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“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”
Commonplace Book

Gissing’s Triumphant Return to the Reading Room

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On a recent visit to London I returned to the scene of so many happy days of fruitful scholarly labour: the great dome of the Reading Room of the British Museum. When on 6 December 2000 Queen Elizabeth II conducted the formal opening of the transformed and rejuvenated rectangular courtyard at the heart of the British Museum, few of the regular visitors to the old Reading Room could have anticipated the nature and scale of the astonishing change effectuated. Although the courtyard was part of the original Museum when completed in 1850, it had been hidden from public view since the addition of the circular Reading Room in 1857, when the space around it was filled with buildings to store books. During the recent restorations these library storage buildings have all been removed, thus exposing the Great Court, as it is now known, with the Reading Room at its centre. The Great Court is covered by a spectacular glass roof, which makes it into the largest covered public square in Europe. The impact of the radical conversion at first is a little overwhelming, but once you discover that the Reading Room has remained virtually untouched, a comfortable sense of familiarity returns.

The magnificent interior of the Reading Room has been carefully restored, including the repair of the *papier mâché* interior of the dome and the reinstatement of the 1857 azure, cream and gold decorative scheme devised by Sidney Smirke. The Reading Room, formerly only accessible to those with a Reader’s ticket, is for the first time in its history open to all visitors of the Museum. It now houses the Paul Hamlyn Library, a new public reference library of some 25,000 books and catalogues, which is complemented by COMPASS, a multi-media public access system, which is part of the Walter and Leonore Annenberg centre, also situated in the Reading Room.

One of the roles of the Reading Room that was envisaged after the British Library had moved to its new site at St Pancras in 1998, was to serve as a memorial to the intellectuals and writers from George Eliot and Thomas Hardy to Karl Marx and T. S. Eliot who frequented it. To that end two panels have been erected on either side of the entrance to the Reading Room on which the names and professions of “Notable holders of readers’ tickets” are recorded. From a quick count I learned that approximately 320 British cultural heroes and heroines have found their way into this national pantheon. To find that, among so many others, Charles Darwin, Joseph Conrad, Matthew Arnold, William Morris and Edmund Gosse were there, was no surprise, while the welcome inclusion of W. H. Hudson was unlooked for and Frank Swinnerton’s presence positively startled me. However, for me the most gratifying inscription on the (right-hand) panel was the name of the writer who gave his name to this *Journal*. In sixteen bookpresses (i.e. bookcases) adjacent to either side of the entrance to the Reading Room works were exhibited and additional information provided about writers selected from the 320 illustrious culture heroes. Again, I felt there was a particular justice, too long delayed, in finding Gissing represented there. I have copied the text accompanying the exhibition (in bookcase no. 7) of four of his titles in modern editions (*The Whirlpool* [Hogarth], *The Nether World*, *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women* [all three in the World’s Classics]):

George Gissing (1857-1903): novelist

At the time when I was literally starving in London, when it seemed impossible that I should ever gain a living by my pen, how many days have I spent at the British Museum, reading as disinterestedly as if I had been without a care!

The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (1903)

As a young man, Gissing was expelled from college and jailed for theft. On his release he spent a year wandering throughout America. He then made two disastrous marriages, each time to women regarded as social inferiors. Although initially desperately poor he became prosperous through his writings. The Reading Room, for which he obtained a reader’s ticket in 1877, provides a background for his novel *New Grub Street* (1891).

[Gissing portrait]

Unattributed photograph taken about 1895
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[The photograph was in fact the portrait taken by the firm of Elliott and Fry on 7 May 1895.]

One rejoices at Gissing's inclusion in the ranks of men and women of note, especially when one remembers the inauspicious beginnings of his career, when he resided with Nell at 22 Colville Place, so close to the British Museum. Yet one feels disappointed about the phrasing and accuracy of the text used on the panel. Is it strictly true to claim that Gissing "spent a year wandering throughout America"? Surely, it is inaccurate to state that "he became prosperous through his writings"? Not to mention the inability to establish the name of Gissing's photographer and the inaccurate date of publication (1902) of *The Private Papers*, which I have silently corrected above. Apart from these quibbles, however, it would appear that after all those years "the native malignity of matter" has allowed Gissing some late but well-deserved recompense for the neglect suffered in his lifetime.

Gissing and the Theatre A Lucid Outlook on "the Drama in the Doldrums"

PIERRE COUSTILLAS

[This essay was originally commissioned for a French Festschrift which appeared in 1998. Although proofs were requested, the editor of the volume stubbornly declined to send any. The consequences of this unprofessional behaviour were so disastrous that the previously published version must be held null and void.]

Any account of Gissing's interest in the theatre is bound to read like the story of a growing disenchantment. In view of the period during which he was active as a writer and of his own temperament--that of a frustrated idealist--this can hardly surprise even those readers who are but moderately acquainted with both. That, by and large, English drama under most of Victoria's reign is not worth considering by serious students of the genre is one of the commonplaces of literary history; the incipient renaissance of dramatic art which became noticeable by the turn of the century was by no means striking enough for an exacting commentator like him to change his opinion. But no one is born a pessimist, and the process of a genial observer's disappointment is always worth watching. Despite Alain's dictum that optimism proceeds from will power while pessimism is a

matter of temperament, it is common experience that when the milk of human kindness turns sour, external circumstances have played a major part in the change.

The material on which an analysis of Gissing's outlook on the drama must rest is abundant, if of a somewhat scrappy nature; reviewing it will enable us to assess the popularity of the drama in the 1880s and 1890s, and to see into its specificity. In proportion as documents are brought forward chronologically, his judgments will show the impact of an artistic form which was perilously close to mere entertainment on an intellectual whose attachment to culture lost nothing of its intensity during the twenty-five years of his career.

Gissing's reputation--let this be borne in mind--is based on his highly characteristic novels and short stories, on his pioneering Dickens criticism and on his distinguished travel narrative *By the Ionian Sea*, but only specialists familiar with his private papers, published or unpublished, are aware that he was far from indifferent to the theatre. Had he been born a Frenchman, he would probably have tried his luck with plays as he successfully did with fiction. It was the contemporary status of the English stage that deflected him early on from this possible course, for of its appeal to his youthful mind there is no doubt. Among the copious juvenilia held by the Beinecke Library at Yale are to be found a number of such verse plays as only an extremely precocious child could be expected to have written. Gissing was not yet in his teens when he composed these plays which of course have no claim to rank above prentice work, but some of his subjects are of a kind that he did not dismiss from his mind until, after his return from America in the autumn of 1877, he felt compelled to make a living by his pen. In Leigh Hunt's *Stories from the Italian Poets*, he found the tale by Tasso from which he drew "The Tragedy of Tancred and Clorinda" (13 pages) and that by Ariosto for "Ariodante and Ginevra" (18 pages), while his longer "King Richard I" (37 pages) must have been suggested to him by Tennyson's verse, of which his father, Thomas Waller Gissing, was a keen admirer. The dramatic nature of these stories set in remote ages struck his childish imagination, and he readily conceived that their fame should be kept green through theatrical representations. Still, another vision of the theatre coexisted in his mind with this one early on, and we find it in a thirty-line poem entitled "The Theatre" composed in 1870 which began thus:

Attend all ye who love the play and to the theatre go,
I sing a theatre's history that stands in Bunkum row,

How on one famous boxing night to suffocation cramm'd
The people paying for the pit were in the boxes ramm'd.¹

Notable for its bathetic conclusion, it graphically evokes the atmosphere within a playhouse, and is more concerned with the sociology of the audience than with the spectacle on the stage. In his biography of Gissing, Jacob Korg aptly noted apropos of his social stance that this poem unambiguously reflects his hatred of crowds, even in boyhood.²

This attitude was to remain his to the end of his life, far from all boards and platforms in the small Pyrenean village of Ispoure³; he could not, for very good reasons to be stated later, dissociate the theatre, its English brand at all events, from its public. A form of art which was more visibly connected with the culturally deficient part of the population than any other, was, he thought, bound to be degraded by this connection. Yet he could not dismiss it from his mind. Images of the theatrical world appear in at least three of his novels and as many short stories. Near the end of *Workers in the Dawn*, Arthur Golding chances upon his debauched, faithless wife Carrie on the stage of a wretched London music-hall advertising “Tableaux Vivants” at the entrance. The naturalistic description shows her parading

apparently naked, but in reality clothed in tight-fitting tissue of flesh colour [on a platform which keeps] slowly revolving to the sound of a melancholy hand-organ. [...] Such was the entertainment, watched in silence, only broken now and then by a coarse laugh or a whispered comment. Of course it was meant to be vicious, and certainly was indecent in character; but surely not the severest moralist could have devised a means of showing more clearly the hideousness of vice. The cold, bare room, swept through by a gust from the street whenever the door opened, the wailing hand-organ playing a waltz in the time of a psalm-tune, and with scarcely a correct note, the assemblage of gross and brutal-featured men, whose few remarks were the foulest indecencies, the reek of bad tobacco which was everywhere present, the dim light, save on the revolving platform where the shivering wretches went through their appointed parts,—surely only in England, where popular amusement is but known in theory, could so ghastly an *ensemble* attract a single spectator.⁴

In his last and strongest novel of working-class life, *The Nether World*, Clara Hewett, a girl of humble origin who has sought her fortune as an actress in a travelling company, is the victim of a rival who dashes vitriol in her face. Again the context is a naturalist one, and, if the picture of life on the boards is of a slightly higher order, the

glimpses of it that we catch in the central chapters are anything but engaging. By the time *The Nether World* was written, that is mid-1888, Gissing had completed his ten-year exploration of the lower depths of London life, and the murky theatrical corner of it had particularly attracted his notice--the affinities of his work with that of the early George Moore, notably with *A Mummer's Wife*, being conspicuous.

Altogether different, because of its jocose tone, is *The Town Traveller*, with its image of Polly Sparkes, a twenty-two-year-old Cockney programme seller at a fashionable London playhouse, but the rowdy atmosphere in which she moves does not jar with that of the two previous narratives. Gissing--it was clear by then--neither could nor would depict the more respectable side of the stage or its precincts in his novels--or at least in those he handed down to us, for a whole novel of theatrical life, "Clement Dorricott," which he completed in 1887 and offered George Bentley for serial publication in *Temple Bar*, has not survived. Bentley was only prepared to publish it in book form, which Gissing refused, thinking it an unworthy potential successor to his gentlest novel of proletarian life, *Thyrza*.

Nor do his three short stories inspired by the world of the stage offer a more exalting reflection of it. The early one, entitled "My First Rehearsal,"⁵ is a farcical, self-mocking tale of misapprehension in the first person singular which relates how the young protagonist, Richard Morton, was duped by a ne'er-do-well actor who has just been sacked by his director. The story glances back to its author's first contacts with theatricals in his native town, where the Gissings' friend, Matthew Bussey Hick, had founded "The Tragedians of Wakefield," then to the speech-nights at Lindow Grove School in the early 1870s, and lastly to his chastening Chicago experiences among a troupe of actors in a Wabash Avenue boarding-house. But "My First Rehearsal," like most of the short tales composed by way of relaxation after the huge efforts demanded by *Workers in the Dawn*, can barely be said to reflect his serious opinion of the stage. More valuable is "The Muse of the Halls," a mid-career story commissioned by C. K. Shorter and written in the autumn of 1893 for the *English Illustrated Magazine*. It is notable for its fresh treatment, between *New Grub Street* and the posthumously published *Will Warburton*, of the characteristic theme of the artist's integrity in a world ruled and corrupted by the necessity of making money. Denis Bryant, the cantata composer who accidentally discovers his own talent for the concert-room song of the cheap sort, would seem to have taken a leaf from the book of Messrs. Milvain and Whelpdale, foreshadowing therein the mercenary artist Norbert Franks. And the

last Gissing short story set in the theatrical world, "A Despot on Tour," confirms his critical view of the haphazard, bohemian life of managers, actors and actresses.

