to assess why Gissing zooms in on some of the paintings’ visual details at the expense of others and to examine the future writer’s definition of *mimesis* and emerging aesthetic credo. In looking at the links between the two sister arts, painting and writing, Gissing does not only strive for an insight into others’ creative minds, he also briefly meditates on his own imaginative power to re-create what he defines as «those sad, sweet legends of old times».

The events surrounding Gissing’s entanglement with the prostitute Nell Harrison — how he stole money for her, was caught red-handed, summarily expelled from College, sent to prison and packed off to America to make a new life — make a compelling tale, which has long been familiar to Gissing readers and critics. Given such spectacular, disastrous biograph-

1. P. COUSTILLAS, “Introduction”, *An Art Exhibition in Boston*, privately printed, Tragara Press, Edinburgh 2004, pp. 5, 8. For a recent reprint of Gissing’s essay, see G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, ed. and intr. P. Coustillas, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2015, pp. 57–61.

2. ID., “Introduction”, cit., pp. 7–8.

ical data, and although «he knew that, once arrived in Boston, he would be welcomed and assisted materially by those mentors whom his English well-wishers had contacted in recent weeks»<sup>3</sup> and managed to make the best of his new life with surprising alacrity, it is impossible not to perceive a distinct note of relief in the opening words of this first American publication of his: «The exhibition in this city of Tojetti's picture of "Elaine" suggests a comparison with the work of Rosenthal, on the same subject, which we had the pleasure of seeing not long ago»<sup>4</sup>.

Making this relatively authoritative entry into the Boston journalistic circles must have been a real boost to the youthful offender's deflated, badly bruised ego, one easily imagines. The carefully poised introduction posits a recognisable reading contract between a Boston professional journalist and the fellow citizens he is routinely addressing. In the concluding paragraph of the review the authorial "we" is mouthed by the young exile with the same subdued authority and, we guess again, soothing relish:

Though we are thus induced to point out the superiority of Rosenthal in some points we do not wish for a moment to deny the merits of Tojetti's picture, which are many and obvious. It is well worth seeing, and we should certainly advise all to pay a visit to Brainard's Gallery.

Looking at the few letters from America that have survived, one notes that the young immigrant, who was out for employment, was determined to make his mark as a freelance journalist and a writer<sup>5</sup>. What did it matter that the «Atlantic

3. P. COUSTILLAS, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing, Part I: 1857–1888*, Pickering & Chatto, London 2011, p. 100.

4. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 59.

5. See notably G. GISSING, "To William", 5 Oct. 1876, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 1, p. 67.

Monthly» had rejected his work on German poetry<sup>6</sup>? For the first time Gissing's literary fluency was becoming marketable, and it seemed that he had something to "teach" the public even before he took a post as substitute teacher at Waltham High School, at the end of the year. Understandably, the young man kept a copy of the weekly in which his reclaiming, if anonymous, piece modestly featured, in very small print in the "Art Notes" section (middle column). He penned "G.R.G." in ink at the end of a proof before proudly sending it to his mother as evidence that he was, as he told his brother Algernon a couple of weeks later, «doing a little writing for newspapers & periodicals»<sup>7</sup>.

Gissing's only piece of art criticism is devised as a comparative analysis of the way two artists chose to convey the scene and atmosphere so powerfully evoked by Tennyson in *Elaine*. The poem, first published in 1859, was extremely popular and had been reprinted as *Lancelot and Elaine* in 1870, six years before Gissing saw the paintings. The passage illustrated by Rosenthal and Tojetti is the penultimate iconic scene of the beginning of the death voyage: the "lily maid of Astolat" has died of unrequited love for Lancelot; anxious to go "in state to court" to "speak for [her] own self"<sup>8</sup>, she has arranged to be carried to a barge after her death. She is steered up the river to Camelot by a dumb old servitor; clutched in her lifeless hand, a letter for Lancelot. Tobias ("Toby") Edward Rosenthal's version of this highly emotional scene is an oil on canvas which can now be seen at the Art Institute of Chicago<sup>9</sup>. Being commissioned

6. «[O]f his other writings of the period — the translation of Heine's poems and 'Sketches of Life in a Manufacturing Town,' the latter of which he sent tentatively 'to one of our Magazines' — none achieved publication, and the manuscripts have been lost». P. COUSTILLAS, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing, Part I*, cit., p. 107.

7. G. GISSING, "To Algernon", 13 Nov. 1876, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 1, p. 52. Proofs initialled "G. R. G." are to be seen in the Beinecke Library: see P. COUSTILLAS, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing, Part I*, cit., p. 337, n. 10.

8. ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON, *Elaine, The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, Wordsworth Editions, Ware 1994, p. 519.

9. See <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/72320>

by one Turbicio (or Tibercio) Parrott, a wealthy San Francisco merchant and art patron, as early as 1871, it was executed in 1874 and in the autumn of that same year, exhibited in Munich where Rosenthal, of German origin, had returned, enrolling in the Royal Academy<sup>10</sup>. However, it was not exhibited in San Francisco before April 1875, having changed hands after bitter wrangling between the young American expatriate and Parrott over deadlines and costs brought their agreement to an end. Crown prince Friedrich Wilhelm tried in vain to purchase it back from its new owner, Kate Johnson, who arranged for the canvas to travel back to America. The prolonged public controversy that this dispute caused seems to have made *Elaine* Rosenthal's most popular picture in the late 1870s, even though he is more often cited today for his elaborate narrative pictures with grand historical and mythological themes. The picture was then displayed at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, where it took the gold medal, before being sent on to Boston, where Gissing saw it shortly before viewing Tojetti's own image of Elaine. "The new Elaine", as Tojetti's painting was then being referred to in the Boston art circles, is a larger canvas (77 x 102 in., against 38 9/16 x 62 1/2 in. for the Rosenthal), now privately owned. Turbicio Parrott, who seems to have been particularly anxious to possess an image of the Tennyson idyll, approached the older artist, who taught at the San Francisco School of Design at the time — Domenico Tojetti was born in 1806 and died in 1892. The artist readily complied with Parrott's request; his painting was promptly executed and exhibited in San Francisco in July 1876, before following the same route to Boston's Brainard's Gallery that Rosenthal's painting had taken shortly before.

10. See [http://www.artic.edu/aic/visitor\\_info/selfguide/april07\\_guide](http://www.artic.edu/aic/visitor_info/selfguide/april07_guide). For more details on Rosenthal (1848–1917), see P. COUSTILLAS, "Introduction", *An Art Exhibition in Boston*, cit., pp. 6–7, and especially *California Art Research: Toby Rosenthal, Domenico Tojetti, Thaddeus Welch, Charles Dorman Robinson*, San Francisco, January 1937, vol. 3. Digitized by the Internet Archive with funding from San Francisco Public Library, 2010, <http://www.archive.org/details/californiaartreso3hail>

If Gissing's voice is to be reckoned with in what art historians now remember as the interesting fray, local and nationwide, which agitated American art circles over "the two Elaines", one should keep in mind that a large range of Elaine material was produced during the Victorian and Edwardian periods as a result of the "Arthurian Revival" of the best part of the nineteenth century. As a result, this unique Gissing link should perhaps not be overemphasized. Besides, he had always been an unconditional admirer of Tennyson, to him "the greatest of living poets"<sup>11</sup>. Some three and a half years after his review came out, he would go back to Tennyson, reading aloud Section 106 of *In Memoriam* to Nell in their Hanover Street lodgings, to welcome the New Year, 1888, in appropriate manner, «following [his] Father's immemorial practice»<sup>12</sup>.

Strictly considered as art criticism, "Elaine" — *Rosenthal and Tojetti* calls for a reassessment in terms of the degree of perceptiveness it reflects. There is no denying Gissing's intellectual precociousness: to read the two paintings comparatively, he adopts both a fragmented observation of details and a to-and-fro movement between the two images (one, a mental representation only) and the poet's words, very much in the manner which Philippe Hamon, in *Imageries: littérature et image au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, describes as the new modes of reading that were developed to address the increasing palette of images in the "oversemioticised" nineteenth

11. G. GISSING, "To Arthur Bowes", 21 Feb. 1874, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 1, p. 27. In the introduction to her study of Gissing's short stories and non-fiction, Barbara Rawlinson aptly attracts readers' attention to a much later, but similarly enthusiastic, statement: «Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson — these were to me as the names of household gods; I uttered them with reverence before two of the framed portraits upon our walls». G. GISSING, "Dickens in Memory", *Essays, Introductions and Reviews*, ed. P. Coustillas with an Afterword by A.S. Watts. *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, vol. 1, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2004. Quoted by Rawlinson as *The Immortal Dickens*, Cecil Palmer, London 1925, pp. 1–2, in B. RAWLINSON, *A Man of Many Parts. Gissing's Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, Rodopi, Amsterdam–New York 2006, p. 6.

12. G. GISSING, "To Algernon", 2 Jan. 1880, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 1, p. 229.

century<sup>13</sup>. The reviewer sounds quietly self-assured, and such unassuming confidence is all the more remarkable as Gissing did not have access to the two paintings at the same time. The demonstration visibly strives for clarity and the isotopy of the uncontroversial is omnipresent. Because the reviewer "cannot but think that" one painting succeeds better than the other, he feels "induced" to point out its superiority. The patiently accumulative rhetoric enables the viewer to reason the reader into an acceptance of his own conclusions, although he ostensibly steers away from all partisanship:

We cannot but think that Rosenthal succeeds better than Tojetti in the preservation of the idea. It is true that the artists have chosen rather different moments in the story, but, seeing that this very choice of situation is an indication of how far the painter is imbued with the spirit of the poet, we are justified in including this among our points of comparison. For two reasons, as it seems to us, Tojetti labours under a disadvantage [. . .].<sup>14</sup>

Gissing's preference is indeed "not far to seek", Coustillas rightly points out<sup>15</sup>. Typically, as shall be seen, Gissing favours Rosenthal, although, to be fair to the young reviewer, it is to be wondered how much elbow-room he would have had in the circumstances. The mundane compliments paid in the first lines to two «on the whole, admirable paintings», the oratorical precautions with which he surrounds his own intervention («opinions may differ with regard to the respective merits of the artists»<sup>16</sup>) seem to indicate that Gissing cautiously tried to maintain a safe distance between himself and the current controversy in which he had been invited to take part. Before judging Gissing the amateur art critic too harshly, we should remember, too, that he had then not seen much of the world and, especially, that he had no first-hand knowledge of contemporary art works to speak of.

13. P. HAMON, *Imageries: littérature et image au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Corti, Paris 2001.

14. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 59.

15. P. COUSTILLAS, "Introduction", *An Art Exhibition in Boston*, cit., p. 7.

16. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 59.

However, the main reason why Rosenthal “succeeds better than Tojetti”, according to Gissing, is that the paintings under consideration happen to be word-based images, and Gissing’s aim as literary expert is, quite ostensibly, to «confin[e] himself], in the first instance, to the words of the poet»<sup>17</sup>. His purpose, he repeatedly declares, is to enlighten viewers’ minds by considering «what impression is left on the mind of Tennyson’s exquisite description», by determining which of the two painters has best “kept up” and “preserved” the poet’s “idea” and whether any of the figures in the paintings are at variance with their literary prototypes. The yardstick against which each picture is to be measured is «how far [is] the painter [...] imbued with the spirit of the poet» and which of the two has a «truer perception»<sup>18</sup> of it. Thus, Gissing unambiguously foregrounds the notion of mimesis, of artistic fidelity: in order to posit Tennyson’s poetic interpretation against Rosenthal’s and Tojetti’s visual renderings of such an iconic figure as Elaine, he starts out by providing a summary, *his* summary, of the sourcetext.

Interestingly, Tennyson himself had been looking at the links between the two sister arts, painting and writing, and at the divide between their respective representational capacities, and was, it seems, generally dissatisfied with the numerous pictures that his poems inspired. Gissing echoes the Tennysonian idea of the necessary subordination of the visual artist’s creativity to that of the author, also of the impossible pictorial rendering of some verbal notations, especially in the context of the poetic motto (underlined below) which is the text of the pictures — lines affording rich pictorial fancies, one would object:

Then rose the dumb old servitor, and *the dead*  
*Steer’d by the dumb went upward with the flood —*  
 In her right hand the lily, in her left  
 The letter — all her bright hair streaming upward with the flood —

17. *Ibidem*.

18. Ivi, p. 60.

And all the coverlid was cloth of gold  
 Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white  
 Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead  
 But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled. (my italics)

«Neither artist has adhered strictly to the words of the poet, for in neither picture does the maiden lie “as though she smiled”», Gissing comments, «and perhaps they were wise in not attempting to depict her so»<sup>19</sup>, he adds (v. Fig. 1). To the fledgling writer, who clearly questions whether the smile of the dead can be painted even though you can write about it, one is tempted to respond that the bride-of-death motif has been beautifully captured by an impressive number of visual artists, notably by Julia Margaret Cameron, then Tennyson’s neighbour. Her haunting photograph of *Elaine in the Barge* (1875) subtly expresses the mystery of life-in-death, capitalising as it does on the ambiguous aspect of the recumbent figure, posed as a corpse in conventional post-mortem photographic language, stared at insistently by four people gathered round her plain bier, and yet also, with her hair slightly unkempt, wandering over the pillow and falling in a mass behind her head, pictured as if she had been caught asleep, unguarded, in a moment of absolute privacy<sup>20</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Gissing shuns any embarrassing discussion — either of the sensuality suggested by Elaine’s spiritualized pose of abandonment, or of the decadent association of love and death — and foregrounds instead the unresolved challenge posed to mimetic visual arts, in the process perhaps forgetting to remark that the dumb cannot be painted either: indeed, who would know that the boatman is dumb if Tennyson and Gissing did not tell us so? (v. Fig. 2).

19. Ivi, p. 61.

20. See for instance <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/images/jcelanbrg.htm>



**Figure 1.** Domenico Tojetti. *Elaine*, 1876. Detail [Elaine's head].

Gissing's idiosyncratic mode of regard also becomes apparent in another form of self-blinding regarding what he calls «the respective merits of the artists in their treatment of the subject»<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, while he notices the strong points of Rosenthal's painting perceptively enough — the more so since he had to work from memory — he fails to appreciate Tojetti's more original artistic options altogether. His «choice of the moment of departure from the shore»<sup>22</sup> is a disadvantage, Gissing claims, keenly aware of the, admittedly, deflationary quality of a leave-taking scene. However, the proximity of the barge allows the lily face of the almost life-size figure to be seen from a closer angle. There is possibly also, in the Tojetti image, a

21. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 59.

22. *Ibidem*.



**Figure 2.** Domenico Tojetti. *Elaine*, 1876. Detail [Dumb old servitor's head].

provocative suggestion of a twisted Nativity scene, involving a transgressive maiden running, in death, after her appointed lover, her arms crossed just below her girlish bosom, not outstretched, like those of Rosenthal's very pallid, corpse-like figure. In the positioning of the reclining, cradled body, Tojetti is perhaps tapping the Mosaic myth as well (v. Fig. 3). As for the light of day, it is introduced so as to fall on an interesting picture-within-a-picture which occupies the foreground — an epiphanic tableau far better attuned, one may feel, to Tennyson's figurative hierarchy:



Figure 3. Domenico Tojetti. *Elaine*, 1876. Detail [Elaine in the barge].

But when the next sun brake from underground,  
 Then, those two brethren slowly with bent brows  
 Accompanying, the sad chariot–bier  
 Past like a shadow [...]

[...] to that stream whereon the barge,  
 Pall'd all its length in blackest samite, lay.  
 [...]

So those two brethren from the chariot took  
 And on the black decks laid her in bed,  
 [...]

And all the coverlid was cloth of gold  
 Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white  
 All but her face, and that clear–featured face  
 Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead  
 But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled

The last lines suggest enshrinement of the queenly figure. The poet is gazing away from the waterscape to zoom in on her placid features. With its interesting *mise en abyme*, Tojetti's canopied tableau creates a fine window effect of Nature subordinate to the embowered figure of the maiden. The light-



Figure 4. Domenico Tojetti. *Elaine*, 1876. Detail [The mourners].

ing effect in his painting is the visual equivalent of the lily maid’s smile and is finely suggestive of the metaphorical value of the rising sun, the importance of which is urged on the reader in the epic opening words of the stanza. The mourners’ “bent brows”, the “sad chariot–bier” (v. Fig. 4), the “pall’d” barge and the “black decks” all recede before this bringing–a–dead–person–back–to–life effect, this haunting, epiphanic beauty of the transfigured maiden, skillfully reflected in the rippling water.

Strangely enough, Gissing fails to respond to this impressive spot–of–time arrangement in 1876, just as he fails to notice that Rosenthal has departed from the poem in opting for a remarkably bleak, subdued skyscape for a “summer day” and for a dimmer and more distant female figure. And yet, in a very

few years, Gissing too would readily stage–manage such an impressive portrait in death *à la* Georges de la Tour — the *mise en scène* of the dead Thyrza, probably one of the most striking examples in the Gissing corpus of his articulation of how the visual may serve an accurate exploration of a person’s essence, of how the shadow may capture the substance. In *Thyrza* unrequited love endows the sufferer with a superior existential status. Death sanctifies the working–class girl with a “passionate imagination” and an exceptional voice: she is henceforth able to defy Time and Egremont’s “perishable love”<sup>23</sup>, in the same way as Tojetti’s Elaine defies Lancelot’s with her ineffable smile, suggested by the wistful, delicate lines about her mouth. Gissing’s interest in chiaroscuro effects and in a quasi–decadent union of death and beauty becomes remarkable ten years later:

Then Lydia raised the lamp from the table, and held it so that the light fell on her sister’s face. No remnant of pain was there, only calm, unblemished beauty; the lips were as naturally composed as if they might still part to give utterance to song; the brow showed its lines of high imaginativeness even more clearly than in life. The golden braid rested by her neck as in childhood.<sup>24</sup>

Like Tennyson, Gissing here intuits the relationship between writing and painting, utilizing the verbal to articulate the non–verbal and move towards the visible — possibly the closest he ever gets to hypotyposis<sup>25</sup>. A death portrait, Tennyson and the creator of *Thyrza* both recognize, makes the dead more real than the living and captures the essence of the woman that was:

23. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, ed. Jacob Korg, Harvester Press, Brighton 1984, p. 455.

24. Ivi, p. 475.

25. See notably P. FONTANIER, *Les Figures du discours*, Flammarion, Paris 1977, p. 390, for a theorization of the concept: «Elle [l’hypotypose] peint les choses d’une manière si vive et si énergique, qu’elle les met en scène en quelque sorte sous les yeux, et fait d’un récit ou d’une description, une image, un tableau, ou même une scène vivante». «It [hypotyposis] paints things in such a lively and forcible way that it stages them under one’s eyes, so to speak, and turns narrative or description into image, picture or even a real scene taken from life».

“Have you any picture of her?” Mrs. Ormonde asked [...].

“No.”

“Will you let me have one made — drawn from her face now, but looking as she did in life? It shall be done by a good artist; I think it can be done successfully.”

Lydia was in doubt. The thought of introducing a stranger to this room to sit and pore upon the dead face with cold interest was repugnant to her [...].<sup>26</sup>

She [Mrs. Ormonde] [...] returned quickly, carrying a red crayon drawing framed in plain oak. In the corner was a well-known signature, that of one of the few living artists to whom one would appeal with confidence for the execution of a task such as this, a man whom success has not vulgarized, and who is still of opinion that the true artist will oftener find his inspiration in a London garret than amid the banality of the plutocrat’s drawing-room. The work was of course masterly in execution; it was no less admirable as a portrait. In those few lines of chalk, Thyrza lived. He had divined the secret of the girl’s soul, that gift of passionate imagination which in her early years sunk her in hour-long reverie, and later burned her life away. The mood embodied was one so characteristic of Thyrza that one marvelled at the insight which had evoked it from a dead face [...] her eyes *saw* something, something which stirred her being, something for which she yearned, passionately, yet with knowledge that it was for ever forbidden to her. A face of infinite pathos, which drew tears to the eyes, yet was unutterably sweet to gaze upon.<sup>27</sup>

In 1876, however, because his own subjectivity is taking him in another direction, Gissing is not prepared to grant Tojetti any of this “insight”, any of the painter’s capacity, as Tennyson writes in *Elaine*, to «por[e] on a face» and, «Divinely thro’ all hindrance», to find the man behind the face, to paint a face «[t]he shape and colour of a mind and life»<sup>28</sup>.

Given Gissing’s avowed allegiance to verbatim artistic fidelity, one is further led to wonder why, in 1876, he altogether overlooked a major intertextual gap. In the process of personal recontextualisation of the myth, Gissing seems indeed to have

26. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 475.

27. Ivi, pp. 486–87.

28. A. TENNYSON, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

refused to remember that Tennyson's Elaine is essentially an infatuated "child", as Lancelot calls her repeatedly (indeed, he is three times her age). Examining Tojetti's treatment of Elaine's face, Gissing nonetheless complains: «The result is to our mind somewhat insipid, and the face certainly seems too girlish for that of a woman who has been the victim of passionate love»<sup>29</sup>. Freshly arrived from England, Gissing was obviously unaware of the fact that, even though Rosenthal's painting had attracted crowds of enthusiastic art lovers when it was first exhibited in San Francisco in 1875, his attribution to Elaine of a rather indelicate physique — notably, a far too manly pair of legs — had caused some uneasiness too. This large, womanly image of the lily maid was immediately identified as one of the canvas's weak points: a typically "rigid", "Teutonic" propensity, detractors of the School of Munich summarily decided<sup>30</sup>.

To the scholar, Gissing's eminently subjective exploration of frustrated love is a valuable index of the inveterate streak of romanticism which so often tempers the realism in his later fiction. Driven by his own emotions, the young exile, who is then more of a fledgling poet than a prose writer and whose mind is full of the poetry of Goethe and Heine, to name but a few of the poets in his pantheon in the 1870s, fails to realize that Rosenthal has been carried away by the romantic potential of his subject, regardless of the Tennyson more sober source text. For once, Gissing is not splendidly isolated and shares, in his own measured way, the popular enthusiasm with the very excesses

29. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 61.

30. For instance, Rosenthal's Elaine was described as «a good loud translation of our household Tennyson into the dialect of Munich» by Isham in his *History of American Painting* (quoted in *California Art Research*, cit., p. 14). Despite a number of harsh reviews, nevertheless, the painting was widely acclaimed by the public. Its popularity even became a source of amazing profit: Elaine clubs were founded, Elaine cigars were sold, an Elaine waltz and funeral dirge were composed. For more details, see <http://www.jmaw.org/toby-rosenthal-jewish-artist-of-early-san-francisco/>; <http://www.californiapioneers.org/wp/tobias-edward-rosenthal%E/>; <http://www.californiapioneers.org/wp/tobias-edward-rosenthal/>; <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/yankee/rosen.html>.

of Rosenthal's academic studio painting. Blissfully unaware of the cheap medievalizing characterizing Rosenthal's youthful piece of Arthurianism, the young reviewer has here and there nothing but surprising approximations to write: «the old man stands, quietly and without effort, directing their course, and gazing the while in the calmness of fixed grief on the beautiful face of the dead»<sup>31</sup>. Where we see a figure woefully like a real corpse — indeed, dissatisfied with his early efforts, Rosenthal, «in desperation [...] sneaked the corpse of a young woman into his studio»<sup>32</sup> —, where we see a grim, Gothicised, monk-like version of Charon ferrying a dead soul across the river Styx to Hades, with perhaps shadowy suggestions of a male allegory of Death holding the scythe, Gissing, steeped in his recent romantic findings, remains blind to the weeping sentimentalism of this utterly conventional genre scene, and notes approvingly: «The well-chosen garb of the servitor and the grotesque carving on the barge alike tend to preserve the antique air of this scene from the days of chivalry»<sup>33</sup>.

What is the point, one could ask by way of conclusion, in digging up a piece of juvenilia where Gissing goes quietly wrong by mixing up fidelity to the Tennyson text with commercialised, middlebrow medievalism? To the Gissing scholar, such short-sightedness is a powerful index of his exacerbated emotional stance in 1876, especially as regards the artistic exploration of passion once the psychological crisis is over. Partly unconsciously, probably, Gissing uses theoretical notions of artistic fidelity in word-based pictures as a pretext for the expression of his own exalted worldview. Leaving biographical

31. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 60.

32. *California Art Research*, cit., p. 8.

33. G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, cit., p. 61. The oarsman's gothic sombreness is emphasized in the self-guide to the collection issued by the Art Institute of Chicago, where Rosenthal's "Elaine" is housed (in the "Poetry and Art" section, Gallery 161): «the painting depicts a *grim* boatman ferrying the body of Elaine to Camelot, a love letter to Lancelot clutched to her chest», [http://www.artic.edu/aic/visitor\\_info/selfguide/aprilo7\\_guide](http://www.artic.edu/aic/visitor_info/selfguide/aprilo7_guide) (my emphasis).

might-have-beens aside, what the Gissing scholar wishes to remember is this confident, if quiet-spoken, display of expertise in the poetic field. Does it really matter that this very young man's painterly eye should prove partly inaccurate here — as Marcel Proust notes in *Time Regained*, «style for the writer and colour for the painter are essentially a matter of vision, not of technique»<sup>34</sup>. In the last analysis, even though Gissing saw genuine emotion where, retrospectively, we find a striking, if interesting, example of the vulgarianism of the day, his art review already shows him, amusingly enough, cringing from the slightest suspicion of vulgarity: «Why am I popular? I don't write very vulgarly», he could have exclaimed after Tennyson<sup>35</sup>.

34. «Le style pour l'écrivain aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre est une question non de technique mais de vision». M. PROUST, *Le Temps retrouvé*, Gallimard, Paris 1954, vol. 4, p. 474.

35. A. TENNYSON, Letter to William Allingham, 1869, cited by A. SINFIELD, *Alfred Tennyson*, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 166.

## The Visual World of Gissing's *The Unclassed* (1884)

PAUL DELANY\*

Victorianists, like medievalists, assume that the cultures they deal with form an organic whole. When considering Victorian literature, everything else Victorian is relevant: Victorian art, Victorian morals, Victorian dress, and so on to the furthest horizon. *The Unclassed*, I will argue, is Gissing's most Victorian novel, and especially the text of 1884. By 1895, when Gissing revised and shortened the book, he removed various Victorian elements that he now found embarrassing. I want to restore some of these elements here, with a focus on Victorian art and what I call the "visual world" of the novel. I will do this under three headings: first, physiognomy and criminology; second, the Pre-Raphaelite *femme fatale*; third, the importance of visual mythology.

Duncan, in *Macbeth*, learns about the treachery of the Thane of Cawdor and comments: «There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face» (I. iv. 11–12). For the Victorians, though, there was such an art: the Victorian pseudo-science of physiognomy, which has a pervasive influence in the 1884 text of *The Unclassed*. Gissing may have taken his belief in it from Schopenhauer, who wrote that

every human face is a hieroglyphic, and a hieroglyphic, too, which admits of being deciphered, the alphabet of which we carry about with us already perfected. As a matter of fact, the face of a man gives

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us a fuller and more interesting information than his tongue; for his face is the compendium of all he will ever say, as it is the one record of all his thoughts and endeavours.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest reader of such hieroglyphics was a certain Sherlock Holmes:

It was a tremendously virile and yet sinister face which was turned towards us. With the brow of a philosopher above and the jaw of a sensualist below, the man must have started with great capacities for good or for evil. But one could not look upon his cruel blue eyes, with their drooping, cynical lids, or upon the fierce, aggressive nose and the threatening, deep-lined brow, without reading Nature's plainest danger-signals. He took no heed of any of us, but his eyes were fixed upon Holmes's face with an expression in which hatred and amazement were equally blended. "You fiend!" he kept on muttering. "You clever, clever fiend!"<sup>2</sup>

Waymark, in *The Unclassed*, practises the same art on Mr. Mellowdew in the Café Royal. His face bears

the plainest traces of a life spent in vicious gratifications [. . .]. He would have done well to leave the moustache on his lip; the mouth, thus bare, was too repulsive in its undisguised ferocity of appetite. His neck was thick and red, with a great swelling at the throat.<sup>3</sup>

The bodies of immoral women bear such traces too. For his portrait of Harriet Casti in *The Unclassed*, Gissing drew on a blend of physiognomy and criminology (as it was then conceived). Cesare Lombroso defined the criminal type as a blend of "moral insanity", degeneracy (evolution going backwards, in a reversion to more primitive forms of humanity),

1. A. SCHOPENHAUER, "Physiognomy", *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders, Wiley, New York n.d., pp. 61–62.

2. A. CONAN DOYLE, *The Adventure of the Empty House*, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, vol. 2, Doubleday, New York n.d., p. 492.

3. G. GISSING, *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, ed. P. Delany and C. Colligan, ELS Editions, Victoria, BC 2010, p. 102. After his ominous appearance in this chapter, Mellowdew plays no great role in the novel. It seems likely that Gissing cut his character down when he made final revisions at the request of his publishers.

and epilepsy. Not all epileptics are criminals, but there is a family resemblance between them:

The extreme excitability manifested by born criminals is shared by epileptics. Distrustful, intolerant, and incapable of sincere attachment, a gesture or a look is sufficient to infuriate them and incite them to the most atrocious deeds. Epilepsy has a disastrous effect on the character. It destroys the moral sense, causes irritability, alters the sensations through constant hallucinations and delusions, deadens the natural feelings or leads them into morbid channels.<sup>4</sup>

Victorian pseudo-science suggested that epilepsy was caused by masturbation, and that an epileptic seizure was a kind of orgasm. In the 1884 *Unclassed* there is a graphic description of Harriet's seizure, no doubt modelled on Gissing's personal experience with Nell.<sup>5</sup> This is cut in 1895.

In general, though, physiognomy was more likely to be invoked for men than for women. A woman's aesthetic self-presentation made a stronger and more immediate impression than the application of physiognomical schemes, and her appearance was more likely to be associated with other kinds of myths and stereotypes. We see this when Osmond Waymark dines at the Café Royal with Ida Starr, whom he has just picked up on Pall Mall. Gazing across the table, he makes an inventory of her looks:

Strongly outlined and rather large features; cheeks exquisitely rounded and marked with sound health; full nostrils; nose almost straight from the forehead; the eyebrows making two perfect arches, dark brown lines of divine sweep [...]. Then the mouth, long but delicate, the upper lip a lovely bow [...]. Low on her forehead, and making a back ground for head and neck, a wonderful mass of the richest and brownest of rich brown hair [...].<sup>6</sup>

4. G. LOMBROSO-FERRERO, *Criminal Man*, Patterson Smith, Montclair, NJ 1972, p. 62.

5. Cf. G. GISSING, *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, cit., pp. 227–28.

6. Ivi, pp. 101–2.



**Figure 5.** Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Venus Verticordia* [Venus Turner of Hearts], 1864–68. Photograph reproduced with the kind permission of The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth (UK).

It is fair to say that the young Gissing was under Dante Gabriel Rossetti's spell, so it is not surprising that his description of Ida might just as easily be of Rossetti's *Venus Verticordia*, "Venus Turner of Hearts" (1864–68; v. Fig. 5). The model for the final version of this painting was Alexa Wilding, a garment worker whom Rossetti spotted on the street and persuaded to

become a regular model. Some of the details of Ida's appearance, such as the arched eyebrows and bow-like mouth, might correspond to interpretations in a handbook of physiognomy. But it is more important that she represents a Pre-Raphaelite fantasy of transforming an attractive working-class woman into an icon of sexual worship. Gissing's relationship with Nell Harrison may even have been inspired by the Pre-Raphaelites' intimacy with prostitutes, and use of them as models.

