

THE GISSING NEWSLETTER

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

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*Sleeping Fires* as a Thematic Ramble  
through Gissing’s Devices and Patterns

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In his introduction to *Sleeping Fires* (recently published by the Harvester Press) Professor Coustillas observes that the book “deserves attention on more counts than one,” and that “the novel derives its interest from the special place it occupies in Gissing’s rich thematic pattern.” Both statements contradict the persistent belief that this neglected short novel is almost alien to the author’s production and of little value. The book, in fact, suffers from the same kind of prejudices as *Eve’s Ransom* owing to its size, rapidity of execution, and to Gissing’s habit of disparaging his own work. Yet the reviews of the first edition (to be found in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*) were far from unfavourable, but quite typically they concentrated on what is new in the book and

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reviewers were inclined to sever it from the author’s previous production. There is no denying the conciseness of the novel nor its unusual turn, particularly at the end. But the whole arrangement is worked out from a fundamental pattern of themes and situations essential to Gissing’s fictional universe. My aim then is to point out those elements and, by relating them to other works, to show how deeply *Sleeping Fires* is inscribed in Gissing’s world. At the same time this exploration will

bring out more clearly those differences in orientation or treatment which mark the originality of the novel.

Reading *Sleeping Fires* is, to some extent, like revisiting the worlds of *Isabel Clarendon* and *The Emancipated* with echoes from *Workers in the Dawn*. *Sleeping Fires* and *The Emancipated* draw on Gissing's travels in Greece and Italy. Both novels have a double setting which corresponds to a division in plot: abroad for the first part, England for the second. In both cases the Southern surroundings are connected with a flight from reality, conventions and the character's past, all elements which the return to England brings back into the foreground. Each time the exploration of the foreign country is achieved from a cultural point of view, with a desire on the heroes' part (Langley as well as Mallard) to live in a small guest-house, away from more conventional tourists, thus carrying out to the extreme the eternal desire of Gissing's characters to live on the fringe of society. Edmund Langley, like Mallard, is a Reardon or a Julian Casti to whom circumstances have been more propitious and whom nature has endowed with a stronger backbone and greater balance. They represent the gradual metamorphosis from the low-born hero, standing out as a frustrated or broken down figure in the novels of youth and maturity, to the better-equipped, more mature and peaceful creations of middle-class or aristocratic origin that eventually lead to the atmosphere of Ryecroft. In that respect Langley is perhaps closer to Mr. Spence in *The Emancipated* than to

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Mallard himself. Despite the change in social status there remains the constant interest in culture without which Gissing's characters would not be what they are and which makes them look at the world through the glasses of culture. In the first part of *Sleeping Fires* Langley sees Greece with the eyes of the scholar; in the second part, some sort of scholarly interest in the past is preserved through the associations with Lady Revill's country seat. Buried in a secluded part of England, Fallowfield conjures up the image of Knightswell and links the novel with the theme of hopeless love for a lady amid beautiful surroundings such as it appears in *Isabel Clarendon*. Both dwellings function as symbols of the lady's social status and aloofness. The link with the past establishes her nobility more securely. The place is at once the source and scene of a pattern of behaviour that is strongly reminiscent of mediaeval romances, there is something of a "précieux" in Gissing as far as matters of love are concerned. Langley's passion might well have remained as unfulfilled as Kingcote's had not Gissing endowed him with more will and energy to prevail upon the beloved to consent. The likeness between the two novels is further strengthened by the presence of a rival who is supposed to marry the heroine: Lord Henry Strands is a duplicate of Robert Asquith. Moreover, the heroines have been conveniently widowed so as to make flirting and courting easier. At the same time nature plays its part as ever in the fulfilment of love. In like manner, the crucial love scene between Hubert Eldon and Adela Waltham (*Demos*) and between Nancy Lord and Lionel Tarrant (*In the Year of Jubilee*) takes place out in the country, and so does the last scene of *The Crown of Life*.