However, inferring Gissing's personal appreciation of the drama from fictional representations of it would be a questionable method if one's findings were not corroborated by biographical data. These data are now available, not only in his collected correspondence, the nine volumes of which offer a detailed record of his activities and opinions through forty out of the forty-six years of his life, but also in his diary which covers the years 1887-1902, as well as in various private papers recently published. Careful examination of the earliest documents oddly enough shows Gissing as an actor before he had an opportunity to attend any professional performances. We first meet his name on programmes in the days when he was still a pupil at Alderley Edge, Cheshire, as intrepid on the stage as he was shy and retiring in the ordinary circumstances of life. He took the leading parts, with an ardour akin to intellectual passion, and he would know the plays almost entirely by heart, whether they were in English or in French, a language he was taught to speak with the southern accent. A lengthy account of one of those end-of-term ceremonies, attended by pupils and parents, was printed in the *Alderley and Wilmslow Advertiser*; it shows young Gissing as something of a local *vedette*.⁶ The anonymous reporter did not stint his praise: "Mr. Gissing, as L'Avare, was the character of the evening. We believe this is not the first appearance in which his talented acting has delighted an Alderley audience." This is a judgment which is matched by those of Gissing's schoolfellows, Arthur Bowes and T. T. Sykes. "On the great 'speech nights,'" wrote the former at Gissing's death, "it was Gissing who mouthed the most brilliant Greek and Latin orations, and who filled the most important parts in the French plays." And Sykes declared on the same occasion: "All the old boys of Gissing's time at Lindow Grove will remember what a great part he took in all appertaining to the two speech nights at the end of each autumn term. [...] Gissing was our shining light. He was at one and the same time stage builder, stage manager, instructor, leading actor, and prompter, as well as our chief reciter."⁷

Similar enthusiasm is conveyed directly by his letters of 1873 and 1874 to Arthur Bowes, who had remained at Lindow Grove while he, a brilliant scholarship boy, had moved to Owens College, the establishment from which grew the University of Manchester.⁸ Although only fifteen, Gissing already showed his discriminating taste, writing glowingly of the Shakespeare plays performed at the Theatre Royal by the

then popular actors, Daniel and Milly Bandmann and their company. He had read all the playwright's works several times in preparation for the Shakespeare Prize that he was to win in 1875 with the best essay on the subject, and we see him delighting in the recollection of performances of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night*. But of the highly praised modern play *The Green Bushes; or, A Hundred Years Ago*, by John Baldwin Buckstone, he would not hear. Obviously he thought it *infra dig* to accept Bowes's invitation to attend a play which, in his eyes, was not literature. Contrastingly, in another letter of those days of great cultural fervour we find him asking his friend to go and see the powerful and capable actor Samuel Phelps in the role of Bottom, "that most complacently self-satisfied of men," the weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In this invitation lies indirect evidence that it was partly through actors and actresses that he appreciated the drama, being initially guided in his judgments by the reviews he happened upon in the Manchester press. After his expulsion from Owens College and his depressing one-year attempt to start life anew in Boston and Chicago, that is about the time he was finishing his first published novel, this attitude of his is confirmed in a letter to his younger brother, Algernon, of 22 September 1879: "On Saturday night I squeezed into the gallery at the Lyceum to see Irving in 'The Bells' [an adaptation by Leopold Lewis of Erckmann-Chatrian's play, *Le Juif polonais*], a melodrama which exhibits some of his most powerful acting. [...] The play was fearful, a perfectly horrible story. He is going to play Shylock for the first time soon. We must certainly try to go."⁹ He could not imagine then that at the turn of the century he would find himself coupled with Henry Irving in Part XI of William Rothenstein's *English Portraits*, an early Grant Richards publication. Irving he naturally associated with Ellen Terry, the leading lady during the celebrated actor's management of the Lyceum Theatre, and it was with much pleasure in June 1882 that he reported to his brother his chance meeting with her and her two children on Wimbledon Common.¹⁰

More personal was his relationship with Julia Gwynne, a lesser-known actress who was to marry George Edwardes, the manager of the Empire. They had some correspondence, as we shall see, in early 1883, and the actress had herself pleasantly remembered to him at the end of a public dinner in November 1894, at which time his name probably meant more than hers to their English contemporaries.¹¹ Similarly his interest in the once prestigious American actress Mary Anderson rested on a personal basis, on account of her connection

with Broadway, the beautiful Worcestershire village where she had a fine old house, the Court Farm, and where some of his maternal relatives, the Bedfords, the Russells and the Shailers, had lived--and were to live--for decades. Mary's brother, the journalist Joseph Anderson, was to interview him for the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1896¹² and to introduce him to Mary's not too impressive husband, Antonio de Navarro, a former papal chamberlain. For a few years in the early and mid-eighties he followed the careers of these two actresses, until his own career, first with the publication of *The Unclassed* in 1884, then with that of *Demos* in 1886, developed in a way which altered his outlook on the theatre. But meanwhile, that is so long as he did not see his way to making a living, albeit a poor one at first, by his pen, anything that concerned the stage retained its full appeal for him, as his correspondence with Algernon and their two sisters, Margaret and Ellen, amply shows.

It is indeed more appropriate to refer to the world of the stage than specifically to the drama, seeing that his interest extended to all forms of theatrical entertainment--the opera, the music-hall, the ballad concert and others. In his voluminous scrapbook--a fascinating mix of press-cuttings and personal remarks on a variety of subjects likely to be useful to a professional novelist--a section is devoted to the stage. It spilled over into his *Commonplace Book*, where this telltale self-reminder occurs: "Analyze the attraction of the theatre on the London vulgar."¹³ But his correspondence and, from late 1887 onwards, his diary, also offer a wealth of material for a detailed study of his steadily declining enthusiasm for what in "My First Rehearsal" he half-pedantically, half-humorously called the Thespian art. In his *Letters of an Old Playgoer* Matthew Arnold wrote of the cultural climate of the Victorian period: "Refinement, respectability and religious zeal, all kept people away, and the theatre suffered."¹⁴ Gissing's estrangement had nothing to do with religious zeal, which he viewed, especially at the time, as a mind-deadening infirmity. For respectability and refinement, often of a spurious kind, he did not greatly care either. To him the problem raised by Arnold was one of intellectual dignity, and so long as talented actors redeemed by their impersonations the mediocrity of a play, he considered his presence in the pit or gallery compatible with self-respect. Also, rereading a Shakespeare play prior to, or after, a new, possibly bad, performance of it, somewhat atoned for what, in his eyes, was a debasing contact with the sensational and melodramatic. With pleasure Gissing became acquainted with Gilbert and Sullivan's operas. His correspondence is studded with appreciative

references to *The Mikado*, *Iolanthe*, *Patience* and *Princess Ida*, the source of which, Tennyson's poem, was for him justification enough for attending a performance. He was in those days a regular reader of the weekly journal the *Era*, which was a must for play-goers. When his sister Ellen, by then an eighteen-year-old self-conscious provincial girl, was invited to her London home by his new upper-class friend, Mrs. Sarah Gaussen, in June 1885, they all went to see *The Mikado*, as well as the highly successful revival of *Olivia*, an adaptation by William Gorman Wills of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and Gissing found "Irving and Ellen Terry admirable in the latter [play]."¹⁵ Yet, it is fairly clear that he was anxious to make many concessions so as to ensure the success of his sister's first stay in town.

Indeed in recent years his response to the English plays that London audiences were prepared to put up with had been a very mixed one. The turn of the tide occurred in February 1883, when he wrote to Moy Thomas, the author of a Monday feature column entitled "The Theatres" in the *Daily News*, a letter which the editor did not ignore:

Apropos of your remarks on Mr. Morton's volume of unacted farces, could you not lift up your voice against the monstrous inanity of the pieces substituted of late by managers for the really humorous old farces. Take, for instance, "Mock Turtles," at the Savoy, and "The Little Sentinel" at the Haymarket. In spite of the former, I indulged myself in a second visit to "Patience," and would gladly see "Iolanthe" again, but am withheld by absolute fear of the first piece, which runs its course, discreditable alike to author, actors and manager. This must be the position of many people who perforce take seats in the pit, and must go early if they want a seat at all. "The Little Sentinel" is almost as bad, and it is distressing to see an actress of promise, like Miss Julia Gwynne, doing her best in an intangible part. One sighs for even such pieces as "The Turned Heads" and "To Paris and Back for 5l."¹⁶

A few weeks later--the time required, one suspects, for another, worthier, curtain-raiser to be found and rehearsed--the mediocre *Mock Turtles* was withdrawn and replaced by a newly composed one-act comic opera, *Private Wire*, on which it is impossible to pass judgment. Later again, he thundered against "one of those astonishing new plays," *Retaliation*, by Rudolph Dircks, "produced at Matinées from time to time, which are always so fearfully cut up by the critics." Julia Gwynne had sent him a ticket for a stall. "It was meant for melodramatic comedy," he commented for his brother's benefit, "but proved outrageous farce. Throughout the three acts the house roared heartily,--always at the serious parts. No description could give an idea

of the monstrosities of this piece [...] Ye Gods! I hope I shall never be called upon to witness such a spectacle again.”⁷ in other letters of the period, one finds him deriding several low farces which he viewed as a challenge to him to produce something much better. His letter to his brother of 16 March 1884 shows to what unexpected temptation he fell a prey temporarily: “In addition to my new novel [*The Unclassed*], I am at work on a play, which I at present think of calling ‘Madcaps.’ I have the 4 Acts sketched out, & think I can make something really good of it. What odds will you take against my having a play out before I am thirty?”¹⁸ Algernon’s response is unknown and, for some unstated reason, the project fell through. So did, fourteen years later, a fresh attempt, variously entitled “The Golden Trust” and “Clare’s Engagement,” at a time when the idea of improving his income by writing a play floated again in his mind. Some successful dramatists earned huge sums of money. So why should he not emulate them? But after a few false starts on this latter occasion, he had to acknowledge to himself that, unlike Barrie for instance, he had talent neither for the drama nor for comedy.

During the two very brief periods when he tested his capacity to write for the stage, another influence was at work--the quality of French, German, then Norwegian plays performed in London playhouses. Echoes of his responses to the foreign drama and operas are scattered in his correspondence of the 1880s, and they speak for themselves. A typical passage occurs in a letter of 7 June 1882 to his brother in which he related how his old college friend John George Black asked him to accompany him the previous day to the performance of Meilhac and Halévy’s *Frou-Frou* given at the Gaiety by the French Comedy Company, with Sarah Bernhardt in the part of Gilberte. “It was really most delightful,” he commented, “an entirely different thing from English acting.”¹⁹ Scarcely a year later, on 23 May 1883, he went to see Victorien Sardou’s *Fedora* in the English version by Herman Merivale and, much like the *Punch* critic, he was struck by Mrs. Bernard Beere’s slavish imitation of the French actress. The English version was not a patch on the original. In February 1886, when he was frantically busy writing his first successful novel, *Demos*, he attended with great curiosity performances of Sardou and Najac’s *Divorçons*, toned down by the censor, then of *L’Ami Fritz*, a dramatization of the best-selling story by Erckmann-Chatrian, and this prompted him to visit Paris when his novel was completed.