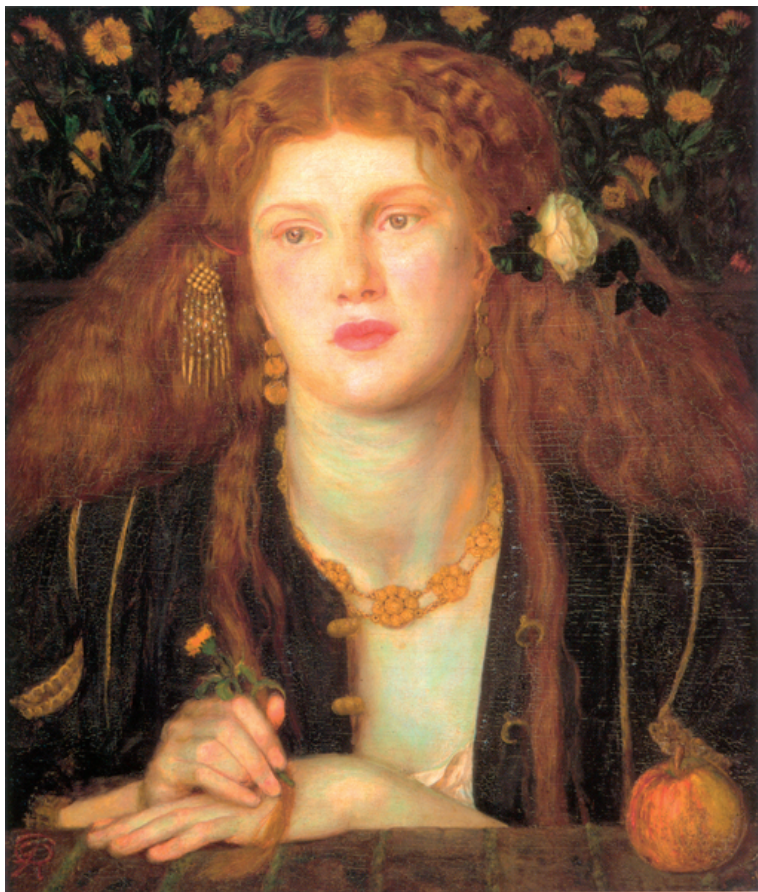
It is an utterly Pre-Raphaelite episode when Osmond accosts Ida on the street and walks her to her lodgings near Temple Bar, off the Strand. She goes into her bedroom and re-appears in «a handsome dressing-gown and with her feet in slippers» (paid for with the good money she earns from plying her trade). «Her glorious hair» has been unpinned and now falls «heavily about her shoulders, warm and fragrant as that of a goddess».7 Ida is Venus re-born, the goddess of sexual love. In the Pre-Raphaelite universe, eroticism is signified by three elements: the dressing-gown, slippers and long, wavy brown hair.8 One sees all three, for example, in John Spencer Stanhope's *Thoughts of the Past* (1859; v. Fig. 6). Unlucky in love, the woman has become a prostitute, but is tormented by remorse. The walking stick on the floor has been left behind by a client, and the money he paid is under her left hand.

7. Ivi, p. 103.

8. J.B. BULLEN, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998, pp. 130–34.



**Figure 6.** John Spencer Stanhope. *Thoughts of the Past*, 1859. ©Tate, London 2018.



**Figure 7.** Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Bocca Baciata* [The Kissed Mouth], 1859. Photograph ©2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata*, "The Kissed Mouth" (1859; v. Fig. 7) uses the same model as Stanhope, Fanny Cornforth. She had been in fact a prostitute who frequented the notorious Argyll Rooms. The dressing-gown and the hair speak for themselves; also the glimpse of the shift underneath, which shows that she has removed her corset. The picture caused a scandal when first exhibited, with criticism focusing on the model's «pouting

lips». <sup>9</sup> Its title comes from the story of Alatiel in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. She has eight lovers, ends up on the island of Cyprus (where Venus was born), then returns to marry the King of Algarve. He believes she is a virgin because, as Boccaccio says, «a kissed mouth, like the moon, renews its freshness».

In Waymark's first visit to Ida's rooms, it seems at first that Gissing is following not just Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata*, but also his poem *Jenny*<sup>10</sup>. There, a middle-class young man goes home with a prostitute, "Lazy, laughing, languid Jenny". She changes into a silken gown, lets her hair down, and later falls asleep with her head in his lap. He spends the night in musing on how she is exploited by the "man-swine" who cruise the streets looking for women. He steals away before Jenny wakes up, leaving a couple of gold coins on her pillow. But the flaw in Rossetti's moral romance is that men cannot be so neatly divided into swine and saints. Like the young man of the poem, they want to enjoy love with a nice girl and sex with a naughty one. It is no wonder that Waymark finds his "thoughts in heaps" when he tries to sort out his feelings for Ida. When she lets down her hair and puts on her embroidered robe, this would normally be a sign that she is sexually available. But for Waymark, Ida's partial undress moves her away from sexuality, rather than towards it. All that follows is a decorous conversation about *The Vicar of Wakefield*, whose plot turns on young women of good family who are in danger of losing their virtue. Waymark and Ida agree to meet again on an evening when Ida is not receiving clients.

To keep the relationship on this lofty plane, Waymark must skirt around the brute facts of sex and money. Ida is successful at her trade, and has much more money than he does. But if Waymark were to accept any from her (starting with the price

9. S. ANDRES, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, Ohio State UP, Columbus, Ohio 2003, p. 2.

10. D.G. ROSSETTI, *Jenny*, in D.G. ROSSETTI, *Poems*, Tauchnitz, Leipzig 1873, pp. 109–26.

of their meal at the Café Royal), he would consider himself “a pensioner on her bounty” — something close to a pimp.<sup>11</sup> Nor could he just have sex with her without paying because both of them are trying to prove that they are capable of having a “pure” friendship. They are trapped in a double frustration: Waymark suppresses his desire for sex, Ida suppresses her desire for love (perhaps because she feels unworthy of *being* loved).

To resolve the conflict, Ida must give up prostitution and be re-born as a pure woman — some one who can both give and receive ideal love. When she swims naked at Hastings, the description ends (in the 1884 text only): «When she came forth on to the beach again, it was another Venus Anadyomene. Heaven gloried in her beauty, and over-shone her with chaste splendour».<sup>12</sup> Anadyomene means “rising from the sea”, and the most famous image of this is Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*. In *The Unclassed*, the term sets off a complex chain of associations. The most important of these is that whenever Venus bathes in the sea, her virginity is restored. Venus was originally born from sea-foam, so she can be born again by returning to it.

In May 1884 Gissing saw a “splendid picture” at the Royal Academy called *Fresh as Foam*, by Philip Hermogenes Calderon. Its subject was Venus Anadyomene. Gissing had already submitted the manuscript of *The Unclassed* to his publisher, but visual treatments of the Anadyomene theme help us to understand his ideas about Ida’s purification. The picture cannot now be found, but we do have Calderon’s *A Woodland Nymph*, in the pose traditionally used for the birth of Venus (c. 1884).<sup>13</sup> Her head is tilted to one side as she raises her arms to wring out her hair. Perhaps Calderon used the same model for both pictures. William-Adolphe Bouguereau’s *Naissance de Vénus*, “Birth of Venus” (1879; v. Fig. 8) suggests what Calderon’s painting may

11. G. GISSING, *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, cit., p. 131.

12. Ivi, p. 168.

13. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/victorian\Tr1\textendashedwardian\Tr1\textendashedlo7132/lot.15.html>.



**Figure 8.** William-Adolphe Bouguereau. *Naissance de Vénus* [Birth of Venus], 1879. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (RF 253), acquis de l'artiste par l'Etat pour le Musée du Luxembourg en 1879. Photo © RMN–Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)/Hervé Lewandowski.

have looked like.

After bathing in the sea, Ida hides away from Waymark and works in a laundry: cleaning clothes makes her feel like a cleaner person. Another classical precedent that may have contributed to Gissing's ideas about purification is the legend of Phryne, a beautiful courtesan who was said to have been

the model for Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite of Cnidos. The statue shows the goddess disrobing to enter the bath that will restore her purity. Phryne represents, in the classical world, the prostitute who combines erotic power with a certain moral superiority to conventional, and hypocritical, society. When put on trial for profaning the Eleusinian mysteries, she overwhelms her judges by stripping herself naked. Henryk Siemieradski's *Phryne at Eleusis* (1889) shows her disrobing in front of a crowd of onlookers.<sup>14</sup> We don't know exactly what went on at Eleusis, but one of the rituals involved purifying yourself by bathing in the sea. Perhaps Phryne was charged as an unclean woman who should not have participated.

When Gissing first became involved with Nell, his friends at Owens College were appalled: not so much because he had gone with a prostitute — many of them had done that — but because he idealised her and believed she could be reformed. Waymark holds forth to his friend Julian Casti on how

prostitution and everything connected with it is my highest interest. In the prostitute you have the incarnation at once of the greatest good and the greatest evil, the highest and the lowest, that which is most pure associated with that which is most foul, — using all these words in the conventional sense. Love is the supreme in human life, and love brought to market, the temple of ecstatic worship degraded to a house of entertainment for the merest bodily need, [...] what has earth to show more rich in artistic suggestion than this?<sup>15</sup>

It is probably just a coincidence, but here Gissing seems to be echoing Flaubert's confession to Louise Colet:

It may be a perverted taste, but I love prostitution, and for itself too, quite apart from its carnal aspects. My heart begins to pound every time I see one of those women in low-cut dresses walking under the lamplight in the rain, just as monks in their corded robes have always excited some deep, ascetic corner of my soul. The

14. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henryk\\_Siemiradzki#/media/File:Genrich\\_Ippolitovich\\_Semiradsky\\_-\\_Roma,\\_1889.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henryk_Siemiradzki#/media/File:Genrich_Ippolitovich_Semiradsky_-_Roma,_1889.jpg)

15. G. GISSING, *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, cit., p. 260.

idea of prostitution is a meeting place of so many elements — lust, bitterness, complete absence of human contact, muscular frenzy, the clink of gold — that to peer into it deeply makes one reel. One learns so many things in a brothel, and feels such sadness, and dreams so longingly of love!<sup>16</sup>

Where could Gissing's romantic views of prostitution come from? From the Victorian cult of the fallen woman, from his father's fallen woman poem, *Margaret*, and particularly from all those Pre-Raphaelite *femmes fatales*, including the "Jenny" of Rossetti's poem. As we have seen, the fallen woman cult was as prominent in the visual arts as it was in literature and popular mythology. By 1884, Gissing had gone through the whole cycle from idealism to disillusionment with Nell, and had separated from her. Nonetheless, *The Unclassed* gave equal weight to three incompatible judgements on the "fallen woman". One was the romantic view, the fetishistic cult of the "soiled dove". The second was the sociological view, which is the single lens through which we see Ida's friend Sally. For her prostitution is just a second job, made necessary by low wages for women in respectable employment. However, Ida refutes this economic justification by accepting low-paid work in the laundry; Gissing's point is that she will give up her fine clothes and luxuries in order to make herself worthy of Waymark. John Everett Millais' *Virtue and Vice* (1853)<sup>17</sup> makes a similar point, where a seamstress resists the temptation to go on the street. The third view of prostitution comes from physiognomy and criminology: the fallen woman as an innately foul and degenerate creature. Harriet, in the novel, has all these attributes *except* being a prostitute. I would guess that Gissing could not bear the idea of giving too direct a representation of his painful experiences with Nell.

Having three such different views of the fallen woman

16. Cit. in F. STEEGMULLER, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, Vintage, New York 1957, p. 284.

17. <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/millais/drawings/43.html>.

made the 1884 *The Unclassed* an incoherent novel, but also one that is highly expressive of Victorian perplexities about gender and morality. When Gissing came to revise the novel in 1895, he wanted to disown his youthful conflicts. *The Unclassed*, he wrote, «idealized a woman of the class which always has such an attraction for young men — an absurdity!»<sup>18</sup> Perhaps; but no more absurd than the whole Victorian obsession, whether in print or on canvas, with *femmes fatales*, fallen women, long hair, dressing-gowns, the chink of coins and the rest — and which, somehow, still claims our attention today.

18. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 2, p. 146.



## The Place of Art

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My focus in this essay is primarily on *Isabel Clarendon*, but also drawing on *Workers in the Dawn* for purposes of comparison. *Isabel Clarendon* began life between November 1884 and March 1885 as the three-volume *Lady of Knightswell*, which Chapman & Hall's reader, George Meredith, requested recasting in two volumes, a rewriting that Gissing undertook between June and August 1885<sup>1</sup>. The only published novel separating the composition of *Workers* and *Isabel Clarendon* was *The Unclassed* which, like its predecessor and successor, owes much to Gissing's interest in Pre-Raphaelite ideas and the "cult of beauty"<sup>2</sup>. My concern for the *place* of art is quite literal — what real or imaginary places are depicted in works of art that feature in these novels, whether sites of romantic idealization (e.g. Arthur's paintings based on Tennyson's *Palace of Art*), picturesque landscapes (Ada's watercolour of the cottage that Kingcote decides to rent) or gritty streetscapes (Tollady's invocation of Hogarth, or Gabriel's *Market Night*); but also where are these artworks encountered: in the public space of the shop window, over the artist's shoulder, in an art gallery or the pages of a magazine, or in the private space of studio, dining-room or the imagination?

It is not until Volume II of *Isabel Clarendon* that we encounter

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1. See Pierre Coustillas's Introductions to successive editions of *Isabel Clarendon*, Harvester, Brighton 1969, 1982 and Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2010.

2. P. DELANY and C. COLLIGAN, "Introduction" to G. GISSING, *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, ELS, ed. P. Delany and C. Colligan, Victoria, BC 2010.

Kingcote's friend, Clement Gabriel<sup>3</sup>. Gabriel is working on two canvases for display at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. The first is *Market Night*:

[a] portion of an East End market–street at night; the chief group, a man at a stall selling quack–medicines to a thronging cluster of people. The main light came from a naphtha–lamp on the stall, but there was also the gleam from one of the ordinary lamps of the street. The assembled men, women, and children were of the poorest and vilest, and each face seemed a portrait. That of the medicine vendor was marvellous, with its look of low brag and cunning; on it was the full glare of the naphtha flame.

The second depicts:

[a] little girl standing before a shop–window, and looking at an open illustrated paper which was exposed there. The subject was nothing, the pose and character of the child everything. Poor and ragged, she had lost for the moment sense of everything, but the rich and comfortable little maiden displayed in the coloured page; her look was envious, but had more of involuntary admiration. This too was a night piece; the light came from the front of the shop, above the picture.<sup>4</sup>

Both paintings recall scenes in *Workers*, which famously begins with what can only be described as a word–painting of Whitecross Street market late on a Saturday evening. Gissing exhorts us not only to «Walk with me, reader» but «Let us see how they spend this “Truce of God”» and then, to «look in» to a slum passageway, «look up» at the beams fixed across the house–fronts («sure sign of the rottenness which everywhere prevails») and «look down» to see a little girl, «the very image of naked wretchedness». We are told to «open the door and look into» a gin–palace, and to «look at the faces» in the crowd. In

3. In Volume I there are several references to Gabriel and his art, but it is not until Chapter VIII of Volume II that he makes a personal appearance.

4. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, ed. P. Coustillas, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2010, pp. 227, 228.

sum, «One could find matter for hour-long observation in the infinite variety of vice and misery depicted»<sup>5</sup>. Later in *Workers*, Arthur drags Carrie round the worst slums in London, again late on a Saturday night, trying to impress upon her where her vices will lead: he desperately hopes that *showing* her the consequences will have more effect than just telling her<sup>6</sup>.

Another scene in *Workers* features the young Arthur, wandering out of Whitecross Street on Christmas Eve, staring in the shop windows: «his eyes gloated over what seemed to him the priceless delicacies which flashed and glistened in the light of the gas-jets»<sup>7</sup>. Move on a couple of chapters, and we find Arthur on an errand, passing through Charlotte Place, where he:

[s]topped, as he always did instinctively, before a shop where newspapers and books were exposed for sale in the windows. It was a very small shop, over the door of which was painted the inscription: "Samuel Tollady, Printer." As Arthur looked over the illustrated papers which lay open in the window, his eye fell on a card suspended at the back, upon which were the words: "A Boy Wanted."<sup>8</sup>

These two scenes — Arthur's envious gas-lit gaze and his curiosity inspecting the print-shop window — combine to provide the subject of Gabriel's painting.

Neither of Gabriel's paintings could have been contemplated by Arthur himself as a fit subject for art. He is wedded to a conception of art as beauty, rather than social realism or purveyor of morality. This contrasts with some notable Pre-Raphaelite art, such as Ford Madox Brown's didactic *Work* (1862–65) or John Roddam Spencer Stanhope's *Thoughts of the Past* (1859), both situated in recognisable London locations: Heath Street, Hampstead, and the Thames near Waterloo Bridge. So Arthur

5. G. GISSING, *Workers in the Dawn*, ed. D. Harrison, Victorian Secrets, Brighton 2010, pp. 5–8.

6. Ivi, p. 413.

7. Ivi, p. 57.

8. Ivi, p. 82.

ignores Tollady's exhortation, when they visit Whitecross Street together, to emulate Hogarth:

«Paint a faithful picture of this crowd we have watched, be a successor of Hogarth, and give us the true image of *our* social dregs, as he did of those of his own day. Paint them as you see them, and get your picture hung in the Academy. It would be a moral lesson to all who looked upon it, surpassing in value every sermon that fanaticism has ever concocted!»<sup>9</sup>

Arthur, however, «felt that it would be impossible for him to take up his pencil for the delineation of such varieties of hideousness». He prefers beauty and cannot contemplate searching for models in «the slums and the hovels amidst which his wretched childhood had been passed»<sup>10</sup>.

Gabriel is presumably named for Gissing's hero, the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had died in 1882, shortly before Gissing moved to Chelsea, close to Rossetti's own home. Gissing emphasized the district's literary and artistic associations in letters to his family — Rossetti at 16 Cheyne Walk, Maclise and George Eliot at different times at 4 Cheyne Walk, Frederick Leighton in «a grand new house, built in the old style», and Thomas Carlyle in «a narrow & dirty little street» (Cheyne Row<sup>11</sup>). He repeated much of this in *Isabel Clarendon*, situating the Meres family in Chelsea, in:

[a] small house in a little square, between which and the river is a portion of Cheyne Walk. Three minutes' walk brings you to the Albert Bridge, which leads over to Battersea Park. In that part of Cheyne Walk which is close at hand stands the house where for many years Rossetti painted and wrote; not many doors away is that in which George Eliot died; and that which was Carlyle's home for

9. Ivi, p. 123. On Gissing and Hogarth, see J. SLOAN, "Gissing and Hogarth", *A Garland for Gissing*, ed. B. Postmus, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 249–59.

10. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., p. 127.

11. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 2, pp. 100, 122.

half a century is scarcely more distant, in the shadow of old Chelsea Church.<sup>12</sup>

This is the right place for people with artistic sensitivity to cherish. Ada «promised herself» that one day she too would occupy a house in Cheyne Walk<sup>13</sup>.

Yet Gabriel's art bears little resemblance to Rossetti's, except insofar as he would occasionally stop a girl in the street and pay her «to let him sketch her face»<sup>14</sup> — perceiving, if not beauty, then exceptional interest in the ordinary, much as Rossetti celebrated unconventional beauty in the women he depicted<sup>15</sup>. We learn that Gabriel's art «addressed itself successfully both to the vulgar and to the cultured» and that, like Rossetti, he did not set out to be didactic: «Some people made a sermon of it [*Market Night*], — which the painter never intended»<sup>16</sup>. Those with more advanced tastes in art, like Hilda, defended the brutal honesty and power of Gabriel's art; those who liked their art to be purely decorative, like Isabel, found it offensive: «“Oh, I don't like that at all!” she exclaimed positively, moving away from the throng. “Those faces are disgusting. I should not like to have such a picture as that in my house. [. . .] What a pity he paints such things! Why don't you make him choose pleasant subjects<sup>17</sup>?”»

Both of Gabriel's Academy pictures resembled some well-known *real* mid-Victorian paintings. Children looking in shop windows was a familiar theme in sentimental Victorian art, for example by William MacDuff (*Shaftesbury, or Lost and Found*, 1862) and Thomas P. Hall (*One Touch of Nature Makes the Whole World Kin*, 1867). However, Gabriel emphasized the

12. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 203.

13. Ivi, pp. 203, 211.

14. Ivi, p. 226.

15. S. CALLOWAY, “The search for a new beauty”, *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860–1900*, ed. S. Calloway and L.F. Orr, V & A, London 2011, p. 11.

16. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 237.

17. Ivi, p. 238.

poignancy of the scene by setting it at night and making the object of the child's gaze a «rich and comfortable» version of herself. But there were even more obvious precedents for *Market Night*.

A few years before Gissing wrote either novel, the illustrator Frederick Barnard had exhibited *Saturday Night* in the 1876 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. The picture has vanished from circulation, but a sketch, made for a subsequent guide to British pictures exhibited at the Paris Exhibition of 1878, shows that it looked like a Frith social panorama, such as *The Railway Station* or *Derby Day* (and its recorded dimensions — 84 inches x 39 inches — almost matched Frith's canvases: *The Railway Station* measures 101 x 46). It seems like the cast of a theatrical spectacular lined up on stage. Martin Meisel discusses how it inspired the staging of George Sims's play, *The Lights o' London*, at the Princess's Theatre in the autumn of 1881, in which the final act opened in “‘The Boro’, Saturday night”<sup>18</sup>. Leading theatre critic, Clement Scott, noted that:

This scene of the Saturday night marketing in the Borough, with its hundreds of varied supernumeraries, men, women, and children; its grim squalor and hideous depravity, its drunkenness and its dirt, its fierce unbridled animal passion and wild-beast fighting, its street row and police-court mêlée is realism out-realised.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Higgins concludes that «the production emphasized the “perfect” recreation of an East End, “inner city” scene: a panoramic, hyper-real view of the entire market». But designed for a West End audience, the production's «realistic details» are «signs that only refer to what a middle-class audience expected

18. M. MEISEL, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1983, p. 399; M.R. BOOTH, ed., *The Lights o' London and Other Victorian Plays*, Clarendon, Oxford 1995, pp. xxi-xxiv.

19. C.S., *The Playhouses*, «Illustrated London News» (17 Sept. 1881), p. 275.

an East End market scene to contain»<sup>20</sup>. Watching *The Lights o' London* was a form of “slumming”, to be enjoyed from the safe distance of the dress circle. Gabriel’s *Market Night* was similar, painted in a studio «on the north side of Regent’s Park», safely removed from the *real* East End, and exhibited to the chattering classes in Burlington House<sup>21</sup>.

Sims also employed Barnard as the illustrator of his journalistic exposé, *How the Poor Live*, first published in weekly instalments in «The Pictorial World» in 1883<sup>22</sup>. There is no firm evidence that Gissing saw Barnard’s painting or Sims’s play or read *How the Poor Live*, but given what we know of his interests in theatre-going and his reading of other social investigators, it would be surprising if he did not. Gabriel’s picture, focused on the crowd around a quack–medicine stall, lit by a naphtha lamp, was perhaps not on such an epic scale as Barnard’s *Saturday Night*. It was probably closer to an illustration in *How the Poor Live* where Barnard focused on a group of youths being invited to try their hand at a shooting gallery — «Three shots a penny!» — amidst more everyday market activities<sup>23</sup>. Substitute the quack–medicine seller for the proprietor of the shooting gallery and Barnard’s engraving is transformed into Gabriel’s painting.

Like Gabriel’s, Barnard’s pictures were primarily descriptive and illustrative, not didactic. William Rossetti, in «Academy», called *Saturday Night*: «one of the most remarkable illustrations of London low–life that could be cited from any period of our

20. R. HIGGINS, *London on Stage: The Urban Melodrama of George Sims*, «Literary London Journal», 4, 1 (2006): <http://literarylondon.org/the-literary-london-journal/archive-of-the-literary-london-journal/issue-4-1/london-on-stage-the-urban-melodrama-of-george-sims/>.

21. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., pp. 224, 237.

22. G.R. SIMS, *How the Poor Live, With Sixty Illustrations by Frederick Barnard*, Chatto & Windus, London 1883, first published in weekly episodes, commencing June 1883, in «Pictorial World».

23. Ivi, pp. 48–49. For an online version of *How the Poor Live*, including all Barnard’s illustrations, see <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications2/howthepoorlive.htm>.

art. It is certainly not a sightly picture — full of grime and flare, and of human uncouthness»<sup>24</sup>. An anonymous reviewer for «The Athenaeum» thought:

There is a telling picture here, of a coarse kind, but possessing considerable merit and interest, on account of the abundance of character it displays. [...] comprising numerous groups of half-brutalized figures and squalid persons buying provisions; a work which is full of motion, and gives a tolerably just notion of the scene, and it is not without pitiable illustrations of poverty and disorder.<sup>25</sup>

These are just the kinds of comments that Gabriel's painting attracts. Kingcote confesses to not liking either *Market Night* or another London street scene that Gabriel had exhibited the previous year, but acknowledges their «great technical merits»<sup>26</sup>. «The Times» managed to spot the «stale oranges» as just one detail in Barnard's *Saturday Night*: an «overcrowded canvas» which «shows uncommon observation and rare power of delineation, though the work is slight and sketchy and with a tendency to caricature»<sup>27</sup>.

There is another act of painterly composition in *Isabel Clarendon*, very early in the novel when Kingcote passes Ada making a water-colour sketch of Wood End, the cottage he subsequently rents. We can imagine that it conformed to the kind of landscape painting that Gissing mentioned in his letters — works by Keeley Halswelle, Thomas Creswick or Myles Birket Foster, the last of whom especially was associated with water-colour views of country cottages<sup>28</sup>. When Gissing visited the Surrey countryside from Sutton Place, the Harrisons' country house near Guildford, he observed that «Never have I so understood

24. W.M. ROSSETTI, *The Royal Academy (Third Notice)*, «The Academy», 212 (27 May 1876), p. 518.

25. An., *The Royal Academy (Third Notice)*, «The Athenaeum», 2533 (13 May 1876), p. 670.

26. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 63.

27. «The Times» (29 Apr. 1876), p. 14.

28. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 82–3, 143.

the origin of the type of English rural scenery. Among other things, here one finds the source of the ordinary drawing-copy farm-house & cottage»<sup>29</sup>.

However, landscape art generally has a lower profile in Gissing's novels than historical or portrait painting. In *Workers*, for example, Gresham despatches Arthur up the Thames to make some landscape paintings as part of his artistic training, and Gresham himself occasionally strays from society portraits and historical epics to indulge in landscape painting, reflecting his lack of commitment to one style: he is a jobbing painter who can turn his hand to whatever the market demands, happy to follow popular taste, «troubled by no subtle scruples with regard to the dignity of his art»<sup>30</sup> — Jasper Milvain with a paintbrush! Helen Norman, too, when she is in Tubingen, contemplates sketching the town and surrounding countryside in its «rich autumn hues»<sup>31</sup>. But this is tourist-art, equivalent to today's holiday snaps.

So it is unsurprising that Ada turns from water-colour painting to word-painting, submitting her essay, *River Twilight*, for publication in «The Tattler». Thomas Meres has advised Ada to write purely from her imagination, but *River Twilight* derives from a walk that Ada and Hilda take one evening along the edge of Battersea Park<sup>32</sup>. We can reasonably assume that Ada's «picture in words» resembled Gissing's own essay, *On Battersea Bridge*, published in the «Pall Mall Gazette» in 1883, a mood piece describing the view looking west up the Thames just before 5.00 pm on a November evening. The water was «rich with the reflection of dusky gold», there was a mist «obscuring, but not hiding» the meanness of industrial and residential buildings lining the river banks. It resembles a Whistler nocturne, looking towards Wandsworth railway bridge — «only a faint

29. Ivi, p. 141.

30. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., p. 166.

31. Ivi, p. 153.

32. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., pp. 210, 239.

vision of arches» in the distance — set in motion as barges, a «footling tug» and a steamer stir up the water, and the «fire of the west» gradually repaints the palette: «Green and purple, amber and gold, all conceivable richest colours wax and wane»<sup>33</sup>. Whistler's nocturnes, painted either from Battersea Bridge or nearby, were variously *Blue and Silver* (at least four paintings between 1871 and 1878), *Grey and Silver* (1873–75), *Silver and Opal* (early 1880s) and, after sunset, *Black and Gold* (1875<sup>34</sup>). Gissing ended his essay with the down-to-earth comment of a fellow loiterer on the bridge, who turns out to be meditating not on «the beauties of earth and heavens» but on the mud: «Throws up a deal o' mud, don't it?». Knowing Gissing, we may read this as another reference to the unculturedness of the working class; but he has also effectively debunked the aestheticism of his own meditation and, perhaps, alluded to Ruskin's dismissal of Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875) (which evoked a firework display at Cremorne Gardens, just upstream from Battersea Bridge): «flinging a pot of paint in the public's face»<sup>35</sup>. Gissing assured Algernon that «The incident at the end is a fact», contradicting his own character's advice to «write a story in which every detail, every person, shall be purely a product of your imagination — nothing suggested by events within your experience»<sup>36</sup>.

Whistler, too, lived in Chelsea, and his paintings (including *The Falling Rocket*) were exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery, which had opened in Bond Street in 1877, and where Gissing was a regular visitor from 1882 onwards. Yet Gissing never

33. G. GISSING, *On Battersea Bridge*, «Pall Mall Gazette» (30 Nov. 1883), p. 4.

34. R. DORMENT and M.F. MACDONALD, *James McNeill Whistler*, Tate, London 1994, pp. 120–39; K. LOCHNAN, ed., *Turner Whistler Monet*, Tate, London 2004, pp. 140–61.

35. R. DORMENT and M.F. MACDONALD, *op. cit.*, pp. 136–38; K. LOCHNAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–28.

36. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, p. 184; G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 213.

mentioned Whistler in his extant correspondence<sup>37</sup>, and we might imagine him on the side of Ruskin in the case of *The Falling Rocket*. In June 1880 Gissing enthusiastically commended Ruskin's first *Fiction — Fair and Foul* essay in «Nineteenth Century» to his brother. Three years later he read Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, and in February 1884 he told his sister, Margaret, that he was enjoying *Modern Painters* «vastly». The following week he either attended or read the reports of Ruskin's "Storm Clouds" lecture, which associated environmental problems with moral decline: «Strange sight, the old fellow standing up in the London Institution & rebuking his hearers like a Hebrew prophet!» Eight months on, and about to embark on *Isabel Clarendon*, he offered Algernon more reflections on *Modern Painters*: «a marvellous book, very technical in parts, but abounding in true Ruskinisms of thought & diction», although Gissing predictably disliked «its theological mode of regarding aesthetic questions»<sup>38</sup>.

Yet Gissing also subscribed to the idea of "art for art's sake", which Whistler embraced in his rebuttal of Ruskin, especially in his "Ten o'clock" lecture, first delivered in Prince's Hall, London, on 20 February 1885, about the time Gissing was engaged on the last volume of the original three-volume version of his novel. In a letter to Algernon in June 1884, Gissing observed:

When I am able to summon any enthusiasm at all, it is only for Art.  
— How I laughed the other day on recalling your amazement at my theories of Art for Art's sake! Well, I cannot get beyond it. Human

37. There is a passing reference to «Whistler, and etching, and so on» in Gissing's short story, *A Lodger in Maze Pond*, but that was not written until 1893.

38. J. RUSKIN, *Fiction — Fair and Foul*, «Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review», 7, 40 (June 1880), pp. 941–62, includes a discussion of Croxsted (sic) Lane, Dulwich, which finds echoes both in the opening pages of *Isabel Clarendon* and, much later, in Gissing's description of the Morgans' new home in Part IV, Chapter 2 of *In The Year of Jubilee* (1894). On Ruskin's "Storm Clouds" lecture, see B.J. DAY, *The Moral Intuition of Ruskin's 'Storm-Cloud'*, «Studies in English Literature», 45, 4 (2005), pp. 917–33, and D. MALTZ, "George Gissing as Thwarted Aesthete", *A Garland for Gissing*, cit., p. 205. For Gissing's comments, see G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 1, p. 280; vol. 2, pp. 134–35, 196, 197, 264.

life has little interest to me — on the whole — save as material for artistic presentation.<sup>39</sup>

And in *Isabel Clarendon*, following Kingcote, Isabel and the Meres sisters' visit to the Royal Academy, Hilda dismisses Isabel's disdain for *Market Night*, claiming that «she didn't look at it from an artistic point of view». When Hilda continues to explain that «Very likely it wasn't a pretty subject, but that has nothing to do with its merits as a picture», her father responds: «You are an advanced young lady. [...] Art for art's sake, eh<sup>40</sup>?».

Iredell Jenkins has discerned different targets for the rhetoric of “art for art's sake”: against the didacticism of those who thought art should teach morality; against a spirit of utility which required that everything must have a direct practical purpose; and against a slavery of subject–matter that looked «not at a picture, but *through* it», to the objects, scenes and events depicted<sup>41</sup>. In *Isabel Clarendon* Mr Meres's interpretation of Hilda's views employs the last of these alternatives. In *Workers*, Arthur was more concerned with the question of utility, oscillating between dedicating his life to art under the tutelage of Mr Gresham; rejecting art as «useless labour», «dependent upon the rich and proud» and feeling «utterly ashamed» of his former aspirations to be an artist; and then, under the influence of Helen, giving himself «henceforth solely to art». Despite Helen's commitment to the cause of social and educational improvement in the East End, she urges Arthur to pursue art that has a «higher and nobler existence» than the «sordid cares and miseries» of everyday life<sup>42</sup>.

39. Ivi, vol. 2, p. 223.

40. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 241.