Lady Revill seems as remote to Langley as the lady of Knightswell to Kingcote, but the social distance between the two characters has simply been superseded by moral considerations. As a matter of fact the theme of love frustrated by moral considerations can be traced back to *Workers in the Dawn*: Arthur Golding cannot go on seeing Helen Norman because of his previous commitment

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to Carrie Mitchell. Love for or marriage to a pure, refined girl or lady is prevented by a previous affair with, an engagement or promise, however vague, to a more sensuous or possessive creature

who often appears as a blight. Julian Casti endures his marriage to Harriet Smales like a disease that prevents him from declaring his love to Ida Starr (*The Unclassed*). Hubert Eldon's claims to Adela Waltham are discarded because of his affair with an actress (*Demos*); in *The Odd Women* Barfoot's image is temporarily shattered in Rhoda Nunn's eyes by an adventure strangely similar to Langley's (a short-lived liaison with a lower-class girl resulting in the birth of an illegitimate child). Similarly Kirkwood, in *The Nether World* must relinquish Jane for Clara Hewett. In all those cases, love is either forbidden or protracted until a further stage of realization, affording meanwhile an estrangement akin to purgatory, generally accompanied by a piling up of responsibilities on the female character. This often takes the shape of a lack of confidence in the hero coupled with a strong adherence to conventions and narrowness of mind, all defects which the characters have time to correct in the course of their lonely crossing of the desert. As far as conversion to new patterns of thought is concerned, Lady Revill is more like Miriam Baske than Isabel Clarendon. Langley, like Mallard, manages to bring the heroine to share his view of life.

The character of Worboys, too, is strongly reminiscent of *Isabel Clarendon*, and his archaeological passion reminds us of Mr. Vissian, the book-ridden parson. In both novels friendship originates in culture, only that between Worboys and Langley is older, as often with Gissing's characters it dates back to college days (Arthur Golding senior and Mr. Norman, Kingcote and Gabriel, Peak and Earwaker). There is the same distance between Kingcote and Mr. Vissian as between Langley and Worboys. The younger character is more leisurely in his appreciation of art

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and culture, he has assumed something of the detachment already advocated by Wilfred Athel in *A Life's Morning*. But if Kingcote's detachment results in a feeling of helplessness and frustration, Langley's enables him to enjoy life more freely, perhaps a little like Everard Barfoot in *The Odd Women*. Here we touch on the main element which has brought so many reviewers and particularly Wells to think that Gissing was taking a new direction. It is true that in several respects the book is an ode to a measured enjoyment of Life and Love, thus heralding *The Crown of Life*. On the other hand, the subdued tones in which Langley expresses his love – “No castles in the air; no idealisms of boy and girl; but two lives that have a want, and see but one hope of satisfying it” (p. 218) – are strongly reminiscent of Mallard's reasonable affection for Miriam Baske, something less than passion, but more enduring because it partakes of the philosophy of compromise already advocated by Biffen. Coming to terms with life does not go without a certain neglect of culture which may well surprise in Gissing. It is conveyed in a symbolical manner through the absence of books about Langley in the last chapter. Besides, his letter to Lady Revill leaves no doubt as to the meaning of his departure: “I was glad to know that I had to travel to find you – in the world of realities. As Louis said, this Greece is mere fairyland; to us of the north, an escape for rest amid scenes we hardly believe to be real.” (p. 229)

This dilemma between culture and life, asceticism and enjoyment, is traceable, at least in a clearly expressed form, to Wilfrid Athel. In *A Life's Morning*, the hero confides to Emily his fear that life and its more worldly joys will slip by while he remains burrowed in books. In spite of his passion for culture, Gissing was not entirely blind to the dangers and limitations of a life solely guided by bookish interest or learning, but he perhaps came to a greater awareness of it as his own expectation of life was shortening. At least we can notice that, strangely enough, starting with *The Odd Women*, we have a group of four novels, including *Sleeping Fires*, in which heroes or heroines

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lay particular stress on the enjoyment of life, and this is especially clear in Everard Barfoot (*The Odd Women*). The same anxieties appear with new strength in *The Crown of Life*. Culture had too strong a grip on Gissing's whole being to have ever been entirely forsaken, but on the whole in those novels its expression is more subdued. That concern has in fact always been more or less present in Gissing's characters and is connected with the problem of time, which generally consists in the contrast between past and present, here embodied in the characters of Worboys and Langley. In reviving the old form already explored with Mr. Vissian, Gissing projects in a semi-caricatural shape the fears with which too great and exclusive a devotion to culture inspires him. (Think of the contrast between Jessica Morgan and Nancy Lord in *In the Year of Jubilee*.) This does not of course mean that Gissing was personally capable of self-restraint in this respect, particularly if we keep in mind the reports of his friends presenting him as an undefatigable toiler to the end.