By then his dissatisfaction with the production of English plays had become tinged with bitterness. He deliberately eschewed programmes

which contained a promise--to him a threat--of revival of some low farce offered as a curtain-raiser. More than previously, he favoured concerts and operas, and the passages in his letters of the late 1880s dealing with the spectacles and performances he attended bristle with French, German and Italian names, until a new name appeared--that of Henrik Ibsen. Wagner's operas, *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, Verdi's *Traviata*, occur by the side of a concert where Adelina Patti sang at the Albert Hall, or a performance of *Athalie* which he attended at the Odéon during his second stay in Paris in 1888. With special relish he saw the French Company play *Tartuffe* in December 1887 ("vastly enjoyable") and several other plays by Molière at the Français in the following autumn. These developments harmonized with his enthusiastic exploration of Russian literature, mainly Turgenev, Dostoievski and Tolstoy, and with his excursion into Danish fiction, essentially Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*, which, like Ibsen's plays, he read in German, a language as familiar to him as was French. But indeed most of the foreign texts he read then in French or German had not yet been translated into English.

It was in June 1888 that he turned to Ibsen's plays--"extraordinary productions" he told his younger sister²⁰--and he eagerly watched the progress of the Norwegian dramatist's reputation in England during the next few years, a period during which he had few opportunities of going to the theatre as he was often away from London. Surprisingly perhaps, he fought shy of the efforts made by the Independent Theatre to encourage a genuine theatrical renaissance in England. "These London people (headed by that rather offensive young man, George Moore)," he wrote to Eduard Bertz on 18 October 1891, "have acted Ibsen's *Ghosts* & Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*; but the latter has now passed to the stage of an ordinary theatre.-- I have no sympathy with this movement. It is futile, because there are no English dramatists, absolutely none. It is not the age for acted drama; the public is too gross."²¹ A related problem concerning the diffusion of Ibsen's plays was the quality of the translations used on the stage. Behind Gissing's question to Bertz earlier in 1891--"What of Ibsen's new play [*Hedda Gabler*]? Here it is abused. But so are most things original"²²--lay the pitiable reality of Gosse's incompetence as a translator from the Norwegian. Still, to Gissing's mind, this was only a side issue. His bitterness was turning to anger. In another letter to Bertz of 1891 he remarked: "Ibsen's '*Hedda Gabler*' has been rather remarkably acted at a series of matinées in London. It was a distinct success, the theatre each day being crowded with intellectual people. Now that it has been

put on in the evening, the result is complete failure. Worse than idle to present anything original to the mob of London playgoers. They are the support of vulgar playwrights, & the ruin of those few capable men who are misled into writing for them.”²³ The social questions treated in Ibsen’s refreshingly innovative plays had no appeal for spectators who only sought cheap entertainment, which they knew they had a better chance of finding in “transpontine” theatres, that is in playhouses on the Surrey side of London, where melodrama was rife.

It is characteristic that Gissing, always watchful for new developments, was shortly to read Shaw’s *Quintessence of Ibsenism*. One of Ibsen’s acknowledged merits, together with a new attitude towards drama and the outstanding quality of his dialogue, had been to write genuine tragedies about common humanity, which endeared him to Gissing, an apostle of veracity in fiction. Besides, although he did not say so anywhere, one suspects that he found in Ibsen’s last plays, *Romersholt* for instance, a concern for the forces of the unconscious, duly admired by Freud, which paralleled his own as he was currently expressing it in two successive novels *Denzil Quarrier* and *Born in Exile* (published, though not written, in this order), to be followed by two related short stories, “The Schoolmaster’s Vision” and “A Freak of Nature.” The qualitative gap between Ibsen’s plays and even the best of what English dramatists such as Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones²⁴ had to offer astounded him. Would he ever have an opportunity to give his candid opinion in print?

Chance assisted him. Just when the question was very much in the minds of that portion of the intelligentsia which yearned for a rebirth of the English drama, William Archer, a major dramatic critic and a translator of Ibsen at that, published a much-noticed article entitled “The Drama in the Doldrums” in the *Fortnightly Review* for 1 August 1892, urging more authors, Gissing by name, to write for the stage. E. T. Cook, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, at once saw that he could fill his own columns at little cost. He sent a circular letter to the novelists named by Archer and to some others, requesting them to state the reasons why they did not write plays. By his own account, Gissing’s reply was “rather a savage criticism of all things dramatic,”²⁵ and it reads like his last word on the matter. Short extracts from it must of necessity serve the purpose of the whole:

The acted drama is essentially a popular entertainment; author and player live alike upon the applause of crowds. When the drama flourished in England, it was by virtue of popular interests, for in those days the paying public was the

intelligent public. Dramatists had no temptation to write below their powers; the better their work, the surer its reception by those patrons of the theatre upon whom success depended. Trash might be produced in abundance, but only because genius and talent are always rare. [...] Nowadays, the paying public are the unintelligent multitude. The people who make a manager's fortune represent a class intellectually beneath the groundlings of Shakspeare's time [...] When Johnson, or when Lamb, sat in the pit, they had no such fellow playgoers about them as now crush together at the unopened doors, but a majority of men who with us would merit the style of gentle. Our democratic populace, rich and poor, did not exist. [...] Conceivably we may some day have a theatre for those who think, quite distinct from the houses sought out by those who are conscious only of crude sensations. But at present we may be grateful that one form of literary art, thanks to the mode of its publication, can be cultivated regardless of the basest opinion. Professed playwrights may be left to entertain their admirers. A novelist who would deliberately contend with them has to study a craft which goes, or ought to go, sorely against his conscience. I cannot see that the man of letters suffers in any way, except financially, under his exclusion from the stage. The history of culture prepares us to take for granted that a period will have its predominant artistic form, and that of our time is narrative fiction.

After declaring that he had “never written anything in scenic form,” he explained why, despite Archer's invitation and Ibsen's success, he would remain faithful to the art of fiction:

In dealing with the complex life of to-day I am not content to offer only dialogue. The artist, I agree, must not come forward among his characters; but on the other hand, it appears to me that his novel will be artistically valuable in proportion to his success in making it an expression of his own individuality. To talk about being “objective” is all very well for those who swear by words. No novelist was ever objective, or ever will be. His work is a bit of life as seen by *him*. It is his business to make us feel a distinct pleasure in seeing the world with *his* eyes. Now, to be sure, a skilful dramatist does this, up to a certain point. For my own part, I wish to go beyond that point, to have scope for painting, to take in the external world and (by convention, which no novelist has set aside) the unuttered life of soul. Stage directions and soliloquy will not answer my purpose.²⁶

Unwittingly he had already begun to answer a question he was asked when he contributed, in *The Humanitarian* for July 1895, to a symposium on “The Place of Realism in Fiction.” And in “straight and shapely words” (Virginia Woolf's phrase applied to his writings) were his two replies couched.

Rarely did he attend theatrical performances in the eleven years he still had to live. The new opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, *Utopia, Limited*, he was apparently gratified to see at the Savoy in October 1893, just as he had enjoyed *The Gondoliers* in December 1890. But even Shakespeare's plays, in the hands of bungling directors, were for him a source of intense dissatisfaction. Witness his angry diary jottings after a performance of *Twelfth Night* at Daly's Theatre on 25 April 1894: "Ada Rahan as Viola. The most offensive performance I ever sat through. Only 3 acts were given, and then, to fill up the time, a concert followed! The Viola very absurd in slow tragic utterance. The Maria an impudent barmaid. Sir Andrew, a circus clown, and so on."

In this indignant protest, as in his previously reported attitudes and opinions, Gissing's fine taste and artistic integrity are writ large. His exacting cultural commitment was never in doubt. Here as elsewhere, his point of view was a consistently and courageously elitist one, and there is no need to feel apologetic about it. His sincerity was far too rarely equalled.

¹*The Poetry of George Gissing*, edited and introduced by Bouwe Postmus (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 11-12.

²*George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 271-72.

³His last (negative) remark on the theatre occurs in a letter of 16 June 1903 to Edward Clodd, who had told him an anecdote which Clodd retold in chapter XV of his *Memories* (1916): "The 'story' was of two ladies who sat in neighbouring boxes at the Lyceum Theatre, when Irving was acting in *King Lear*. When the curtain fell at end of Act III, one lady, reaching forward to speak to her friend, said, with a yawn, 'What a very disagreeable family these Lears must have been to live with.'" Gissing commented: "Oh, the delightful story in your last letter about 'these Lears'! There is the representative of the theatre public." See the *Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas, Volume IX (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996), p. 96. Hereafter abbreviated as *CL*.

⁴*Workers in the Dawn*, Volume II, edited and with an introduction by P. Coustillas (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985), pp. 381-82.

⁵*My First Rehearsal and My Clerical Rival*, edited and with an introduction by P. Coustillas, London: Enitharmon Press, 1970.

⁶"Lindow Grove College: Annual Soirée," 25 December 1874, p. 2. Although by then a student in Manchester, Gissing still boarded at Lindow Grove.

⁷*Dinglewood Magazine*, April 1904, pp. 107 and 105-06.

⁸For the letters to Bowes from which the substance of this paragraph is drawn, see *CL I*, pp. 14-32.

⁹CL I, pp. 203-04.

¹⁰CL II, p. 90.

¹¹*London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, edited and with an introduction by Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 354. Entry for 19 November 1894.

¹²“George Gissing As He Is,” 13 June 1896, p. 24.

¹³*George Gissing’s Commonplace Book*, ed. Jacob Korg (New York: The New York Public Library), p. 52.

¹⁴Posthumously published in 1919, pp. 23-24.

¹⁵Letter of 9 June 1885 to his brother Algernon, CL II, p. 309.

¹⁶Letter printed in the *Daily News* of 5 February 1883, p. 2. CL II, p. 114.

¹⁷Letter to Algernon of 21 July 1883, CL II, p. 147.

¹⁸CL II, pp. 203-04.

¹⁹CL II, p. 89.

²⁰Letter of 17 June 1888, CL III, p. 218.

²¹CL IV, p. 331.

²²Letter of 23 January 1891, CL IV, p. 264.

²³Letter of 15 May 1891, CL IV, p. 295.

²⁴Scathing assessments of Pinero’s *Sweet Lavender* and of Jones’s *The Middleman* are recorded in Gissing’s diary: “I went off to Terry’s Theatre and saw Pinero’s ‘Sweet Lavender’ [...] Ye gods, what a play! Sentimental farce; conventionality gone mad; acting the feeblest I ever witnessed, excepting Terry’s extravagant part” (16 June 1888). Of *The Middleman* he wrote: “Bad play and bad acting, detestable conventionality of structure and dialogue” (16 October 1889).

²⁵Letter to Algernon of 23 August 1892, CL V, p. 49.

²⁶His reply, written on 23 August, was published on 10 September under the title “Why I Don’t Write Plays. XV: Mr. George Gissing.” CL V, pp. 50-53.

Money and Manhood: Gissing’s Redefinition of Lower-Middle-Class Man

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Although one hundred years ago no one was clamouring for the distinction of being the pre-eminent creator of the lower-middle-class character, Henry James was nevertheless willing to confer this somewhat dubious honour on H. G. Wells. In a letter to Wells after the publication of *Kipps* in 1905, James praises him for having

for the very first time treated the English “lower middle” class, etc., without the picturesque, the grotesque, the fantastic and romantic interference, of which Dickens, e.g., is so misleadingly, of which even George Eliot is so deviatingly, full. You have handled its vulgarity in so scientific and historic a spirit, and seen the whole thing all in its *own* strong light.¹

As I have argued elsewhere, “Wells’s characters are not, in fact, free of the kind of interference for which James criticizes Dickens and Eliot; it is most probably this ‘interference’--mostly affectations of speech and dress--that produces the ‘vulgarity’ that James interprets as a scientific and historic fact.”² H. G. Wells was not representing the late Victorian/Edwardian lower-middle-class male in a “scientific and historic spirit.” The author who was doing that was George Gissing.