41. I. JENKING, «Art for Art's Sake», *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Studies*, vol. 1, ed. P.P. Wiener, Scribner, New York 1974, pp. 108–10. On Gissing, art and aesthetics, see D. GRYLLES, *The Paradox of Gissing*, Allen & Unwin, London 1986, pp. 56–58, 69–73; D. MALTZ, *Practical Aesthetics and Decadent Rationale in George Gissing*, «Victorian Literature and Culture», 28, 1 (2000), pp. 55–71.

42. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., pp. 265, 316, 475–76, 497.

I have already noted the space of the artist's studio, where Kingcote first sees Gabriel's paintings, the space of Burlington House, where *Market Night* is subsequently displayed, and the space of Tollady's shop window, where illustrated papers are displayed and where, subsequently, Gresham's self-absorbed attention is caught by seeing Arthur's copy of his own work, a painting of a scene from *Cymbeline*. But there are numerous other spaces in which art is encountered in *Isabel Clarendon* and *Workers in the Dawn*. A variety of old masters decorate the walls of Mrs Clarendon's dining room at Knightswell, including a Veronese, a Ruysdael and a Greuze, all «taken with the house from the preceding occupants». Their only function is to signify status, wealth and taste. In practice, they merely confirm that Mr Clarendon had been «a *novus homo*» whose family possessed no art of their own. The only picture that captures Kingcote's attention is a portrait of Mrs Clarendon herself, «painted probably at the time of her marriage, an excellent picture»<sup>43</sup>. Gissing was familiar with some striking portraits of female acquaintances: in February 1883 he had visited the Rossetti collection at the Academy «and being delighted beyond all utterance» had applied to Vernon Lushington, to whose children he was a tutor, to be permitted to see Rossetti's portrait of Mrs Lushington then on display at the Burlington Art Club<sup>44</sup>; and in May he commended «a fine portrait», really extraordinarily arresting, of Ethel Harrison, Frederic Harrison's wife, by William Blake Richmond, on display at the Grosvenor Gallery<sup>45</sup>.

Contrasting with the pretensions of Knightswell, the «small parlour» in the Vennings' modest East End home was decorated with «several pictures, all representing quiet country scenes»<sup>46</sup>. But if Mr Venning's choice of pictures made his room «truly

43. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., pp. 29, 98.

44. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 113, 116; A. CURTIS, «Gissing and the Lushingtons», *A Garland for Gissing*, cit., pp. 153–62.

45. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 135. For Richmond's painting see <http://goldenagepaintings.blogspot.com/2010/10/sir-william-blake-richmond-portrait-of.html>

46. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., pp. 361, 364.

home-like» to Arthur, Kingcote experiences the opposite sentiment when he visits rooms occupied by his newly widowed sister, Mary Jalland, in «the north end of Camden Town», where «the air seemed heavy with impurity»<sup>47</sup>. Kingcote is appalled by the art on the walls, which comprises:

Over the mantelpiece [...] a large water-colour portrait of a man in Volunteer uniform, the late Mr Jalland; elsewhere on the walls hung pictures such as are published at Christmas by the illustrated papers, several fine specimens of the British baby, framed in cheap gilding. But the crowning adornment of the room was the clock over the fireplace. The case was in the form of a very corpulent man, the dial-plate being set in the centre of his stomach.<sup>48</sup>

Gissing reports that Jalland's portrait was «faithful, for it had simply been copied from a photograph, to save the trouble of sittings, as the artist said»<sup>49</sup>. We sense the author's disapproval of this technique since, when Kingcote finds Mary new lodgings in Highgate, the «specimens of British infancy» are banished to the children's bedroom, and the living room is purged of *all* decoration<sup>50</sup>. But Jalland's portrait is rivalled in deceitfulness by the photographic portrait of the Rev. Whiffle, mass-produced to sell to admiring parishioners at St Abinadab's church fete; and by the tableau vivant of Adam and Eve in which Carrie earns her living<sup>51</sup>.

Not that Gissing was averse to all forms of copying or photography. Kingcote and Mary's new lodgings are in a house shared with «an engraver and his family, not intolerable beings»<sup>52</sup>. In *Workers* Arthur is first inspired by Helen showing him «a large volume of engravings» in her father's rectory

47. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 188.

48. Ivi, p. 190.

49. Ivi, p. 195.

50. Ivi, p. 201.

51. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., pp. 380–81, 558–59.

52. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 201.

at Bloomford<sup>53</sup>. Later, he imitates Tuck, the pavement artist, «chalkin' nastiness on walls an' floors», and then, under Mr Tollady's guidance, spends his time copying from prints in art books<sup>54</sup>. In *Isabel Clarendon* Meres's study has a «fine photograph» of Raphael's Sistine Madonna over the fireplace, «an ideal of womanhood and of maternity» which Meres himself had never known<sup>55</sup>. Gissing purchased etchings from a City dealer (1/6 each), and the May 1883 issue of «The Portfolio» which contained «3 plates after Rossetti; one an autotype, the others photographs», which he judged «very glorious» and «two magnificent etchings, — real, veritable etchings, each one at least worth the half-crown». In September 1884 he not only had «an etching of one of Rossetti's heads framed & hung» but also invested in «engravings of Raphael's Seven Cartoons for 3/6. They are two feet long by one broad, & in a very good state. Some day I will have them all framed»<sup>56</sup>.

Gissing's obsession with value for money is echoed by the operations of the art market in his novels. Gresham is offered £200 for his painting of his own daughter, while he pays five shillings for Arthur's «copy, and yet not a copy» of his own painting. Arthur's water-colour landscapes are quickly sold from the front window of a picture shop in Oxford Street «for prices which Arthur laughed at as extravagant»<sup>57</sup>. Gabriel had launched his career with water-colour sketches of boxers and racehorses, which «sold well, especially on Saturday night», from «an open stall in Hampstead Road». Ada is overjoyed to discover that she will be paid for *River Twilight*<sup>58</sup>.

53. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., p. 39.

54. Ivi, pp. 78, 117.

55. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 206.

56. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 117, 136, 256, 259. On «The Portfolio», which adopted a critical stance towards Ruskin, see J.F. CODELL, *Moderate Praise: The Contribution to Art Criticism of «The Portfolio»*, «Victorian Periodicals Review», 20, 3 (1987), pp. 83–93.

57. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., pp. 130, 167, 187.

58. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., pp. 226, 240–42.

But not all art is for public consumption. Arthur keeps his portfolio hidden away, especially his portrait of Helen which Tollady, ignorant of its existence, inadvertently reveals to her. Later, Carrie discovers the same portrait. To her, «every picture must be a likeness», so, when Arthur refuses to destroy it, that proves that «it was somebody»<sup>59</sup>. Helen hangs one of Arthur's drawings in the drawing-room of her Highbury cottage, «framed in a good light»<sup>60</sup>. Isabel gives Kingcote a portrait — a photographic vignette — as a token of her love, to be returned when love dies. She also claims for herself Ada's water-colour of Wood End, not for its quality, but because she associates it with Kingcote, who arrived in the village on the day when Ada painted it. She wants it «framed for the boudoir»<sup>61</sup>.

Some art *ought* to be kept private. In *Workers* Gresham paints a portrait of his daughter, Maud, and «seriously talks of sending it to the Academy». Maud is thrilled at the idea of being on public display, and suggests that her dressmakers should be charged «a handsome sum in return for the advertisement, having it stated in the catalogue by whom the dress was made»<sup>62</sup>. Later, Gresham proposes to paint Helen, *not* to exhibit at the Academy, but for his own gratification, to hang, ideally, over the mantelpiece in his studio<sup>63</sup>. These episodes intriguingly foreshadow events three years after publication of *Workers* when Mrs Lushington and her talented daughters, «painted in a group» in Arthur Hughes's *The Home Quartett*, were «to hang on the line at the Academy». Gissing reports, with some incredulity, Mrs Lushington's justification for this public exposure: «one wouldn't consent to this kind of thing but for the artist's sake»<sup>64</sup>!.

59. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., pp. 243–45, 395–96.

60. Ivi, p. 496.

61. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., pp. 187, 259.

62. G. GISSING, *Workers*, cit., p. 129.

63. Ivi, p. 215.

64. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 132–33.

Public art galleries are places for private diversion — Arthur and Kingcote both seek distraction from their troubles in solitary visits to museums and galleries, while Vincent Lacour uses the art gallery of the South Kensington Museum to flirt with Ada: «I should like you to come upstairs to the pictures. You really understand art; you can help me to appreciate the right things». Lacour's self-conscious presentation of himself constitutes a form of performance art: «His faculty for making himself and his circumstances a source of pathetic suggestion did in fact almost amount to artistic genius»<sup>65</sup>.

When Kingcote first sees Ada, he judges «that he had never seen a less pleasing girl». Halfway through the novel, Isabel shows him a photograph that reveals Ada as Mr Clarendon's daughter. But in the penultimate chapter our attention is drawn once more to Meres's photograph of Raphael's Sistine Madonna, endorsing Ada's decision to relinquish her inheritance and devote her life to writing: «Ada kept her eyes upon Raphael's Madonna. She could not see quite clearly, but the divine face was glowed around with halo, and seemed to smile»<sup>66</sup>. The truth of Raphael, even in photographic form, has triumphed; and the production and consumption of literary art — Kingcote reborn as bookseller, Vissian as collector, Meres as editor, Ada as author, and Gissing as painter of word pictures — has supplanted all contemporary forms of visual art.

65. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, cit., p. 108.

66. Ivi, pp. 7, 137, 291.



## Beyond the Aesthetics of Existence

*The Nether World* and the Negation of Art

EMANUELA ETTORRE\*

It might appear ironic to speak about artistic paradigms in connection with Gissing's *The Nether World*, a novel in which the notion of art appears to have been rejected in favour of a materialistic and unimaginative vision of reality centred on the principles of profit-making and on strategies for survival. This is, nevertheless, the starting point for this essay, whose aim is to demonstrate how some of Gissing's aesthetically talented characters are absorbed into the consumer society with which they are obliged to come to terms. By describing the figures of Sidney Kirkwood the jeweller and Bob Hewett the forger, Gissing clearly shows how the artist's ingenuity can either be converted into passive resignation or degenerate into a vulgar and punishable form of falsification. Sidney and Bob, who in different ways embody the gifted would-be artist, both struggle to pursue their artistic goals when confronted with the adversity of everyday life. The course of their existence reflects the impossibility of keeping alive the vital spark of imagination and resisting the brutal forces of society. From this perspective, *The Nether World* confirms Gissing's problematization of the conflict between materialistic necessity and idealistic yearning, while offering a representation of a world afflicted by the loss of axiological values, the degradation of art, and the cultural

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malaise of the time.

Both the novel's protagonists are initially endowed with an artistic sensibility whose outcomes are progressively doomed to collapse when confronting a society that annihilates and corrupts, as is the case with Sidney Kirkwood and his frustrated natural propensity for painting:

The boy had a noticeable turn for drawing and colouring; at ten years old, when (as often happened) his father took him for a Sunday in the country, he carried a sketch-book and found his delight in using it. Sidney was to be a draughtsman of some kind; perhaps an artist, if all went well. Unhappily things went the reverse of well.<sup>1</sup>

The dreadful unfolding of circumstances prevents Sidney from realizing his aspirations, and compels him to surrender to an irreversible social condition. In such a context, even his artistic drives end up by offering only an anodyne consolation: Sidney embodies the spirit of an artist who is inhibited by civilization and who, therefore, turns to a passive acceptance of life, abnegation and silence. Not even art can guarantee salvation in a world in which the idea of redemption makes no sense, and bleakness seems to be the only experienced condition of life. Art is incapable of stopping the unending process of degeneration within the "nether world" that progressively descends towards decadence and despair. However, Sidney's disillusionment as an artist is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when the narrator refers to his renewed but inevitably thwarted painterly impulses:

He lost his guiding interests, and found himself returning to those of boyhood. The country once more attracted him; he took out his old sketch-books, bought a new one, revived the regret that he could not be a painter of landscape. A visit to one or two picture-galleries, and then again profound discouragement, recognition of the fact that he was a mechanic and never could be anything else. It was the

1. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, ed. S. Gill, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992, p. 52.

end of his illusions. For him not even passionate love was to preserve the power of idealising its object.<sup>2</sup>

In a Schopenhauerian vein, desires become a kind of «fatal infection» and the world, to quote Terry Eagleton, «simply a futile craving, a grotesquely bad drama, an immense marketplace or Darwinian amphitheatre in which life-forms seek to crush the breath out of each other»<sup>3</sup>. The visit to the galleries reinforces Sidney's yearning for aesthetic knowledge which might provide the only alternative to the brutal forces of mechanization and commodification. But he soon realizes that he cannot belong to the world of art; such an awareness on the part of the protagonist is intertwined with the notion of reification that Gissing's novel manifestly brings to the fore — a process that annuls the potential of art to produce any aesthetic object. In this sense, the artistic object can only testify to its functional value, which denies the self-sufficiency of art and the ensuing pleasure of aesthetic contemplation.

In Gissing's worldview art is often related to the products of consumer society and to the laws of the market, fundamentally based on the principles of profitability; it is no accident therefore that Bob Hewett and Sidney Kirkwood, although with different modalities, express their artistic inclination through the manufacturing of what, for Hannah Arendt, belongs to the sphere of «utilitarian instrumentalism»<sup>4</sup>: casting golden medals and making jewels can be defined as an attempt to reinforce, if not establish the value of gold and therefore of money as a site of absolute value. And, as Simon J. James puts it, «Although money may not be a reliable signifier of value, it is, worryingly, perhaps the only one in a material world that is undergoing a

2. Ivi, p. 58.

3. T. EAGLETON, *The Meaning of Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 94.

4. H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1998, p. 174.

relentless commodification»<sup>5</sup>.

Within the realm of the nether world, urban desolation and thirst for money become the main hermeneutic indexes that inexorably place Clerkenwell at or beyond the margins of any moral and aesthetic principles. The dysphoric implications of an aggressive, greedy and money-oriented society are reflected in the impossibility of indulging in fantasies and desires. Considering the psychological and behavioural codes represented in the novel, we can say that the social context of the nether world negates much that is intrinsic or necessary to the work of the artist: the aspiration to solitude, the prospect of hope and the creative function of imagination. This annihilation of all the idealistic and aesthetic drives, while expressing a practical attitude towards existence, ultimately leads the protagonist to a frustrated and barren life. Sidney is almost compelled to refrain from desiring, to stop rebelling, and therefore accept life without any amelioration:

The spirit of revolt often enough stirred within him, but no longer found utterance in the speech which brings relief; he did his best to dispel the mood, mocking at it as folly. Consciously he set himself the task of *becoming a practical man*, of learning to make the best of life as he found it [. . .] Who was he that he should look for pleasant things in his course through the world? “We are the lower orders; we are the working classes,” he said bitterly to his friend, and that seemed the final answer to all his aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

The premises of the artist are inevitably doomed to vanish, and the would-be artist has to surrender before the evidence that the “practicalities of living” will repress his idealizing spirit or rebellious impulse. As a result, Sidney will finally abandon all hopes and aesthetic illusions in order to reduce suffering and survive in a cruel environment. Sidney’s need to adapt to a lower and less complex form of life — a life of practical

5. S.J. JAMES, *Unsettled Accounts. Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing*, Anthem Press, London 2003, p. 28.

6. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, cit. p. 58, my italics.

need rather than artistic ambition — is also an illustration of a degenerative vision of the Darwinian “survival of the fittest”, a sort of evolutionary “progress” gone into reverse. Sidney’s delight in art and the natural world unfits him for life in the slums. His making jewels for an invisible upper world is a sort of alienated labour, in which the worker’s activity is the loss of himself:

He had no liking for his craft, and being always employed upon the meaningless work which is demanded by the rich vulgar, he felt such work to be paltry and ignoble; but there seemed no hope of obtaining better, and he made no audible complaint. His wages were considerably more than he needed, and systematically he put money aside each week.

But this orderly existence concealed conflicts of heart and mind which Sidney himself could not have explained, could not lucidly have described.<sup>7</sup>

Gissing’s personal investment in the value of literary creation is not different from Sidney’s talent as a draughtsman: both are reduced to helpless spectators of a world which seems incapable of any change.

Even the manufacturing process of gold, far from representing the appeal of the artistic method, engenders a process based on the tenets of profitability and the ephemeral effects of consumerism. Most significantly, Sidney Kirkwood is thus described when he is intent on working gold: «This was a dark day with him. The gold he handled stung him to hatred and envy, and every feeling which he had resolved to combat as worse than profitless»<sup>8</sup>. The semantic correspondence between the most destructive of human feelings and gold emphasizes the symbolic relevance of the episode and clarifies Sidney’s compromised position as a craftsman: all he can now perceive is a detestable activity that, having lost its value for promoting artistic work beyond consumer sales marketing, is ultimately

7. Ivi, p. 57.

8. Ivi, p. 59.

bound to the mystifying principles of profit. If seen from this perspective, the artistic object is deprived of its real essence, of its «autonomous intention»<sup>9</sup>, and is conceived of in terms of its commercial worth. However, the work of art's defining essence should be that of uselessness, as Hannah Arendt states while defining an artistic object:

Objects which are strictly without any utility whatsoever [...] are unique, are not exchangeable and therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money; if they enter the exchange market, they can only be arbitrarily priced. Moreover, the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not "using" it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use object to attain its proper place in the world. By the same token, it must be removed from the exigencies and wants of daily life, with which it has less contact than any other thing.<sup>10</sup>

Arendt's concern for the object of art *per se* does not seem to correspond to the logic of Gissing's would-be artists, whose frustration derives from the impossibility of refusing the functional utility of the artistic object, and consequently, from the incapacity to recognize the quintessential element of the work of art, that is its singularity — a singularity whose accomplishment is paradoxically bound to the mercantile mechanisms and the implacable logic of the market. As a craftsman, Sidney is a slave to the economies of scale insofar as profit is directly proportional to the quantity that is produced and sold.

9. R. WILLIAMS, *Culture*, Fontana Press, Glasgow 1981, p. 122.

10. H. ARENDT, cit., p. 167. It should be noted here that an artistic object like a sword, a chair or a tool could be beautiful as well as useful, but use and/or profit should never be the definitive goals of art. In Arendt's vision, the discourse on the "uselessness" of the art object is counterbalanced by the idea of permanence it inevitably entails. In this perspective the philosopher observes: «works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent purpose — as the purpose of a chair is actualized when it is sat upon — can only destroy them. Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages» (*ibidem*).

The great paradox of this novel is that in order to reach a state of economic security and social independence the artist is compelled to produce and sell as many works of art as he can. By associating and legitimating art with money, Gissing definitely condemns the former to failure. Such an outcome results in a frustrated condition on the part of the protagonist who, at the end of the novel, will be explicitly recognized in terms of anonymity: «He with the ambitions of his youth frustrated; *neither an artist, nor a leader of men in the battle for justice*. [...] Unmarked, unencouraged save by [...] love of uprightness and mercy, [he] stood by the side of those more hapless [...]»<sup>11</sup>.

Even though Sidney complies with the necessity of becoming a “practical man”, he is torn between the appeal of being productive and the urges of his artistic nature. This latter aesthetic drive cannot but generate contempt for the vulgarity of the working classes and isolate the protagonist from the ordinariness of the slums. Therefore, Sidney often expresses his natural aversion to the masses, to the vulgar habits of the lower classes and the places they generally patronize: «Kirkwood was irritated by the conversation and laughter that fell on his ears, irritated by the distant strains of the band, irritated above all by the fume of frying that pervaded the air for many yards about Mrs. Tubbs’s precincts»<sup>12</sup>. His «fit of disgust» when visiting Mrs. Tubbs’s restaurant is a natural reaction of the protagonist who, though devoted to the causes of the poor, is often repelled by the squalor of their lives. What Sidney expresses can be partly compared to the Decadent desire of the artist who is willing to detach himself from bourgeois constraints and conventions and to find a sort of stability in a self-imposed isolation from the others. While expressing the «fear of undifferentiation [...] as fear of engulfment by the mass, of external invasion by barbarian hordes»<sup>13</sup>, Gissing’s artistically talented characters try

11. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, cit., pp. 391–92, my italics.

12. Ivi, p. 31.

13. R. GAGNIER, *The Insatiability of Human Wants. Economics and Aesthetics in*

to build for themselves secure social boundaries in order to achieve «the psychological condition of decadents, for whom art is the only space — a tiny, safe space — of freedom»<sup>14</sup>.

What Gissing emphasizes in *The Nether World* is an intellectual snobbishness and a form of social intolerance which are expressed, to use Regenia Gagnier's words, through the «fear of the freedom of Others», that is to say, «of working-class Others»<sup>15</sup>. Not even charity can be recognized as an appropriate form of compensation for the wretched and, as the narrator observes when referring to the most miserable individuals who hope to be relieved by philanthropic projects: «Of all forms of insolence there is none more flagrant than that of the degraded poor receiving charity which they have come to regard as a right»<sup>16</sup>. Here Gissing overtly expresses his fear of loss of class boundaries; at the same time he tries to reinforce the confines of the self through the figure of an artist who defies society, who often subverts social conformism and ethical precepts.

Through the textualization of the artist Gissing develops an ambivalent structural paradigm that brings into relation the social and the aesthetic domains. As in other novels, even in *The Nether World* Gissing fails to resolve the issue he raises while opening up his text to different possibilities and unconventional perspectives. In a growing process of social degeneration, the only escape from squalor that Gissing envisages seems to be represented by the artistic model, but at the same time, art can degenerate and become one of the «criminal practices»<sup>17</sup>, as is the case with Bob Hewett. The figure of the artist, in its

*Market Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2000, p. 147.

14. Ivi, p. 148. Regenia Gagnier's main concern is to explore the functions of the aesthetic categories within specific material conditions and social relations. She therefore observes: «What kinds of aesthetic knowledge provide alternatives to the forces of brutalization, mechanization, or commodification? What are the pragmatics or practical functions, of aesthetics in everyday life, in this case in modern market society?» (Ivi, p. 146).

15. Ivi, p. 152.

16. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, cit., p. 253.

17. Ivi, p. 333.

ambivalent representations, testifies to the author's difficulties in dealing with the unresolved contradictions of his time and, in Carol Bernstein's words, «afford a deeper glimpse into that heart of darkness that was at once the nineteenth-century slum and the problematic of an urban fiction»<sup>18</sup>.

In this very context we can place the character of Bob Hewett who seems to correspond to the type of the rebellious would-be-artist whose passions and unprincipled behaviour destabilize the rigid trajectories of the life of the slums. Accordingly, his artistic propensities and manifest eccentricity often come to the fore in the course of the novel: «Bob's temperament was, in a certain measure, that of the artist; he felt without reasoning; he let himself go whither his moods propelled him»<sup>19</sup>, and even his habit of sharing a room with a fellow-workman «was great extravagance, obviously»<sup>20</sup>, the extravagance of the artist whose «self-conceit was supreme»<sup>21</sup> and whose forms of «lovemaking, under whatever circumstances, always took the form of genial banter *de haut en bas*»<sup>22</sup>.

In this respect, the narrator's task seems to be that of foregrounding the artistic proclivities of his protagonist; he often has a sympathetic engagement with Bob Hewett, thus justifying, or at least recognizing his deplorable behaviour as the inevitable product of a miserable society. Bob's artistic inclinations are further investigated so that he comes to represent the potential artist as an amoral but fascinating individual. Self-confident and arrogant, Bob is endowed with a peculiar sensibility, an unscrupulous consciousness which enables him to stand outside law and order. Impermeable to human affections, he is often at odds with the rest of humanity, and

18. C.L. BERNSTEIN, *The Celebration of Scandal. Towards the Sublime in Victorian Urban Fiction*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania 1991, p. 80.

19. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, cit., p. 218.

20. Ivi, p. 21.

21. Ivi, p. 35.

22. Ivi, pp. 35–36.

apparently unable to show any obligation towards society, or guilt for his behaviour:

Here is *a man with no moral convictions*, with no conscious relations to society save those which are hostile, with no personal affections [. . .]. It is suggested to him all at once that there is a very easy way of improving his circumstances, and that by exercise of a certain craft with which he is perfectly familiar; only, the method happens to be criminal. 'Men who do this kind of thing are constantly being caught and severely punished. Yes; men of a certain kind; not Robert Hewett. Robert Hewett is altogether *an exceptional being; he is head and shoulders above the men* with whom he mixes; he is *clever*, he is remarkably *good-looking*. If anyone in this world, of a truth Robert Hewett may reckon on impunity when he sets his wits against the law. Why, his arrest and punishment is an altogether inconceivable thing; he never in his life had a charge brought against him.<sup>23</sup>

Bob Hewett is an artist in the sense that he plays with a fictitious reality; his capacity for deception does not make him morally detestable but endows him with a superior capacity for invention and manipulation. As a forger he tries to escape from the slavery of his social condition and from the yoke of a massified culture; as a figure of dissent, Bob rejects the conventional role society commonly assigns to slumland inhabitants. But the destabilizing effects of his actions make him a victim of a deterministic worldview which compels him to surrender. Therefore, death is the inevitable consequence of the life of an insensitive and 'monstrous' individual who gradually loses faith, affections and family<sup>24</sup>. The justification for Bob's hideous actions is to be found in the

23. Ivi, pp. 217–18, my italics.

24. «The man was conscious of his degradation; he knew how he had fallen ever since he began criminal practices; he knew the increasing *hopelessness of his resolves to have done with dangers and recover his peace of mind*. The loss of his daily work, in consequence of irregularity, was the last thing needed to complete his ruin. He did not even try to get new employment, feeling that such a show of *honest purpose was useless*. Corruption was eating to his heart; from every interview with Clem he came away a feebler and a baser being. And upon the unresisting creature who shared his home he had begun to expend the fury of his self-condemnation.

deficiencies of the slums with respect to education, art and social control, in a word, in a hostile suburban environment with which Gissing (and most of his characters) never fully succeeded in coming to terms:

Should it happen that you possess nothing, and that your education in metaphysics has been grievously neglected, the strong probability is, that your mind will reduce the principle of society to its naked formula: Get, by whatever means, so long as with impunity. On that formula Bob Hewett was brooding [. . .]. And to a foregone result.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst taking a share of the meal, Bob brought a small box on to the table; it had a sliding lid and inside were certain specimens of *artistic work* with which he was wont to amuse himself when tired of roaming the streets in jovial company. [. . .] His daily work at die-sinking had of course supplied him with this suggestion, and he still found pleasure in work of the same kind. In days before commercialism had divorced art and the handicrafts, a man with Bob's distinct faculty would have found encouragement to exercise it for serious ends; as it was, he remained at the semi-conscious stage with regard to his own aptitudes, and cast leaden medals just as a way of occupying his hands when a couple of hours hung heavy on them.<sup>26</sup>

What the narrator represents in *The Nether World* is an unruly and isolated artist who self-consciously forges his distinctive identity while reflecting his disappointment with society and its restrictive and restricted ethical codes. Gissing's novel seems to engender the typical *fin-de-siècle* dichotomy of Art versus Morality as it brings to the fore the figure of an artist

He hated her [. . .]. As she moved painfully about the room he watched her with cruel, dangerous eyes. [. . .] He had horrible impulses, twitches along his muscles; [. . .] he leapt up and sprang on her, seized her brutally by the shoulders and flung her with all his force against the nearest wall. [. . .] With his clenched fist he dealt blow after blow at the half-prostrate woman, speaking no word, but uttering a strange sound, such as might come from some infuriate animal» (Ivi, pp. 333–34, my italics).

25. Ivi, p. 217.

26. Ivi, p. 214, my italics.

who conceives for himself a wicked reality and an unorthodox pattern of conduct.

The only chance offered to Bob Hewett is a conception of art founded on the celebration of counterfeiting. His abandonment to forgery makes artistic activities illicit, thus conducting him to self-annihilation. In the “nether world”, both Sidney and Bob evolve and become two unconscious mechanisms, but their inventiveness falls away and they inevitably progress towards anonymity. Bob is totally indifferent to the effects of his actions and to the existence of others. Not even art can therefore guarantee the source of ethical values, an authentic morality that takes into account the dual aspects of man’s existence as an individual and as a social being. Art degenerates into nothingness (Sidney) or into counterfeiting (Bob). In Gissing’s world the idea of morality as obedience to a code of actions has already disappeared, but the tragedy of man resides in his further incapacity to search for an aesthetics of existence.

# *The Hope of Pessimism*

Philosophy and Fiction

ROGER MILBRANDT\*

*The Hope of Pessimism* — George Gissing’s only philosophical essay — was written at 17 Oakley Crescent where Gissing had moved on 13 September 1882. Its twenty–eight manuscript pages were likely written rather hurriedly for Gissing’s first reference to the text occurs in a letter of 20 September and on 6 October he tells his brother Algernon «[t]he pessimistic article is finished»<sup>1</sup>.

As he began *The Hope of Pessimism*, Gissing may have regarded it as an attempt to familiarize English readers with the writings of Schopenhauer — of whom he said in the 20 September letter the article would be “redolent” — and he anticipated submitting the completed work to either «The Nineteenth Century» or «The Fortnightly Review». However, while the completed article warmly commends Schopenhauer’s pessimism, most of it consists of a corrosive reflection on what Gissing calls here “the Religion of Humanity”. Gissing elsewhere calls this religion “the emotional side” of Positivism and in the 6 October letter he reverts to the latter term as he regrets that the essay has become «nothing more nor less than an attack on

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1. G. GISSING, “To Algernon”, from 17 Oakley Crescent, Chelsea S. W., 20 Sept. 1882, Manuscript and Archives Division, The New York Public Library; G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 2, p. 103.

Positivism»<sup>2</sup>. Feeling that the aforementioned journals would decline publication and fearing to offend his patron, Frederic Harrison, whose writings had ignited the now-extinguished flame of his enthusiasm for Positivism, Gissing determined against submission. The article, accordingly, did not become available to the public until 1970 when Pierre Coustillas included it in *George Gissing: Essays and Fiction*.

Hitherto, *The Hope of Pessimism* has received rather little attention from Gissing scholars, owing no doubt to its sometimes opaque and often tortuous style and its incommensurability with other Gissing texts. Such attention as it has received has been motivated primarily by the hope that it will provide a partial explanation for the fiction that surrounds it. Jacob Korg finds in this essay «a key both to Gissing's convictions and to the many problems of his novels»<sup>3</sup>; Markus Neacey asserts that the «essay derives its importance today, in the context of Gissing's career, from the fact that it sets out the philosophy which permeates Gissing's novels beginning with *The Unclassed*»<sup>4</sup>. Pierre Coustillas regards the essay as an early manifestation of the «undercurrent of Schopenhauerian thoughts and attitudes in Gissing's most characteristic works»<sup>5</sup>.

However, the probability of finding in *The Hope of Pessimism* any kind of explanatory code for the interpretation of the fiction that surrounds it is limited by two conspicuous factors. First, most of the text — approximately the first two-thirds — is a recantation of Gissing's earlier adherence to the “Religion of Humanity”. This portion tells us only what Gissing once believed — and likely believed rather tentatively. Second, the affirmative portion of the essay — the final third wherein Gissing

2. Ivi, pp. 14, 103.

3. J. KORG, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, The University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA 1963, p. 52.

4. M. NEACEY, *The Hope of Pessimism and the Will to Live in The Unclassed*, «The Gissing Journal», 34, 1, Jan. 1998, p. 10.

5. P. COUSTILLAS, “Introduction”, *George Gissing: Essays & Fiction*, ed. P. Coustillas, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 1970, p. 23.

endorses the pessimism of Schopenhauer — is so extreme in its conclusions and so melodramatic in its presentation as to seem rather like the manifestation of a temporary and disturbed mental state than the articulation of a settled world-view likely to be applicable to Gissing's novels. Although we can draw some valid inferences about some of Gissing's enduring attitudes through a judicious reading of the essay, it provides nothing of a grammar for the interpretation of Gissing's fiction.

While there is little to be gained through attempting to read Gissing's fiction in the flickering light of the "philosophy" adumbrated in *The Hope of Pessimism*, there is much to be learned through examining the latter in the light — not of Gissing's fiction — but of his vocation as a fiction-writer. For the notion proposed by Morley Roberts that fiction was not Gissing's natural *métier*, that he was by nature a discursive writer deformed by market forces into a reluctant and self-alienated author of fictions is nowhere so thoroughly discredited as in this — the most ambitious piece of discursive writing from the early stage of Gissing's career. To anticipate my argument briefly, when we examine the rhetorical strategies of *The Hope of Pessimism* we find that, as Gissing set out to examine an important set of philosophical issues, his first care was to establish a setting within which the conceptual contestation might transpire, that his inclination to co-ordinate ideas with narrative was very strong, that he instinctively enlivened the exposition with fictional rather than historical characters, and that he secures his effect through emotionally compelling scenes, not through rationally convincing arguments. In fact, to the extent that *The Hope of Pessimism* provides any kind of key for the reading of Gissing's fiction, we will find that key in the rhetorical strategies with which Gissing's philosophical positions are advanced rather than the philosophical positions themselves.