To return to the theme of time, the contrast between past and present is materialized more forcibly in Worboys and Louis Reed, Langley's son. Langley's conversion to a quiet and measured enjoyment of life is partly influenced by the contacts he has with his son. It also illustrates another of Gissing's favourite themes: change and the transformation of character, the process of psychological maturing. For both Langley and Lady Revill the change is highly significant: he becomes more virile, realistic and determined to enjoy what remains of life, while she loses her prejudices and pride. The sense of time is so convincing in Gissing's work partly because he is so good at conveying change and the passage from one state to another. A study could be made of the recurrence of the word "change" in connection with his characters. They lend themselves particularly well to such a study because of their changeable and impulsive natures, but even so

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Gissing has a gift for catching the fluidity of human nature or the change of outlook either in men or women. In the same way, his love stories may well surprise us nowadays by their specifically Victorian, idealistic, unrealistic, puritanical or fastidious features, but their odd patterns serve as a basis for much remarkable psychological study. In many ways Gissing resembles those story-tellers whose subject is known beforehand but to whom one listens because they tell their story so well, because it is a pretext for listening to remarks and themes, for witnessing experiments that perhaps correspond to patterns in one's own soul, a certain outlook on life, a certain view of man. In many respects Gissing was less of his time than Wells: there is something deeper and more lasting in him that may give hope of greater recognition for Gissing in the future. In his early novels, time was often connected with money and culture because culture was felt as an impossible achievement without those requisites. On the verge of middle age he seems more particularly aware of the essentiality of what he later calls "The Crown of Life." The title *Sleeping Fires*, which is both revealing of the structure and themes of the novel, might have been *Last Fires* or *Indian Summer*.

The profile of *Workers in the Dawn* lurks at the back of this short novel in more ways than one. Some of the similarities have already been hinted at, but the most obvious heritage is certainly to be found in the character of Louis Reed and the sort of by-plot worked out of his relationship with Mrs. Tresilian. Both characters have something of Arthur Golding and Helen Norman; the hero in his refined prettiness, his age, his turn from culture to radicalism; the heroine in her dedication to the poor and her role as an adviser to the young man. Their relationship and their occupations are a mild recollection of Gissing's first concerns with the condition of the people, philanthropy and radicalism. More enduring and forcibly expressed are the themes connected with childhood, the problems of parental duties and education. Louis Reed belongs to a long line of abandoned children and orphans, starting with Arthur Golding, while Edmund Langley is a member of the

corresponding brotherhood of parents that easily get rid of their children and develop a late sense of parental responsibilities, like Mrs. Lord of *In the Year of Jubilee*. Education is the other major link with Gissing's first novel. An outgrowth of his steady interest in childhood and culture, it never disappears from his works. Its most conspicuous features in the present case are the author's views on pedagogy and the form it assumes with some of his characters. Gissing's preference for a type of education based on personal relationships might of course be ascribed to his own infatuation for Greek culture. It would nevertheless be more accurate to view it as the sign of his firm belief that culture and education are a highly individual and delicate adventure. As a matter of fact there are very few schools in his works. He seems to prefer the study of the personal influence a parent, a friend, a lover may have on a child or an adult. That influence can be operative only when the two people are in sympathy. That notion is essential to the relationships of his characters. When they meet (at least those who are closest to his heart and mind) they have a kind of sixth sense at work which immediately identifies the other as belonging to the same race or not, as being receptive or not to exchange. His hypersensitive creations seem to be endowed with feelers capable of picking up the minutest signals sent forth by a newcomer. Gissing is always very keen on noting resemblances in faces or voices: in *Workers in the Dawn* for instance, Helen's friend, Maud Gresham, observes that she has a strange similarity to Arthur Golding in her facial expressions; more remarkable perhaps is the number of times male characters analyse the voices of the women they meet. Tastes and distastes arise from the combination of a number of small elements generally related to a subtle network of temperamental and cultural affinities. In that respect the Langley-Reed relationship is exemplary: Gissing repeatedly notes the physical likeness existing between the two men. At once, the young man is more permeable to the influence of the man with