Both Wells and Gissing faced problems in representing lower-middle-class man, those problems being the conventions for creating such a character that had evolved during the second half of the nineteenth century. Those conventions constructed the lower-middle-class male as both comic and domestic, as a figure that did not have to be taken seriously and that was unthreatening and ineffectual. In the novels of the period, this figure was typically a minor character, as marginalized in the literature as he was in the culture.³ By the end of the nineteenth century, lower-middle-class writers like Wells and Arnold Bennett were challenging the by then entrenched stereotypes by presenting the lower-middle-class male as at least worthy of greater interest--for example, as the protagonist (though perhaps never the hero) in novels such as *The Wheels of Chance* and *Kipps* (Wells) and *A Man from the North* and *The Card* (Bennett). In none of these novels, however, is the author able to make significant breaks from the stereotypes. In all but one, the lower-middle-class protagonist is constructed from the same comic mould as his literary predecessors; the one exception (Richard Larch in *A Man from the North*) is bland and unengaging--that is, defined by other elements of the popular conception of the lower middle class.

In his *oeuvre*, George Gissing works with and challenges these same conventions with varying degrees of success. In his uncharacteristically comic novellas, *The Town Traveller* and *The Paying Guest*, he constructs the lower-middle-class male according to the prevailing conventions (Christopher Parish and Clarence Mumford, respectively). In other novels, versions of the same type are saved from the condescension of the stereotypes by their creator’s general proclivity for uncompromising realism and even pessimism. Gissing accordingly pro-

duces two male lower-middle-class characters that move beyond the stereotypes in important ways: Edmund Widdowson in *The Odd Women* and Maurice Hilliard in *Eve's Ransom*.⁴ Neither of these characters is comic, but that, as the example of Richard Larch indicates, does not necessarily move them far beyond the cultural stereotypes. What, then, distinguishes these characters from others in their social class?

At the base of the characterizations of these atypical lower-middle-class men are economics and masculinity. Whatever conventions had developed for defining the lower middle class, it is economic marginality that generally prevents its members from escaping the stereotypes. Economic impotence is paralleled by other kinds of impotence--intellectual, physical and sexual. Lower-middle-class man never gets the girl, unless she is an equally asexual Miss Skiffins; and if he does marry, there is no sexually charged romance involved, again as in the Skiffins-Wemmick union.⁵ Gissing manipulates the conventional economic and gender constructions of lower-middle-class man in the characterizations of Widdowson and Hilliard, a manipulation that produces characters who are recognizably lower-middle-class and yet who escape at least some of the limitations that would otherwise be imposed upon them by the conventions that define them. As a result, Widdowson does get the desirable girl and although Hilliard does not, he does pursue her with a heated passion quite foreign to the stereotypical clerkly character.

Romance or lack of it is not where the manipulation of the conventions begins, however, although it is an important feature of the characterization because it becomes an indication of how interesting the character is, or is not, as the case may be. Part of what Gissing is successfully able to do is to construct these lower-middle-class men as characters who are profoundly interesting--interesting as something other than the butt of a joke that assumes an identification between the narrator and the reader in opposition to the characters who inspire their mirth. With both Widdowson and Hilliard, the characterization begins with their economic situations.

Widdowson first appears in *The Odd Women* as a man whose economic status is clearly not the marginal one of the lower middle class. We can judge him initially only from his outward appearance, however, as we observe Monica Madden carefully size him up as he sits next to her on a bench in Battersea Park and strikes up a conversation with her.

His utterance fell short of perfect refinement [Monica notes], but seemed that of an educated man. And certainly his clothes were such as a gentleman wears. He

had thin, hairy hands, unmarked by any effect of labour; the nails could not have been better cared for. Was it a bad sign that he carried neither gloves nor walking-stick?⁶

We are given clues here about Widdowson that alert us to the fact that if he is not necessarily on the margins of the middle class, his status is indeterminate. He is well-dressed, well-manicured, and he seems to be educated. These apparent signs of affluence contrast with an apparent shortfall in breeding: his speech falls short of refinement and he is out and about without the gentleman's requisite gloves and walking-stick. Gloves and stick materialize on Monica's second meeting with him, but he is not very adept at handling the props of middle-class status; he raises his hat to her "not very gracefully" (p. 65). When he takes her down the river in a pleasure boat, he handles the sculls adequately, "but by no means like a man well trained in this form of exercise" (p. 67). Nevertheless, Monica also notes his very good boots, gold cufflinks and "a gold watch-guard chosen with a gentleman's taste" (p. 67), as if to remind herself and us of his affluence. What is most strikingly un-lower-middle-class about Widdowson, however, is his ability to intimidate Monica without any apparent effort to do so. She has agreed to meet him a second time against her better judgement because "she had not felt the courage to refuse; in a manner, he had overawed her" (p. 60). Just what overawes her is unclear. She registers his sobriety and his sometimes stern expression; she concludes that he is a "man of means" (p. 60), but by their second meeting observes that "[n]o particular force of character declared itself in his countenance, and his mode of speech did not suggest a very active brain" (p. 66). Widdowson by now comes across as a class hybrid, and a fairly ungainly one. It comes as no surprise, then, when we learn that he has been a lowly clerk most of his life and that he has only recently inherited the money that allows him to maintain the outward appearance of a gentleman.

That Widdowson initially appears in the novel as a figure whose class designation is unclear allows Gissing to delineate characteristics of the man rather than of the representative of a class. By contrast, the first appearance of a lower-middle-class male character in the fiction of this period generally clearly announces his status, or more properly his lack of it: he is the clerk in Mr. Scrooge's or Mr. Jagers's office, he is the shop assistant who dreams of the adventures that await him on his ten-day cycling holiday (i.e. Mr. Hoopdriver). Widdowson escapes the initial condescension of humour or pity that inevitably accompanies the occupational and thus the class designation. By the

time we learn that he has been a clerk, traits that are atypical of the lower-middle-class character have already been established: he is sober, even severe; he is a man of means and dresses with taste (if perhaps not style); he is able to overawe a young woman who has had a middle-class upbringing. Even as Widdowson goes on to manifest defining marks of lower-middle-classness as the novel progresses, he remains distinct as a character rather than as a type. He indeed takes on that characteristic so patently lacking in his fictional predecessors--potency--despite the fact that we see him continue to struggle with his social and intellectual limitations. He may prove himself incapable of dealing effectively with the challenges that marriage presents to him or even with the modest demands of polite social intercourse while holidaying with Monica at Guernsey, but he does not lose his power to disturb us, just as he never loses the power to torment Monica.

Widdowson's limitations are indeed part of what makes him intimidating. Rather than producing an unthreatening and self-effacing subordinate, Widdowson's limitations produce a baffled and thwarted monster. His notions of domestic felicity are so restrictive and stifling, he is so possessive of Monica in his adoration of her, he is so narrow in his interpretation of the Victorian ideals of marriage and womanhood that he is inevitably frustrated, and the frustration of his desire for domestic bliss leads to domestic violence. When afraid that Monica does not love him, he crushes her in such a wild embrace that she cries in pain: "Oh, you hurt me, Edmund!" and he confesses: "I had rather you were dead than that you should cease to love me!" (p. 182). There is at one point a suggestion that his passion might have been diverted into a more benevolent channel when he temporarily accepts Monica's plea for a more egalitarian relationship, an idea that briefly makes "his passionate love glow with new fire" (p. 183). His mounting sense of insecurity, however, produces mounting paranoia and escalating aggression. Convinced that Monica is having an affair with Everard Barfoot, Widdowson denounces her as a liar and an adulteress and nearly strangles her:

[H]e sprang at her, clutched her dress at the throat, and flung her violently upon her knees. A short cry of terror escaped her; then she was stricken dumb, with eyes starting and mouth open. It was well that he held her by the garment, and not by the neck, for his hand closed with murderous convulsion, and the desire of crushing out her life was for an instant all his consciousness. (p. 256)

That Widdowson's violent tendencies are a displacement of sexual potency is clear in that his aggression is driven by jealousy. His

sexuality is not appealing or erotic, but it is there, just as his love is there. And his love is also powerful, as Monica's assessment of it to Mildred Vesper before the marriage attests: "He loves me so much that he has made me think I must marry him" (p. 130). Widdowson's passion is thus both powerful and menacing.

When Maurice Hilliard first appears in *Eve's Ransom*, waiting on a railway platform, his status too is indeterminate. He is "habited in a way that made it difficult to ascertain his social standing."⁷ His overcoat, however, is subsequently described as "seedy" and he takes a seat in a third-class carriage; we learn that he works as a draughtsman (pp. 2-3). Unlike Widdowson, Hilliard is clearly presented as an impecunious white-collar worker, a sure indication of his lower-middle-class status. But Hilliard also has attributes that do not fit lower-middle-class stereotypes: he speaks "the language of an educated man" and, like Widdowson, has a manner that is sometimes disturbing. His demeanor is "suggestive of anything but prudence and content" (pp. 2, 1) and when Dengate, his deceased father's former associate, approaches him, Hilliard is belligerent and insulting. His response to Dengate's belated offer of restitution for the bad debt owed to his father is indeed threatening. "If this is a joke," he warns Dengate, "keep out of my way after you've played it out, that's all" (p. 6).

Dengate's payment of four hundred and thirty-six pounds is in a very real sense Hilliard's ransom, both from the literal bondage of his financial situation and from the figurative bondage of literary conventions. Gissing uses this very precise sum to make poverty and freedom concrete, to emphasize poverty and affluence as material, not abstract, states of being. Money in fact means life, and life and liberty in turn become commodities purchased with money. After first hearing of the coming payment, Hilliard's "eyes gleamed with life" (p. 6). He later tells his friend Robert Narramore that he is now a "free man," that he is "going to live":

Going to be a machine no longer. Can I call myself a man? There's precious little difference between a fellow like me and the damned grinding mechanism that I spend my days in drawing—that roars all day in my ears and deafens me. I'll put an end to that. Here's four hundred pounds. It shall mean four hundred pounds'-worth of life. While this money lasts, I'll feel that I'm a human being. (pp. 11-12)

At the same time, Hilliard recognizes that four hundred pounds will purchase freedom for a restricted period only. "I have a year or two before me," he tells Narramore (p. 13). That Hilliard's term of freedom and full manhood is time-limited emphasizes the non-essential

nature of either poverty or affluence and hence of its defining power. Since Hilliard can move from one state to the other and back again, poverty and the personal attributes that conventionally attend it in representations of the lower middle class cannot be intrinsic. In other words, Gissing prevents Hilliard's poverty from becoming a symbolically defining feature by making the relation between income and social status and even identity so blatant that financial marginality loses its figurative power. Rather than his poverty being part of the stereotypical constellation of unmanly characteristics of lower-middle-classness, a quasi-intrinsic quality, it is explicitly presented as an external, material condition of life, *the* material condition that limits Hilliard's potential. Poverty may be emasculating, but poverty is not a personal character trait of the non-virile.

The putative connection between economics and virility--or at least social/cultural potency and sexual attractiveness--is further developed through Hilliard's relationship with Eve. It is the windfall of four hundred pounds that allows Hilliard to "ransom" Eve from a compromising relationship with a married man. The modesty of all the sums required for various kinds of ransoms in the text leaves the issues of freedom and identity firmly within the lower middle class, however. And the constant reminder of Narramore's far greater wealth emphasizes the class specificity of Hilliard's situation. Eve's ransom is effected for a paltry £35 (p. 55). Moreover, Eve has had her own liberating windfall that allowed her a period of relative liberty, a reward of £20 for having returned a stolen and discarded cashbox containing valuable documents to its rightful owner. And Eve's "ideas of extravagance," as she notes herself, are "very modest--a few new clothes, an outing to the theatre and, most delightful of all to her, a subscription to Mudie's" (pp. 76-77). Hilliard's notions of what constitutes "a man's life" are almost as moderate. After initially succumbing briefly to "London's grossest lures" (p. 20) he spends a month studying "the Paris of art and history" and then returns to a temperate life in London, where his greatest enjoyments now seem to be indulging his interest in architecture by visiting London churches, keeping track of Eve and dining moderately well in restaurants (pp. 20, 41-42, 44). His only real extravagance is financing several weeks holiday in Paris for Eve to restore her health, but the cost of even this indulgence is kept down by Eve's insistence on living inexpensively with her friend Mlle Roche (pp. 67-68). During the months following their return to England, Hilliard lives "penuriously" and toils "at professional study night as well as day" in the hopes of qualifying as an architect; occasionally he

spends an evening in Narramore's "cozy bachelor quarters"--a quiet reminder to us of the comforts that remain beyond Hilliard's reach (p. 81). The difference between Hilliard the draughtsman and Hilliard the man of temporary independent means is mostly a difference of perception--Hilliard's perception of his liberty. "On most days I satisfy myself with the feeling of freedom," he tells Eve, "and live as poorly as ever I did" (p. 46).