It is worth noting at the outset that the issue of his literary vocation had not yet been resolved as Gissing set out to write this essay in September of 1882. Since settling in London in late 1877, he had published one novel and three short stories and

had recently submitted a new novel, “Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies”, to Smith, Elder. However, he had had to publish *Workers in the Dawn* at his own expense and on 20 September — very likely just before he began composition of *The Hope of Pessimism* — he learned that the Smith, Elder reader regarded “Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies” as «too painful to please the ordinary novel reader»<sup>6</sup>. In the meantime, Gissing had published three articles on socialism in the «Pall Mall Gazette» and was about to complete the last of the eight articles he was to write for the Russian journal «Vyestnik Evropy». Having by now lost more than £100 through the publication of fiction while earning more than £70 through non-fictional writings, Gissing must certainly have wondered about the economic viability of a life devoted to fiction. Furthermore, Gissing may have begun to ask himself whether fiction was his native bent. As he began *The Hope of Pessimism*, he told Algernon he was planning to write articles on Johann Heinrich Jung and on Sir Thomas Browne; upon completing the essay, he tells his brother: «I feel more inclination at present to write in this abstract way than to go on embodying theories in fiction»<sup>7</sup>.

It is mildly surprising that none of these non-fictional projects were undertaken and that Gissing would wait fifteen years and write a dozen novels before (in 1897) writing his next substantial piece of non-fiction: *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that, although *The Hope of Pessimism* is written in “an abstract way”, it comes nearer to “embodying theories in fiction” than Gissing was likely aware. However, before considering the fictional features of the essay, it is essential to summarize, “in an abstract way”, its thought content.

The essay is comprised of three quite distinct parts (although there are no formal divisions). In the first of these, Gissing coyly posits the “Religion of Humanity” as a belief system worthy of

6. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, cit., vol. 2, p. 99.

7. Ivi, p. 103.

serious consideration in an age in which traditional faiths are no longer intellectually viable. In the second, longest and most cogent part of the essay, Gissing identifies what he considers the two central assumptions of the Religion of Humanity, subjects both to devastating assault, and concludes that this new persuasion will not achieve a wide or enduring adherence. The last stretch of the essay proposes that Schopenhauer's pessimism is humanity's best hope for a tolerable future, as it will encourage human beings to pity one another as fellow victims in an absurd and heartless universe.

The first part of the essay requires little comment. Gissing takes it for granted that «knowledge of the absolute is incompatible with the conditions of our being» and that, accordingly, the old faiths based on a belief in the supernatural are «passing away without hope of restoration to the hearts and consciences of men»<sup>8</sup>. The Religion of Humanity, he says, merits serious attention because it is the only extant belief system which provides a viable set of ethics while frankly accepting the current intellectual conditions.

Gissing begins the second part of the essay by asserting that the Religion of Humanity is based on the two following assumptions: that the metaphysical instinct will be permanently eradicated from human kind; and that the extinction of the metaphysical instinct and the attendant triumph of agnosticism, by confining human attention on the things of this world, will lead to altruism. He energetically disputes both of these assumptions.

The first of these assumptions, Gissing asserts, is based on the naive belief that the agnostic phase through which science is currently passing is certain to be permanent. Philosophic orientations, he points out, are not hereditary: if they were we would all adhere to some form of fetishism. Nor is it certain that scientists will always be agnostic. Indeed, as scientific ad-

8. G. GISSING, *The Hope of Pessimism*, in G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, ed. P. Coustillas, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2015, pp. 81, 80.

vances bring us nearer to the barriers of the unknowable, it is possible that future scientists, “Faust-like”, will revolt against the triviality of their achievement and carry science itself to a metaphysical turn<sup>9</sup>. Finally, Gissing indicates, agnosticism is an orientation especially susceptible to self-destruction. By encouraging us to learn more about the world and to regard it «objectively, in the philosophic spirit», it guarantees the constant resurgence of an existential wonder which will sustain and even intensify the metaphysical instinct<sup>10</sup>.

The other base of the Religion of Humanity identified by Gissing is the belief agnosticism will call into being an unprecedented and world-transforming altruism. He describes this assumption with eloquent lucidity:

When we have ceased, — it is urged — to peer into the clouds after impossible explanations of our being; when we have convinced ourselves of the purely natural sanctions of morality; when we have learned to regard the earth as our true and only home, and one capable of being made delightful to all creatures; then, and not till then, will our hearts overflow with the single love of Humanity, and “to live for others” be recognized as at once the noblest moral theory and the highest practical blessedness.<sup>11</sup>

Gissing offers two reasons for believing that agnosticism will not lead to altruism. Secularist though he was, Gissing firmly agrees with orthodox theology’s claim that human beings will not behave decently unless they are deterred from vice by the threat of divine punishment and lured into virtue by the promise of heavenly reward. But Gissing has another, more original and more revealing reason for believing that agnosticism will neither guarantee nor even encourage altruism. In the future that he imagines, social and economic inequalities will become increasingly more pronounced. The already debilitating problem of «how to make the food of two keep three

9. Ivi, p. 87.

10. Ivi, p. 89.

11. Ivi, p. 85.

alive» will become yet more importunate<sup>12</sup>. If the metaphysical dimension of our being disappears utterly, if we see this world and its components as the only things of value we will ever encounter, we are certain, Gissing supposes, to become more graspingly egotistical than ever.

Since he believes the Religion of Humanity to be the «last stronghold of philosophical optimism», Gissing can claim in the last portion of the essay that with its demise pessimism will secure universal adherence<sup>13</sup>. He distinguishes two levels of pessimism. Pessimism of the first level is characterized by an awareness that «the world is synonymous with evil», that life is but a «feverish combat» and the human body «a house of torment, and the seat of lusts which obscure the soul»<sup>14</sup>. Pessimism of this kind, Gissing indicates, is traditional. It is central to two major religious traditions — Buddhism and Christianity — and has been a powerful undercurrent of popular culture for centuries. But there is a second, metaphysical, level of pessimism which is truly modern and, to Gissing, more precious. It is a pessimism only possible in the wake of the intellectual discreditation of revealed religion and the certain demise of the agnostic Religion of Humanity. In the ambience that succeeds these departures, those who ask the ultimate philosophical questions will eventually become aware that these will never be answered, even on that day «when the last human soul has ceased to dash itself against the barriers of the unknowable, and the last prayer from human lips has wasted itself upon the unpitiful void, and the great tragedy will have found its close»<sup>15</sup>. The boundless pathos accompanying this realization will nourish an immense self-pity in which, Gissing says, we must find our salvation.

Suppose all men so far intellectually trained as to be capable of

12. Ivi, p. 93.

13. Ivi, p. 82.

14. Ivi, p. 95.

15. Ivi, p. 97.

fully and intensely realizing the pathos of the human lot, the deeper pathos which goes so much beyond our every-day griefs, and indeed gives to such their significance, — were it not inevitable that their souls should be forthwith possessed by an overpowering mutual pity?<sup>16</sup>

The prevalence of this mutual pity would cause us to see each other as fellow victims, not as competitors. It would spell the end of the system of “competitive greed” and give dignity to human behaviour in the grey denouement of the human saga. It will as well, Gissing states, nourish the recognition that sex is the essential sin because it results in the generation of unhappy creatures, leading to a final consummation in which «a childless race will dedicate its breath to the eternal silence, and Mercy will have redeemed the world»<sup>17</sup>.

As will often be the case in his major novels, Gissing begins *The Hope of Pessimism* by positing a “solution” which will be ultimately subsumed, after a process of relentless interrogation, by the problematic from which it emerges. The “solution”, here, is the Religion of Humanity which, as it is presented in the first few pages of the essay, appears to settle a grave and urgent contemporary problem. The problem of course is that, while advances in human knowledge have made Christianity intellectually untenable, the emotional and social needs to which Christianity had once effectively ministered still remain. The credentials Gissing attributes to the Religion of Humanity lead one to think it will be equal to the challenge. It is enlightened, he indicates, based on the «solid-seeming accretions of human knowledge» and creatively cognizant of new scientific developments, even to the point of extracting from the doctrine of evolution «a principle of beatitude»<sup>18</sup>. It has also a populist side, finding a philosophic sufficiency in the «uncon-

16. Ivi, pp. 97–98.

17. Ivi, p. 100.

18. Ivi, p. 81.

scious optimism of the common man»<sup>19</sup>. Finally, although new it is also traditional, as its ethic makes «its supreme appeal to what has ever been confessed the noblest of man's instincts, that of self-forgetfulness in devotion to others' good»<sup>20</sup>.

As we have already seen, however, the remainder of *The Hope of Pessimism* consists of a vigorous attack on what Gissing asserts are the principal assumptions of the new religion, followed by a moving extolment of an ostentatiously antithetical philosophical orientation: Schopenhauer's pessimism.

The organizational structure we observe here — a hopeful salute to a promising solution followed by a remorseless interrogation — is a structure, as I noted above, that we often see in the Gissing novels currently most widely read. Perhaps the most obvious example is *Demos*. In this — Gissing's "story of English socialism" — the late Victorian "social problem" seems to have been solved in the opening chapters of the novel when the intelligent and articulate working man, Richard Mutimer, inherits a prosperous iron works and resolves to conduct it on "socialist principles". By the novel's end, the "solution" is devoured by the greed, snobbery, avarice and class antagonism it was intended to dispel. *New Grub Street*, Gissing's classic study of the debilitating effects of the commercial market upon literary artistic integrity, presents us at the outset with the embodied solution of the central contradiction of the novel: Edwin Reardon has achieved commercial success through the composition and publication of novels which involved no compromise of his artistic standards. Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot appear, at the commencement of *The Odd Women*, to have solved the problem labeled in their novel's title through the training school they operate which equips unmarried women for office work. Furthermore, it appears at the outset that Everard Barfoot's advanced and enlightened philosophy of sexual relations will enable Rhoda to find personal happiness in a quasi-marriage

19. Ivi, p. 80.

20. Ivi, p. 81.

that will preserve her personal freedom. By the novel's end, the recidivism of Monica Madden and Bella Royston coupled with Everard's retreat into convention bring the initial solution into doubt.

While the pattern noted here — an early enthusiasm that is soon depleted — is not a specifically fictional pattern, it is worth noting at this point because the link it establishes between *The Hope of Pessimism* and Gissing's fiction is structural rather than thematic. When we observe, within this over-arching structure, the specific rhetorical strategies with which Gissing discredits the Religion of Humanity and valorizes pessimism, we find features that all readers agree are integral to fiction but not to discursive prose.

The first of these is setting. In the letter of 6 October already cited, Gissing referred to this essay as a work of «philosophico-social speculation»<sup>21</sup>. This characterization is both accurate and helpful, for Gissing's adjudication of the «struggle between optimism and pessimism for the possession of man's soul» makes no attempt to disentangle philosophical contestation itself from the social milieu in which the contestation will transpire<sup>22</sup>.

Gissing assumes the contestation will occur in conditions which are an intensification of those currently prevailing and he characterizes the latter as «the union of the highest degree of civilization yet attained with the most flagrant social misery the world has ever seen»<sup>23</sup>. He goes on to stress the viciousness that this milieu instills and the complacency with which it is defended:

The motto of our time is: Every man for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost. We will not listen to any of your socialistic nonsense, not we; let every man fight his way through life as best he can, one up, another down. The competitive system, depend upon it, is the

21. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, cit., vol. 2, p. 103.

22. G. GISSING, *The Hope of Pessimism*, cit., p. 82.

23. Ivi, p. 91.

grandest outcome of civilization.<sup>24</sup>

The foreseeable future, Gissing supposes, will see a magnification of the evils of the late Victorian order and the disappearance of whatever redeeming features it could boast. Already, he says, we see «the struggle for mere existence becomes daily more and more all-absorbing» but to understand the future, he implores us,

imagine the intensifying through another generation or two of the social strife which every day grows more bitter; imagine wealth accumulated in the hands of yet fewer capitalists, and the immense majority toiling desperately for mere subsistence.<sup>25</sup>

This, then — a world of growing scarcity and increasing competitiveness — is Gissing’s far-from-neutral setting for the contestation between the optimism of the Religion of Humanity and the pessimism of Schopenhauer. As we have seen, one of Gissing’s central reservations about the Religion of Humanity concerns its claim that the elimination of our metaphysical inclinations would lead to an era of unprecedented altruism. Gissing’s counterclaim that in a thoroughly agnostic world human beings will become more insensitively egotistical than ever derives much of its force from the associated assumption that the social order in which the tenets of the Religion of Humanity are to be tested will be one of desperate and ruthless competitiveness. The setting of this work of “philosophico-social speculation” is not an idle backdrop: it is a decisive participant. Indeed, John Goode’s insistence that «Gissing demands a materialist analysis» because he uses ideas “locationally” is at least as well supported by this essay as by any other Gissing text<sup>26</sup>.

24. Ivi, p. 93.

25. Ivi, pp. 89, 92.

26. J. GOODE, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, Barnes & Noble, New York 1979, p. 48.

Within this setting, Gissing sketches a series of events which could be considered a fictional plot. The first of these is an intellectual event which combines an enhanced understanding of the external world with an increased philosophical self-consciousness. Since «[k]nowledge of the absolute is incompatible with the conditions of our being», Gissing sees this vector of the human future culminating in a devastating nescience in which cultivated people realize that «they know nothing save that they are miserable»<sup>27</sup>. The next event is a socio-economic one: as wealth is concentrated in fewer hands and as the impotence of a purely humanistic ethic becomes evident, the aforementioned intellectual distemper will be weighted with a material misery and moral chaos that will achieve the nadir of the human project. This will spell the end of every optimistic philosophy and restore humankind to the pessimistic estimate of human life to which, he tells us, «the wisest of all ages» have always borne witness<sup>28</sup>. The pessimism of the future, though, will be more absolute than any previous pessimism because advances in human knowledge have permanently discredited the consolation of religious faith. As we have already observed, Gissing foresees a final phase in which our compassion for our fellow sufferers will extend itself to the unborn.

Besides providing us with a quite vividly realized setting and a simple plot, Gissing offers us minimal characters in the form of allegorized labels for proponents of various world-views. Some of these characters are highly generic: the two principal of these being “the mass of mankind” on the one hand and, on the other, “deep-pondering minds” sometimes singularized as “the philosopher”<sup>29</sup>. Others are much more specific: these include the “agnostic optimist” for whom life is a good in itself, «your average European in his rare moments of introspection» who is a pessimist about this world and an optimist about the

27. G. GISSING, *The Hope of Pessimism*, cit., pp. 81, 90.

28. Ivi, p. 95.

29. Ivi, pp. 83, 79.

world to come, and «your modern rationalistic Christian» who is an optimist about both this world and the next<sup>30</sup>. The most important character is «he who has experienced the second birth of philosophical consciousness», the hero of the essay whose self-pity is transformed into universal compassion and transmitted to the species as a whole<sup>31</sup>. The aforementioned characters exist in isolation but in two cases Gissing provided interacting pairs. Early in the essay he contrasts the “practical energetic minds” who uncritically embrace the Religion of Humanity as the solution to a besetting contemporary difficulty with “less easily satisfied intelligences” like his own who raise skeptical questions about it<sup>32</sup>. Later, he contrasts “[y]our very Philistine” who scoffs at the Genesis account of the origin of life without offering an alternative explanation, with “[y]our average scientifically-cultured man” who glimpses in the space between nothingness and being some «dimly imaged act of spontaneous generation»<sup>33</sup>. These two opposing characters eventually coalesce in a minor sub-plot of the essay, however, because when confronted with the “convincing metaphysics of death” the complacency of both collapses<sup>34</sup>.

The importance of these minimally realized characters is enhanced by an interesting adjacent consideration — the infrequency with which Gissing names historical persons and the entire absence of characterization of the few persons whose names occur. Schopenhauer is clearly the most important intellectual influence in the essay but the very few references to him are brief — e.g., «It is in the pessimistic philosophy as developed by Schopenhauer that we find the true successor of pure Christianity» — and he is not personalized<sup>35</sup>. The names of

30. Ivi, pp. 90, 80.

31. Ivi, p. 96.

32. Ivi, p. 83.

33. Ivi, pp. 89–90.

34. Ivi, p. 87.

35. Ivi, p. 99.

Heraclitus, Democritus, Kant, and Sir Thomas Browne occur, but merely as labels to briefly mentioned concepts. Tennyson is quoted, while Pope and Shakespeare are paraphrased, but the names of these authors are unmentioned. It is particularly notable that, in an essay Gissing characterized as “an attack on Positivism”, he names neither Comte nor his English adherents<sup>36</sup>. The absence of historical characterization makes the fictional characterizations more salient and the largely fictional quality of the text more evident.

One further fictional feature of the text merits comment: its intercalation of emotionally compelling scenes — scenic arguments — within the exposition of abstract ideas. Three such scenic arguments stand out.

The first of these occurs just after Gissing explains his reasons for doubting the metaphysical instinct will ever be expunged from the human species. After a calm, rational, and quite convincing elucidation of his position, Gissing swerves into a pugnacious assault on one of his own former selves: the intellectual who tries to promote agnosticism to the working classes:

Gather your audience of intelligent, but only half-educated, working men, and convince them that modern science has overthrown belief in revealed religion. Well, so far you may prevail; so far you *have* prevailed through large masses of the population. But do you flatter yourself that these minds have become in the true sense of the word agnostic?<sup>37</sup>

The prose is aggressive and hectoring but becomes positively bullying as Gissing brings this scenic argument to its conclusion: «Cast one of your disciples into the midst of severe mental trouble, or even afflict him with bodily anguish not easy to be borne and threatening death, — and see whether his

36. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, cit., vol. 2, p. 103.

37. G. GISSING, *The Hope of Pessimism*, cit., p. 88.

agnosticism is more than skin deep»<sup>38</sup>.

The second of these scenes occurs as Gissing asks whether altruism could be imagined to flourish in a world of increased capitalist accumulation among persons with no belief in God or the afterlife. Gissing here elicits a character, one of the millions of the world's dispossessed, and then peers with a novelist's omniscience into the man's inner life:

Let a man say to himself: This is my first and last existence; here on this earth must I find the development of my faculties, reap the delights of my senses, if ever I am to do so; it is now or never with me, miss this my one chance in all eternity and far better that I had never been; — suppose this impressed upon his mind as a vehement conviction, does it not perforce follow that he will set himself with desperate determination to win what he deems his just share in the enjoyments of life? Will he not brood himself into frenzy over the social wrong which holds him, as it were spell-bound, a mere famishing onlooker at the world's banquet? Will not envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness keep riot in his heart and brain?<sup>39</sup>

Both of these “scenes” are preceded by strenuous arguments, of which one might say that the emotive passages I have quoted are culminations. However, the third scene to which I wish to draw the reader's attention features a somewhat different relationship between thought and feeling. This scene occurs at that late and decisive moment in which Gissing supersedes the familiar, traditional pessimism emerging from our day-to-day pain and disillusionment, lifting us to the vertiginous altitude of a specifically Schopenhauerian apprehension of the ultimate tragedy of the human enterprise. We are guided by that hero of the essay — «he who has experienced the second birth of philosophical consciousness» — and taken to «this deeper pathos which goes so much beyond our every-day griefs, and indeed gives to such their significance»<sup>40</sup>.

38. Ivi, pp. 88–89.

39. Ivi, p. 92.

40. Ivi, pp. 96, 97.

This deeper pathos is the intellectual pathos of a creature cursed with the ability to frame questions which «transcend the conditions of his intelligence»<sup>41</sup>.

The insoluble problem meets him on every hand and in a multitude of forms: the chain of causation without beginning or end, the meaning of force, the origin of matter and its infinite divisibility, the boundlessness of space, the eternity of time. Look up to the sky above you, and try to reconcile that logical necessity of belief in infinitude with that finite practical understanding which stubbornly revolts against the conception; in the effort the brain reels and the heart is sick, an immense self-pity takes possession of the imprisoned soul.<sup>42</sup>

These questions have perplexed humanity since the dawn of consciousness; it is the fate of moderns, though, to realize that they will remain unanswered even when the history of our species is consummated in “the grave of thought”<sup>43</sup>.

This highly lyrical passage alludes to thought —mentioning the insoluble problems of causation, boundlessness and eternity — but is in fact driven by feeling. The reader is not persuaded that humanity will never solve the most intriguing of philosophical questions; the reader is made to feel, however, that there is a deep poignancy in this possibility.

It is entirely appropriate that the essay would culminate in an eloquent passage which is more compelling emotionally than it is convincing intellectually. As we have seen, Gissing situates his philosophical speculation within a setting that is both precise and decisive; he populates the text with fictional rather than historical characters; and the argument of the essay is difficult to disentangle from its containing narrative structure. While *The Hope of Pessimism* has none of the conventional markers of fiction it constitutes perhaps the most compelling evidence we have that Gissing’s deepest literary instincts were those of a writer of fiction.

41. Ivi, p. 96.

42. *Ibidem*.

43. Ivi, pp. 96–97.

# The Land Beyond the City

## The Natural World and the Feminine in the Work of George Gissing

RANDY JASMINE\*

In the 2006 collection, *Gissing and the City*, edited by John Spiers, several of the selections convincingly point to connections between place and gender as these interrelated themes play out in George Gissing's visions of London life. Few would argue with the validity of this association as applied to the urban settings we see so often in Gissing's work, but a similar interplay between geography and gender can be seen on those somewhat rare occasions when Gissing transports the action of his novels out of the city and into the countryside. Hardly an author known for his scenes from nature, Gissing's writing does, however, significantly contain important encounters between major characters and the natural world; these encounters are wrapped up with aspects of gender and the idealization of nature as a mysterious feminine force. Throughout Gissing's fiction, his male characters often make meaningful and fateful decisions in the defamiliarized moments when they find themselves in rural places, confronted by their own Victorian attitudes toward women.

Interactions with the natural world, including rural landscapes, the countryside, and even those pockets of green space that can be found in city parks, figure prominently in the plot

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and character development of several of Gissing's works. Gissing was all too aware of the precious nature of open spaces inside the city, pointing out in *In the Year of Jubilee* the fortuitous fact that «Something—or—other Park»<sup>1</sup> was often maintained even when «London, devourer of rural limits [. . .] made hideous encroachment upon»<sup>2</sup> what used to be countryside. Retreat into open green spaces seems to offer a beneficial outlet for those characters who attempt to take advantage of these rural settings. While some of Gissing's characters naively try to remove themselves into any form of nature available, Gissing himself seems aware of the hidden psychological burden that accompanies such attempts. Gissing's figures who seek the natural world see their own movements toward rural space as some form of retreat, but inevitably they find increased anxiety in the rural landscape because of their lack of familiarity with the environment and because of the troubling presence of the feminine in such settings. Each character also carries with him an idealized vision of womanhood that cannot be disentangled from nature; this conflation of place and gender ultimately leads to disillusionment, failure and even death.

Perhaps so many of Gissing's male characters desire from nature a type of rejuvenating power because the author himself regularly attempted to experience such delights. At Clevedon in Somerset, for example, Gissing often found «the air [. . .] very inspiring»<sup>3</sup>. This passing comment suggests the idea that forays into the natural world for urbanites were expected to accomplish very real goals: reviving, restoring and inspiring the mind. Such getaways, however, are also clearly understood to be temporary: return to the toils of city life always looms at the end of these holiday periods. Like Gissing, the men attempting escape actually seem to prefer residence in the city, despite its

1. G. GISSING, *In the Year of Jubilee*, ed. P. Delany, Everyman, London 1994, p. 184.

2. *Ibidem*.

3. G. GISSING, qtd. in S. BLACKMORE, *George Gissing and Clevedon*, «The Gissing Newsletter», 2 (1966), pp. 1–3, here p. 1.

hardships and deprivations; the city, in the end, is the place that they know best, and it is the place where they can exert some type of control over their lives through the predictability of routine and the gendered segregation usually associated with their labour and lifestyle. In the countryside, in the presence of the female forces that seem to be connected to it, predictability, ordinariness and control disappear.

Gissing was living and writing in the late Victorian era where conflict between the country and the city was taking on oppositional dimensions in the popular imagination; the country was supposed to be everything that the city was not; as John Stuart Mill suggests, nature in most people's minds represented «things as they would be, apart from human intervention»<sup>4</sup>. This binary distinction applies to more than just physical geography: it connects to ways of thinking about culture, about progress, and about gender. Indeed, almost from the beginning of the Victorian era, the definition of nature was changing from what it had been only a few decades before. Philip Davis suggests that «The Wordsworthian meaning of "Nature" — as something more than 'the material world,' as, indeed, the very language of God — was increasingly both banished and relegated to the backwaters of 'the countryside'»<sup>5</sup>. Davis points out the distortion and the qualification that the concept of nature underwent once the brief but brilliant flourish of the Romantic movement subsided. What did not seem to change, however, was the tendency of the urban population to invest visions of nature with characteristics of wholesomeness and idealized living — even if such ideas were not connected to spirituality; these notions of what could be found in nature became more and more secular, but no less prevalent. Consider Raymond Williams's words in *The Country and the City* as he explores these two powerful titular ideas throughout English

4. J.S. MILL, qtd. in P. DAVIS, *The Victorians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 91.

5. Ivi, pp. 55–56.

history:

the means of agricultural production — the fields, the woods the growing crops, the animals — are attractive to the observer. [...] They can be effectively contrasted with the exchanges and counting houses of mercantilism [...]. That contrast, in many ways, still holds in experience.<sup>6</sup>

These all too conveniently divided realms are explored throughout Victorian fiction, and Gissing certainly engages in this type of examination, choosing to place significant romantic and sexual encounters between male and female characters in the idealized country.

A survey of Gissing's literature shows that two primary emotional reactions tend to emerge when a male Gissing protagonist ventures into the countryside and encounters a woman: the man is never completely at home in the natural setting and, perhaps due to lack of familiarity, he mentally associates the rural, green countryside with the feminine, either an actual female figure or a perceived sense of the feminine that resides inside his mind. At a very young age, Arthur Golding, in *Workers in the Dawn*, is taken away from the squalid streets of London and transplanted into rural Bloomford: a place of remarkable beauty when «the fields [...] cast off their winter garments, and clad themselves with grass and flowers and sunlight, to greet the coming of spring»<sup>7</sup>. Although this description of a place far removed from London's east-end slums sounds almost idyllic, surprisingly for young Arthur, «Bloomford could never be anything but a foreign land»<sup>8</sup>. For him, even at a very young age, «there was the dumb, strong desire to find himself once more in the scenes where he had lived with his father»<sup>9</sup>. The feelings

6. R. WILLIAMS, *The Country and the City*, Oxford University Press, New York 1973, p. 46.

7. G. GISSING, *Workers in the Dawn*, ed. Debbie Harrison, Victorian Secrets, Brighton 2010, p. 30.

8. Ivi, p. 42.

9. Ivi, p. 43.

drawing him to the city are «instinctive, unreflecting»<sup>10</sup>, and to a certain extent, inexplicable. Arthur quickly accomplishes his desire of returning to the filth and degradation of Whitecross Street, but as he grows and develops his extraordinary artistic sensibilities, he realizes that «the few weeks of his abode at Bloomford Rectory had not been unimportant in [his] life»<sup>11</sup>. More specifically he thinks of the countryside of Bloomford and «[thinks] of little Helen Norman, and wishe[s] he could again walk hand-in-hand with her along the spacious lawn»<sup>12</sup>. As the plot of the novel develops, so, too, does Arthur's idealization of Helen — the female representative of the rural setting of Bloomford. Like most of these types of encounters in Gissing's other works, the relationship between Arthur and Helen fails. Similarly complex relationships involving men and their perceptions of the natural world and its feminine essence thread through Gissing's literary career. Even his most unflinching urban novel contains a significant confrontation between the male protagonist and the feminine representation of the natural world.

In Chapter 19 of *The Nether World*, "A Retreat", Sidney Kirkwood along with Jane and Michael Snowdon leave behind "the pest-stricken regions"<sup>13</sup> of the city and head out into the country. This small group of travellers presents an odd picture, placed as they are outside of what has become their natural habitat. In describing their exodus, Gissing writes: «the train made its way at length beyond the outmost limits of dread, and entered upon a land of level meadows, of hedges and trees, of crops and cattle»<sup>14</sup>. The scene is set for the visit to Danbury and the Pammenter farm to be «as simple as could be, but beautiful on this summer afternoon, and priceless when one

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ivi*, p. 69.

12. *Ibid.*

13. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992, p. 164.

14. *Ibid.*

has come forth from the streets of Clerkenwell»<sup>15</sup>. The intense focus of this novel upon the urban nether world of the title contrasts the natural scenes of this vacation more strikingly than in other Gissing novels, even though several patterns of interaction between characters are remarkably similar to other works. Sidney quickly encounters a moment of profound importance, both in the presence of natural beauty and under a strange feminine influence. On the group's first night at the farm, Sidney retires to the solace of the garden only to find that Jane is seeking him out:

Sidney [. . .] found a corner of the garden whence there was a view of wooded hillside against the late glow of the heavens. Presently he heard footsteps, and through the leafage of a tree that shadowed him he saw Jane looking this way and that, as if she sought some one.<sup>16</sup>

Sidney reluctantly reveals himself to Jane and the two proceed to have the talk that both have been nervously anticipating for some time. The words that pass between the two at this moment, in this unfamiliar setting actually constitute their most intimate and emotional conversation, but in this setting, more than just words are exchanged. As Gissing describes it, «Jane met [Sidney's] look for an instant — they could just read each other's features in the pale light — then dropped her eyes»<sup>17</sup>.

In the countryside, Jane's appearance seems to be altered, and she finds the strength to speak more openly than at any other time. Sidney hardly knows how to act because he has for so long thought of Clara Hewett as the only woman worthy of his love; his ambiguous, platonic relationship with Jane has been a source of increasing confusion as the girl has grown older and as her relationship with her grandfather has strengthened. Sidney is also strongly affected by the natural forces that

15. Ivi, p. 165.

16. Ivi, p. 166.

17. Ivi, p. 168.

surround them; he seems as much oppressed as inspired by the natural world: «Sidney felt as though the fragrance of the earth and the flowers were mingling with his blood [. . . ] confusing him with emotions»<sup>18</sup>. This confusion of emotion leads the normally careful Sidney to hurry «towards an end which he must approach with more thought, more preparation of himself»<sup>19</sup>. That end is a declaration of his feelings toward Jane. While still making it clear that he has never gotten over his feelings for Clara, Sidney subtly indicates to Jane that she and he could have a future together.

At least part of the confusion of feeling that arises in Sidney comes from the fact that while he is suffering during this vacation, Jane is emerging in his mind as a feminine sexual force, clearly related to the natural beauty and greenery of Danbury; she seems to flourish in her new surroundings. The normally quiet Jane revels in the company of the Pammenter's eldest daughter — «Their voices sounded from all parts of the garden and the farm-yard, Jane's clear-throated laugh contrasting with the rougher utterance of her companion»<sup>20</sup>. At the close of her interview with Sidney in the garden, we are presented with a vision of a young girl nearly transfigured in the natural world: «Jane drew down a branch and laid the broad cool leaves against her cheek»<sup>21</sup>. Clearly Jane is comfortable in the place that causes Sidney so much distress; inexplicably it seems as if Jane and her emerging femininity are at home and thriving, in a very literal sense, in this rural world of fresh air and farmland. Not surprisingly, Sidney and Jane do not end up together, as Sidney instead marries Clara, and lives a life full of intense urban horrors.

A similar male–female sexual dynamic emerges in *Born in Exile*. Gissing wrote this novel while living in Exeter in 1891.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. Ivi, p. 166.

21. Ivi, p. 169.

According to W.J. West, Gissing benefited from the change in scenery and the new setting he found himself in: «leaving behind him the years of impoverished life in [...] London [...] [Gissing] immediately began long daily walks into the surrounding countryside»<sup>22</sup>. Godwin Peak, who is on a “geologizing holiday”<sup>23</sup> in Exeter engages in the same practice of vigorous exercise. When he by chance encounters Sidwell Warricombe for the first time since his school days, his reaction is immediately juxtaposed to his feelings about the countryside that have been formed on these long walks: «Not long ago, on first coming into that quiet space, with its old houses, its smooth lawns, its majestic trees, he had felt the charm peculiar to such scenes — the natural delight in a form of beauty especially English»<sup>24</sup>. Later, uncertain of his standing with the woman he desires, his attitude toward the natural beauty of the Exeter countryside evaporates for a time:

In the morning he returned to the seaside. Prospect of pleasure there was none, but by moving about he made the time pass more quickly. Wandering in the lanes (which would have delighted him with their autumnal beauties had his mind been at rest), he came upon Miss Walworth, busy with a water-colour sketch.<sup>25</sup>

Later still in the novel when he feels he is on the verge of securing his position as Sidwell’s lover, his positive attitude toward the natural world reemerges accordingly: «How beautiful were these lanes and hills, even in mid-winter! Once more he sang aloud in his joyous solitude»<sup>26</sup>. The male urban dweller is once again taken in and confused by the combination of the world of nature and the enticement of the feminine that he so easily and idealistically conflates.