whom he is in communion than to that of his appointed tutor, Mr. Worboys. Moreover, there was some passion for education in Gissing which appears in the way his older characters seem to lay siege against young people or children. They are possessed with an eagerness to model them according to a scheme they have in mind: Helen Norman was prepared from youth by her father to be good to the poor, Arthur Golding was meant to be a social artist by Mr. Tollady, Jane Snowdon is supposed to carry out her grandfather's plan with the poor, Stephen Lord is distressed about the widening gap between himself and his children and the failure of their education. And in the same way, in *Sleeping Fires*, there seems to have been a regular battle, partly posthumous, around the education of Louis Reed, with Lady Revill, the latter having apparently tried to counter his radical tendencies and Langley regretting not to have been able to stand by his son under the circumstances.

Finally, a word should be said about a more formal feature of Gissing's novels. His characters are most aptly described as men of letters: on the one hand because they are often interested in literature both from a recreative or creative point of view, on the other hand because they are particularly fond of writing and receiving letters. These are not simply the necessary medium through which people communicate when they are supposed to be in different places in a world from which the telephone is absent. They often send messages when they are in the same town, or when they could easily meet. These letters have more significance than would appear at first sight. They are first a historical and social testimonial to the formality of social intercourse in those days but they are also a clue to the characters' behaviour and psychology. As we know many of Gissing's characters are impulsive, shy and diffident. Letters, to a certain extent, may be considered

as the natural outcome of their impulses in a world that would not allow of them in acts and words. In writing, they immediately give vent to their impulses or carry out the decisions they have reached without coming up against the barriers of the world or of circumstances. Their letters are an outlet

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for their passions and impulses. They give an impression of immediate power and they are an extension of the world of unreality and idealism without which the characters could not live. As an illustration of this, there is, among the numerous letters that occur in the novel, the letter of excuse which Langley writes after his harsh words to Lady Revill, which he sends and then regrets having sent. The letter in that case almost plays the same part as with Peak when he wanted to write to Lady Whitelaw. Both characters have the same impulses and there is a strange likeness between Langley's behaviour when he acts on his impulse to go and visit Lady Revill in her rural retreat, and Peak's when his steps take him to the Warricombe's house (*Born in Exile*) or even with Glazzard's when he takes the train to go and meet Northway (*Denzil Quarrier*). Characteristically, Langley's and Lady Revill's love story comes to a satisfactory conclusion but through letters. It is love from afar and with gloves on to handle subdued feelings and hurt susceptibilities.

*Sleeping Fires* and *Eve's Ransom* were both published in 1895 and they suffer from the presence of such giants as *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirlpool* on their flanks. But even if they are lighter works, they belong fundamentally to the Gissingian tradition by their themes and especially by their treatment of love; in that respect they are like the two leaves of a diptych. Both start with the theme of detachment from the world, its lures and conventions, a process often initiated by the male character and which the female is required to join: Lady Revill accepts, Eve refuses. The symmetry of the two books is enhanced by the presence in the former of a female character of lower-class origin and in the latter of a heroine of gentle birth. Eve was in exile on the verge of the whirlpool and she plunges into it to be herself, Lady Revill on the other hand grows purer and more reasonable and eventually agrees to lead a measured worthy life which anticipates that attempted by Harvey Rolfe. Both novels develop differently because of the personalities of the

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characters but their inner possibilities are thwarted or favoured by that other major element of Gissing's novels – money.

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#### Some Notes on Quotations and Literary Allusions in Gissing

P. F. Kropholler

Gissing's works are a happy hunting-ground for those in search of quotations and literary allusions. Some of them are easy enough to identify but to trace all the more obscure ones is a laborious undertaking. The trouble is well spent, however. An author's quotations and allusions contribute to the colouring of his style. They show his literary interests. Finally they may give the reader a pleasurable thrill of recognition.

For some time now I have been on the look-out for quotations in Gissing's works and while I cannot pretend to have spotted all of them – this requires a number of close readings and an extremely thorough knowledge of the authors Gissing was familiar with – at least some conclusions

may be drawn.

What strikes one especially is that some novels contain far more quotations than others. The humorous stories – *The Town Traveller*, *The Paying Guest* and the like – yield a remarkably small crop. On the other hand quotations abound in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, *The Crown of Life* and *Ryecroft*.