What Hilliard's £400 does not do for him is make him an attractive suitor in Eve's eyes. Hilliard himself laments the limits of his power to stir her emotions or to provide for her in the long term. "She would never love him," he admits to himself, "and it was not in his power to complete the work he had begun, by freeing her completely from harsh circumstances, setting her in a path of secure and pleasant life" (p. 62). Like Widdowson, however, and unlike their literary predecessors, Hilliard is passionate--sometimes violently passionate--despite Eve's coolness. "His pulses were sensibly quickened" at the first sight of her; he feels a "savage jealousy" over her past relationship with another man; being close to her raises "his blood to fever-heat" (pp. 24, 60, 79). While his influence on Eve's life is benign, Hilliard's obsession with her is as intense as Widdowson's with Monica. Neither of these men is the stereotypical lower-middle-class figure whose sexuality is never explicit and whose adoration of the heroine is never more than mildly comic or, as in the case of John Chivery's devotion to Little Dorrit, touching in its futility. Hilliard's and Widdowson's devotion sends their passions raging in ways that are disruptive and disturbing, both to characters within the novels and to readers. The amiable, unintimidating and slightly ridiculous figure in *Eve's Ransom* is middle-class, not lower-middle-class; it is Robert Narramore, who is languid and even effeminate, whose "blood is too temperate" to produce a passionate love for Eve (whom he does admit he "like[s] better" than the previous young woman he had considered marrying), and who wants to settle down in "a little house of [his] own; an inexpensive little house, with a tree or two about it" (p. 92). That he is planning to invest five or six thousand pounds in this little house underscores both his absurdity and the real costs of the domestic idyll. It is quite out of the range of supposedly domesticated lower-middle-class man.

Gissing's manipulation of the conventional economic and gender constructions of lower-middle-class man in the characterizations of Widdowson and Hilliard produce significant shifts in the ways in which such characters could be constructed and perceived. Widdowson and Hilliard acquire levels of potency in those categories in which lower-

middle-class men are conventionally deficient--economics, intellect, physical presence and sexuality. As a result, their ability to influence both the fictional worlds they inhabit and the lives of the characters they come in contact with, whether for good or ill, is far greater than that of their literary predecessors. Widdowson and Hilliard are thus not amiable and reassuringly non-threatening representatives of their class, but are instead clear indicators of their creator's commitment to representing lower-middle-class man in a "scientific and historic spirit."

¹Henry James to H. G. Wells, 19 November 1905, *Henry James and H. G. Wells*, ed. Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), p. 105.

²See my *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1999), p. 102.

³See my "Virtue Domesticated: Dickens and the Lower Middle Class," *Victorian Studies* 39:4 (Summer 1996), pp. 483-511 and *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel*.

⁴I have chosen not to consider Godwin Peak in *Born in Exile* because the semi-autobiographical nature of that characterization presents different problems of representation.

⁵In the fictional world created by Gissing, however, it is not necessarily only the lower-middle-class male who ends up alone. As Annette Federico observes, in the Gissingesque state of "sexual anarchy" emotional and sexual fulfillment is virtually impossible" and many of the men in Gissing's novels "end up without sexual partners, for better or for worse." *Masculine Identity in Hardy and Gissing* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991), p. 53.

⁶*The Odd Women*, ed. Arlene Young (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1998), p. 59. Subsequent references are in the text.

⁷*Eve's Ransom* (New York: Dover, 1980), p. 1. Subsequent references are in the text.

Two Classes of Story: Literature and Class in Gissing's *Demos*

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Richard Mutimer, the working-class protagonist in Gissing's *Demos*, cautions his sister about the reading of novels; he says, "don't go playing with that kind of thing; it's dangerous" (p. 220). While

Gissing is using this scene to mark Mutimer as lacking a creative imagination, he is also emphasizing an idea that is important to his book--novel reading *can be dangerous*. Gissing sees earlier, more traditional novel paradigms as dangerous because they purvey an idealized view of the social class system.

Dickens, for example, had sentimentalized the poor. Elizabeth Gaskell, among others, had created a division between the deserving and undeserving poor, a division that, as P. J. Keating points out, stems from a decidedly middle-class view of the labouring classes. Gissing's refusal to adhere to these Victorian literary traditions has caused him to be seen as unsympathetic to the poor people depicted in his novels. He often disparages them: he calls the London poor the "least original and least articulate beings within the confines of civilisation" (*The Nether World*, p. 41). My paper argues that Gissing's depictions of the working-class in his proletarian novels attempt to avoid the middle-class myths about the poor which pervaded the traditional Victorian novel--myths that he sees as dangerous because of the ideological work they perform. Looking closely at the storytelling scene in *Demos, I* will show how Gissing points to and comments on the ideological work of narrative, both the traditional nineteenth-century narrative and the new naturalist narrative that he himself creates.

Gissing inserts his work into a debate with literary traditions of the nineteenth century by using but overturning traditional motifs. In *Demos* he reverses the rags-to-riches plot that had been so effective in such popular nineteenth-century novels as *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, and *Jane Eyre*. The rags-to-riches plot line suggests the possibility of transcending one's class and Gissing's use of the rags-to-riches motif suggests, therefore, that it is on the specific issue of class that he wants to intersect with these earlier literary traditions. But the idea of crossing class boundaries suggested by the rags-to-riches plot line is in fact a myth promulgated by the middle-class writer, for this motif carries two important messages, comforting thoughts both to the Victorian middle-class reader. The first is the "cream rises to the top" theory: it holds that the unusually deserving, clean and moral working-class character can, in the end, become middle-class (Pip, for example), suggesting that class boundaries are permeable. But it is, of course, only those working-class characters seemingly evincing *middleclass* values who manage the successful social climb. And as Raymond Williams points out, the self-sufficient, get-ahead, individualist mentality needed to achieve this climb is a decidedly middle-class one, and the much touted possibility of a move upwards was only available to

individuals, not to whole groups. The second message carried by the rags-to-riches story is based on the “truth will out” theory: if a middle-class person should happen to fall on hard times, eventually the truth will out and their genuine middle-class status will be recognized (*Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* are examples here). This assuages the fears of middle-class readers that financial difficulties might demote them into the ranks of the working-class. The combination of these myths--working-class characters who have middle-class values *can* rise, while middle-class characters *cannot* really fall--supports a sort of utopian, middle-class view of a basically fixed social class system. But this utopian view does not ring true for Gissing. Gissing wants to replace this comforting myth with a new vision of social class, a vision that sees the problem of social class as a daunting political reality.

Gissing's 1886 novel *Demos*, considered by critics the most reactionary of his five proletarian novels, is based on a failed version of the rags-to-riches story. The novel tells the story of Richard Mutimer, socialist leader extraordinaire who inherits money and power from a distant relative, marries a gentlewoman whose family has fallen on hard times and, while still professing his socialist views, tries without success to remake himself into a gentleman--he tries to be, as his name suggests, mutable. It is that other old stand-by of the Victorian plot that undoes him in the end--the discovery of a later will left by that same distant relative. The newer version of the will is found--in, of all places, the church, almost as though God himself were intervening--and Mutimer finds himself a penniless working man, but this time with the burden of a beautiful gentlewoman as his wife. Despite seemingly living a traditional Victorian rags-to-riches plot, Mutimer not only loses all his money, but cannot now even command the respect of the other workingmen and he is eventually stoned to death. It is a story that has been read as Gissing's warning to those who would raise themselves above their class; in other words, as his support of the status quo. But since Gissing blatantly uses and inverts novelistic conventions, it is my contention that his warning is a literary one; he is pointing to the dangers of those middle-class myths. Gissing replaces them with what he sees as the political reality.

As I have already noted, Gissing marks Richard Mutimer as someone who lacks creative imagination. But his erstwhile fiancée, the poor uneducated seamstress whom he abandons in Islington when he inherits power and money, seems to have gauged the value of imaginative storytelling: while she sits at the sewing machine in the evening, Emma tells stories to her niece and nephew, the children of her alco-

holic sister. "It was a way," the narrator tells us, "of beguiling them from their desire to go and play in the street" (p. 394). Like many of the *novels* in the Victorian era, her storytelling apparently has a purpose, an improving, moral purpose; it saves the children from the temptations and dangers which are--presumably--lurking in the evenings on the streets of Islington, temptations and dangers to which their mother had already succumbed.

"Emma had two classes of story," according to the narrator, "the one concerned itself with rich children, the other with poor; the one highly fanciful, the other full of a touching actuality" (p. 394). If we read Emma's stories as analogous to novels, then the "highly fanciful" story, the one concerned with the rich, represents the traditional Victorian novel, while the one which is full of "a touching actuality" concerning itself with the poor, stands for Gissing's work. The narrator created by Gissing appears, then, to be pointing out the difference between Gissing's work and the work of other Victorian novelists. The narrator elucidates:

The most elaborate of [Emma's] stories [...] was called 'Blanche and Janey.' It was a double biography. Blanche and Janey were born on the same day, they lived ten years, and then died on the same day. But Blanche was the child of wealthy parents; Janey was born in a garret. Their lives were recounted in parallel, almost year by year, and there was sadness in the contrast. (p. 395)

This is a story that denies the reader the comfort of the rags-to-riches paradigm.

It is interesting to note that Gissing respected Charlotte Brontë above all his novelistic predecessors, and it is probably therefore no coincidence that the young girls in Emma's story are named for the rich girl and the poor girl in *Jane Eyre*: Blanche and Jane. (Jane Eyre is a character that must have appealed to Gissing because while being powerless, voiceless and penniless, she is an intelligent, creative, educated person; she is, in fact, much like George Gissing himself.) Despite his respect for Brontë's writing, however, Gissing--through his surrogate storyteller, Emma--subverts her novel's ending. There is seeming justice in Brontë's disposal of *her* two women: she sends Blanche off in pursuit of a wealthier catch, duped by Rochester's rumor-mongering; to all intents and purposes she is a victim of her own greed and materialism. And Jane's "Reader, I married him" is Brontë's signal of *her* success. But Jane's final victory is won through inherited money, *not* all her hard work and spunk, the qualities modern-day readers admire in her. Jane Eyre succeeds in the rags-to-

riches plot. She comes back to Rochester because she has been remade into a middle-class, propertied woman and he has been reduced to a needy invalid; he has been chastened for his sins, and she has been rewarded for her suffering. But for Gissing (and therefore for his storyteller, Emma) Brontë's ending will never do, for this is not life as he experiences it.