22. W.J. WEST, *George Gissing in Exeter*, Exeter Rare Books, Exeter 1979, p. 5.

23. Ivi, p. 7.

24. G. GISSING, *Born in Exile*, Hogarth, London 1985, p. 145.

25. Ivi, p. 308.

26. Ivi, p. 355.

Sidwell's own connection to nature is predictably more comfortable and familiar than Godwin's. She does not see the natural world as Godwin does, nor is her relationship with nature completely like that of her sister Fanny or her father. These two characters are far more engaged with the scientific significance of plants and animals, and take a markedly more Darwinian position in relation to these elements than their religious orthodoxy would have outsiders believe. After Sidwell and Godwin get caught outside in a storm, she reveals to him, «You should be on Dartmoor in such weather [. . .]. Father and I were once caught in storms far worse than this — far better, I ought to say, for I never knew anything so terrifically grand»<sup>27</sup>. Sidwell seems at home in and at peace with the unpredictable and even violent natural world, while Peak, once his wooing is successful, seems to long for the known spaces of an urban landscape. When Godwin's plan to win Sidwell fails, he immediately returns to the city. Nature to both Godwin and Sidwell is a place outside of their control, but the response that this fact elicits is gender-coded in much the same way that it is for Sidney and Jane.

The enigmatic and socially rebellious Rhoda Nunn is similarly transformed by her journey into the wild of the Lake District in *The Odd Women*. It is on her vacation that Rhoda is proposed to by Everard Barfoot, but only after the two spend a long day hiking through what is described as “grand wild country”<sup>28</sup>, an outing that Everard proposes as a means to test Rhoda and her commitment to him. After enjoying what he describes as «An ideal realized, for once in one's life. A perfect moment»<sup>29</sup>, Everard places a ring on Rhoda's finger to represent their emotional, but also their conventional, legal union. Motivated by a force that seems to contradict her own desires, Rhoda refuses this gesture, despite the fact that she had

27. Ivi, p. 214.

28. G. GISSING, *The Odd Women*, Penguin, London 1983, p. 294.

29. Ivi, p. 296.

resolved to accept this expected offer before she had left the city. The remote countryside and the stunning landscapes of yet another part of rural England have forced Rhoda from the course she had set for herself earlier. The rejection is a blow: «profoundly mortified, Everard restored the gold circlet to its hiding-place and stood gazing at the dim horizon»<sup>30</sup>. These incidents, played out in the secluded natural world, spell the end of the relationship between the two. Fittingly, at the close of the novel, we see the still unmarried Rhoda once again in a rural setting, Clevedon this time, passionately mothering Monica's baby, a powerful symbol of the unattainable Victorian ideal of a woman surrounded by all that is mysterious and unknowable to men.

Despite the frequency of the above stated pattern, a few notable and telling exceptions occur in significant places in Gissing's work; thus, when Jasper Milvain, in *New Grub Street*, leaves London for Wattleborough, he usually does so as a matter of habit, to pay obligatory visits to his mother and his sisters. Milvain appears to be on vacation from the demands of the city, but he makes it very clear that he only wishes to stay as long as is necessary for the sake of appearances: at the breakfast table he shockingly comments in front of his mother and sisters, «There's a man being hanged in London at this moment»<sup>31</sup>. He misses everything about the city, and apparently wishes to keep up to date with all that he might be missing while relegated to rural isolation. On the particular visit to the country that opens the novel, his primary purpose is to obtain more money from his mother in order to further his promising but slowly developing literary career. While on his «favourite walk [which] led him to a spot distant perhaps a mile and a half from home»<sup>32</sup>, Jasper encounters Marian Yule, whom he hopes to use to ingratiate himself with her father, a man whose acquaintance Jasper

30. Ivi, p. 305.

31. G. GISSING, *New Grub Street*, Modern Library, New York 1985, p. 5.

32. Ivi, p. 23.

believes will also be an aid to his advancement.

As they converse, Jasper and Marian watch a speeding train bound for London pass and note the influence it exerts on the landscape: «The leafy branches that grew out over the line swayed violently backwards and forwards in the perturbed air»<sup>33</sup>. Jasper responds to what can only be described as a violent incursion of the city into the landscape of the countryside by saying: «It enspirits me. It makes me feel eager to go back and plunge into the fight again»<sup>34</sup>; his description of the emotions brought on by the passing train echoes Gissing's description of the countryside in and around Somerset, although his focus is in the other direction — Jasper is inspired by being reminded of the speed of life in the city. In the novel, Marian responds: «Upon me it has just the opposite effect»<sup>35</sup>. Of course we know that this encounter is just the beginning of the perplexing relationship between the two, and although much of their future interaction will take place in London, this early encounter between the two is telling. For Jasper, the countryside is merely another resource to be utilized in his climb to the top of the literary world: the place to which he needs to go to obtain money and to meet Alfred Yule — a place infuriatingly removed from the routine and ambition that he knows and loves so well.

Another noteworthy encounter between a consummate city dweller and the natural world actually appears within the confines of the city near the end of *New Grub Street*, when the character who is perhaps the ultimate urbanite comes in contact with both nature and the feminine. Throughout the novel, Harold Biffen has been firmly ensconced amongst the scenes of the bleakest and darkest manifestations of London poverty. Indeed, as a novelist he celebrates the people he encounters in the crowded city streets and alleys as material with which to create his undiluted realist masterpiece. Biffen boasts,

33. Ivi, p. 28.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

as I came along by Regent's Park half an hour ago a man and a girl were walking close in front of me, love-making; I passed them slowly and heard a good deal of their talk — it was part of the situation that they should pay no heed to a stranger's proximity. Now, such a love-scene as that has absolutely never been written down [...]. I am going to reproduce it verbatim [...].<sup>36</sup>

Surely Biffen, the disinterested realist observer, would not be influenced by the same estrangement from the natural world and the feminine as are the characters already mentioned. Biffen never vacations in the country, but this fact is not enough to insulate him from forces similar to the ones distressing other male characters.

As Biffen goes through the process of taking his own life following the death of his friend Reardon and the completion of his great novel, the influence of both the natural world and the feminine are ever-present in his mind with surprising intensity. In the days leading up to the fateful event, we learn that although he did not love Amy Reardon «in the true sense of exclusive desire [...]. She represented for him all that is lovely in womanhood; to his starved soul and senses she was woman [...]. Circumstance had made her the means of exciting in him that natural force which had hitherto either been dormant or had yielded to the resolute will»<sup>37</sup>. Biffen no longer possesses the will or the strength to control the “natural force” that this idealized vision of the feminine has brought before him. Less equipped than any of the male characters presented here to deal with the strangeness that he feels toward an unknowable force pressed into his otherwise mundane world, Biffen suffers great disturbance of mind when thinking of Amy, as he does increasingly toward the end of the novel. The only possibility of escape open to him is death.

As he chooses the location of his ultimate departure, Biffen wanders into a foreign world, one filled with natural elements

36. Ivi, pp. 119–20.

37. Ivi, p. 404.

and decreasing light:

The sun was just setting; he paused a few moments on the bridge, watching the river with a quiet smile, and enjoying the splendour of the sky. Up Putney Hill he walked slowly; when he reached the top it was growing dark, but an unwonted effect in the atmosphere caused him to turn and look to the east. An exclamation escaped his lips, for there before him was the new-risen moon, a perfect globe, vast and red. He gazed at it for a long time.<sup>38</sup>

The ultimate symbol of the feminine in nature rises to meet this man with so little understanding of either of these powerful forces. Certainly Biffen has his experience with the natural world and the idealization of the feminine inside the city limits, but comparison here to the other male characters is justified (after all, Amy Reardon, who ultimately ends up as the wife of the “successful” Jasper, serves as Biffen’s object of desire). It is only in the city that Biffen can conduct his experiment in realist fiction, and ultimately he lacks the financial resources to escape the urban world once his job is done. Biffen’s art has been dedicated to unflinchingly observing the urban, the mundane, the real — but even he seems inevitably drawn to simultaneous forces about which he has so little understanding:

When the daylight had entirely passed, he went forward on to the heath, and rambled, as if idly, to a secluded part, where trees and bushes made a deep shadow under the full moon. It was still quite warm, and scarcely a breath of air moved among the reddening leaves.<sup>39</sup>

Once the moon is hidden from his view and Biffen is effectively secreted from possible detection, the novelist takes his own life and thus ends the conflict that has arisen within him as a result of his conceptualization of powers that he can neither control nor understand.

38. Ivi, pp. 406–407.

39. Ivi, p. 407.

Gissing is never able to fully resolve the conflict between male characters and their own idealizations of the natural world, but he comes closest to doing this in one of his last publications, the semi-autobiographical, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. In this work, Ryecroft, as he comes to terms with the fact that his life is ending, develops a relationship of understanding and appreciation with the natural world around him. Like other male characters in Gissing's work, the country is not where Ryecroft has lived his life, but he knows that it is the setting in which he is going to die. The seasons of the book signal the progress of Ryecroft toward his ultimate fate, but along the way he develops a keen attachment to his natural surroundings: «To-night the wind is loud, and rain dashes against my casement; to-morrow I shall awake to a sky of winter»<sup>40</sup>. As the "Winter" section of the work begins, we hear Ryecroft confess,

blasts from the Channel, with raining scud, and spume of mist breaking upon the hills, have kept me indoors all day. Yet not for a moment have I been dull or idle, and now, by the latter end of a sea-coal fire. I feel such enjoyment of my ease and tranquility that I must needs word it before going up to bed.<sup>41</sup>

Ryecroft, and perhaps Gissing himself, seem to have come to terms with the power and mystery of nature. This reconciliation, however, can only come with a resignation to imminent death, and even more notably with the absence of any female presence. In his solitary retreat, Ryecroft has found what so many others before him have failed to find: «the repose to follow when I have breathed the word 'Finis'<sup>42</sup>».

Repeatedly in the fiction of George Gissing, male city dwellers find themselves lost in a world apparently antithetical to the world

40. G. GISSING, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, p. 135.

41. Ivi, p. 139.

42. Ivi, p. 177.

they have experienced for most of their lives. As these characters struggle in their unfamiliar surroundings, they are simultaneously confronted with images and representations of the idealized feminine that Gissing so closely associates with the natural world. Few of these men can successfully negotiate their way back onto familiar ground, unchanged. Only Milvain, the character whose “dreamy bliss”<sup>43</sup> at the very end of *New Grub Street* drives home Gissing’s condemnation of the modern publishing world, ends up successful: firmly placed in the urban world he has always esteemed and married to the woman who will best suit his professional and personal needs. Milvain never idealizes the natural world, nor does he ever misread the women in his life, but his ultimate victory is surely meant to provoke, not to inspire. Gissing repeatedly represents a natural world in which most of his male characters can find no solace or meaning; these encounters with the world outside of the city are complicated by interactions with their own Victorian conceptions of the country and of the feminine. The only possible resolution offered for these characters is a return to the harshness and reality of the urban world or the more drastic escape of death.

43. G. GISSING, *New Grub Street*, cit., p. 425.



# Women Singers in Gissing's Novels

Thyrza Trent and Beatrice Redwing

AKEMI YOSHIDA\*

1. Gissing was a writer with a deep interest in music and a keen auditory sense. Allan W. Atlas analyzes Gissing's reactions to music recorded in his diary and letters in the course of his Italian journeys, and observes: «he could forgive the “savage” Calabrians everything as soon as they [made] music»<sup>1</sup>, thus granting music some sort of special sanctifying quality. Atlas quotes another, particularly relevant, passage: «one voice only begins to sing, a woman's voice, exquisitely rich & true — This is “street” music, but such a voice I have never heard anywhere but in great concert halls, never»<sup>2</sup>. This sentence shows that Gissing appreciates the value of music for its true and genuine spirituality as well as for its technical quality; and it is perhaps for this reason that he detests male sopranos: «again the music was spoiled for me by those male sopranos», he wrote in an entry of his diary in December 1888<sup>3</sup>. This detestation of “male sopranos” might account for Gissing's

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1. A. W. ATLAS, *George Gissing on Music: Italian Impressions*, «The Gissing Journal», 38, 1 (Jan. 2002), pp. 1–24, here p. 5.

2. *Ibidem*. Qtd from G. GISSING, “To Ellen”, 5 Feb. 1889, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 4, p. 35.

3. Cit. in Atlas, cit., p. 3, from G. GISSING, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. P. Coustillas, Harvester Press, Hassocks, Sussex 1978, p. 108.

appreciation of a spontaneous musical expression compared with an artificial one, and his belief in human voice as a vessel of emotions, the mediator or conveyor of one's personality.

Nicky Losseff — who argues that, to Gissing, the beautiful singing voice can be the embodiment of noble spirituality as well as a source of sensual pleasure — also refers to the cultural context of his works: «True music which most nearly approached “the divine”, in the sense of Carlyle’s “universal harmony”, could speak through all “sincere” forms of music-making»<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, in pointing out that «[L]ike Hardy, Gissing was disturbed by the spiritual degeneration of modern society»<sup>5</sup>, Herbert Rosengarten maintains that traditional Christian doctrines were losing the power of preserving people's moral disciplines, as religious unbelief took root and became widespread. Indeed, a novel like *Thyrza*, as Constance Harsh points out,

dispenses with traditional Christianity almost summarily [. . .] Mary Bower's evangelical faith is an irrelevant curiosity, while Lydia Trent's final embrace of Christianity is an anachronism from which Thyrza averts her eyes.<sup>6</sup>

However, as early as 1880, the year when *Workers in the Dawn* came out, Gissing seems to have been looking for some transcendental value in the form of absolute beauty which could imply the presence of a correspondingly beautiful personality. Diana Maltz quotes John Ruskin's phrase “noble beauty”<sup>7</sup> to show how, in late Victorian Britain, aesthetic concepts and

4. N. LOSSEFF, “The Voice, the Breath and the Soul: Song and Poverty in *Thyrza*, *Mary Barton*, *Alton Locke* and *A Child of the Jago*”, *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*, ed. N. Losseff and S. Fuller, Ashgate, Hants 2004, pp. 3–26, here p. 3.

5. H. ROSENGARTEN, *The Theme of Alienation in Thyrza*, «The Gissing Newsletter», 2, 4 (1966), pp. 1–4, here p. 1.

6. C. HARSH, *George Gissing's Thyrza: Romantic Love and Ideological Co-Conspiracy*, «The Gissing Journal», 30, 1 (Jan. 1994), pp. 1–11, here p. 2.

7. D. MALTZ, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870–1900: Beauty for the People*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2005, p. 7.

moral values came to merge. Under the influence of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, Gissing seems to have shared this notion of beauty as the guardian of morality. Thus, when Mr. Norman, the Anglican priest who, in *Workers in the Dawn*, has lost his faith, is asked by his daughter Helen what God is, he hesitatingly answers:

[Y]ou have learned that there is something in your mind which gives you the power of distinguishing between a good and a bad action, a beautiful and an ugly thing, and also bids you choose the good and the beautiful rather than the bad or the ugly. And this *something* is God.<sup>8</sup>

These words seem to reflect the writer's own ideas: Gissing clearly shows sympathy for intellectual characters plagued by religious doubts, and Mr. Norman and his daughter Helen are among them.

With this in mind, I aim to focus on the musical talents of two Gissing female protagonists of the pre-Italian period: Thyrsa Trent in *Thyrza* (1887) and Beatrice Redwing in *A Life's Morning* (1888). For my argument's purposes, I shall start from the latter. After examining modes of representation of these women singers, I hope to elucidate the special function and significance Gissing gives the characters' musicality and singing voices. In the last analysis, the sources of literary inspiration for these novels and their contextual backdrop will be explored.

2. Beatrice Redwing, in *A Life's Morning*, exemplifies Gissing's belief in the moral and civilizing power of aesthetic beauty. Near the novel's opening, Beatrice is depicted as a beautiful but rather shallow character, who directs her intellectual energy to three distinct fields: "religious zeal", "the life of society" and music. Her cousin Wilfrid tells her to concentrate on one

8. G. GISSING, *Workers in the Dawn*, ed. D. Harrison, Victorian Secrets, Brighton 2010, p. 30.

of these three courses to «make of [her]self a true woman»<sup>9</sup>, and if she should choose to become an artist, to «[p]ursue music with seriousness» and to «humanise humanity at large by devotion to an artistic ideal»<sup>10</sup>. Wilfrid's words seem to echo not only Arnoldian and Ruskinian ideas<sup>11</sup>, but also the positivist thought of Auguste Comte; in the Utopia suggested by Comte, the presence of artists is justified by their moralizing role as philosophical priests<sup>12</sup>. Beatrice's musical talent is described as a special gift: «the passionate poetry of her notes was what no training could have developed»<sup>13</sup>. The narrator regards her excellent musicality as evidence of her rich personality: «It was no shallow nature that could pour forth this flood of harmony»<sup>14</sup>. Beatrice's exceptional musical gift is associated with her profoundly noble nature, which, though hidden at the outset, comes to be revealed as she goes through musical training. Beatrice's genius is a civilizing power which improves her as well as others morally, through aesthetic experience.

Another woman singer of genius is Thyrsa Trent. Leaving aside Nicky Losseff's argument that she is one of those singers who «allow the divine to speak through their agency»<sup>15</sup>, I aim to focus on other aspects of Thyrsa's characterization as an artist. While Beatrice can be regarded as a quintessential ex-

9. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, ed. P. Coustillas, The Gissing Trust, Wakefield 2003, p. 32.

10. *Ibid.*

11. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin asserts that «men's lives must be given» to advance art; «this labour, the necessity of which, in all ages, has been most frankly admitted by the greatest men, is justifiable from a moral point of view, that it is not a vain devotion of the lives of men, that it has functions of usefulness addressed to the weightiest of human interests». J. RUSKIN, *Modern Painters*, vol. 2, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 4 vols., ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, George Allen, London 1903, pp. 26–27.

12. T.R. Wright has examined how Gissing read Comte's work and was strongly influenced by his ideas in *George Gissing: Positivist in the Dawn*, «The Gissing Newsletter», 20, 2 (April 1984), pp. 1–20.

13. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, cit., p. 43.

14. *Ibid.*

15. N. LOSSEFF, *The Voice, the Breath and the Soul*, cit., p. 3.

ample of such “divine” singers, Thyrsa’s personality cannot be confined to the role of moral agency. If Beatrice’s talent works to maintain or ameliorate society’s spiritual well-being, Thyrsa seems to show more revolutionary aspects of an artist of genius; she possesses the “[a]rtist’s soul”<sup>16</sup>, which has the power to question and subvert the existing moral values and social system. This special endowment might, therefore, rank the character among the *fin-de-siècle* “New Women”.

Thyrsa is endowed with both a singing voice which makes «every hearer spell-bound»<sup>17</sup> and an ability to memorize and reproduce the melodies she has heard at a concert photographically<sup>18</sup>. Mrs. Ormonde, who assumes the role of her guardian in the latter part of the novel, has an intuition of her «latent genius»<sup>19</sup>. Thyrsa’s countenance is described as «beauty of rare suggestiveness», and «every line of the face» as «delicate, harmonious, sweet»<sup>20</sup>. In Gissing’s novels, outward appearance faithfully reflects a character’s inner nature and any subtle change in his/her mental state — Thyrsa’s fragile body is thus a finely tuned instrument itself. Her nerves are so delicate that, the narrator intimates, it is only natural that the dreary weather should seriously affect her physical condition<sup>21</sup>. Thyrsa’s difficult adaptability to the environment is presented as a part of her gift: «She was very young to suffer that oppression of the

16. G. GISSING, *Thyrsa*, ed. P. Coustillas, Victorian Secrets, Brighton 2013, p. 433. A very similar expression appears in *The Unclassed* (1884), in a passage about Maud: «her soul in reality was that of an artist, and, whereas the artist should be free from everything like moral prepossession, Maud’s aesthetic sensibilities were in perpetual conflict with her moral convictions ». G. GISSING, *The Unclassed* (1884), Sidgwick & Jackson, London 1911, p. 150.

17. G. GISSING, *Thyrsa*, cit., p. 67.

18. The argument in this paragraph overlaps with the content of my chapter “Aestheticism: the Pursuit of Ideals through Beauty”, *Society and Culture in the Late Victorian Age with Special Reference to Gissing: In the Year of the Sesquicentennial of His Birth*, ed. M. Matsuoka, Keisuisha, Hiroshima 2007, pp. 421–38, here p. 435.

19. G. GISSING, *Thyrsa*, cit., p. 418.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ivi*, p. 120.

world-worn; it was the penalty she paid for her birthright of heart and mind»<sup>22</sup>. Unlike her sister Lydia, who perfectly and healthily adjusts, Thyrza finds life lying about her «barren and weary»<sup>23</sup>. Her keen sensitivity, which constitutes her genius and can never allow reconciliation, inevitably involves frictions with her social milieu.

According to what logic, however, is the narrator led to say that to suffer «the oppression of the world-worn [is] the penalty [for Thyrza's] birthright of heart and mind»? It could be argued that such vulnerability and maladjustment are considered the privileged bi-product of possessing an exceptional genius. Although it would be a mistake to ascribe such characterization to any one single influence or source, Thyrza seems intriguingly to exemplify the Schopenhauerian idea of genius. The influence of Schopenhauer's pessimism on Gissing has been well documented<sup>24</sup>, notably by Takanobu Tanaka, also with reference to Gissing's misogyny<sup>25</sup>. However, while Schopenhauer did not admit of female genius, Gissing seems to evaluate Thyrza as a female musical genius. According to Schopenhauer, ordinary people have access to forms of knowledge of the world only through the appearance of things and can live contentedly with this superficial, fragmented view of the world. Only the minds of exceptional people such as saints or artists of genius, alone capable of perceiving “the thing-in-itself”, might have access to a deeper understanding of the world. This superior knowledge, however, inevitably brings suffering upon the subject. Artists can access the deeper reality of the world instinctively, and it is music, the most direct of arts, that Schopenhauer has placed the most highly among the arts. He explains «the gloomy dis-

22. Ivi, p. 72.

23. *Ibid.*

24. See Roger Milbrandt's essay in the present volume.

25. T. TANAKA, “Misogyny: Male Confusion and Resistance”, *Society and Culture in the Late Victorian Age with Special Reference to Gissing: In the Year of the Sesquicentennial of His Birth*, cit., pp. 274–282, here p. 289.

position of highly gifted minds»<sup>26</sup> as follows: «on the whole, the melancholy accompanying genius rests on the fact that, the brighter the intellect enlightening the will-to-live, the more distinct does it perceive the wretchedness of its condition»<sup>27</sup>.

At this point, the aim of this essay is to focus on the revision Gissing made in the facial description of Thyrsa from the 1887 first edition to the second edition published in 1891. In the original version, the first description of Thyrsa's face includes the sentence: «It was not a morbid physiognomy, yet it impressed one» (I, 58), which becomes four years later: «It was a subtly morbid physiognomy, and impressed one» (p. 35<sup>28</sup>). Whereas in the 1887 version the litotes clearly assures the reader of Thyrsa's fundamental soundness and normality, however oversensitive she might appear to be, the narrator pointedly presents her, in the 1891 version, as "morbid" or "possibly abnormal". «Perhaps Gissing wished to emphasize sooner the ill-health that eventually kills Thyrsa, or perhaps he meant to heighten the heroine's attraction»<sup>29</sup>, David Grylls contends. By characterizing Thyrsa as "subtly morbid", Gissing may also have wished to define her genius as an undoubtedly genuine quality — as Schopenhauer sees it, people of genius are «only extremely rare and abnormal men»<sup>30</sup>, and their seriousness has «something foreign to human nature, something unnatural»<sup>31</sup>.

Further evidence of Gissing's acceptance and adaptation of the Schopenhauerian idea of music («the most direct is that for

26. A. SCHOPENHAUER, trans. E.F.J. Payne, *On Genius, Philosophical Writings*, ed. W. Schirmacher, Continuum, New York 1994, pp. 83–97, here p. 91.

27. *Ibid.*

28. D. GRYLLES, "Gissing's Revision of *Thyrsa*", in G. GISSING, *Thyrsa*, cit., pp. 542–57, here p. 545.

29. *Ibid.*

30. A. SCHOPENHAUER, *On Genius*, cit., p. 92.

31. Ivi, p. 93. Interestingly enough, the megalomaniac Harold Emerson, who deems himself a poet "unrecognized by little people", claims to be "profoundly morbid", while deeming Thyrsa "healthy and natural", which probably indicates that such association between "morbid" and genius could have been rather prevalent among the reading public. G. GISSING, *Thyrsa*, cit., pp. 423, 440.

which music expresses the stirrings of the will itself»<sup>32</sup>) could be traced in the description of street music, «that music of the obscure ways, to which children dance»<sup>33</sup>, through which «all that is purely human in these darkened multitudes speaks as you listen»<sup>34</sup>. «It is the half-conscious string of a nature which knows not what it would attain», the narrator comments<sup>35</sup> — audibly paraphrasing the Schopenhauerian concept of the “Will.”

3. From what we have seen, these two heroines, Beatrice and Thyrza, might seem to have little in common, both in their social standings and also in the ways their gifts manifest themselves. How can we interpret such difference in the representations of these female singers? Could we find any congruity or coherence between them? Arguably, Gissing might have modelled both his singing heroines as successors to the lineage of great literary divas, specifically, Consuelo in *Consuelo* (1842–3) and *The Countess of Rudolstadt* (1843) by George Sand, and Emilia Sandra Belloni, or Vittoria, in *Sandra Belloni* (1887; originally published as *Emilia in England* in 1864) and *Vittoria* (1867) by George Meredith<sup>36</sup>. Sand and Meredith were among those who had significant influence upon the formative process of Gissing as a writer. Gissing admits his “vast” indebtedness to Sand in a letter to his brother Algernon on 9 December 1887<sup>37</sup>. It also seems worth paying attention to the fact that his frequent references to Sand in his letters coincide with the period when he was writing *Thyrza*. Thus, praising Sand’s *Consuelo* in one of his letters to Ellen on 20 August 1886, Gissing enthusiastically

32. A. SCHOPENHAUER, *On the Metaphysics of Music*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, *Philosophical Writings*, cit., pp. 113–24, here p. 115.

33. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 133.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Meredith, who was a reader of the French writer George Sand, read her work for «a high note of passionate feeling». R.E. SENCOURT, *The Life of George Meredith*, Severus Verlag, Hamburg 2012, p. 177.

37. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, cit., here vol. 3, p. 169.

exclaims: «What a poetry is in the book! What a sweet musical style! George Sand is a right splendid woman»<sup>38</sup>. Both Sand and Meredith narrated the stories of their great divas in a pair of coupled novels: while the first one focuses on the peculiar individuality and physical and emotional sensibilities associated with their exceptional gifts, its sequel allows the divinity of their talents to be fully manifested through the heroines' involvement in large-scale social schemes. Gissing chooses, it seems, to divide these elements and attributes between his two heroines. *Thyrza* represents the more pessimistic side of the life of genius, due to the troubled profundity accompanying the gifted temperament; *Beatrice*, by contrast, stands for a melioristic worldview according to which, with a heightened sense of aesthetic beauty, people's minds could be awakened to moral ideals, leading to the establishment of a better society. Admittedly, Meredith was much influenced by Sand's works. For the characterization of his own heroine Gissing also seems to owe much to Meredith and, probably, found direct inspiration, too, from his own reading of Sand's *Consuelo*.

Some remarkably similar episodes appear in *Sandra Belloni* and *Thyrza*<sup>39</sup>. In the early chapters, both heroines are scolded by their guardians for having sung in an improper place to an undesirable audience. At the time of Emilia's encounter with Wilfrid, who is to become the object of her unflinching devotion, she has already got a fiancé<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, when *Thyrza*, as the future wife of Gilbert Grail, meets Egremont, she realizes that the "reverence" she has "always felt"<sup>41</sup> for Grail should not have been mistaken for love — that, due to the life-consuming passion she will suffer for Egremont thereafter,

38. Ivi, p. 57.

39. Some parts of this section have been developed from my paper "A Comparative Reading of George Sand's *Consuelo*, George Meredith's *Sandra Belloni* and George Gissing's *Thyrza*", read at the First International George Meredith Conference at Bishop Grosseteste University, in July 2015.

40. G. MEREDITH, *Sandra Belloni*, BiblioBazaar, Charleston, SC 2008, p. 48.

41. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 143.

she can no longer marry Grail<sup>42</sup>. Just as Thyrza is separated from Egremont for two years, Emilia is forbidden by Pericles to correspond with Wilfrid for three years at the end of the volume.

Meanwhile, the male protagonists are also fatefully attracted by the strange charm of these uneducated heroines, against their rational will. Though «veritably, this girl», Emilia, «was the last sort of girl to please» Wilfrid's fancy, «here he was, running after a little unformed girl»<sup>43</sup>. In *Thyrza*, the Oxford graduate Walter Egremont is similarly embarrassed to discover that, though a «poor girl, a worker with her hands, untaught»<sup>44</sup>, Thyrza «had a power over him» which «might drive him into acts of insanity»<sup>45</sup>. Egremont thus defines Thyrza's personality as «the strong, passionate heart, source of music and love»<sup>46</sup>: words which could equally apply to Emilia. Their strength of passion and unconventional presence could pose a certain threat to the existing order of society. Other female characters, then, are inclined to refer to and treat them as mere children, as if they refused to take the subversive and revolutionary tendencies about them seriously and reduced them instead to symptoms of immaturity and childishness.

The musical gifts of Emilia and Thyrza are hereditary, their fathers being talented violinists. Feeling dejected, plagued by hopeless love, both heroines choose to disappear and remain hidden in the urban anonymity of London. Having seen her lover drawn more and more decisively to her aristocratic rival, Emilia envisions herself triumphantly retrieving his love by the

42. Thyrza's warning message to Totty against loveless marriage, «I hope you do love him, as you're going to marry him» (G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 244), might echo Cornelia's remark to her brother Wilfrid, who is about to desert Emilia for a mercenary marriage with an aristocratic lady: «I wish you to be loved, first of all» (G. MEREDITH, *Sandra Belloni*, cit., p. 138).

43. G. MEREDITH, *Sandra Belloni*, cit., p. 41.

44. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., pp. 270–71.

45. Ivi, p. 270.

46. Ivi, p. 337.

power of her song:

[H]ow if he should see her and hear her in that hushed hour when she was to stand as a star before men? Emilia flushed and trembled. [...] She lived vividly through her far-projected sensations, until truly pity was active in her bosom, she feeling how he would yearn for her.<sup>47</sup>

One could detect an echo of this quotation in the following passage from *Thyrza*, which gives the psychological description of the heroine who has failed to see Egremont at the end of the forced two-year separation:

She had a vision of herself, on some day not far off, sending forth her voice in glorious song, and knowing that among the crowd before her *he* sat and listened. He would know her then. To him her voice would say what no one else understood, and for a moment — she wished it to be no more than a moment — he would scorn himself for having forgotten her.<sup>48</sup>

Can the power of love and art overcome the barriers of social class and conventionality? The question seems to run through both *Sandra Belloni* and *Thyrza*, but also *Consuelo*. In *Consuelo*, soon after the heroine's confession that her father is unknown, Sand has Count Albert declare to her: «you are more ennobled by your character than we are by our birth and titles»<sup>49</sup>, which shows the same sort of idealistic esteem that could be found in Grail's observation to *Thyrza* that «[m]en who wrote books» are «much greater than kings»<sup>50</sup>.

In *Consuelo*, Sand presents the eponymous heroine as an opera singer of genius, an unconventional and subversive figure, who is always in harmony with nature and detests artificiality. Her musical gift allows her to cross not only national borders

47. G. MEREDITH, *Sandra Belloni*, cit., pp. 368–69.

48. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 511.

49. G. SAND, *Consuelo*, translator unidentified, Fredonia Books, Amsterdam 2004, p. 379.

50. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 85.

but also class boundaries. Linda M. Lewis argues that, together with Mme de Staël's *Corinne*, Sand's *Consuelo* played a great role in the construction and dissemination of the concept of female genius at a time when Western myths of artistic genius were still exclusively monopolized by males. Sand's works were widely read by the Victorians<sup>51</sup>, including Meredith and Gissing.