We can hardly say that Gissing made an increasing or decreasing use of quotations as he became older. *The Unclassed*, an early novel, contains a good many but so does a late one like *The Crown of Life*. A novel from the middle period – *In the Year of Jubilee* – appears to contain very few. The sources of the quotations may be expected to throw some light on Gissing's reading. His literary idols – Shakespeare, Boswell's Life, Landor – are well represented, but some reservations

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must be made. A large number of trite quotations are rather in the nature of proverbs and any one using them is merely drawing on the common stock of idioms. This applies particularly to the Bible and Shakespeare. Nevertheless, some of the biblical references deserve notice. After all, Gissing's biographers agree that he rejected the dogmas of Christianity and at times even expressed a dislike of some manifestations of the Christian churches. The fact remains that Gissing's knowledge of the Bible was extensive and accurate. He often quoted from some less well-known passages of the Bible and these allusions are remarkably to the point. This applies especially to *Our Friend the Charlatan*. The use of biblical quotations is all the more striking here because they do not serve merely as an incidental ornament but supply the arguments with which contemporary "charlatanism" is condemned. It might be argued that the very title of one novel, *The Crown of Life*, contains a biblical allusion (James 1:12 and Rev. 2:10), though it is more directly derived from Victor Hugo's "L'amour c'est la couronne" quoted in Ch. XIII.

How did Gissing obtain his wide knowledge of the Bible? We can follow his reading from his correspondence and the *Commonplace Book*. These contain few references to the Bible. Gissing's familiarity with the Bible must be largely a result of religious teaching in his youth, although he resented church-going more and more as he grew older. A schoolfellow recalled in an essay (reprinted in *George Gissing at Alderley Edge*) that Gissing studied his Latin grammar in church while pretending to be using a prayer-book. The episode is repeated in *Born in Exile* when Godwin Peak commits "to memory lists of dates and the like" during the service. Even so, the fact remains that Gissing's list of "modest intellectual ambitions" (*Commonplace Book*, p. 26) includes a "thorough knowledge of the Bible." It may be significant or not that the Bible appears in the 10th place (in a list of 15 items) before the history of Magna Graecia and Dante. A reduced version of

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this list turned up in *Ryecroft* (Winter XVI) but this time the Bible was left out. The best thing to say on this subject may well be that Gissing's interest in the Bible represented his respect for a splendid literary monument. We may compare it to his delight in the Latin inscriptions in Italian churches.

The second source of quotations is almost inevitably Shakespeare. The remote allusions – to *The Winter's Tale* and *Timon of Athens* – are of course the most interesting.

The third place goes to Tennyson. We know Gissing admired Tennyson and defended this poet from criticism by Bertz. His choice of appropriate quotations from Tennyson is quite impressive. Not only are the set pieces such as "The Princess" and "Ulysses" drawn on, but also several less well-known poems such as the "Prefatory Sonnet to the 'Nineteenth Century'" and

“The Epic.” Apart from Shakespeare there is no English poet of whom Gissing wrote with such enthusiasm. Browning is well behind and so are Wordsworth, Keats and other romantic poets.

Another writer he showed a fairly good acquaintance with was Milton, as appears from several quotations and by no means always from familiar passages. Apart from a few well-known tags from Pope and Gray’s “Elegy” Gissing rarely quoted from 18<sup>th</sup> century poets. This is not surprising. He does not seem to have cared for these poets and this is quite in accordance with contemporary taste which did not appreciate 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry.

As to foreign writers quoted the Latin poets come first, especially Virgil and Horace. There are, however, a few allusions to Seneca and Claudian, which can only come from a man deeply attached to the classics. He quoted some Greek authors, too, but more often alluded to them. Too much Greek in his pages might have put off even some very enthusiastic admirers of his works. There are a few French quotations in *The Crown of Life* – written shortly after he met Gabrielle Fleury – but German quotations are on the whole more numerous and seem to have come to him more naturally. He quotes from Goethe’s *Faust* (which contains almost as much quotable material as *Hamlet*) but also from a less well-known work like the *Venezianischen Epigramme*.