[Emma's] story ended thus:

'Yes, they died on the same day, and they were buried on the same day. But not in the same cemetery, oh no! Blanche's grave is far away over there'—she pointed to the west—'among tombstones covered with flowers, and her father and mother go every Sunday to read her name, and think and talk of her. Janey was buried far away over yonder'—she pointed to the east—'but there is no stone on her grave, and no one knows the exact place where she lies, and no one, no one ever goes to think and talk of her.' (p. 395)

The implication here is that Heaven and Hell are irrelevant, and that the Christian story embodied in the rags-to-riches plot of those traditional novels has, in fact, more to do with middleclassness than with Christianity. In Emma's story, the quality of life after death depends on where the body is buried, not where the soul lives. Blanche, being rich, is buried in the west--which suggests the West End. For her, death seems almost as happy as life: her parents visit, they bring her flowers, she is the center of attention. The cemetery in which she is buried has "tombstones covered with flowers." The wealthy dead have their possessions, just like the wealthy living. Blanche's ending is a parody of the sentimentalized view of life proposed by traditional Victorian novels; it betrays the stolid, middle-class, materialistic world-view. In this scenario, it is not Jesus Christ, but wealth that overcomes even the pain of death.

Janey, by contrast, must be buried in the East, or the East End, that metonym of the London marginalized. Janey was poor and therefore unimportant alive; dead she is entirely forgotten. No one has even marked her grave. She is the heroine of the new realism, what Gissing called "our school of strict veracity" (*Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, p. 64), which he said was "to be judged by the standard of actual experience" (*Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens*, p. 51).

Gissing's narrator describes Emma's stories thus:

Unlike the novel which commends itself to the world's *grown* children, these narratives had by no means necessarily a happy ending [...] she believed that [the children] would grow up kinder and more self-reliant if they were in the habit of

thinking that we are ever dependent on each other for solace and strengthening under the burden of life. (p. 394, my emphasis)

In this passage, Gissing is mocking Victorian novels with happy endings and the childlike readers who crave them, calling them “the world’s grown children.” Like Gissing, Emma is a new kind of storyteller, and just as Emma wants the children to grow up without illusions, Gissing wants his readers to harbor no illusions either. Whereas Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, had shown at the end of *North and South* a utopic vision of class harmony, Gissing presents a blatantly unworkable solution to the problem of class, and it is this pessimism in him which separates him from Dickens, Gaskell and other earlier writers. Gissing cannot accept the myth of rags-to-riches plot served up in many Victorian novels, for paradoxically it supports the idea of a fixed, ‘natural’ social class system. And while he does not see social class as ‘natural,’ he *does* see it as an insolvable problem.

Gissing died at the age of 46 after having written twenty-two novels, not to mention many short stories, his books on Dickens, and other miscellaneous writings. Though he was pessimistic, his earnestness and hard work give the lie to the accusation by some critics that he was hopeless. Emma’s storytelling in *Demos* suggests where Gissing’s hope may lie. Commenting on Emma’s story of Blanche and Janey (the two girls--one rich, one poor--who were born and died on the same day), the narrator says: “The sweetness of the story lay in the fact that the children were both good, and both deserved to be happy; it never occurred to Emma to teach her hearers to hate little Blanche just because hers was the easier lot” (p. 395). Like Emma, Gissing does not teach hate, and like Emma, too, he *does* believe in the power of storytelling. Despite Gissing’s lack of hope for religious, political or philanthropic help for the poor, or other solutions to class problems, the very act of telling his stories, writing his novels, is an act of hope. It is a way to inform his reader, to educate his reader, just as Emma does. Like Emma, he believes, if nothing else, in the ideological work of narrative. And indeed Janey *is* remembered: in Emma’s storytelling, and in Gissing’s.

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Book Reviews

PIERRE COUSTILLAS

Chester W. Topp, *Victorian Yellowbacks & Paperbacks, 1849-1905*, Volume V: Macmillan & Co., Smith, Elder & Co., Denver, Colorado: Hermitage Antiquarian Bookshop, 2001.

This sizeable volume belongs to a category well known to book-lovers, that of books about books, a field in which the most active firm currently is probably the Oak Knoll Press, of New Castle, Delaware. It is the fifth of a series, all of them compiled and edited by Dr. Chester W. Topp, one of those book collectors among whom in recent decades Michael Sadleir and Robert Lee Wolff were perhaps the most distinguished. Gissing made a brief appearance in Volume I, where an entry was devoted to the extremely scarce sixpenny reprint of *The Unclassed* (Routledge, 1905), which very few librarians or collectors claim to have ever handled and, although the volume in which its existence was recorded looked superb, the Gissing entry betrayed but poor knowledge of the edition concerned. Now, with this Volume V available from the Hermitage Antiquarian Bookshop, Denver, Colorado, we have a better opportunity of assessing the compiler's knowledge and capacity. For indeed the House of Smith, Elder and Co. brought out a greater number of yellowback editions of Gissing's works than any other. We shall see in Volume VI whether Dr. Topp has revelations to make about the other yellowbacks and sixpenny reprints issued between 1896, with the two-shilling edition of *Born in Exile* in pictorial boards published by A. and C. Black, and 1913, the year when Constable launched a second paperbound impression of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* which proved to be the last Gissing volume issued at the incredibly low price of sixpence.

In the volume under review, the early history of five titles is discussed, and it may not be unfair to consider them representative of Dr. Topp's mammoth inquiry. As one leafs through the 340-page quarto some misprints of an all too common kind catch one's eye. For instance, the recurrence of "Dicken's" where "Dickens's" or "Dickens'"

is expected, will be a source of amusement or irritation to more than one reader, as will be the “reformed” spelling of Mrs. Humphry Ward’s name, even though in the modern books in which she appears and in the booksellers’ catalogues where her books are offered for sale, her name is frequently misspelt. The systematic occurrence of Gissing’s name in the form “George R. Gissing” is also slightly disturbing, as it might suggest that the bibliographer did not go further than the first edition of *Workers in the Dawn*, a book which actually does not fall within the scope of his enquiry. Similar unconventional identification seriously affects the names of several female novelists. Why should Mrs. Henry Wood be introduced to us as Ellen Wood, Mrs. Gaskell as Elizabeth C. Gaskell, Mrs. Hungerford as Margaret Argles? Kipling’s brother-in-law was known to his readers as Wolcott Balestier, not as Charles W. Balestier. Users of such a reference work, if in a hurry or ignorant of Mrs. Hungerford’s first marriage, might at first excusably consider that her books have been omitted since they are systematically given as by Margaret Argles. Similar eccentricities affect references to Victorian currency. “Six shillings” should have been abbreviated either as 6s. or 6/–, not as 6/0; “two shillings” as 2s. or 2/–, not as 2/0.

Dr. Topp should not have let himself be influenced by a notoriously faulty bibliography of Gissing’s works. His entries on *Demos*, *Thyrza*, *A Life’s Morning*, *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street* are riddled with errors and omissions. Contrary to what he writes no edition of *Thyrza*, *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street* was ever published at 3s.6d, but there was one, which he overlooks, of *Demos* in 1888, with the author’s name on the title page (a cancel), that consisted of sheets of the anonymously published 1886 one-volume edition, and, incidentally, it was not issued in brown, but in red, cloth. (It was a copy of this very 3/6 *Demos* that Gissing said he saw at the Station in Oxford on 12 June 1888.) One wonders why the half-crown editions in red cloth published before 1905 are recorded for *Demos*, but not always for the other books. The revision of *Thyrza* must have been confused with that of *The Unclassed*; it was the latter novel, not the former, which was “greatly shortened.”

On the jacket of his book Dr. Topp is said to have collected 1,700 yellowbacks and 1,900 nineteenth-century paperbacks in thirty years, a feat which invites comparison with those of his best known predecessors. Yet he should not have let his publishers imprudently declare that his work is definitive, for the simple reason, which booksellers and collectors will gradually discover, that it is not and could hardly be.

A number of corrections could be made. His use of the phrase “the author’s copy” applied to some of Gissing’s first editions is--to put it tactfully--misleading. Also, is it methodologically acceptable to list inexpensive cloth editions instead of yellowbacks when no copies of the latter are available? More importantly, would it not have been more profitable for all users of the volume to have descriptions of the bindings of the books listed than multiple references to dates of publication in various trade and/or literary weeklies which inevitably repeated one another for the same edition (see the case of the first edition of *Demos* in three volumes as announced in the *Athenæum* and the *Spectator*)? Only the illustrations can be praised unreservedly. There are thirty-two of them, all of excellent quality and much more faithful to “the real thing,” be it said in passing, than those in the Quaritch catalogue of the Gissing material in the Pforzheimer Library before it was acquired by the Lilly Library. The photograph of the front cover designed by Edmund Evans for *A Life’s Morning* (1889, 1890 and probably 1892) could hardly have been improved. Gissing made no comment on this particular cover, but we know what he thought of the front cover of the yellowback *Demos*. However, time has mended matters a little: present-day collectors of yellowbacks and sixpenny reprints (not favourites of Dr. Topp these!) are not primarily concerned with their aesthetic aspect. After buying a yellowback, whether yellow, pink (like that of Trollope’s *Warden*) or green (like that of the 1896 *Born in Exile*), the purchaser always feels happy because luck has assisted him in a way that no knowledgeable outsider is likely to deny.

David C. Smith, ed., *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, four volumes, 1880-1946, London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998.

This four-volume *Correspondence of H. G. Wells* could have been a great scholarly achievement, but it is a disappointment in many respects. Considering that, when the set came out three years ago, it was lavishly praised in several journals, one can only suppose that early reviewers were impressed by the bulk of the material that all of a sudden was made available, and that they did not pay much attention to the critical apparatus, that is to the efforts, successful or otherwise, of David Smith to solve innumerable editorial problems, foremost among which were the reliability of transcriptions, the capacity to clear up allusions, personal and historical, which the passing of time has made more obscure than they probably were to the recipients of

this prolific correspondence. A list of all the factual errors, mistranscriptions, misdatings, failures to elucidate satisfactorily references to people's activities and to articles published in newspapers and periodicals, would be so long as to fill a volume. One repeatedly feels that David Smith was intellectually paralysed by the distance between the University of Maine and London with its Newspaper Library, Family Records Centre, and Public Record Office, unless he chose not to acquaint himself with the techniques of research that no editor of literary or historical correspondence can afford to ignore. Of his many predecessors' work, whether that of commentators on Wells's life and achievements or of scholars who have studied the contributions to culture of Wells's contemporaries, English and foreign, his knowledge is pitifully deficient. Where he deplures obscurities, fellow scholars and knowledgeable readers will more than once see well established facts and notions or at least be prepared to point to avenues of research which could hardly fail to produce results. Examples of careless thinking or flagrant disregard of facts are too many not to throw discredit on those parts of the editorial apparatus which at first sight strike one as sound.

As far as the relationships between H. G. Wells himself and Gissing and his circle are concerned the only positive aspect of the four volumes (for indeed we still find Gissing mentioned in a letter of 23 August 1940, p. 272 of Vol. IV) is the publication of a number of letters partly or entirely devoted to Gissing's posthumous affairs and addressed to such friends or acquaintances of both men as Edward Clodd, Morley Roberts, Frederic Harrison and Edmund Gosse. Although these letters are few in number, they very nicely complement the hundreds of others available elsewhere, neither from nor to Wells, that concern the immediate consequences of Gissing's death as well as the relationships between executors, publishers, family and friends. One of them shows Wells writing to George Wyndham, the former Irish Secretary, as a true, disinterested friend of Gissing, doing his best to secure a small pension for Walter and Alfred after their father's death. There is also an amusingly scorching letter of early February 1904 from Morley Roberts to Wells about *Rachel Marr*, which begins "My Dear Prophet of Sandgate, Many thanks for your highly illegible letter, so full of genial insults. The symbolism of R. M. is altogether beyond you as I feared it would be." Other letters exchanged by the two writers show that they were already at it tarnishing Gissing's memory. From another yet, addressed to Gosse, in which "Rivers" (i.e. Wells in *Henry Maitland*) is misread by the editor as "Pensus," we learn

(*mirabile dictu*) that there is “a very good book on Gissing by *Frank Swinnerton*, who is by way of being an authority on G. G.”! David Smith, who ignored disinterested suggestions from at least two scholars, painfully gropes for the truth when it comes to presenting the main figures of Gissing’s circle, and he blunders his way through the difficulty-ridden terrain.