There are notable similarities between *Consuelo* and *Emilia*. Neither of them boasts of outstanding physical beauty at the time they make their first appearance in the novel as a peculiarly exotic, small being; but, as they mature, as if to reflect and represent faithfully the divinity of their inward souls, their appearance comes to assume majestically feminine beauty, by which they can unwittingly attract many undesirable suitors. Both are characterized as sincere, morally upright, and associated with the pure beauty of their singing voices, which are not only sensually beautiful but also so powerful as to stimulate and deeply stir human emotions, revealing new ideals. Susan Rutherford points out the special significance and impact the figures of divas could have in societies where women's activities were restricted to neatly defined roles in the domestic sphere: «One perception of the prima donna (promulgated predominantly by women authors and singers) was as a proto-feminist, a role model of female endeavour and achievement»<sup>52</sup>. In the history of literature, there has always been another dominant traditional representation of the woman singer, that of the "erotic siren"<sup>53</sup>. But «some women writers were concerned with challenging the notion of the siren»<sup>54</sup>, and among them was George Sand, who was inspired by her friendship with

51. «According to an 1877 essay by Matthew Arnold, it remained the most popular literary work in England more than three decades after its 1842 publication». L.M. LEWIS, *Germaine de Staël, George Sand and the Victorian Woman Artist*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2003, p. 42.

52. S. RUTHERFORD, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 34.

53. Ivi, p. 60.

54. Ivi, p. 43.

Pauline Viardot. Arguably, in the depiction of his heroine Emilia, who later calls herself Vittoria, Meredith inherited from Sand the topos of the socially influential female musician of genius, and further developed it to adapt it to the day's social context.

One of the chief concerns in *Consuelo* is with the dilemma between talented women's artistic vocation and the ideal of feminine domesticity they are meant to embody. Failing to understand rightly Count Albert's singularity, people would regard him as mentally deranged, and there seems no way to save him except by marrying him to Consuelo. Count Christian, his father, deems it natural that Consuelo should gladly become his bride to "consecrate" her life, if there is any love on her side. For her, however, it is no easy decision. «I have an object, a vocation, a calling; I belong to the art to which I have devoted myself since childhood»<sup>55</sup>, Consuelo implores. Count Christian, however, is not prepared to appreciate how strong her need of self-realization through art is: «But you do not love him [Count Albert], since you consider it impossible to renounce what you call your destiny!»<sup>56</sup> Likewise, in *Sandra Belloni*, Mr. Pole preaches to Emilia the impropriety of stage careers: «You must marry and get out of this. This'd never do. All very well in the boxes: but on the stage — oh, no!»<sup>57</sup> And then, their successor, Thyrza, joins the debate, showing her own revolutionary "artist's soul". When practising singing and waiting for Egremont's return, she imagines that he will be pleased to see her as a professional singer, but never suspects that he might demand her to sacrifice her profession for the conventional role of a lady:

She would be able to sing to him then. If her voice proved good enough for her to sing in a concert, like *the* concert at St. James Hall, would he not be proud of her? Artist's soul that she had, she never gave it a thought that, if she became his wife, he might prefer that

55. G. SAND, *Consuelo*, cit., p. 386.

56. Ivi, p. 387.

57. G. MEREDITH, *Sandra Belloni*, cit., p. 228.

she should not sing in public. She imagined herself before a great hall of people, singing, yet singing in truth to one only.<sup>58</sup>

Even if not consciously revolutionary, Thyrza's way of thinking naturally deviates from the norm. Phyllis Weliver has delineated the situation of female musicians in the mid- and late Victorian period: women's musical performance was considered approvable if they performed within the domestic sphere as amateurs, but it was condemned if they betrayed any ambition to become professionals and sing in public, especially in married state<sup>59</sup>. Thyrza, however, naively fails to recognise that her great achievement would not naturally please her husband.

Affinities could be found between Consuelo and Thyrza, suggesting the possibility of direct influence. The thirst for change is a common trait shared by these heroines: a monotonous life is oppressive and intolerable for their artistic temperament. Just as between Consuelo and Albert, the clairvoyant, there seems to be telepathic sympathy between Thyrza and Egremont. Even when there is no knowing that Egremont should be there, it seems that Thyrza somehow senses the proximity of his presence intuitively, and is "drawn"<sup>60</sup> to where he happens to be, whether to the library or the Chestnuts at a critical time, so that she can eavesdrop on the conversation between him and Mrs. Ormonde without being suspected.

There are also analogies between the two novels in the motif of the lovers' reunion marred by the treacherous mentor-figure, who, depreciating the damage done to the fragile and vulnerable temperament of the unfortunate lover, self-righteously manipulates his or her course of life in a lethal way. In *Consuelo*, the heroine, having determined to return to Albert, prepares a letter telling him of her intention to come back to him. However,

58. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 433.

59. P. WELIVER, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900*. Aldershot, Ashgate 2000, p. 56.

60. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 358.

Porpora, holding «that disappointed affection kills nobody»<sup>61</sup>, steals and burns the letter to cause fatal disappointment in the heart of one who so longs to hear from her. Likewise, in *Thyrza*, the authoritatively manipulative Mrs. Ormonde, who prefers the lives of Thyrza and Egremont to be «sped upon their several ways — ways surely very diverse»<sup>62</sup>, breaks the promise that the two may see each other again after the two years' separation, on the supposition that Thyrza must have cheerfully forgotten Egremont. Frustrated passion deprives the eponymous heroine of all life force and hastens her premature death<sup>63</sup>.

On hearing Porpora tell the story of Metastasio, Consuelo exclaims: «To wait and die! is this then the fate of these who love with passion<sup>64</sup>?» — and such, indeed, is Thyrza's fate. «She could not have lived», Annabel comments<sup>65</sup>. As the eponymous heroine's name suggests, she is like Thyrsis in Virgil's *Eclogues*, who «sang his best, and was beaten»<sup>66</sup>. Gissing characterizes Thyrza as a female version of the damned artist, caught between her unconventional self and the constrictions of society.

By contrast, the more positive aspects of artistic genius are explored by Gissing through the character of Beatrice in *A Life's Morning* (1888). Even from the adaptation of the protagonists' names, it seems evident that he drew inspiration from Meredith's *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria*. Gissing almost gives his protagonists, Wilfrid Athel and Emily Hood, the names of

61. G. SAND, *Consuelo*, cit., p. 665.

62. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 353.

63. Affinities could also be drawn between Thyrza and Count Albert, who is said to have «the revelation of the true, the grand music», to be endowed with «a dreamy inquiring soul that sought into everything», and onto whose characterization dark and gloomy aspects of the gifted mind are projected (G. SAND, *Consuelo*, cit., pp. 272, 399). Both characters are visionaries. However, while Albert, once believed to be dead, is miraculously revived in the sequel *The Countess of Rudolstadt*, Gissing opts for a tragic denouement.

64. G. SAND, *Consuelo*, cit., p. 639.

65. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 553.

66. VIRGIL, *The Eclogues and The Georgics*, trans. C.D. Lewis, Jonathan Cape, London 1963, p. 35.

Wilfrid Pole and Emilia in *Sandra Belloni*. Wilfrid in *A Life's Morning*, like his namesake in *Sandra Belloni*, is torn between two women, while, unlike Meredith's Emilia, Gissing's Emily does not actually sing vocally, though her charm is compared to music — in her, Wilfrid finds a beauty «which drew him as with siren song»<sup>67</sup>. Although the text allows the musically talented Beatrice but the position of sub-heroine, it endows her with aspects of what Rutherford calls the “superdiva”<sup>68</sup> — that is, the idealized figure of a woman singer of genius, able to elevate the human soul by the divine power of her music, as shown in Wilfrid's injunction:

Pursue music with seriousness. Become a real artist; a public singer, let us say. No amateur nonsense; recognize that you have a superb voice, and that by dint of labour you may attain artistic excellence. You talk of getting up concerts in low parts of London, of humanizing ruffians by the influence of music. Pshaw! humanize humanity at large by devotion to an artistic ideal [...].<sup>69</sup>

Beatrice is expected to develop her talent in a direction likely to align her with literary superdivas such as the eponymous character of *Vittoria* — the sequel to *Sandra Belloni* — and Consuelo. Indeed, *Vittoria*, formerly called Emilia in *Sandra Belloni*, is «stern in her devotion to an ideal of classical music that should elevate and never stoop to seduce or flatter thoughtless hearers». Her voice belongs to «the order of the simply great voices»<sup>70</sup>, whose special function, the narrator comments, is to reveal the depths of the human mind and make visible what has hitherto been unseen:

This is what the great voice does for us [...]. It illumines our souls, as you see the lightning make the unintelligible craving darkness leap into long mountain ridges, and twisting vales, and spires of

67. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, cit., p. 314.

68. S. RUTHERFORD, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

69. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, cit., p. 32.

70. G. MEREDITH, *Vittoria*, BiblioBazaar, Charleston, SC 2008, p. 228.

cities, and inner recesses of light within light, rose-like, toward a central core of violet heat.<sup>71</sup>

This recalls Count Albert's eulogy of music in *Consuelo* — «Music exposes all that the mind dreams and foresees of mystery and grandeur» —, and the narratorial comment on the morally uplifting function of the musical art: «It has been justly said, that the aim of music is to awaken feeling. No other art so reveals the sublime emotions of the human soul. It presents things in an entirely new and original aspect»<sup>72</sup>. For Beatrice too, music is a means of self-discovery as well as of self-expression: «[T]he complexities of her character covered and concealed, which were not clear to her own consciousness» are given form by «the divine impulse»<sup>73</sup>. The adjective “divine” is again used near the end of the novel to describe Beatrice's noble spirituality, when Wilfrid, struck by her act of self-sacrifice, inwardly exclaims: «What divine nature had lain hidden in this woman! He gazed at her as on a being more than mortal»<sup>74</sup>. Thus, a very similar idea on the revelatory and moral power of music is found resonating through the novels by Gissing, Meredith, and Sand.

Chiyo Sakamoto and Yuri Kato point out that the vision of the ideal, egalitarian society presented in *The Countess of Rudolstadt*, the sequel to *Consuelo*, reflects the utopian thoughts of Pierre Leroux and Saint-Simonism<sup>75</sup>. In Sand's novel, Consuelo goes through various trials before she is initiated into the secret society that aims to establish such an ideal state; however, no active engagement is further required in the subversion of the existing order. Conversely, Meredith's Vittoria is allowed to play such a role: the artist-heroine has to get actively involved in a social

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ivi*, p. 356.

73. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, cit., p. 43.

74. *Ivi*, p. 327.

75. C. SAKAMOTO and Y. KATO, *George Sand et Quatre Musiciens: Liszt, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Chopin*, Sairyusha, Tokyo 2013, pp. 137–38.

revolution, to liberate Italy from Austrian rule; she is to do so by bravely singing out a critical tune at a critical time, to trigger the rising in Milan.

It would be tempting to speculate that Gissing was conscious of such a lineage of great literary divas when creating the character of Beatrice. However, he differentiated himself from his predecessors in a noticeable way: while Meredith and Sand let their diva–heroines ultimately attain both of their two aims in life, love and music, Gissing chose two heroines instead of one, as if to indicate that one heroine could not alone meet such an end in his own day, when especially married women suffered from society’s disapproval if they sought opportunities of performing professionally. In spite of the often pessimistic tone of his narrative, Gissing was a sympathetic vindicator of, and an enthusiastic believer in, women’s artistic genius. He strove for an expression of his transcendental ideals and values by projecting them onto the figures of divinely gifted women. Thus, while the significant influence of George Sand upon “female Georges”, such as George Eliot and George Egerton, has already been pointed out<sup>76</sup>, her link with the “male Georges”, Meredith and Gissing, proves just as important.

76. L.M. LEWIS, *Germaine de Staël, George Sand and the Victorian Woman Artist*, cit., p. 2.

## “Entirely to My Taste”

Gissing’s Reception of Charlotte Brontë

CONSTANCE D. HARSH\*

A Gissing scholar is likely to think of Charlotte Brontë first in the context of his admiring references to her in his letters. In writing to his sister Margaret on 12 April 1887, he declares:

I am again reading “*Villette*”. Charlotte Bronte [sic] I find more & more valuable. She is the greatest English woman after Mrs. Browning, without question. George Eliot is poor in comparison with her. No page of her is without genius, & she wrote a style such as you find in no other writer. She strengthens me enormously.<sup>1</sup>

To Eduard Bertz five days later, still clearly elated by his rereading of *Villette*, he observes, «of English novelists I see more & more clearly that there is *only one* entirely to my taste, & that is Charlotte Bronte. A great & glorious woman<sup>2</sup>!». In praise of her style to George Bainton on 24 September 1888, he identified an instinctive though untaught feel for Latin (a point of great appeal to Gissing the Classicist): «She did not know Latin, yet I recall many instances in which the wonderful choice of an uncommon word proved that she *felt* its meaning in the tongue from which it is derived»<sup>3</sup>.

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1. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 3, p. 101.

2. Ivi, p. 105.

3. Ivi, p. 246.

Charlotte Brontë's significance as a literary model for Gissing might be explored in many ways<sup>4</sup>, but some of Gissing's own observations provide a few logical starting points. The character of Caroline Helstone in *Shirley*, who suffers pathetically from unrequited love, provides a useful point of comparison with Thyrsa Trent. The portrait of Vashti in *Villette* quite clearly had some influence on the writing of *The Nether World*. And Brontë herself as a literary personality held enormous interest for Gissing throughout his career, partly due to their temperamental similarities. There are real affinities between these writers, but no simple equivalences. This comparative case shows as much about the limits of literary influence as it does its power. Yet clarifying his connection to a writer he deeply admired helps reveal more clearly the distinctiveness of Gissing's own literary art.

In 1880, Gissing offered his sister Margaret the surprising opinion that *Shirley* «is, on the whole, certainly Charlotte Brontë's best book»<sup>5</sup>. In later years, he would indicate a preference for *Villette*, but it is worth pausing on this letter's appreciation of Brontë's characterization: «I think perhaps Caroline Helstone is a better drawn character than Shirley herself, though the latter is very delightful»<sup>6</sup>. From its first appearance in 1849, the novel had garnered praise for the sensitivity with which Caroline's portrait is drawn<sup>7</sup>. She dominates the first volume of the novel, and her plight as the unrequited lover of Robert Moore is the occasion for

4. J.W.M. Bemelmans, for instance, has argued that *The Unclassed* offers an exceptionally significant engagement with Brontë and her fiction. His analysis places particular emphasis on Maud Enderby, whose artistic sensibility and uneasy conventionality align her with Brontë and her heroines. J.W.M. BEMELMANS, "A Permanent Interest of a Minor Kind": Charlotte Brontë and George Gissing's *The Unclassed*, «Brontë Society Transactions», 18, 5 (1985), pp. 383–91.

5. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 1, p. 232.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. See for instance the unsigned reviews in the «Daily News» (31 Oct. 1849) and «Atlas» (3 Nov. 1849). *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. M. Allott, Routledge, London 1974, pp. 117–21.

some of Brontë’s bitterest expressions of emotional pain. The following famous passage provides the narrator’s advice to Caroline, who is devastated when Robert ceases to pay attention to her.

A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can say nothing: if she did the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. [...] Take the matter as you find it: ask no questions; utter no remonstrances: it is your best wisdom. You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don’t shriek because the nerves are martyred: do not doubt that your mental stomach — if you have such a thing — is strong as an ostrich’s — the stone will digest. You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. For the whole remnant of your life, if you survive the test — some, it is said, die under it — you will be stronger, wiser, less sensitive.<sup>8</sup>

The intensity of this passage evokes considerable pathos as well as bitterness, creating an emotional bond with the reader by vividly representing the experience of unjust romantic suffering. Gissing comes close to this mode in *Thyrza* with his portrait of Thyrza Trent. The experience of its composition, and his involvement with his heroine’s fate in particular, brought Gissing to tears. When Walter Egremont fails to return to her after a two years’ absence, Thyrza, like Caroline, experiences an emotional abandonment that she finds excruciating. As with Caroline, this experience leads to increased claims on the reader’s sympathy and a heightened subjectivity. But the differences in their evocation of pathos are instructive.

For both, suffering finds expression in changed appearance. Caroline’s good looks fade.

8. C. BRONTË, *Shirley*, ed. H. Rosengarten and M. Smith, Clarendon, Oxford 1979, pp. 117–18.

She could see that she was altered within the last month; that the hues of her complexion were paler, her eyes changed — a wan shade seemed to circle them, her countenance was dejected: she was not, in short, so pretty or so fresh as she used to be.<sup>9</sup>

Thyrza's beauty, in contrast, is only enhanced by suffering. Mrs. Ormonde, recognizing Thyrza's enactment of a "supreme martyrdom", is struck with awe at her looks:

In her glances at Thyrza's face she felt, with new force, how spiritual was its beauty. For in soulless features, however regular and attractive, suffering reveals the flesh; this girl, stricken with deadly pallor, led the thoughts to the purest ideals of womanhood transfigured by woe in the pictures of old time.<sup>10</sup>

It is significant that Egremont never *sees* Thyrza after his return — he recognises the very real possibility that «the sight of her would revive [his love] and make it lasting»<sup>11</sup>. In the end, Thyrza does not simply evoke paintings of old time but becomes herself a work of art. Her most impressive appearance comes in the portrait that Mrs. Ormonde commissions after her death. It serves as a crucial piece of evidence in the conversation between Annabel Newthorpe and Egremont that ends the novel. «But you are conscious now of what that face means?» she asks him. «The crisis of your life was there»<sup>12</sup>. The portrait is a monument to Thyrza's exalted nature and a reproach to Egremont for his weakness in abandoning her. So, a significant element in Gissing's pathos lies in the spiritual apotheosis of his heroine reflected in her appearance. Thyrza's personal pain is also a source of pathos, but her external representation as a tragically spurned ideal woman is of at least equal force.

9. Ivi, p. 197.

10. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, Harvester, Brighton 1984, p. 455.

11. Ivi, p. 445.

12. Ivi, p. 489.

Caroline is not spiritualised by suffering, and she does not become an icon of ideal womanhood. Her suffering is not triumphant: like Thyrza’s, her pain is legible, but it does not compel a response. Taking leave of Robert at the end of an evening with Shirley, Caroline presents a spectacle available for interpretation:

She turned to Robert [. . .]: as he looked up, the light of the candles on the mantelpiece fell full on her face: all its paleness, all its change, all its forlorn meaning were clearly revealed. Robert had good eyes, and might have seen it, if he would: whether he did see it, nothing indicated.<sup>13</sup>

What follows suggests that he has chosen not to notice. The power he enjoys as a “lover masculine”, the power he has already exerted to spurn her, continues unabated. Pathos here lies partly in the distance between the intensity of feeling and its inefficacy. Ultimately Robert does marry Caroline, after his perspective has been readjusted by the humiliation of Shirley’s romantic rejection and the physical challenge of recovery from a gunshot wound. He emerges chastened, but not diminished. His behaviour to Caroline demonstrates his imperfectly developed sensibility rather than, as in Egremont’s case, an essential deficiency in his character.

It is not that Brontë is entirely sceptical of women’s power. But she provides a different answer than Gissing to a question posed by both novels: what is the force of women’s romantic suffering? For Brontë, the agency that emerges out of disappointment is a kind of self-mastery or ascetic self-fashioning. The result of this process is unbeautiful etiolation rather than active power, as the following narrative aside indicates. (At this point in the story Caroline has fallen into anomie after having sought in vain for a meaningful role in the world).

People never die of love or grief alone; though some die of inherent

13. C. BRONTË, *Shirley*, cit., p. 283.

maladies, which the tortures of those passions prematurely force into destructive action. The sound by nature undergo these tortures, and are racked, shaken, shattered: their beauty and bloom perish, but life remains untouched. They are brought to a certain point of dilapidation; they are reduced to pallor, debility, and emaciation. [...] [T]hey live on; and though they cannot regain youth and gaiety, they may regain strength and serenity. The blossom which the March wind nips, but fails to sweep away, may survive to hang a withered apple on the tree late into autumn [...].<sup>14</sup>

For Gissing, women's suffering can provide a kind of distillation of an ideal essence. The difference between the two authors' views of this subject is evident in the natural images that they use. While Brontë's language likens sufferers to the blossom that is besieged by the elements, Gissing aligns Thyrza with the elements themselves. As Egremont vacillates for the final time about whether to return to Thyrza, there is a brief narrative exclamation: «The stars and the night wind and the breaking of the sea — the sea which Thyrza loved — spoke to him. Could he not understand their language<sup>15</sup>?». There is an awesome profundity to Thyrza's elevated character: all nature joins to support her cause. In comparison with Brontë at this stage in his career, Gissing elevates the stakes of feminine suffering. But with this elevation comes a shift in focus from his heroine's personal experience. He makes Thyrza's narrative function at least as important as her interiority: he sets her up as the standard by which the insufficiency of his imperfect hero can be measured.

Only a few years later, Gissing's artistic engagement with Brontë's example would have a different and less idealistic tenor. Several Gissing letters make particular reference to *Villette*, her last completed work. In one he judges it to be her best novel. In two others he specifically references its "Vashti" chapter as an extraordinary piece of writing. Writing to his sister Ellen on 22

14. Ivi, p. 214.

15. G. GISSING, *Thyrza*, cit., p. 445.

May 1887, he recommends, «If you have it not by heart, prithee turn to “Villette” & read that description of her acting. One of the most glorious pages in English literature»<sup>16</sup>. (In December of 1887 he would also recommend to Algernon that he learn this by heart). Surely he had in mind a passage like this, in which Lucy Snowe communicates her assessment of Vashti’s performance.

Suffering had struck that stage empress; and she stood before her audience neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor in finite measure, resenting it: she stood locked in struggle, rigid in resistance. She stood, not dressed, but draped in pale antique folds, long and regular like sculpture. A background and entourage and flooring of deepest crimson threw her out, white like alabaster — like silver: rather, be it said, like Death. [. . .]

I have said that she does not *resent* her grief. No; the weakness of that word would make it a lie. To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions. [. . .] Wicked, perhaps, she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives peerlessly fair, and docile as fair. Even in the uttermost frenzy of energy is each maenad movement royally, imperially, incedingly upborne. Her hair, flung loose in revel or war, is still an angel’s hair, and glorious under a halo. Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled. Heaven’s light, following her exile, pierces its confines, and discloses their forlorn remoteness.<sup>17</sup>

On some level it is remarkable that Gissing would recommend that his siblings learn this passage, or one like it, by heart. There is of course much to appreciate in the sound and meter of Brontë’s language. But it possesses qualities that do not typi-

16. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 3, p. 115.

17. C. BRONTË, *Villette*, ed. H. Rosengarten and M. Smith, Clarendon, Oxford 1984, pp. 369–70. This is one of two passages in *Villette* that Gissing cites in his *Commonplace Book* in support of Brontë’s intuitive feel for Latin. «One in ignorance of Charlotte Brontë’s history, would, from a study of her style, assuredly believe her to have studied Latin. [. . .] In the Vashti passage, she says “royally, imperially, incedingly upborne” [. . .]». G. GISSING, *George Gissing’s Commonplace Book*, ed. J. Korg, New York Public Library, New York 1962, p. 31.

cally characterise his own writing such as the employment of melodramatic vocabulary and the rhythmic use of synonyms to underscore meaning. And Gissing, though occasionally ready to create a tableau for artistic effect (as in the vision of nature at the end of *Eve's Ransom*), is not as prone as Brontë to stimulate emotional affect through set pieces that, superficially at least, interrupt narrative development.

This passage is particularly exemplary of the novel's treatment of the actress Vashti. She is an embodiment of the alluring yet ethically dubious power of artistic activity. And she also presents a heightened manifestation of the sensibility that Lucy possesses: one that is morbidly sensitive, intuitive, and unbounded. Earlier in the novel we learn of the effects upon Lucy of a storm, which «woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy. [...] I did long, achingly, [...] for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards»<sup>18</sup>. In the world of *Villette*, there are tokens of the possibility of transcendence that are visible to those with eyes to see. Alongside the drearily prosaic world of the pension there runs another world, full of ghostly nuns and mysteries, and the metaphorical language of the text continuously points to this. To use a phrase from Leslie Stephen's 1877 assessment of Brontë, «The whole machinery is in a state of the highest electric tension»<sup>19</sup>. The narrative is quite explicit that Vashti does *not* cheat death, as her performance nearly suggests that she can — «night and oblivion long since closed above her». But in her time her «name [...] could thrill Europe»<sup>20</sup>.

This favourite figure from Brontë makes an appearance, in very altered form, in Gissing's own work. In 1888 he was rereading *Villette*. On June 17, as he famously lamented his

18. C. BRONTË, *Villette*, cit., p. 152.

19. L. STEPHEN, *Hours in a Library: Charlotte Brontë*, «Cornhill Magazine», 36 (Dec. 1877), pp. 723–39, here p. 727.

20. C. BRONTË, *Villette*, cit., p. 366.

friendless state in London, he noted in his diary that he was unable to work but had «read a few chapters of *Villette*»<sup>21</sup>. And the very next day he finished composing Volume 2 of *The Nether World*. At this point (the close of Chapter 27), Clara Hewett has returned to her family in despair after her face (and acting career) have been destroyed by vitriol. Gissing would have had Vashti freshly available in his mind as he developed the fate of his own morally flawed actress.

Clara hardly inhabits the same artistic heights as Vashti. Like her, she is not a particularly good woman. She has an “impulse of revolt”<sup>22</sup> that manifests itself in selfishness: «combining the temper of an ambitious woman with the forces of a man’s brain, [she] had early learnt that the world was not her friend nor the world’s law»<sup>23</sup>. Her talent seems real, but her closest approach to success on the stage comes in a seedy touring company’s production of a piece of “claptrap”<sup>24</sup>, *A Secret of the Thames*. Acting on the stage offers food for her egotism and some vehicle for the expression of her personal vitality, but not a real artistic power. Her greatest performance instead comes when, disfigured, she acts her way back into the good graces of Sidney Kirkland, the hapless hero who becomes her husband. «An actress improvising her part, she regulated every tone with perfect skill, with inspiration; the very attitude in which she seated herself was a triumph of the artist’s felicity»<sup>25</sup>. Clara of course has a very limited field of operation. But this is precisely the point. Gissing’s world does not allow the same possibilities as Brontë’s. The characters who inhabit the London of *The Nether World* can at best find or create a momentary shaft of sunlight in the darkness. Charlotte Brontë’s world of sublime

21. G. GISSING, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. P. Coustillas, Harvester, Hassocks 1978, p. 33.

22. G. GISSING, *The Nether World*, ed. S. Gill, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992, p. 79.

23. Ivi, p. 26.

24. Ivi, p. 204.

25. Ivi, p. 284.

interiority, constrained by circumstance yet capable of rising above it, is quite different. This particular point of comparison, the figure of the actress, provides an especially clear means of distinguishing their respective registers. It also shows that even when Brontë's influence on Gissing is quite demonstrable, his use of her is far from slavish. In *The Nether World* the Vashti figure is not so much a direct model as a distant inspiration.

Finally, Gissing's interest in Brontë extended beyond matters of mode or subject. There are numerous indications of his fascination with her life and personality. A diary entry from 1889 finds him briefly in Brussels walking «the hilly streets, and [thinking] of Charlotte Brontë»<sup>26</sup>, who had studied and taught there in the 1840s. Another entry from 1896 reports with interest (and some implicit discomfort) Clement Shorter's account of wheedling Charlotte's literary remains out of her widower<sup>27</sup>. He thinks of her when he receives an account from Ellen of a visit to Anne Brontë's grave: «Strange to think of Charlotte Brontë having stood on the spot, — at the time of course regarded by those with whom she had dealings as an insignificant stranger»<sup>28</sup>. When he dined with his publisher George Smith in 1887, Gissing pressed him for stories of the Brontës and reported the results to Ellen. On this occasion Gissing wrote in his *Commonplace Book* that «In no modern writer have I such intense *personal* interest as in Charlotte Brontë [sic.]»<sup>29</sup>.

Gissing of course was not alone in finding the personal history of the Brontës compelling. He is very much in the tradition of Victorian critics, although his according of the highest literary laurels to *Villette* is unusual. Certainly since the 1857 publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and arguably even before that, fascination with Brontë's life has been

26. G. GISSING, *London and the Life of Literature*, cit., p. 141.

27. Ivi, pp. 399–400.

28. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 3, pp. 235–36.

29. G. GISSING, *Commonplace Book*, cit., p. 29.

a significant component of her critical reception. Her story is inherently tragic and dramatic, and it seems to provide a key to her novels’ unusual and even disturbing qualities. Throughout the nineteenth century, biography played an important role in structuring Brontë criticism. According to Miriam Allott, this may be particularly true at the time Gissing came to maturity: «References to the Brontës in the 1870s indicate more clearly how strongly interest in them had survived, the interest now being increasingly biographical. [...] [N]ew biographical studies prompted new critical assessment [...]»<sup>30</sup>. One of the most significant studies of the century, Algernon Swinburne’s adulatory *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877), was stimulated by a «Spectator» review of Thomas Wemyss Reid’s biography that Swinburne found inadequately appreciative of its subject. Although provoked indirectly by a biography, Swinburne’s book does at least take a literary approach to its subject. Peter Bayne, in *Two Great Englishwomen* (1881), uses a more common procedure, opening his section on Charlotte with biography and interlarding criticism liberally with personal details. There is something quite particular to Brontë in this practice. Bayne’s discussion of the other great Englishwoman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, provides a detailed assessment of her artistry to the almost total exclusion of biography<sup>31</sup>. Throughout Gissing’s life, articles in the periodical press can be found that dilate on some element of Charlotte’s personal history<sup>32</sup>. A personage well

30. M. ALLOTT, “Introduction”, *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, cit., p. 42.

31. It is interesting to revisit Gissing’s letter of 12 April 1887 in light of Swinburne’s and Bayne’s books. Like Bayne, Gissing asserts that Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning have both achieved greatness. He also sounds a great deal like Swinburne, who makes an extended comparison between Brontë and George Eliot to the great disadvantage of the latter. Gissing may well have been acquainted with these books, although comparing authors was a relatively common critical pastime. (See for instance Stephen’s comparison of Brontë and Eliot).

32. For instance, see two accounts, a decade apart, of remarkably similar pilgrimages to Haworth to find traces of Charlotte. L.B. WALFORD, *The Home of Charlotte Brontë*, «Longman’s Magazine» (Jan. 1890), pp. 306–13. E.B. PARRY, *Charlotte Brontë and Haworth: A Gossip and a Medley*, «Leisure Hour» (Dec. 1900), pp. 139–47.

known to Gissing, Frederic Harrison, summed up the literary grounds of the nineteenth-century fascination with Charlotte Brontë the woman with admirable precision: «It is this intense personality which is the distinctive note of her books. They are not so much tales as imaginary autobiographies»<sup>33</sup>. Yet Gissing's personal connection to Brontë was more immediate than this. The *Commonplace Book* entry cited above continues with an observation that suggests some degree of personal investment in her. «It has stirred me strangely to hear George Smith speak of his remembrance of her. [...] But I wish he spoke more reverently»<sup>34</sup>. In his letter to Ellen describing the Smith dinner, Gissing does mention a rather derisive story of how Charlotte «was very vain of her narrow waist & small foot, & she laced herself so tight as to injure herself»<sup>35</sup>. There was probably more irreverence in Smith's descriptions than this. In 1900 Smith published an article of Brontë reminiscences for «Cornhill Magazine» that seems likely to have contained stories that he had delivered privately for the past generation. In addition to some anecdotes that overlap with what Gissing reports, there is a repeated insistence on Charlotte's provincialism and her social awkwardness with those who sought to make a literary lion of her<sup>36</sup>. Smith put his audience in the position of smug superiority, a position that evidently Gissing resisted.

In retrospect that evening with Smith has its ironies. After all, the comfortable businessman who regaled Gissing with unsympathetic stories of Charlotte would subject him to the same sharp practice he had used on her. Frederick Nesta has described the calculated way in which Smith delayed the cheap

33. F. HARRISON, *Charlotte Brontë's Place in Literature*, «Forum», 19 (Mar. 1895), pp. 29–40, here pp. 30–31.

34. G. GISSING, *Commonplace Book*, cit., p. 29.

35. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 3, p. 131.

36. Smith also makes a statement that will ring false to all sensitive readers of *Jane Eyre*: «I believe that she would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful». G.M. SMITH, *Charlotte Brontë*, «Cornhill Magazine», ns 9 (Dec. 1900), pp. 778–95, here p. 785.

edition of *Thyrza* until he succeeded finally in purchasing the copyright; for this, «Gissing would never forgive Smith, Elder»<sup>37</sup>. *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* contains a revealing and relevant meditation on the literary marketplace. In the midst of decrying the modern degradation of the profession of author, Ryecroft nonetheless acknowledges the abuses of the past.