Finally, what was Gissing’s attitude towards quotations? He does not appear to have expressed any direct views. Emerson considered we all quote at times “by necessity, by proclivity – and by delight.” Gissing certainly did quote by “proclivity” and especially by “delight.” A remark in a letter to his brother (September 23, 1883) shows that he had at any rate discovered the best way to obtain a large stock of ready and apt quotations: “I learn a good deal by heart just now, both prose and verse. I believe it is good.” A great many of his quotations are striking enough to make another view of Emerson’s applicable to Gissing: “Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it.”

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#### Two Notes from Wakefield

Clifford Brook

#### Dunfield now has a History as well as a Geography

The story of a new novel *Pageants of Despair* by Denis Hamley (André Deutsch, £1.75) takes place in mediaeval Dunfield. This Junior Fiction book tells of a present-day schoolboy who is carried back into the fifteenth century to help fight a spirit of evil which is attempting to enslave mankind. There, the boy takes part in rehearsals and a performance of Dunfield’s Corpus Christi Plays, and there is a description of the town five hundred years ago. Like Gissing the author says that the distant view of Dunfield is of “A town on a hill. With a great spire in the middle.” Other details of the town such as the Chantry Bridge Chapel on the bridge over the River Calder, and the quarry in which the plays were performed can be identified with Wakefield though Gissing does not

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refer to them in *A Life’s Morning*.

It is unlikely that Gissing knew of the relationship between the so-called Towneley Plays and Wakefield when he wrote that book. The Surtees edition of the plays had been published in 1836 but it was not until the Oxford Early English Text Society edition was printed in 1897 that the association of the plays with Wakefield was spelled out.



Denis Hamley who taught at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Wakefield, in the sixties has already published a modern transcription of some of the plays. That he is also interested in Gissing I know because my copy of *A Life's Morning* has his name inscribed in it.

Old Wakefield in Photographs, by H. Speak and J. Forrester (Hendon Publishing Co., 88p)

This is a tantalising book for any student of Gissing. Near the end of it (the pages are unnumbered) is a photograph said to be of T. W. Gissing's shop: I spent a morning proving that it was a shop on the opposite side of Westgate, and then when I showed it to a friend who is in his seventies, with a glance he confirmed my opinion and made unprintable remarks about its occupants. Further, on the opposite page is another mistake in that it shows the Tudor-built back of that shop, wrongly described as in Cock and Bottle Yard instead of Cock and Swan Yard.

However it does contain several interesting pictures. The one of Westgate c. 1900 shows Gissing's shop, under the name of his successor J. L. Chaplin of Chaplin & Son, on its extreme left; and there is the cover of the catalogue of the Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition of 1865 of which T. W. Gissing was a committee member.

Several of the places mentioned in *A Life's Morning* are illustrated: the Mechanics' Institution standing in front of the Town Hall in the view of Wood Street; the Corn Exchange; the Parish Church, now Wakefield Cathedral; an interesting photograph from an upper window in South Parade, looking across the cattle market to the Ninety-Nine Arches, with "Dagworthy's Mill" in the

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right-hand top corner, and "Cartwrights" garden on the left edge; the moat of Sandal Castle; and looking across Wakefield Bridge c. 1800 there can be seen in front of the Chantry Chapel, the start of the path to Heath Common, with its own small bridge, by which Wilfrid Athel skirted Dunfield after his rejection by Emily Hood. In the photograph of Westgate c. 1900, the building in the centre, named Yorkshire Penny Bank, held the office of John Binks, Corn Factor, a friend of T. W. Gissing.

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### Book Reviews

Oswald H. Davis: *George Gissing: A Study in Literary Leanings*. Introduction by Pierre Coustillas. Kohler & Coombes, Dorking, 1974. (First published 1966). xiv + 75pp.

Some authors are known to inspire infatuations. There are people who, once having come across Jane Austen, Dickens, Trollope, Proust or Simenon, devour all their works, read them over and over again, and in some cases, read nothing else. Gissing found such an acolyte in Oswald H. Davis, whose little book, published four years after his death in 1962, constitutes a testimonial so affectionate and generous that it borders on the extravagant. From the first sentence of Gissing's that he read, says Davis, he sensed a mysterious affinity with him which made him a devotee for life. He denies that he is Gissing's ideal reader; his Author's love for classical antiquity is, on the whole, lost on him, and he does not especially admire the books that express it. But he says that he has gained more "exquisite pleasure" from reading and re-reading Gissing than from the works of any other author. He is far from blind to his faults, but his passion for the special flavor of Gissing's pages is so strong that he forgives everything in advance.