Fantastic comments occur in footnotes. For instance, in his rejected preface to *Veranilda*, Smith writes, “Wells referred to Gissing’s rather raffish life, living with prostitutes. His legal wife objected to a discussion of Gissing in anything but glowing terms.” Earlier on, a note to a letter from Wells to Gosse of 3 December 1903 about Algernon Gissing’s chronic financial stress reads as though George were dead: “The issue,” he carelessly writes, “is the creation of a pension for Gissing’s children from the Royal Literary fund.” A little later a note to a letter to W. Baxter explains that Wells left Ispoure before his friend’s death “because he had been misinformed about the real state of his health.” When in a letter to Clodd dated 30 March 1904 about the pensions of £37 that have been granted to each of Gissing’s two sons Wells informs Clodd that Gabrielle Fleury had better stay in France and not “ventilate her romantic affair & generally stir up [...] curiosity about Gissing,” the editor’s ignorance reaches a paroxysm: “Gabrielle Fleury was Gissing’s common-law wife,” he explains, “but Collet had similar claims on him. Gissing’s marital situation was never a routine matter.” Smith’s sense of chronology (*Our Friend the Charlatan*, according to him, was published in 1902) is as shaky as his reading of surnames. In a letter to Constable and Co., that is to Otto Kyllmann (spelt Kyllman), Frederic Harrison becomes Frederick Harrisson and he is described elsewhere as a man who had known Gissing as a boy. Eliza Orme is metamorphosed into Miss Come on pp. 36 and 38 of Volume II. Clara Collet is editorially allowed to double her final t in 1915, but fortunately her orthographic integrity is restored in 1926. In a letter tentatively dated “c. 5 Nov 1912” (the original is in the Berg Collection, not in the University of Illinois) from Wells to Roberts which reflects their conflicting estimates of Gabrielle Fleury, we read that she “wrote her letters on thin paper & cursed them,” while the original and Wells’s autobiography show that Wells wrote “& crossed them.” Nor does the comment in Roberts’s hand after Wells’s signature make better sense: “I never meant him to see Maitland [*illegible word*] has bitter page.”

As far as Gissing is concerned, the editor’s mind is most of the time in a state of confusion which will surely affect the writings of other

Wellsians when they venture on ground which half pertains to Gissing and his circle. One particular undated letter to Gosse is printed twice and assigned in brackets first to Summer 1915, then to Summer 1926; the first version is said to be transcribed from an original in the Brotherton Library, the second from another original in the Harry Ransom Research Center at Austin, Texas. But there can only be one original. The discrepancies between the two versions are disturbing: “Collett/Collet; Gissing’s literary executor/G.’s literary executor; executor & who was/executor, was; thought the prospects of the book [*illegible word*] by the withdrawal/...of the book injured by the withdrawal; she went/wrote to various people in order to prevent a person of my notorious depravity being trustee for the civil list pension/in order [to prevent] a person of my notorious decadence [?] of being a trustee for the Civil List pension.” On reaching the last sentence--“We have never had a line from the sons who are now both of age & in the army”--we are at least sure that if Wells was reliably informed about the sad fate of Walter Gissing, who was killed on 1 July 1916, the letter cannot be assigned to 1926. Also Walter and Alfred cannot be said to have been of age and in the army at the time this letter was written, since Walter perished in the battle of the Somme before his brother, who was then in India, reached his majority.

Throughout the four volumes annotation is deficient. Wells’s least known correspondents are very poorly identified, if at all. Henry Hick, who was for some years Wells’s doctor, remains a shadowy figure that never seems to have been born or to have died. The case of Ella Hepworth Dixon is only partly better: she did die in 1932, but the editor could find no trace of her birth--in 1855. The case of Desmond MacCarthy, a major literary critic of the 1920s and 1930s, is even more difficult to account for as there is an entry about him in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. References to articles and book reviews are often left undocumented. For instance, when in October 1915 Wells thanks Holbrook Jackson for his review of *The Research Magnificent* in *TP.’s Weekly* and complains about Robert Lynd’s comments on the book in the *Daily News*, the reader is offered space-filling vapidities (“*T.P.* was *TP.’s Weekly*, and Lynd wrote reviews primarily for the *Daily News*”). Some notes read like feeble jokes. Apropos of a letter to the editor of the *Daily Herald*, dated 12 January 1938, David Smith comments: “Whether this was printed is not yet known.” Who is likely to be amused? The private purchaser who paid £275 for the set? Or the publishers who had the book printed before the huge typescript was entrusted to a competent copy editor?

One more variation on the by now familiar theme of doubtful editorial capacity. Letter 906 (Vol. II, pp. 316-17) is printed from an undated typed transcription of an angry note to Martin Secker about Wells's article, originally published in *Rhythm* for December 1912, on Morley Roberts's *roman a clef*, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, which was reprinted in the *New York Times*. The editor, making an effort to enlighten his readers, comments: "The original transcriber dated this letter in 1913, but that cannot be correct. I have been unable to trace an American printing of this article," whereupon he gives a supplied date in brackets, February 1912, forgetting that Roberts's book was published in early November of that year. The facts are as follows. Wells's article was given a second lease of life under the title "The Truth about Gissing" in the *New York Times Review of Books* for 12 January 1913, p. 9.

One last thing. We have heard that enough material is now available for a fifth volume and that Pickering & Chatto, disappointed by the sales of the expensive set, refuse to publish it. Let us hope that, if this worthy prospect materializes, Volume V will not add to the disgrace incurred by its predecessors.

Arlene Young, *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1999.

Purchasing a copy of this book during the last two years proved a trying experience. There are scholarly studies--Arlene Young's is one of them--, usually volumes, which, being commercially speaking more successful than the average, won't let themselves be caught. Prospective buyers come to wonder whether some publishers are really willing to sell their wares. Perhaps the metamorphosis of Macmillan into Palgrave accounts for difficulties: "Out of stock," "out of print," "to be reprinted later this year," "will be available in March." In the present case March came, then April and May, and eventually the volume arrived in June--unjacketed--in its third impression! The book deserves this success.

Arlene Young's detailed exploration is an intellectually distinguished analysis of a field which has often been trodden since the 1970s, as is testified by the eight-page bibliography that concludes it. It belongs to a genre with which we became familiar when the end of the twentieth century was still far ahead--women studies they are called, and they dealt with the changing status and aspirations of women, with

education and marriage, with public and private opinions about sexuality. A quick look at indices in those books which thrashed out feminist problems in the Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian periods helps one to relive what preoccupied and sometimes obsessed the female members of English departments in Anglo-American universities. Take a book like Patricia Stubbs's *Women and Fiction*, first published by the Harvester Press in 1979 and reissued by Methuen in 1981. The index invites you under Feminism to explore feminism and contraception, feminism and the family, feminism and imperialism, feminism and liberalism, feminism and the novel, etc. The index of Arlene Young's book will similarly help readers to investigate promising themes in connection with this or that author: class boundaries and stereotypes, class, speech and dress, code of honour, dandyism, domesticity, gentleman, governess, etc. Arlene Young's engaging book is full of bridges between authors and between themes. It is a constant temptation for the reader to link, say, Thackeray with Gissing and H. G. Wells, or to place Gissing between Amy Levy and May Sinclair--a biographically justified connection since he read *Reuben Sachs* in 1892 and *Audrey Craven* in 1897. Doubtless the subject will have to be investigated more systematically in a way inspired by Christina Sjöholm's study of the influence of Fredrika Bremer's novel *Hertha* on *The Odd Women*.

The passages on Gissing in Arlene Young's book are mainly concerned with this novel and can consequently be seen as a complement to the interpretation she gave in her edition of it (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1998). In the present study the discussion of Rhoda Nunn's ideals and activities come in the wake of Grant Allen's sharply contrasted stories *The Woman Who Did* (1895) and *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897), though Gissing's novel came first chronologically. "It is only with the appearance of Rhoda Nunn," Arlene Young thinks, "that a woman in fiction finally triumphs over the conventions and is able to opt for a career rather than for marriage to a handsome and eligible man. And in the end it is [...] lower-middle-class employment that sets this woman free." Her motivations and artistic originality are finely analyzed. We fully agree that it is partly through the characterization of Monica that the significance of Rhoda's character and actions is made clear. It would be rewarding to discuss the novel in the light of the double theme of freedom and bondage--freedom to think and to act, bondage to social and spiritual conventions as well as to legal partner and family. Arlene Young, whether consciously or not, since she does not mention him, repeats Orwell's approach to Gissing's

work when she observes that “one of the hallmarks of his fiction is the subtlety with which he delineates the hierarchies within [...] marginal classes, and in *The Odd Women* his sensitivity to nuances of status is especially acute.” Behind it all lies the importance of money and its power which, incidentally, is unacknowledged in the aptly compiled index. As is so often the case with Gissing, it is appropriate here to remember the quotation from Samuel Johnson relished by Henry Ryecroft: “Sir,” Boswell reported, “all the arguments which are brought to represent poverty as no evil, show it to be evidently a great evil. You never find people labouring to convince you that you may live very happily upon a plentiful fortune.”

When a new edition of this book is called for--it had better be a moderately priced paperback--some corrections would be welcome. For instance, we do not think that Gissing ever wrote a novel entitled *In the Year of the Jubilee*. The mistake, in the last fifty or sixty years, has become so common as to mislead newcomers to Gissing's work. Other slips will be found on pp. 155 (Brissendon for Brissenden), 213 (*Tinsley's Magazine* for *Tinsleys' Magazine*) and 226 (Peyrouten for Peyrouton). More puzzling is the statement that J. M. Barrie, who was indeed an “odd man” in a certain sense of the epithet, remained single. Reference works tell us that he married the actress Mary Ansell in 1894 and that they divorced in 1909. Gissing visited them on 4 January 1897 and recorded his impressions in his diary.

Notes and News

Some time ago we mentioned articles in which Mrs. Alfred Yule's brand of English were briefly discussed from a linguistic point of view. Jacob Korg has come across another reference to the same subject in *The Dialect of Modernism* by Michael North (Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 19): “The conflict between dialect, idiolect, and the standard language began to appear as a plot element in literature of the [late Victorian] period, but not all writers agreed with Mr. Alfred Yule of Gissing's *New Grub Street*, who was given such exquisite pain by his wife's uneducated speech he never invited guests to his home. Bidialectal shifters such as poor Mrs. Yule, who live in two distinct speech communities, begin to appear in sympathetic light and then in a favorable one, a process that can be traced from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.”