Yes, yes; I know as well as any man that reforms were needed in the relations between author and publisher. Who knows better than I that your representative author face to face with your representative publisher was, is, and ever will be, at a ludicrous disadvantage? [...] A big, blustering, genial brute of a Trollope could very fairly hold his own, and exact at all events an acceptable share in the profits of his work. A shrewd and vigorous man of business such as Dickens, aided by a lawyer who was his devoted friend, could do even better, and, in reaping sometimes more than his publisher, redress the ancient injustice. But pray, what of Charlotte Brontë? Think of that grey, pinched life, the latter years of which would have been so brightened had Charlotte Brontë received but, let us say, one third of what, in the same space of time, the publisher gained by her books. I know all about this; alas! no man better.<sup>38</sup>

In this sympathetic assessment there seems no obvious reason to distance Ryecroft and Gissing himself. Like Brontë, Gissing was at a disadvantage when encountering a shrewd operator.

The evidence also suggests a further level of identification — a temperamental one. Both Brontë and Gissing were natives of the provinces who could be shy in company, shrinking from the possibility of a lack of sympathy<sup>39</sup>. Both explored in fiction

37. F. NESTA, *The Commerce of Literature: George Gissing and Late Victorian Publishing, 1880–1903*, diss. University of Wales, 2007, p. 70.

38. G. GISSING, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Harvester, Brighton 1982, pp. 214–15.

39. Adrian Poole, describing Gissing’s “acute sense of affinity” with Brontë, cites the letter to Ellen about Anne Brontë’s grave as an indicator of his sympathy with Charlotte’s plight as an obscure giant whom time would vindicate. A. POOLE, *Gissing in Context*, Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa 1975, pp. 11–12.

the situation they had experienced in reality — the difficulty of making one's way in a coarse-grained world as a sensitive, passionate outsider. In a letter to his sister Margaret in 1883 he was all but explicit about this affinity:

You remind me, do you know, in what you say of these matters [social opportunities] of Charlotte Brontë. She had that same shrinking from people who might be supposed to look down upon her, & the same half-defiant withdrawing into herself. I myself understand it also.<sup>40</sup>

Gissing had a strong fellow-feeling for the sensibility that Brontë revealed in both life and art. It is a fellow-feeling that transcends the boundary of gender; it may be of a piece with the remarkable sympathy with women of which he is capable in so many of his works.

This shared sensibility may be clearly seen in Gissing's *Isabel Clarendon*. There are echoes of *Jane Eyre* in the story of Ada Warren, the unattractive orphan foisted on a reluctant widow by her late husband's order. Like Jane, Ada inherits a fortune yet shows superiority to wealth by giving money away. These similarities of plot are, however, less striking than a shared conception of character. Unlike Brontë, Gissing has sympathy with the unloving guardian (the eponymous heroine) as well as the ugly child. Yet there is a remarkable degree of compassion shown for the latter. For instance, in her only act of rebellion as a child, the teenaged Ada refuses to come down from her room to join Isabel's guests. Lashing out at her nominal benefactor, Ada shows herself to be a fiery truth-teller like Jane:

«No, Mrs. Clarendon», she exclaimed; «I cannot come down to please you! Why should I torture myself to give you pleasure?»

She had risen, and stood with a face of passionate anguish.

[...] «You ask me to meet your friends because you think it, I suppose, a duty to do so; in truth, you are ashamed of me, you had

40. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 2, p. 176.

far rather not see me downstairs». <sup>41</sup>

Isabel has the difficult task of «fac[ing] the outburst of a nature which was all at once proving itself so deep and vehement» <sup>42</sup>. While we are provided with Isabel’s generally cool perspective on this child, we are not encouraged to share it. For there is sufficient explanation of her action in an earlier account of Isabel’s unloving initial reception of her; there is also an insightful account of Ada’s own understanding of her outburst: «A couple of years later Ada looked back upon her part in [this scene] with that brain–scorching shame to which an intense nature is so subject in recalling immature impulsiveness» <sup>43</sup>. Ada is intelligent, but over–sensitive and ungraceful. It is difficult to think of another male Victorian author who would enter so fully and unjudgmentally into the feelings of a young woman who acts so far outside contemporary norms of female behaviour. But impassioned yet suppressed natures such as Ada’s constitute the premier subject of Brontë’s fiction.

Gissing’s affinity for Charlotte Brontë is at once quite understandable and quite paradoxical. He felt a deep sympathy for this unsociable Yorkshirewoman. He felt great admiration for a literary style that was strikingly different from his own. He is an admirer but not a disciple. His world is more objectively observed than hers. He is more resistant to the allure of the unchained imagination than she. For him, individual subjectivity cannot hope to escape the constraints of the material world. Perhaps for this reason he does not explore and celebrate it in the same intense way.

Yet Gissing and Brontë share an understanding of the pain of the outsider, the socially and economically disempowered. John Goode astutely observes that «Brontë was the only English nov-

41. G. GISSING, *Isabel Clarendon*, ed. P. Coustillas, 2 vols., Harvester, Brighton 1969, here vol. 1, p. 140.

42. Ivi, p. 142.

43. Ivi, vol. 1, p. 143.

elist entirely to his taste, and it is not difficult to see why, since she, above all, registers the rebellious mind trapped within institutions that is at the centre of Gissing's fictive world»<sup>44</sup>. And there may be one more similarity of significance. Leslie Stephen in 1877 criticised Charlotte Brontë's failure to construct a systematic philosophy. «Wisdom», he suggests, «is not the word to apply to a state of mind which seems to be radically inconsistent and tentative». He suggests that she lacks a “consistency of doctrine” that might have yielded “harmony of design” like George Eliot's<sup>45</sup>. Surely he would have had a similar reservation about George Gissing. Gissing too has no consistent doctrine. Both he and Brontë are content to be novelists who enact the unresolvable plight of human beings without seeking to fit them into an inevitably reductive master scheme.

44. J. GOODE, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, Barnes, New York 1979, p. 18.

45. L. STEPHEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 738, 739.

# The Dangers of the Palace of Art

## The Irony of Retirement in Gissing's Tennysonian Allusions

REBECCA HUTCHEON\*

1. This chapter will explore the manifold and variegated references to Tennyson in Gissing. P.F. Kropholler has identified Tennyson as the third source — after Shakespeare and the Bible — of Gissing's quotations<sup>1</sup>. Recognition of intertextual propinquity has been a prominent aspect of Gissing scholarship<sup>2</sup>. Gissing's narratives in part develop themes, images, plot motifs and the portrayal of character around allusion to prior works. The nineteenth century, in fact, could be defined as the initial age of intertextuality as writers attempted to fashion private worlds via a public language. If, as Christopher Ricks suggests, Tennyson was a poet of allusion, he was also a poet of poets: «[n]o other poet», Gissing concludes a letter to Eduard

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1. P.F. KROPHOLLER, *Some Notes of Quotations and Literary Allusions in Gissing*, «The Gissing Newsletter», II, 4, 1975, pp. 11–14, here p. 13.

2. See S. VON GAPP, "Influence of the Classics on Gissing's Novels of Everyday Life", *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, ed. P. Coustillas, Cass, London 1968, pp. 83–97. Also, A. POOLE, *Gissing in Context*, Macmillan, London 1975; J. GOODE, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, Hogarth Press, London 1979; J. SLOAN, *The Literary Affinity of Gissing and Dostoevsky: Revising Dickens*, «English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920», 32, 4, 1989, pp. 441–53, and "Gissing and Hogarth", *A Garland for Gissing*, ed. B. Postmus, Brill, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 149–59. For a recent survey of intertextuality in Gissing see the section "The World of Books" in *Writing Otherness: The Pathways of George Gissing's Imagination*, ed. C. Huguet, Equilibrium, Haren 2010, in particular W. GREENSLADE, "Reading Matter and the Matter of Reading", *ivi*, pp. 173–88.

Bertz, «ever wrote so musically, or with greater command of the picturesque, suggestive language»<sup>3</sup>.

As well as espousing the picturesque language of Tennyson's verse, Gissing's narratives also appear inspired by Tennysonian themes and characterisation. Many of Gissing's protagonists — like Tennysonian speakers — are alienated, artistic figures. Allusions to Tennyson explore different aesthetic viewpoints as well as the impossibility and inherent danger of shutting out the dialogic world to exist only in a monologic echo chamber of art. This style of intertextuality often manifests as merely ornamental allusion, a means of literary self-fashioning in the formation of character and one's relationship with the world. It also constitutes a way of seeing, as suggested in the fictional autobiography *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1901): «[t]hink», Ryecroft directs, «how one's view of common things is affected by literary association»<sup>4</sup>. This sense of looking at the world through the figurative lens of art, and describing it via quotations from literature, is a distinctive and recurrent trope of Gissing's characterisation. That an awareness of a palimpsest of allusion has a deep influence on perception is clear in the references to Tennyson in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *A Life's Morning* (1885), *Isabel Clarendon* (1886), *The Odd Women* (1893), *In the Year of Jubilee* (1895), and *New Grub Street* (1891). These texts reveal how Gissing's narratives, in part, derive their meanings by evoking Tennyson. However, as Jonathan Culler explains,

intertextuality [...] has a double focus. On the one hand, it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written. Yet in so far as it focuses on intelligibility, on meaning, "intertextuality" leads us to consider prior texts as contributions

3. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, 9 vols., ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–97, here vol. 5, p. 64.

4. G. GISSING, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Jonathan Cape, London 1927, p. 116.

to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification. Intertextuality thus becomes [...] a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture [...].<sup>5</sup>

In Gissing, allusion — and particularly direct quotation — forces different views into explicit parallel or contrast, revealing a clash between the social speech types of different classes, intellects and generations. Furthermore, the insertion of poetry — a monologic genre, and the ironic distance thus distended between reader and action — is also a way in which Gissing redirects expectations. Through such irony, the narrative exposes and shares with the reader a lack of self-knowledge in the characters. This underlines a third element of Tennyson's influence: Gissing draws on the dramatic monologue form, creating a site of binate exchange (Culler's "discursive space") between "novelised" poetry and poetic prose<sup>6</sup>.

2. The clash between art and social reform could be understood as the leitmotif of *Workers in the Dawn*, and can be traced via the various repeated allusions in the text: to Shelley, to Hogarth and to Tennyson. Just as Arthur and Mr. Tollady deviate in the ways they interpret the purpose of art, so too do Arthur and Helen who, though considering the same source, witness its influence differently. Towards the end of the novel, Helen introduces Arthur to Tennyson's *The Palace of Art* (1833), which she defines as having «a deep, glad ring of hope [...] which chimes delightfully with [her] own best thoughts»<sup>7</sup>, and, reading it aloud to Arthur, concludes:

5. J. CULLER, *The Pursuit of Sign*, Cornell University Press, New York 1981, p. 103.

6. "Novelised" is Bakhtin's phrase, see M.M. BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1984, p. 33. Bakhtin argued that poetry attempted to strip language artificially of the intentions of others to create the illusion of unity in a single or monologic voice. Bakhtin's writings on dialogism, metalinguistics and the spatialisation of language are of fundamental importance to the theory of intertextuality.

7. G. GISSING, *Workers in the Dawn*, Harvester, Brighton 1985, p. 300.

This poem [...] contains an admirable moral, very applicable to myself. How often have I been tempted to build just such a Palace of Art, and to shut myself up in it with an infinitude of intellectual delights, heedless of the rest of the world. Happily I have hitherto been able to resist such temptations, as I trust I may always do.<sup>8</sup>

Here Helen's unequivocal acceptance of the poem's "moral" can be viewed as a diegetic and actantial allusion; she draws from literary sources for intellectual guidance on how to interact dialogically with the world, and this corresponds with her philanthropic impulse. Nonetheless, via the poetic hyperbole and metaphorical imagery of her descriptions: «deep, glad ring [...] which chimes delightfully; [...] infinitude of intellectual delights», she inadvertently picks up on the internal paradox of moral versus expression ingrained in Tennyson. This is furthered by the way in which she encourages Arthur to interact with the poem:

I think it likely you will find many suggestions for pictures here. One verse particularly struck me this morning, and made me think of — that an artist might make a wonderful painting from it [...]:

And one a full-fed river, winding slow  
By herds upon an endless plain,  
The rugged rims of thunder brooding low,  
With shadow-streaks of rain.

Or this, if you are in a wild, instead of a melancholy, mood —

And one a foreground black with stones and slags,  
Beyond, a line of heights, and higher  
All barr'd with long white cloud the scornful crags,  
And highest, snow and fire.<sup>9</sup>

The inserted stanzas from *The Palace of Art* are descriptions of the soul's internal diorama. The first gives the sense of a protracted tempo and a scene suspended in a liminal state. The active potential of the images is checked by the verbs and

8. Ivi, p. 301.

9. Ivi, p. 300.

adjectives: “brooding”, “shadow”, “endless”. The metonymic “herds”, too, suggest a present absence of human aegis. The second stanza, verbless, and relying on adjectives, nouns and relational prepositions to foreground the physical qualities of the scene, is markedly pictorial. The anthropomorphised “scornful crags”, which give the landscape an agency of its own, stress, in turn, its exanimate quality. Both stanzas, then, have a distancing effect, demonstrating that state of being heedless of the rest of the world and, despite Helen’s denial, are more convincing as contradictions through their monological, or directly quoted, status.

Thus, notwithstanding Helen’s ostensible warnings, Arthur spends «two hours in an artist’s dreamland» sketching out the scenes in “visual form”. Like Rossetti’s illustrations for the poem and the aesthetic movement they were born out of, which asserted that art’s function was to provide sensuous pleasure rather than some moral message, Arthur’s drawings match the word–painting of Tennyson’s verse<sup>10</sup>. His rendering of Tennyson’s verse acknowledges the poem’s peculiarly episodic form: each mood–room expresses a separate, frozen image. Tennyson’s descriptive set pieces are framed and elaborate yet highly subjective and personal — the inner reality of the poetic speaker projected. Gissing, in a letter to Bertz of 1892, recognises this: «[Tennyson] had not much to say, but his utterance is consummate, the very perfection of language»<sup>11</sup>. Gissing, above all, valued the aesthetic immediacy rather than

10. Paintings of scenes from Tennyson’s verse were popular, and perhaps the idea for this was at the forefront of Gissing’s imagination due to his response, written in 1876, to the exhibition of two paintings inspired by *Idylls of the King* — one by Rosenthal and another by Tojetti. Gissing, as Coustillas and Rawlinson independently explain, wrote an article for the Boston *Commonwealth* comparing the two, concluding that Rosenthal more successfully captures the substance and tenor of the poem. See P. COUSTILLAS, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing*, 3 vols., Pickering & Chatto, London 2011, here vol. 1, pp. 106–107; B. RAWLINSON, *A Man of Many Parts: Gissing’s Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 41–42. See also C. Huguet’s essay in the present volume.

11. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., here vol. 5, p. 64.

the ideological aspect of Tennyson's poetry. So, by introducing *The Palace of Art* at the very moment when Arthur dismisses the possibility of a social art, or the potential wedding of private aesthetics with public good, the narrative entertains a paradox already present in Tennyson: evoking the appeal of artistic withdrawal by delighting in, whilst simultaneously denying, the sensuousness of florid expression. The allusion to Tennyson in *Workers* is explicit and literal, reiterating the situation of the source. Tennyson's character experiences life as though it were a landscape in a frame and, in Gissing's iteration, comes the analogous recognition that to make a picture is to render life unreal.

The clash between the world and the self also threatens internal space in *A Life's Morning*. "An artist in life", Emily, through keeping "wholly apart", commits to a scheme of «self-culture which she devised for herself»<sup>12</sup>. The homologous aspiration «to abide in her courts and corridors for ever»<sup>13</sup> directly references the "cool green courts" and "long-sounding corridors" of Tennyson's *The Palace of Art*<sup>14</sup>. In the poem, the soul constructs in a "lordly pleasure-house" devoted to the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure where she can "live alone unto herself"<sup>15</sup>. The description of The Firs in *A Life's Morning*, complete with "rich carpets" and the «light and dark of rooms where wealth had done the bidding of taste», another «little room [...] daintily furnished» in which it «delighted [Emily] merely to gaze at the soft colours of the wall-paper, the vases with their growing flowers, the well-chosen pictures, the graceful shape of a chair» matches the tableau effect of the series of galleries in *The Palace of Art*<sup>16</sup>. Focalised through Emily, it is as though the external world of the Athels acts as a physical

12. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, Smith, Elder, London 1914, pp. 41, 35.

13. Ivi, p. 70.

14. Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Palace of Art*, ll. 25, 53, A. TENNYSON, *Selected Poems*, ed. A. Day, Penguin, London 1991, pp. 44-53.

15. Ivi, l. 11.

16. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, cit., p. 41.

embodiment of her Palace of Art where art replaces life.

In the poem, the soul has managed to contain all “living Nature” perfectly within the rooms of the Palace so that the imagined overtakes the real. Likewise Emily pictures the Surrey scenery as her «idea of perfect rural beauty [. . .] from engravings after landscape painters», suggesting that, somehow, a facsimile of a replica can surpass life<sup>17</sup>. However, in *The Palace of Art*, the initial celebration of equilibrium — «each a perfect whole/ From living Nature, fit for every mood/ And change of my still soul» — is undercut by a tension (between the multitudinous and the holistic entity; between stasis and movement; between development and completion) which presages the nullifying limitations of self-reflexive beauty worship<sup>18</sup>. In *A Life's Morning*, by contrast, Emily's «prayer for “beauty in the inward soul”» is, corresponding to its Socratean allusion, based on outward and inward unity, associated throughout with action, striving, growth and progress<sup>19</sup>.

Throughout her time at The Firs, Emily recognises that her time in the luxury of the upper-class sphere is a borrowed reality and thus it figures in her mind as a dreamscape. Her father's death brings the termination of her intellectual aspirations towards this world:

Here, all the time, was the reality; here in this poor home, brooded over by the curse of poverty, whence should come shame and woe and death. What to her now were the elegance of art, the loveliness of nature? Beauty had been touched by mortality, and its hues were of the corpse, of the grave.<sup>20</sup>

The transient quality figures as a preoccupation with fatality. The “reality” of home is a nightmarish subversion of the ideal, just like the inevitable intrusion of despair, figured in highly

17. Ivi, p. 73.

18. A. TENNYSON, *The Palace of Art*, cit., ll. 58–60.

19. G. GISSING, *A Life's Morning*, cit., p. 68.

20. Ivi, p. 239.

gothicised imagery, into Tennyson's palace of art, where:

[I]n dark corners of her palace stood  
 Uncertain shapes; and unawares  
 On white eyed phantasms weeping tears of blood,  
 And horrible nightmares,

And hollow shades enclosing hearts of flames,  
 And, with dim fretted foreheads all,  
 On corpses three-months-old at noon she came,  
 That stood against the wall.<sup>21</sup>

In the poem, the parataxis evokes the sudden realisation that “uncertain shapes” are in fact (and always have been) “phantasms” and the polysyndetic form enacts the overwhelming claustrophobia created as beauty is revealed as an almost self-haunting terror. Yet in *A Life's Morning* it is Emily's very inability to retreat from her surroundings which taints her inner world with a sense of futility. In this way, Gissing re-appropriates the inevitable failure of the palace of art inherited from Tennyson and explores what happens when the impersonal melancholia of the monologic speaker is rendered in dialogic form. In Tennyson, the image of the ideal is a simulation of the real. In Gissing, the ideal is undoubtedly palpable yet equally as unattainable. The barrier for Emily is all too materially tangible rather than metaphysical. The tragedy of Gissing's early works is that spiritual harmony and potential oneness is undercut by a bathetically physical incongruity.

3. Various critics have pointed out how Gissing's female characters, like Monica and Virginia Madden of *The Odd Women* (1893) and Cecily of *The Emancipated* (1890), are presented as particularly susceptible to idealising life through the lens of romantic fiction<sup>22</sup>. I would like to suggest that a similar “nov-

21. A. TENNYSON, *The Palace of Art*, cit., ll. 237–44.

22. C. CERON, “‘What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists?’: The Metaliterary Ghost of *The Odd Women*”, in *George Gissing and the Woman Question*, ed. C.

elisation” of life happens when the male characters are articulated through the inserted genre of poetry. Male characters, by expression through the speech of another — quoting and alluding to approved authorities — attempt to elevate and extract themselves via a poeticisation of discourse. However, such endeavours are self-undermining due to the elected form of dramatic monologue. By introducing the potentially dialogic form, which the novel has invaded, infected and subverted, characters unconsciously usher in irony through identifying and emphasising the incongruities of the double-voice.

The beginning of *The Odd Women*, set in Clevedon fifteen years previously, is spatially and temporally distanced from the bulk of the plot. It opens with Madden in conversation with his eldest daughter: «[l]et men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, ‘tis their nature to»<sup>23</sup>. Almost immediately Madden’s speech is characterised by appropriation. If, as Christopher Ricks suggests, allusion resonates in its new context, both retaining and pressing against what remains behind<sup>24</sup>, here Madden’s quote from Isaac Watts’s hymn takes the words out of their original, monologic context and forces it into connection with an alien discourse. The sentiment of Watts is retained and responded to by Madden but the narrative, in depicting the doctor as “diffident” and “reticent”, ironically shows his character pressing against the strength of “grapple” in his speech. Following this, Madden presents his romanticised “prescience”:

«There will come a day, Alice, when neither man nor woman is troubled with such sordid care. [. . .] Human beings are not destined to struggle for ever like beasts of prey. Give them time; let civilization grow. You know what our poet says: “There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe—”»

Huguet and S.J. James, Ashgate, Farnham 2015, pp. 119–31, here p. 119; M.T. CHIALANT, “‘Other Scenes and Other Ages’: Gissing’s Reading of Southern Italy in *By the Ionian Sea*”, in *Writing Otherness*, cit., pp. 99–110, here p. 103.

23. G. GISSING, *The Odd Women*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, p. 1.

24. C. RICKS, *Allusion to the Poets*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 33.

He quoted the couplet with a subdued fervour which characterized the man and explained his worldly lot. [...] «Our poet,» said the doctor; Clevedon was chiefly interesting to him for its literary associations. Tennyson he worshipped; he never passed Coleridge's cottage without bowing in spirit. From the contact of coarse actualities his nature shrank.<sup>25</sup>

In Madden's speech, evolution is consciously denied; the reference to "beasts of prey" couches Darwinian discourse in a purposively Biblical register with echoes, again, of Watts's poetic and moralistic diction<sup>26</sup>. The use of adversative conjunctions ("yet"; "but"), along with the repeated "no, no", adds an uncertain tone to the assertion and begins to question the validity of Madden's prescient vision.

The adoptive familiarity of "our" should place Madden in a position of understanding, retrospectively drawing together character and writer of the adopted text. However, the narrative seems to equate Madden with the speaker of Tennyson's *Locksley Hall* (1842). The poem chronicles the interior monologue of a depressed speaker imagining, like Madden, a utopian future, and is an example of the established Tennysonian poetic voice inveighing against the age. Glennis Byron suggests that dramatic monologues, with their propensity for speakers «alienated from, rather than representative of, their particular societies», are «an appropriate form for the purposes of social critique»<sup>27</sup>. The correlation with the "alienated" speaker of *Locksley Hall* acts as an early indication of Madden's detachment from the contemporary. The "subdued fervour" for a "universal law" which the rest of the book periodically undermines — the Madden sisters will struggle against their "worldly lot"

25. G. GISSING, *The Odd Women*, cit., p. 5.

26. Isaiah, 35:9; I. WATTS, *Where Nothing Dwelt but Beasts of Prey*, in *The Psalms and Hymns of the late Dr Isaac Watts*, ed. R. Goodacre, 2 vols., Francis Westley, London 1821, here vol. 1, p. 276; W. BLAKE, *Little Girl Lost*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. D. Erdman, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 2008, p. 20.

27. G. BYRON, *Dramatic Monologue*, Routledge, London 2003, p. 100.

for which their cultural education has so ill-prepared them — gives the intertextual “discursive space” an ironic tone.

The equation with Tennyson’s monologic hero intimates that Dr. Madden is idealistic and escapist. His language is inflected with direct quotations which foreground his passivity, as he allows his discourse to be overpowered by others, shrinking from assertion as he shrinks from “actuality”. The connotations of dwindling carried in this closing reference to withdrawal, in fact, converts the potentially humbled position — suggested via “Tennyson he worshipped” and “bowing in spirit” — into a feeble submission to the bygone views of an outdated, Arnoldian view of culture. Elsewhere, Gissing asserts that both Arnold and Tennyson belong to an earlier generation. Arnold, he suggests, is “very far behind” and “retrospective”: «culture [...] was growing all but impossible beyond the guarded closes of a fortunate few; yet culture, as [he] understood it, must needs enter into the new civilisation»<sup>28</sup>. And of Tennyson Gissing writes: «Remember that his work belongs to a past generation. He is not of today»<sup>29</sup>.

This overarching impression of nostalgic escapism is accentuated by the pastoralised setting: Madden is seen «lounged in a canvas chair against the sunny ivied wall, pipe in mouth». This creates a scene apparently fixed in an eternal summer but, with “ivied”, one already tinged with a sense of a foregone Arcadia<sup>30</sup>. Yet, as Madden is depicted “lost in a dream” of the future, the recurring intimations of “coarse actualities” from the world beyond introduce a sense of the temporal. The scene of luxurious ease, where «many a summer evening they had thus spent, none more peaceful than the present», is heightened by Madden’s choice to read Tennyson’s *The Lotos Eaters* (1832)<sup>31</sup>.

28. G. GISSING, *The Coming of the Preacher*, «Literature», 6, 1900, pp. 15–16, here p. 16.

29. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., here vol. 5, p. 64.

30. G. GISSING, *The Odd Women*, cit., p. 8.

31. Ivi, p. 9.

The lethargy of the mariners accentuates the enervated and outmoded culture for which Madden stands. The speaker in the poem is, like Madden, liminal, existing on the margins of society. And, just as the poem concludes with a paradoxical implication of movement matched with irresolution, Madden's plans, too, remain unfulfilled.

As a dramatic monologue, *The Lotos-Eaters* allows the narrative to maintain an ironic distance from the wistful yearning for passive contentment of the mariner's speaking voice. This is then further dialogised through Madden's direct quotation as the irony is doubled via two speaking voices and two satirising narrators. The explanation of Madden's death — "postponement became fatality" — reveals the mercurial nature of the literary enclave. The unity and stability of spatialised culture appears as a deceptive facade that Madden protects. It also ironises the inserted genre by making it a narrative comment by proxy. Here, then, the inserted genres which modulate Madden's discourse are indicative of the "social speech type" representing an older generation and culture<sup>32</sup>. And so, if his daughters are susceptible to a novelising tendency, it is because their father has prepared them for little else.

In *In the Year of Jubilee*, Nancy, with her professed ignorance of poetry, is partly wooed by Tarrant's poeticised language. The significance of his allusion to Keats, which proleptically frames the scene as beguilement, and to Herrick, with all the associated connotations of sensuality and the non-committance of the *carpe diem* genre, is lost on Nancy. Elsewhere, quotations by Tarrant — from Shakespeare and Shelley — act as cultural markers which likewise demonstrate his controlled use of language, especially in comparison to the more impulsive Nancy. His allusions are unlike those of the "quite uneducated" Barmby who «posed as a broad-minded Anglican, and having somewhere read that Tennyson's "In Memoriam" represented this attitude, he spoke of the poem as "one of the books that

32. "Social speech type" is Bakhtin's phrase, *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., p. 348.

have made me what I am”»<sup>33</sup> and is sardonically presented by the narrator. The narrative might seem to oppose types of allusion: between spontaneous citations derived from erudition and self-indulgent, staged approximations which, in turn, mark out class boundaries. This would confirm John Carey’s view that the «whole withering account [of Barmby] brings sharply before us Gissing’s jealous guardianship of education, and his refusal to believe that it could be acquired by uneducated young men»<sup>34</sup>.

However, unlike his other citations, Tarrant’s allusion to Tennyson is ambiguous. The quotation comes at the close of a letter written to Nancy during his speculative travels:

For his own part, whether he profited or not from these commercial schemes, he had not been mistaken in foreseeing material for journalism, even for a book. Yes, he should certainly write a book on the Bahamas [. . .]. The climate, in winter at all events, was superb. Sutherland and he lay about in delicious sunshine, under a marvellous sky, smoking excellent cigars, and talking over old Oxford days. He quoted Tennyson: “Larger constellations burning,” &c.<sup>35</sup>

Tarrant’s allusion to “Locksley Hall” is self-aggrandising and posturing. This dissociating effect is ostensibly enacted in the form: the letter is reported in the third person, thus obscuring Tarrant’s voice. And yet, with the colloquial “yes”, it becomes apparent that the narrative is focalised, undermining the seeming detachment. The closing reference to Tennyson’s dramatic monologue introduces a further voice and, as Tarrant luxuriates nostalgically in a world which he imagines exists beyond the ties of commitment, he is likened to the fanciful and impetuous speaker of the poem. Thus his reported speech is charged with proleptic irony; as with Madden, reality is soon to intrude upon Tarrant’s constructed and markedly homos-

33. G. GISSING, *In the Year of Jubilee*, Dover Thrift, New York 1982, p. 193.

34. J. CAREY, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880–1939*, Faber & Faber, London 1992, p. 110.

35. G. GISSING, *In the Year of Jubilee*, cit., p. 243.

cial utopia. The allusion undermines Tarrant's over-optimistic rhapsody of life, and the various distancing effects — the form and the many-voiced discourse — emphasise not exultant separation but rather the fictionality and self-deceptive idealism of his description. The most apparent suggestion in the reference to *Locksley Hall* is that of the inescapably haunting present invading the dream of paradise. The irony is made all the more pointed by the fact that, despite Tarrant's literary register and authorial aspirations, his speculative and half-hearted compositional gestures are outvied by Nancy's comparative industriousness when she embarks upon novel writing.

4. The reference to Tennyson in *New Grub Street* also places texts within a discursive culture. In the third chapter, Jasper takes his "favourite walk" to a "spot" with

certain meadows forming a compact little valley. [...] Along the bottom ran a clear, shallow stream, overhung with elder and hawthorn bushes; and close by the wooden bridge which spanned it was a great ash tree, making shadow for cows and sheep when the sun lay hot upon the open field.<sup>36</sup>

The depiction of the pastoralised enclave figures as a spatial motif typical of Gissing's rendering of the lackadaisical rural diversion. Yet the topographical description is also remarkably similar to William Howitt's description of Somersby, Tennyson's birthplace, in *Homes and Haunts*:

A pretty pastoral district of soft, sloping hills and large ash trees. There are also two brooks in the valley, which flow into one at the bottom of the glebe field, and by these the young poet used to wander and meditate.<sup>37</sup>

36. G. GISSING, *New Grub Street*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 27.

37. W. HOWITT, *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets*, 2 vols., Harper, New York 1847, here vol. 2, p. 513.

The ash tree, the valley and the stream as foci, then, makes the scene implicitly Tennysonian, consciously literary and pre-empting the subsequent allusion. Arriving at his “lounging-place”, Jasper comes across Marian and joins her on the bridge, where the ash tree becomes the centre of the discussion:

«When I was here late in the spring,» he said, «this ash was only just budding, though everything else seemed in full leaf».

«An ash, is it?» murmured Marian. «I didn't know. I think an oak is the only tree I can distinguish. Yet», she added quickly, «I knew that the ash was late; some lines of Tennyson come to my memory».

«Which are those?»

«Delaying, as the tender ash delays  
To clothe herself when all the woods are green,  
somewhere in the “*Idylls*”».

«I don't remember; so I won't pretend to — though I should do so as a rule».

She looked at him oddly, and seemed about to laugh, yet did not.<sup>38</sup>

Marian's misattribution is understandable, considering the seasonal cycles central to the *Idylls* and the almost myopic focus of its natural descriptions which render, on a larger scale, a timeless and universal yet decidedly pre-industrial landscape. Marian's identification, equating the consciously ruralised scene with Tennyson's *Idylls*, recalls its pastoral origins in Theocritus. On one level, then, her quotation of Tennyson signifies how urban visitors perceive the rural through the lens of literary association: poetry presupposes nature. The separation between character and setting — confirmed at the end of the passage where Jasper explains he is not “very rural in temperament” — is also accentuated by the form of the citation since, as an interpolated lyric in a narrative poem, it is atypical, signifying a break in structure.