Davis almost makes one believe uncritical devotion is, after all, a useful critical attitude, for it often brings forward elusive virtues, detectable only to the loving eye. In the main, Davis's critical standard is the old-fashioned one of plausibility, and he emphasizes Gissing's ability to achieve a good structure in his plots without straining the reader's belief or surrendering objectivity. He points out a quality that he calls Gissing's "clean mobility" – a capacity for manipulating language and action in a way that enables them to progress and perform their functions without awkwardness. This power is most clearly exhibited, he thinks, in the short stories, where resolutions are achieved with a special directness and firmness of touch. Davis is not disturbed by the many flat or unhappy endings in Gissing's novels. They are due, he says, to a virtue, "his remorseless adherence to cold probability," a quality that Davis joins Gissing in enjoying.

Davis is more than responsive to eccentricities and imperfections which depart from the normal standards of realistic fiction – he positively welcomes them, for the sake of the effects they achieve in establishing atmosphere, revealing character, or expressing personal attitudes. *Workers in the Dawn*, he acknowledges, is uncertain, exaggerated, sometimes artificial; but even these faults are charged with the urgencies of Gissing's concern, so that "power hangs over the immaturities of the book like a sultry sky." He attributes the irregularities of other early books to a venturesome and imaginative spirit of experiment which Gissing was later to bring under better control.

In a book of this kind, much is said, of course, about the man behind the novels. Davis feels that plot and character are reflections of Gissing's personality as well as essential structural elements. In *Demos*, for example, it is clear, as Davis makes us realize, that the turn of events is less a comment on matters of labor, industry, socialism and so forth, than an expression of Gissing's feelings about the world in general. He notes that Gissing maintained a steady rate of production, writing in a lively and animated style when necessary, in spite of his own gloomy nature. In fact, he

sees Gissing's capacity to set himself aside, and to see things in a balanced and reasonable way in spite of the tortures of his life, as an indication of an elevated and generous spirit. These indications are most clearly seen in the letters, which are discussed at length. Gissing, Davis maintains, was aware that he had to please a public much less active of mind than he was; but few, I think, will accept his image of Gissing as a "slim stylish athlete of brains" fighting a boxing match with the stumbling public. It was not the public which received the punishment in this encounter. Some other image is needed to embody Gissing's superiority.

The Gissing tragedy, says Davis, was a part of a situation which has always existed in England. Historically, he feels, the nation as a whole has lacked the sensitivity necessary to appreciate the genius of her great artists. Gissing, like many other English creators, offered beauty to a public which did not care for it. Further, the beauty was of an odd kind, for it was made out of the squalor and torment of modern life – "the bland effusion of his talent," says Davis, "like a sun, lights up, a unique spectacle in English literature, a foul river of our national life in a perpetual pungent noon of aesthetic illumination." The result, Davis feels, is a consistent, coherent world, "the clash of the fire of Gissing's sensitive and fine mind on the heavy yoke of man's tribulation."

This coherence exhibits itself in two characteristics to which Davis is especially sensitive: Gissing's firm sense of actuality, and his capacity for setting the elements of real life in order. In his chapter on four of the five major novels (*The Nether World* is treated separately) Davis emphasizes Gissing's ability to carry out his aims as a story-teller and delineator of character within an

abundant and eventful *ambiance* that effectively counterfeits real life. In spite of this, he avoids diffuseness, and disposes his material in ways that achieve focus, emphasis, and a well-controlled order. Davis calls this sense of shape “balance,” “equipoise” and “reciprocating action,” and its

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most characteristic manifestation is through a dialectic interplay that provides each book with a firm but subtle binding tissue. It appears in such pairings as Mutimer and Eldon, Adela Waltham and Emma Vine (*Demos*) and Reardon and Milvain (*New Grub Street*), and in many contrasting sequences of action that Gissing habitually sets side by side with ironic effect.

Like Gissing, Davis was a marked individualist, whose opinions are neither easily ignored nor readily accepted. Mr. Coustillas' introductory material gives a few suggestive facts about him. He served in the first World War, and wrote a journal about his experiences which has won praise, though it is still in manuscript, and spent most of his life as a critic for the *Birmingham Post and Mail*, producing novels and verse and some sustained criticism as well as literary journalism. He and his book are idiosyncratic, but thoroughly appropriate additions to the Gissing tradition. –

Jacob Korg.