News continues to flood in from Italy, largely thanks to the watchfulness of Mario Curreli, Teresa Liguori and Francesco Badolato. A *Bibliography of Anglo-Italian Studies*, edited by Peter Vassallo and Franco Lanza, covering British Literature and Culture from 1800 to 1990, has just been published by the Institute of Anglo-Italian Studies, University of Malta, but the only Gissing reference listed in it has been known for years. Far more rewarding is the beautiful album issued by Federico Motta Editore of Milan, *Old Calabria: I luoghi del Grand Tour* (see under "Recent Publications"), with editorial material by Mirella Stampa Barracco of the Fondazione Napoli Novantanove, and Giuseppe Merlino of the University of Naples, who both spoke highly of the cultural interest of Calabria at the Paris Italian Institute last November. New views of the Sila, Cosenza, Sybaris and Capo Colonna are found in it side by side with photographs of interiors of noble residences and cathedrals. Professor Liguori and her colleagues of the Istituto tecnico nautico statale "Mario Ciliberto" are again making valuable efforts this year to develop interest in English travellers and their connection with Calabria, and more particularly Crotona, of which Gissing had so much to say. A collection of historical and literary documents in English and Italian has been made available to the group of students concerned. The front cover features Queen Victoria in her Coronation robes on the left and a view of Crotona on the right, with the fourteen students photographed below the castle, in the street, and the Ionian Sea in the distance. The linguistic, historical and literary project concerns Dickens, Gissing and Norman Douglas as seen essentially through *Oliver Twist*, Gissing's writings on Dickens and *By the Ionian Sea* as well as *Old Calabria*. Among the contents, as far as Gissing is concerned, are two portraits of him by Russell and Sons in 1895, the cover of the Marlboro Press edition of *By the Ionian Sea*, the article on Gissing by Signora Liguori which appeared in *Noi Magazine* on 2 March 2000, an appreciation of Gissing and Dr. Sculco, chapters VII to X of *By the Ionian Sea*, with sketches of peasant women reproduced from the early English editions of the book, and the well-known article by Mario Praz ("Gita alla colonna," *Il tempo*, 19 July 1958, p. 3). Since this collection of documents was produced, Signora Liguori's students have published an article which concludes their study of the three British authors, "La scuola e chiusa per ferie," *La Provincia KR*, no. 24, 16 June 2001, p. 13. Signora Liguori has again been in touch with regional and local authorities about the creation of a *parco letterario Gissing-Sculco* in Crotona. We wish her good luck. Francesco Badolato, who is also fostering interest in Gissing in the

deep Italian South, reports for his part that he was pleasantly surprised, as he was watching a television quiz called “Passaparola,” to hear this question: “Chi è George che scrisse *Donne scompagnate*?”, that is *The Odd Women*. This is all the more surprising as, to the best of our knowledge, no translation of the novel has appeared under this title in Italy. True, the title was used by Dr. Badolato himself in an article about Michael Meyer’s dramatization of Gissing’s novel, but things stopped at that. Besides, other possible Italian renderings of this title, particularly difficult to turn into foreign languages, have been suggested in print.

Last January we gave appreciative details about the Greek translation of *Sleeping Fires* by Maria Dimitriadou-Karasimopoulou, and we have now received a long account of the impressive presentation of her book in the municipal hall at Cholargos, the town where she lives just outside Athens. The ceremony, for such a word must be used, took place in the Mikis Theodorakis amphitheatre on 2 May, at 8 p. m., and it was a great success. The Mayor of Cholargos, Mr. Karalabos Skourtis, his wife, and a number of municipal councillors attended among an audience of two hundred and fifty professors, teachers, artists, former students and old schoolmates of the translator. Mr. Konstantinos Evangelidis, of the English Department of the University of Athens, came with his students, and after Mrs. Dimitriadou had welcomed the audience and a journalist friend of hers had introduced the speakers, Mr. Evangelidis spoke of Gissing and of the significance of the novel. Mr. Vasilis Gourogianis, a prominent novelist, placed Gissing among foreign visitors to Greece, who were inspired by the classical world--writers whom he defined in a historical, social and political context. Mrs. Viki Zagavierou, another writer and friend of the translator, focused her attention on Gissing’s descriptive power and rendering of the Athenian setting as well as on the dimension assumed by the classical background in the novel. Lastly, Mrs. Chrisoula Chatzigianou, a distinguished poet and writer of children’s books, discussed the difficulties inherent in the art of translation, particularly in the case of Greek, a language so different from English. She also praised Mrs. Dimitriadou’s illustrations, which were projected on a screen. The presentation of the book, some sixty copies of which the translator was requested to sign, was accompanied by an exhibition of paintings. There have been several reviews of the volume in periodicals, notably one in *Agia Paraskevi* for May 2001, p. 5, another in *30 Meres* [that is, 30 Days], also for May 2001, p. 7. The

acknowledgment of his capacities as a Greek scholar would have been sweet to Gissing, whose “constant aim” had been “to remove the distance which seems to separate Hellas from Lambeth.” The atmosphere of the gathering was one of keen intellectual and aesthetic enjoyment. Mrs. Dimitriadou, who proved an excellent organizer, at once disinterested and dynamic, has done his memory an outstanding service.

An American correspondent has drawn our attention to a derogatory mention of Gissing’s work in *The Letters of James Branch Cabell*, edited by Edward Wagenknecht (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975, p. 79). It occurs in a letter to Burton Rascoe dated 25 August 1918: “I [...] have managed some reading this summer [...] First in personal interest was *Some Modern Novelists*, which I took very leisurely and with honest enjoyment. I resented from my first glimpse of the Contents--and still resent--that Phillipotts and Gissing should be in the book at all: even the Folletts seem annoyed by the fact, which is thus rendered doubly incomprehensible.” Cabell’s dislike of Gissing is undocumented, but the less than tepid estimate by Helen Thomas Follett and Wilson Follett in their book *Some Modern Novelists: Appreciations and Estimates* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1918), pp. 50-71, can be read in secondhand copies. Most of the twenty-two page chapter smacks of intellectual snobbery and is marred by factual errors. Only *The Whirlpool* can the Folletts vaguely understand. They are blind to the originality and power of their subject. It is piquant to realize that Wagenknecht, the editor of Cabell’s letters, should have done his best to rehabilitate Gissing in his *Cavalcade of the English Novel* (New York: Holt, 1943), of which, it would seem, he sent a copy to Cabell so that they might measure the extent of their disagreement. The following are a couple of paragraphs offered as a sample of the way in which he wrote about “Gissing, a scholar in Grub Street,” at a time--that of World War II--when interest in him was at its lowest:

It is ironical that many readers should know George Gissing only by the bookish pages of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903). But it was far more ironical that a man who wanted to spend all his life in scholarly retirement should have become the special historian of “new Grub Street” and “the Nether World.” Gissing’s heart was never with the slum-dwellers who people his pages; in a way he did not even sympathize with them; he kept his sympathy for superior persons like himself who were compelled for lack of means to dwell among them. Gissing was a classical scholar, and he used his scholarship as a refuge from life.

His posthumous *Veranilda* (1904), that elaborate reconstruction of Roman life in the days of Justinian, was far more characteristic of the man as he knew himself than any of the volumes which now seem to constitute his primary contribution to fiction.

Gissing had no faith in the ability of the proletariat to improve their lives, and the thought that they might some day attempt to control the lives of others only filled him with fear and horror. He knew the times were bad, but there was nothing he could do to make them better; as early as 1883 he commits himself to the thesis that the artist's job is simply to study and reproduce in art the "collection of phenomena" which is the world.

It may be asked why such a man felt constrained to occupy himself with the particular phenomena which concern the life of the slums. In Gissing's case there were a number of reasons. From his childhood he admired Hogarth and Dickens passionately, and both Hogarth and Dickens had been much concerned with these things. "Paint a faithful picture of this crowd we have watched," says Tollady, of *Workers in the Dawn*, "be a successor of Hogarth, and give us the true image of our social dress, as he did of those of his own day."

Wagenknecht concluded that Gissing "is not a dull writer. It is impossible not to be interested in his characters; it is impossible not to respect his own integrity and independence. His novels made little popular success when they were published, yet they have stubbornly refused to lose themselves in the shuffle-dance of time. On the contrary, they seem to be gaining in prestige."

That the few pages devoted to Gissing are almost entirely free of factual errors was probably due to Wagenknecht's consultations with Robert Shafer, the most perceptive and knowledgeable Gissing scholar in America at mid-century.

Recent Publications

Articles, reviews, etc.

Arlene Young, *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1999 (third edition 2001). Contains a substantial discussion of *The Odd Women*, but also passages on *Will Warburton*, *Born in Exile*, and *In the Year of Jubilee* and other Gissing novels. See the review in the present number.

Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. A significant figure in the early twentieth-century novel, May Sinclair was an admirer of Gissing's works and she sent him a copy of her first novel, *Audrey Craven*, on which he commented in a letter to her dated 23 July 1897. Miss Sinclair also corresponded with Morley Roberts. On 15 May 1906, in a letter quoted by Suzanne Raitt, she told him: "I 'discovered' Gissing for myself. I had never, in my ignorance, heard his name when the title of *New Grub Street* attracted me to that book, the first of his I have ever read." May Sinclair especially liked *Born in Exile*, about which she wrote to Roberts: "I cannot describe how it gripped & moved me--with an agony of compassion." Suzanne Raitt mentions other Gissing novels, but where she found that *The Unclassed* was published in 1899 will remain one of those mysteries that are not worth clearing up.

Graeme Johanson, *Colonial Editions in Australia 1843-1972*, Wellington, N. Z.: Elibank Press, 2000. Contains some useful information on Gissing's Colonial publishers.

John Francis Lane, "Antichi e moderni viaggiatori raccontano la Calabria: Dalla terra dei Mormoni a quella dolce di Gissing," *Il Quotidiano* (Catanzaro), 11 February 2001, p.39. A review of John Keahey's *A Sweet and Glorious Land* and of Mimmo Jodice's *Old Calabria: I luoghi del Grand Tour* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore, 2000).

Teresa Liguori, "Sezioni/Calabria Ionica: problema collegamenti," *Il bollettino di Italia Nostra*, January-February 2001, no. 372, p. 33. Letter to the editor quoting Gissing on Calabrian railways. Another letter from Signora Liguori on the same subject and quoting from *By the Ionian Sea* appeared under the title "La Calabria ionica e i trasporti" in *Famiglia cristiana*, 13 May 2001, p. 184.

Andrea Sciffo, "Viaggi mediterranei," *Studi cattolici* (Milano), February 2001, no. 480, p. 149. Review of *La terra del sole*.

Anon., "Poet's colourful life and work is celebrated," *Wakefield Express*, 4 May 2001, p. 5. Exhibition about the life and works of Richard Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton) in the Gissing Centre.

Walter Boggione, "...i fotografi scandalistici sono detti paparazzi," *Specchio* (Turin weekly), 2 June 2001, p. 79. On the origin of the latter-day sense of *paparazzo/i*.

Mario Curreli, "Pound, Conrad, Gissing nelle traduzioni di Margherita Guidacci," in *Per Margherita Guidacci: Atti delle Giornate di Studio, Lyceum Club, Firenze, 15-16 Ottobre 1999*, a cura di Margherita Ghilardi, Florence: Le Lettere, 2001, pp. 215-26.

Jane Rogers (ed.), *Good Fiction Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2001. The short Gissing entry, pp. 268-69, merely presents *Workers in the Dawn*, *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*.

Pierre Coustillas (editor and translator), *Gaspar Ruiz: A Romantic Tale*, by Joseph Conrad (Paris: Gallimard, Folio Bilingue, 2001). Gissing's praise of Conrad's work is quoted in the Preface.

Chester W. Topp, *Victorian Yellowbacks and Paperbacks, 1849-1905*, Volume V: Macmillan & Co., Smith, Elder & Co., Denver, Colorado: Hermitage Antiquarian Bookshop, 2001. See the review in the present number.

Tailpiece: A Bargain

On 28 February 1969 a Gissing collector of our acquaintance received from the College Gateway Bookshop, 3-5 Silent Street, Ipswich, Suffolk a quotation for three sixpenny reprints of *New Grub Street* (Newnes, [1901]), *The Unclassed* (Routledge, 1905), and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Constable [1908 or 1913]), all in original wrappers. This little collection, it was said, formerly belonged to an ardent admirer of Gissing's work—Walter F. Cadby of Cadby Hall [in the 1960s the Head Office of Messrs. J. Lyons & Co.]. The title page of *New Grub Street* is covered with Cadby's enthusiastic comments, e.g. "George Gissing, I hail thee! May you come into your own before many years, and be placed with Fielding, Scott and Thackeray. Your admirer and sympathetic friend, Walter Cadby, March 3rd. 1913." The three volumes were offered for £5!