38. G. GISSING, *New Grub Street*, cit., p. 28.

If the mistake is read as Marian's, attributed by the narrator, it adduces Gissing's irony at its most perspicacious and multi-layered, drawing into acute contrast the incongruity between expectation, knowledge and reality. Through the mistake, Gissing references both poems, drawing allusion into ironic relief to extrapolate in a new context. Firstly, Marian's allusion to the *Idylls* evokes the recklessness of romantic attraction, Arthur's willed self-deception and Guinevere's inconstancy, and can be read as prolepsis. However, the ironic gap between expectation and actuality is quickly revealed by the conversation which shatters any pastoral associations. The setting is decidedly not that of the *Idylls*, in which the landscape — rendered with weighted pathetic fallacy — exists predominantly in symbolism but is in fact more akin to the contemporary and domestic *milieu* of *The Princess* (1847). A further ironic gap is revealed through the paralleling of genre: *Idylls of the King* is a pseudo-medievalised romance and *The Princess* is contemporary and serio-comic.

The lines Marian invokes are from the frequently anthologised song «O Swallow, Swallow» which is often, as here, quoted out of context:

Why lingereth she to clothe her heart with love,  
 Delaying as the tender ash delays  
 To clothe herself, when all the woods are green?<sup>39</sup>

When read alongside the preceding line, the quotation appears prophetically symbolic of Jasper and Marian's ill-fated romance. "To clothe" implies dissimulation, and "lingereth" — along with the repeated delay which frames the line — foreshadows the ultimate failure of the match. There seems to be the suggestion that to quote out of context for decorative purposes runs the risk of being disrupted by the symbolism of another: the single-voiced discourse of the inserted genre (here the interpolated lyric) disguises the prosaicness of experience

39. A. TENNYSON, *The Princess*, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. C. Ricks, 3 vols., Longman, Harlow 1987, here vol. 2, p. 235.

and introduces a dissonant irony.

5. In Gissing's novels, references to Tennyson tend to be made by characters rather than the narrative. Such allusions could be understood as mere cultural markers, with learned references being a commonplace feature of discourse. However, if allusion disrupts realism by making it more consciously literary and drawing attention to the imaginary, through assigning it to discourse Gissing is equating his characters to poetic idealism and the narrative to a more prosaic realism. This use of Tennyson resonates with Gissing's aesthetic appreciation of the poet. In 1883 Gissing writes to Algernon: «In turning over Tennyson I have been struck with his felicity in put[ting] vague notions into beautiful words. *Vagueness* of form or of process is, of course, the most difficult of all things to describe»<sup>40</sup>. This "vagueness" could be read as the contentment to exist and settle with uncertainty, the assertion of form over informing vision.

In *Workers*, the intertextual reference to Tennyson is the most monologic. Poetic "vagueness" is portrayed in a form of literary criticism as the characters recognise the unresolved paradox of Tennyson. This consideration deviates from the didactic intertextual discussions of Shelley, Kant and Schopenhauer in Helen's epistolary narrative, since Tennyson, in fact, offers the conflicted dialectic which the text itself fairly clumsily reiterates. Although similarly decorative, the same poetic reference is more complicatedly rendered in *A Life's Morning* as the text sets up an interchange between Tennyson and late Victorian aesthetics, introducing a nonetheless rather heavy-handed or over-stated irony.

As Gissing's prose style develops, the "vagueness" becomes part of intertextual coupling. Allusions take on a more proleptic or symbolic function, are increasingly elliptical, and expose the ironic distance between actantial potential and attainment.

40. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., here vol. 2, p. 161.

This corresponds with Gissing's advice to Algernon to omit the "instructive" element of his descriptions: «[i]n fact, the secret of art in fiction is the *indirect*»<sup>41</sup>. Unlike the didactic or "instructive" element of earlier Tennysonian allusions, in later texts such literary self-fashioning encompasses a convoluted aspect, often becoming part of self-delusion. Whereas earlier allusions act as straightforward metonyms for characters and themes, the satire embroiled in later examples converts them into metaphors based on incongruity rather than similitude. References to dramatic monologues reveal that poetic withdrawal into inactivity, embroidered with hyperbole, becomes as idealised as the impassioned commitment to the palace of art. Rather than providing the unified monologism, the attempt to adopt the "authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative" utterance of the poetic genre, merely contributes to a subversive and ironising discourse of the socially and historically charged novelistic world<sup>42</sup>. And if, as Gissing suggests, Tennyson uses beautiful language to say nothing at all, so the warning, ultimately, is not to put too much faith in the seeming utopian sphere of discourse since, in the dialogic form of the novel, it will inevitably be undercut by plot.

41. Ivi, pp. 177–78.

42. "[A]uthoritarian, dogmatic and conservative" — which correlates with Gissing's "instructive" — is how Bakhtin defines poetic discourse in *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., p. 297.

# The Writer as Literary Critic

## Gissing's Monograph on Dickens

MARIA TERESA CHIALANT\*

1. Gissing's role in reviving Dickens's reputation in the last decade of the nineteenth century—early twentieth has been widely recognized<sup>1</sup>. The late Victorian writer devoted to his predecessor a considerable number of works: a monograph, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), the abridged and revised edition of Forster's *Life of Dickens* (1903), articles for magazines and the introductions to twelve of his novels for the Rochester Edition, which were posthumously collected in *Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York, 1924) and *The Immortal Dickens* (London, 1925). In these writings he offers a reassessment of “the Inimitable”'s *œuvre* in a period in which the latter was very much appreciated by G.K. Chesterton but also condescended to by Henry James as well as by high-brow literary critics<sup>2</sup>.

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1. See, among others: J. KORG, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA 1963 (pp. 215–19), A. POOLE, *Gissing in Context*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke 1975 (pp. 108–13), J. GOODE, *George Gissing, Ideology and Fiction*, Vision Press, London 1978 (pp. 13–40), J. HALPERIN, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1982 (pp. 260–66), S.J. JAMES, *Unsettled Accounts. Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing*, Anthem Press, London 2003 (pp. 36–62), and P. COUSTILLAS, “Introduction”, *Essays, Introductions and Reviews*, ed. P. Coustillas with an Afterword by A.S. Watts. *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, vol. 1, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2004 (pp. 1–44).

2. H. JAMES, *Our Mutual Friend*, «Nation» 1 (Dec. 1865), pp. 786–87; G.K. CHESTERTON, *Charles Dickens*, Methuen, London 1906. See also: L.W. MAZZENO, *The Dickens Industry. Critical Perspectives, 1836–2005*, Camden House, Rochester, NY 2008.

The text I intend to focus on is the monograph, where he

displays his adherence to what he feels to be the more demanding aesthetic standards of the 1890s, although his standpoint is emphatically not that of the professional literary critic, but of the well-informed, discriminating reader.<sup>3</sup>

My aim, in the present essay, is to investigate to what extent Gissing's appraisal of Dickens's work is consistent with his own writing practice, by trying to identify similarities and differences between the two authors through a reading of the late Victorian writer's main critical contribution on his predecessor. Well aware that the subject has already been vastly tackled, I only hope to add some further suggestions as regards Gissing's role as a literary critic and his ideas on the art of fiction in a period of passage from 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism to naturalism and beyond. On the other hand, in a volume which proposes a reflection on Gissing's vision of art and literature as the present one, this writer's main critical contribution cannot be ignored.

A good point of departure is his much quoted article *Dickens in Memory*, which appeared in the weekly journal «Literature» on 21 December 1901, at the editor's invitation to contribute a "Personal View" of the great Victorian novelist. Here we learn that Gissing's interest in Dickens first started at the age of ten or so, when he read *The Old Curiosity Shop*: «the first book — the first real, substantial book — I read through»; a book which «makes strong appeal to a younger imagination», and where Dickens's «quality of picturesqueness» is seen at its best<sup>4</sup>. Gissing seems to have appreciated, in particular, its opening scene, as «that dim-lighted storehouse of things old and grotesque, is the best approach to Dickens's world, where sights of everyday are transfigured in the service of romance»:

3. S.J. JAMES, "Introduction", *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, ed. S.J. James with an Afterword by D. Parker. *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, vol. 2 (2004), cit., p. 2.

4. G. GISSING, *Dickens in Memory*, in G. GISSING, *Essays, Introductions and Reviews*, cit., pp. 47, 48.

a sentence to keep in mind not only because it harks back to the well-known Dickensian phrase «the romantic side of familiar things», but also for the image of the “storehouse of things”, which is an effective metaphor for Dickens’s art. The Dickens world is evoked again further on in the article, with a reference to the centrality of things in his novels as well as in his life; on looking at a picture reproducing Samuel Luke Fildes’s wood-cut *The Empty Chair, Gad’s Hill — Ninth of June 1870* (published in «The Graphic», in the Christmas Number, 1870), Gissing mentions his own curiosity which led him «to look closely at [Dickens’s] writing-table and the objects upon it, at the comfortable, round-backed chair, at the bookshelves behind»<sup>5</sup>.

Three further aspects of *The Old Curiosity Shop* Gissing points out and appreciates in this recollection are Dickens’s «overflowing sympathy with poor and humble folk», his having presented «in abiding form one of the best of our national ideals — rural homeliness», and the representation of London that was to influence Gissing himself in his subsequent discovery of the city, which he first learned to look at through Dickens’s eyes before coming to see it through his own. *Dickens in Memory* is, therefore, both a homage to “the Inimitable”, whose image, as offered by Forster’s biography, of a man «alone at his writing-table, absorbed in the task of story-teller»<sup>6</sup> he so much admired, and a sort of brief summary of Dickensian narrative elements which are detectable in Gissing’s own work. Moreover, that article allows me to introduce my own argument, which is based on the conviction that the late Victorian writer enters into a dialogue with his predecessor at two distinct but intertwined levels: at a public level with the writer, at a personal one with the man.

A fact pointed out by various critics<sup>7</sup> is that Gissing tends to

5. Ivi, pp. 48, 49.

6. Ivi, pp. 48, 51.

7. See J. GOODE, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 20, 34; S.J. JAMES, *Unsettled Accounts*, cit., p. 37; P.

identify Dickens with a father figure, as he finds in him both a psychological model and a moral guide. He even associates Thomas Gissing's death on 28 December 1870 to Dickens's own death and to *The Empty Chair*: «Six months later there was an empty chair in my own home, and the tenor of my life was broken»<sup>8</sup>. But it was not only this coincidence that provoked a more intimate relationship with the “eminent” Victorian; in the commonplace book of Gissing's father, Dickens is the most frequently quoted author, and, predictably, became one of the future writer's childhood readings. Gissing's appreciation, though, was mainly prompted by his admiration for certain features of Dickens's personality as they emerged from Forster's biography, which he claimed to read almost daily as «a good impulse to persistent toil», a sort of invigorating tonic for him: «The vigorous artistic energy of the man — the seriousness with which he takes his work — the accounts of his progress — I find extraordinarily helpful». These words, written in a letter to his brother Algernon on 19 July 1888<sup>9</sup>, are reiterated in *Dickens in Memory*; when Gissing recalls his first, difficult «attempts on the art of fiction», he mentions the encouragement he found in Forster's *Life of Dickens*:

When I was tired and discouraged and could not spur the brain to work, I took down Forster and read at random, sure to come upon something which restored my spirits and renewed my intellectual zest. Merely as the narrative of a wonderfully active, zealous, and successful life, this book scarce has its equal; almost any reader must find it exhilarating; but to me it yielded such special sustenance as, in those days, I could not have found elsewhere, and, lacking which, I should perhaps have failed by the way.<sup>10</sup>

COUSTILLAS, “Introduction”, *Essays, Introductions and Reviews*, cit., pp. 2–3.

8. G. GISSING, *Dickens in Memory*, cit., p. 49.

9. G. GISSING, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P.F. Mattheisen, A.C. Young, and P. Coustillas, 9 vols., Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio 1990–99, here vol. 3, pp. 226–27.

10. G. GISSING, *Dickens in Memory*, cit., pp. 50–51.

A few lines farther on, in the same article, Gissing connects Dickens's success as a writer to his stern discipline and willpower, almost giving a Trollope-like image of him as a hard-working artisan of the pen: «[a] man of method, too, with no belief in the theory of casual inspiration», a labourer on the page who worked regularly and punctually; and concludes: «Well, this it was that stirred me, not to imitate Dickens as a novelist, but to follow afar off his example as a worker»<sup>11</sup>. In this last remark, one can sense the anxiety of influence that operates through the technique of the “revisionary ratio” called *kenosis*, that is, a breaking device similar to the defence mechanisms the psyche employs against repetition compulsions; *kenosis*, then, is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor. This aspect has been underlined by previous critics, among whom Pierre Coustillas, who writes that Gissing «was anxious, right from the outset of his career, to define clearly the difference between his own books and those of his illustrious predecessor»<sup>12</sup>.

Gissing had always been wholly aware of the problem. In 1880, only six months after the publication of *Workers in the Dawn*, he writes to Algernon: «Certainly I have struck out a path for myself in fiction, for one cannot of course compare my method and aims with those of Dickens». In particular, he was eager to distance himself from Dickens's treatment of the poor classes, as he aimed «to bring home to people [their] ghastly condition (material, mental & moral), [and] to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society»<sup>13</sup>. The evolution of Gissing's relationship with “the Inimitable” could thus be summarized in this way: after being a father figure, the older writer becomes for the younger one a literary model to respect and outgrow.

11. Ivi, p. 51.

12. P. COUSTILLAS, “Introduction”, *Essays, Introductions and Reviews*, cit., p. 3.

13. G. GISSING, *Collected Letters*, cit., vol. 1, p. 307.

2. *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* was commissioned by John Holland Rose, who, in 1896, had been entrusted with the editorship of the Victorian Era Series, which was to appear under the imprint of Blackie and Son. Gissing accepted the offer he received on 27 December of the same year, re-read Dickens's novels early in 1897, and worked at the volume also during his third stay in Italy, where he completed it on 5 November, to be published on 15 February 1898. It is a long monograph, consisting of twelve chapters: some have the function of providing historical and social contexts, others are more directly related to Dickens's life and to his moral and political views, but most of them focus on the narrative structures and literary characteristics of his fiction.

In the first two chapters Gissing situates the Victorian writer in perspective, defines the social milieu in which he grew up, and underlines the prestige he reached at the climax of his career, not to mention his extraordinary success even as a very young writer. His attention to the historical and cultural context leads him to emphasize the interconnections between his author's biography and fiction, and to remark how, in spite of his lack of classical education and ignorance in various spheres of knowledge ("his shortcomings as a thinker"<sup>14</sup>), Dickens was a wonderful creator of literature, a self-taught man who had read voraciously since adolescence. The early passion for books was a trait that Gissing shared with him, together with another important biographical aspect: the stigma of a painful event which had taken place in their adolescence, and had been more or less consciously suppressed. In *A Critical Study*, Gissing hardly mentions the Warren's Blacking Factory episode; however, he relates it in his own abridged version of Forster's *Life of Dickens*<sup>15</sup>. Dickens's "guilty secret" finds its counterpart

14. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., p. 29.

15. G. GISSING, *Forster's Life of Dickens*, ed. C. De Vine with an Afterword by J.A. Davies, *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, vol. 3 (2005), cit., pp. 36–41.

in the theft of money young Gissing committed at Owen's College, and one wonders whether these episodes of social shame in both writers' lives might have contributed to make the younger one sympathize with Dickens the man. On these analogies Simon J. James remarks: «Much like the typical Gissing narrative in which the self's autonomous cultural growth is jeopardized by economic need, these experiences might have prevented either man from becoming a writer at all»<sup>16</sup>. According to Gillian Tindall, however, Gissing shared with his character Edwin Reardon another kind of "guilty secret", that «[w]riting is a confidence trick. [...] a crippling sense of the fragility of their own identity»<sup>17</sup>: a feeling that does not seem to have belonged to Dickens.

Gissing took his task as a critic very seriously. In the chapter "The Story-teller", for instance, he writes that, in spite of the emotional impact that some of Dickens's novels have on him, he cannot abstain from pointing out their weak points: «It is difficult to speak of *David Copperfield* in terms of cool criticism; but for the moment I am concerned only with its form, and must put aside the allurements of its matter». However, after having mentioned, and brought examples of, the artistic defects that, according to him, mar this novel — «poverty of invention, abuse of drama» —, he concludes: «But enough; one has not the heart to dwell upon the shortcomings of such a book»<sup>18</sup>. As regards the gap between form and content in Dickens's fiction, the late Victorian writer now and then refers to it, maintaining that, if the latter is almost always attractive, the former is often faulty. The main flaws in Dickens's novels are (in Gissing's view) their theatrical dimension, the search for "effect" at all costs, the author's inability «to make skilful revelation of circumstances which, for the purpose of the story, he has kept

16. S.J. JAMES, *Unsettled Accounts*, cit., p. 38.

17. G. TINDALL, *The Born Exile. George Gissing*, Temple Smith, London 1974, p. 157.

18. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., pp. 51, 51, 52.

long concealed», and the lack of a planned scheme, without which, as a consequence of the serial system of publication, the novel «became an improvisation»; but the grossest “sin” of all is the use and abuse of coincidence. Gissing questions Dickens’s belief that every artificiality is permitted in the world of fiction, although he himself acknowledges the necessity of convention in an art which, «without convention, would not exist»<sup>19</sup>.

Although he was aware that Dickens’s success depended also on his mastery of the conventions of such popular genres as the sensation novel, the detective novel and the Gothic romance, all in vogue in mid-Victorian England, Gissing laments the older writer’s craving for success and for his audience’s approval often resulting in a domesticated portrait of reality. This is the case with David Copperfield of whom he writes: «Had Dickens intended to show us a man of letters, he would here have failed most grievously; of course he aimed at no such thing; the attempt would have cost him half his public»<sup>20</sup>. A statement which prompts two comments: on the one hand, it recalls, by contrast, the bitter representation of the world of letters in *New Grub Street*; on the other, it hardly conceals Gissing’s own envy of Dickens’s ability «to predict what his readership wanted»<sup>21</sup>.

Another example of Dickens’s at times indiscriminate acceptance of the literary conventions of his time is provided by the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, whose theme (in Gissing’s rather ungenerous words) was, unfortunately, «nothing more human than a trivial mystery woven about a vulgar deed of blood». Gissing considers Dickens’s public readings responsible for the choice of a subject based on mystery and murder, as well as for the writer’s premature death, due to the physical and mental efforts he submitted himself to in this activity as a public entertainer. He insists on his predecessor’s shortcomings as a man and a writer; his propensity for melodrama, his

19. Ivi, pp. 48, 49, 53, 54.

20. Ivi, p. 87.

21. S.J. JAMES, “Introduction”, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., p. 12.

“theatrical leanings” and the pursuit of immediate success and popularity governed his whole life, especially in the latter years: «Like the actor (which indeed he ultimately became), his desire was for instant applause». This also explains his use (and abuse) of the “happy ending”, which, in Gissing’s opinion, spoils Dickens’s novels; an instance of this is offered by *Great Expectations* which, owing to «the unhappy deference to Lord Lytton’s judgment», is marred by a conclusion openly in contrast with the characterization of Pip, whom Dickens had meant to leave «a lonely man, and of course rightly so»<sup>22</sup>. It is not surprising that Gissing laments Dickens’s exploitation of this narrative device, which he has hardly ever chosen in the closing scenes of his own novels. In *The Odd Women*, Rhoda Nunn refuses to get married mainly on ideological grounds, or, rather, in terms of gender politics; Milvain and Amy’s marriage, at the end of *New Grub Street*, functions as a parody of that much exploited convention of Victorian fiction, since, more than a love-match, theirs is a marriage of convenience, founded on perfect agreement as regards their plans for the future, both at home and in the literary arena. In *Eve’s Ransom*, then, the eponymous character’s marriage to Robert Narramore (interpreted by critics either as an opportunistic choice or as a retaliation on the protagonist’s part) is an ambiguous closure which leaves unsolved more than one mystery about that character — and rightly so, in my opinion.

Probably the most important issue Gissing confronts in his study on Dickens is the *vexata questio* of realism in fiction<sup>23</sup>. He devotes much attention to the subject and manages to explain his predecessor’s contradictory attitude in the chapter aptly entitled “Art, Veracity and Moral Purpose”. First of all, he

22. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., pp. 57, 65, 55.

23. Only a few years earlier Gissing had published *The Place of Realism in Fiction*, «The Humanitarian» (July 1895, pp. 14–16), where he insists on subjectivity, rejecting the principles of Naturalism as they had been expressed by Zola, and somewhat anticipating Modernist theories. This article is included in G. GISSING, *Collected Essays*, ed. P. Coustillas, Grayswood Press, Grayswood 2015, pp. 141–45.

maintains that Dickens did not deem himself «the creator of a world» but only its «laboriously faithful painter» (a remark that reminds one of George Eliot's well-known pronouncements in the seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*), and that he practised realism with great freedom, without troubling himself with any «theory or argument»<sup>24</sup>. Gissing is in open disagreement, here, with «our schools of rigid “naturalism”», and goes as far as to say that the kind of realism Dickens practised actually, and paradoxically, opened the way to «the later school of English fiction»<sup>25</sup>. In fact, he underlines the writer's conviction that «art [. . .] was art precisely because it was not nature»<sup>26</sup>. At this point, Gissing calls Dickens's realism “Idealism”, both for the constant presence of a moral purpose, and for his tendency to idealize characters or situations: a risk, indeed, that he often runs, as he cannot bring himself to do anything that might make his readers angry: «avoidance of the disagreeable»<sup>27</sup> was his main principle, and Gissing obviously disapproves of it.

This aspect is connected to what his character Osmond Waymark, in a conversation with Julian Casti, says about Dickens's lack of courage in dealing with complex subjects, which are difficult to transform into narrative material:

The fact is, the novel of every-day life is getting worn out. We must dig deeper, get to untouched social strata. Dickens felt this, but he had not the courage to face his subjects; his monthly numbers had to lie on the family tea-table. Not *virginibus puerisque* will be my book, I assure you, but for men and women who like to look beneath the surface, and who understand that only as artistic material has human life any significance. Yes, that is the conclusion I am working round to.<sup>28</sup>

24. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., p. 67.

25. Ivi, p. 66.

26. Ivi, p. 68.

27. Ivi, pp. 68, 70.

28. G. GISSING, *The Unclassed*, ed. J. Korg, The Harvester Press, Hassocks 1976, pp. 116–17. The passage refers to Chapter 15, “Up the river”.

One can assume that Waymark's convictions had been Gissing's own since 1884, the year of publication of *The Unclassed*. Throughout his career, he never faltered in this respect: he *did* face the disagreeable at all levels, as regards not only the "untouched social strata" (*The Nether World* is, probably, the best example of this), but also the various and different spheres of private as well as public life.

Dickens's tendency to obscure "the unpleasing" is further developed in the chapter on "Characterization", where Gissing still lingers on the issue of realism, underlining his predecessor's talent for the description of the externals of characters — «the face, the gesture, the habit» — rather than for a «deliberate analysis», which, in Gissing's opinion, was «never well done, always superfluous»<sup>29</sup>. In the case of Mrs. Gamp, for instance, we have «a sublimation of the essence of Gamp», who embodies «the Platonic *idea* of London's hired nurse early in Queen Victoria's reign»<sup>30</sup>. Thanks to his humour (Gissing goes on) Dickens succeeds where "a rigorous realist" would fail: «We reject the photograph; it avails us nothing in art or life». Although the younger author refuses the "familiar objection" to Dickensian characters as being «so unreal»<sup>31</sup>, he grants that the unreality often arises from the necessities of plot; more importantly, he acknowledges that his predecessor does not often concern himself with what is normal in characters, as his favourite ones are the eccentrics, and particularly those belonging to the lower ranks of society.

This last point is coherent with the modality of "excess" which, in fact, typifies Dickens's writing and personality, as John Kucich has convincingly argued in his *Excess and Restraint in the Novels of Charles Dickens* (1981), and as Gissing himself seems to suggest when he remarks that the great Victorian writer «combined a character of sanguine impulsiveness, and

29. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., p. 82.

30. Ivi, pp. 79, 80.

31. Ivi, pp. 80, 75.

as a result thereof could not endure restraints and burdens which ordinary men accept as a matter of course»<sup>32</sup>. The fact that *excess*, in its various meanings, is lacking, instead, in Gissing's own fiction might probably be the reason why he was so much intrigued by this feature in Dickens. We find it evoked by more than one term he uses to describe his predecessor's characterization, storytelling and style: *exaggeration*, referred to satiric portraiture, *extravagance*, in representing certain situations, *exuberance*, with reference to Dickens's own personality and to some of his characters<sup>33</sup>.

Consistently with the category of "excess", another recurrent feature of Dickens's fiction that Gissing points out is «his artistic preference [...] for the quaint, out-of-the-way quarters, or for the grim and the lurid, out of which he made a picturesque of his own»<sup>34</sup>. Gissing quotes *Pictures from Italy*, here, as regards the "new picturesque" Dickens meant to establish in dealing with the squalor and misery of Naples: an issue he himself would confront in *By the Ionian Sea*. Gissing is openly at variance with the older writer when, mentioning the misery and degradation in Jacob's Island and Tom-all-Alone's, he writes: «Dickens views such scenes in a romantic light. It is the property of his genius to perceive romance in the commonplace and the squalid, no less than in clean and comfortable homeliness»<sup>35</sup>.

Gissing admired, in his predecessor, not only such personal qualities as a ceaseless mental and physical activity, boundless energy and enthusiasm for life, but also something he himself was almost devoid of, humour, which, together with the use of the grotesque, he saw as the secret of "the Inimitable"'s popularity as a novelist. On the other hand, Gissing was very critical of Dickens's exploitation of pathetic scenes in the the-

32. Ivi, p. 183.

33. Ivi, pp. 95, 137, 136.

34. Ivi, p. 154.

35. *Ibidem*.

atrical sense of the word — pathos as a form of excess, again —, which he used to gratify the crude ideals of the popular audience. Gissing, instead, never lowered himself to please the masses: quite the contrary. But, obviously, he was writing in an epoch in which a new class of readers was emerging: not only the quarter-educated mentioned in *New Grub Street* as the outcome of Forster's Education Act, but also the potential consumers of aesthetic and decadent literature. Thus, one is not surprised by his criticism of Dickens's self-censorship in the spheres of love and sex but not in that of violence. In fact, the great writer

even appears on a public platform and recites with terrible power the murder of a prostitute by a burglar, yet hardly a voice is raised in protest. Gore is perfectly decent; but the secrets of an impassioned heart are too shameful to come before us even in a whisper.<sup>36</sup>

Gissing, here, is probably echoing the terms of the literary *querelle* so well expressed by George Moore in his essay *Literature at Nurse; or Circulating Morals* (1885), which contested the three-decker system of publication as well as other forms of censorship in Britain.

3. In his *Critical Study*, Gissing hints, now and then, at the centrality of things in Dickens's novels, and at his skill in describing objects as well as characters and situations in detail. He even argues that the very triviality of detail is a proof of his predecessor's artistic talent, and that a «wonderfully minute observation»<sup>37</sup> is the source of his strength as a writer:

A student is commonly inobservant of outward things; Dickens, far from a bookish youth, looked about him in those years of struggle for a livelihood with a glance which missed no minutest feature of

36. Ivi, p. 129. As Christine Hugué suggests, if Gissing had cared to read this page more carefully, he might have responded to the impressive intimacy of the scene and incredible tenderness in Nancy's last words and body language.

37. Ivi, p. 155.

what he saw. We are told that his eyes were very bright, impressing all who met him with a sense of their keenness. Keen they were in no ordinary sense; for they pierced beneath the surface, and (in Lamb's phrase) discerned the *quiddity* of common objects. Everything he looked upon was registered in his mind, where at any moment he could revive the original impression, and with his command of words, vital, picturesque, show the thing to others.<sup>38</sup>

The importance of detail in fiction is not only a common feature of the realistic approach to description, as the history of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel demonstrates, but also a typically Dickensian trait. It is well known that things proliferate in Dickens's novels: among his favourite stylistic devices are "listing" and "enumeration" as well as the "pathetic fallacy", which all show his need to put objects at the centre of his narrative<sup>39</sup>. Gissing, in highlighting this fact, is raising two distinct, though interrelated, issues: Dickens's attention to detail, and his ability to discern the essence (*quiddity*) of common objects as opposed to their contingency or particularity (*haecceity*). Without tackling the philosophic implications of the distinction between *quiddity* and *haecceity*, and leaving aside the current critical debate opened by Thing Theory and Object Studies, I only wish to underline Gissing's perspicacity in pinpointing this feature of the Dickensian style. He comes back to it in the chapter "Satiric Portraiture", where he writes that Dickens's humour and satire are at their best in «the multiplicity of detail, all exquisitely finished, which goes to make his best-known portraits». Far from being a caricaturist, Dickens excels in «this abounding richness of invention, this untiring felicity of touch in minutiae innumerable»<sup>40</sup>. And further on, speaking of the

38. Ivi, p. 37. See Charles Lamb's essay *On the Acting of Munden*, in *The Essays of Elia. The Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb*, The Modern Library, New York [1935] 1965, pp. 131–32.

39. On this see M.T. CHIALANT, *Things, Inventories and Commodities: the Current "Material Turn" in Dickens Criticism*, «Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania», 17, 2012, pp. 21–44.

40. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., pp. 109, 110.

“priceless description” of Todgers’s Inn in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he writes:

Here is no ‘hitting off’ in a page or so; a broad canvas filled with detail that never tires, and no touch ever superfluous. Not only are the inhabitants of Todgers’s made real to us, collectively and individually, by the minutest portraiture; but the very building and its furniture fix themselves in the mind, so described that each room, each table, becomes symbolic, instinct with a meaning which the ordinary observer would never have suspected.<sup>41</sup>

Gissing is raising, here, a crucial issue regarding Dickens’s descriptive technique, anticipating George Orwell’s statement in his well-known essay on the great mid-Victorian novelist in 1940: «The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens’s writing is the *unnecessary detail*»<sup>42</sup>. It is worth remarking that Gissing uses a similar expression throughout the chapter on “Style”, where he notices that *Barnaby Rudge* contains «an immense amount of detail, actual and imaginative», and that «[o]f all the broad and the delicate touches in which these pages abound, not one could be omitted as superfluous»<sup>43</sup>. It would seem that Orwell, who was a great admirer of both Dickens and Gissing, drew inspiration from the latter in his essay on the former.

I also contend that Gissing too had a peculiar zest for detail as part of his descriptive technique. One can find instances of it in some of his novels, but a very good example is provided, in my opinion, by *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Here, the narrator celebrates the domestic pleasures of his rural abode, where artistic inspiration can take shape and find its true place. In the very first page of the book, he dwells on the depiction of his library through the simple objects inhabiting it, which

41. Ivi, p. 140.

42. G. ORWELL, *Charles Dickens*, in G. ORWELL, *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 128. This essay was originally published in *Inside the Whale* (1940).

43. G. GISSING, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, cit., pp. 152, 153.

are transparent metaphors for the act of writing and of literary creation: the pen, the penholder, the paperweight, but also the white page and the ink<sup>44</sup>. In Section Spring II, he repeats twice: «My house is perfect», and comments: «The first thing in one's home is comfort; let beauty of detail be added if one has the means, the patience, the eye»<sup>45</sup>. The beauty of detail is actually added, in this text, by the use of description, lingering with tender accents on homely spaces and things which evoke a sense of peace and cosiness. In Winter I, his little book-room is compared to «a refuge and a sanctuary»; the various sounds produced by the clock, and the different shades of light thrown by the last embers in the fireplace are meticulously mentioned:

The warm glow is reflected on shining wood, on my chair, my writing-table, on the bookcases, and from the gilt title of some stately volume; it illumines this picture, it half disperses the gloom on that. I could imagine that, as in a fairy-tale, the books do but await my departure to begin talking among themselves.<sup>46</sup>

From this very “Dickensian” picture, where Gissing adopts the device of the pathetic fallacy unreservedly, there emerges a deep connection between the contingency of things and the eternity of art: in the relationship between images of immanence and images of transcendence lies the modernity of this text. This last image brings us back to another image evoked at the beginning of the present essay: the wood-cut *The Empty Chair* that led the younger writer «to look closely at [Dickens's] writing-table and the objects upon it, at the comfortable, round-backed chair, at the bookshelves behind»<sup>47</sup>.

I wish to conclude my reading of *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* with a mention of its penultimate chapter (“Comparisons”), in which Gissing, although underlining his author's

44. G. GISSING, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, ed. Mark Storey, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, p. 11.

45. Ivi, p. 13.

46. Ivi, pp. 139, 140–41.

47. G. GISSING, *Dickens in Memory*, cit., p. 49.

thorough Englishness, looks at him from a more international outlook; by situating him in a larger European context, beside such great writers as Balzac, Hugo, Dostoevsky and Daudet, and by identifying similarities and differences between them, he manages to give his book a sweeping, wide-ranging dimension.



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Printed in June 2018  
by «The Factory S.r.l.»  
00156 Roma – via Tiburtina, 912  
on behalf of «Giacchino Onorati editore S.r.l. – unipersonale», Canterano