George Gissing: *Thyrza, a Tale*. Edited with an introduction by Jacob Korg. The Harvester Press, Hassocks, Nr. Brighton, Sussex, England, 1974. xxvii + 490 pp.

After *Isabel Clarendon*, *Demos* and *The Nether World*, the Harvester Press have now reprinted *Thyrza*. This looks like a deliberate intention on the part of the publishers to concentrate first on Gissing's early novels though it is now an open secret that they intend to reprint the whole of Gissing's *œuvre* gradually. In the last ten years critical attention has noticeably shifted from the belletristic side of his work to those novels which offer a comprehensive picture of the lower and middle classes, and the Harvester reprints have contributed to accelerate this shift of emphasis. I should be the last of Gissingites to complain about this, as there was until the mid-sixties a distressing tendency to see in the master *primarily* the author of the *Ryecroft Papers* and *By the Ionian Sea*. This was an extreme swing of the pendulum and another extreme has now been reached since *Ryecroft* and the travel book are very nearly the only titles that are not obtainable new. This

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state of things is to a large extent a reflection of the average critical attitude at the present moment: commentators as different as John Goode and Gillian Tindall look upon *Ryecroft* as a deplorable mistake, a sign of Gissing's weakening powers after he settled in France. Because there were two sharply contrasted sources of inspiration in Gissing (contemporary reality and the world of literature and philosophy past and present) and because he appeals to two kinds of readers with widely diverging interests (the social condition of England and the writers and thinkers of the western world since the golden age of Greek civilisation), it is comparatively rare to find a Gissing critic with his two eyes wide open. According to his sensibility and culture, he will ten to one disparage either the social novels or the volumes of belles-lettres.

Jacob Korg is a shining exception. He has written appreciatively about the *Ryecroft Papers*, and his recent comments on the working-class stories testify to his equally keen appreciation of Gissing's tormented social studies. In this attractive, but alas rather expensive new edition of *Thyrza*, he discusses two main points: first the picture of the people and the relevance of philanthropy, material and cultural; secondly the artistic and philosophical impression produced by the story.

*Thyrza* is one of the few nineteenth-century novels which attempt to give a picture of the working classes from the inside, eschewing the condescending or the complacent approach. Its link with the preceding stories is made clear by Professor Korg's remark that after *Workers in the Dawn*, with its criticism of revolutionary fervour and religion, and *Demos*, with its stand against socialism, *Thyrza* must be viewed as a rejection of the possibility of reform through liberal education, *The Nether World* consisting in an exposition of the futility of philanthropy. So of all the remedies to social evils denounced by Gissing, this is the least expected from a man who at all times revered learning and approved of Samuel Johnson's dictum that "there is as much difference between a lettered and

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an unlettered man as between the living and the dead" (*Henry Ryecroft*, Summer, XIX). Yet Gissing's attitude is quite consistent; Ryecroft's conviction that it is vain to expect a rich crop from a poor soil was no ephemeral belief: it can be found as early as *Workers in the Dawn*. He viewed study as a personal resource (in his own life it was a safeguard against many temptations), but he refused to believe in it as a factor of social reform. In the early chapters of *Thyrza*, one might think that Egremont will simply fail in his charitable enterprise without any ill result for the Lambeth people with whom he comes into contact, but when the story is wound up, it is clear that he has wrecked the lives of at least two characters he intended to benefit, Thyrza Trent and Gilbert Grail. One remembers Ryecroft's opinion that education would probably have spoiled his housekeeper and made her discontented, also Mrs. Gallantry's hobby-horsical determination to found a school for servants in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, and, in the same novel, May Tomalin's mistaken zeal in trying to reform the poor through the reading of old and middle English. The difference between the case of Egremont and that of Lady Ogram's niece is not a difference in kind but in treatment. Yet, Gissing's attitude to popular education and its power to fulfil idealistic expectations varied, at least in the early eighties – witness "The Lady of the Dedication" and *The Unclassed*. The man who tries to educate himself and/or seeks a refuge in books, enjoys Gissing's sympathy: the philanthropist with a plan to improve the culture of the poor only rouses his scepticism, if not his irony.

The second point tackled by Jacob Korg in his introduction – the sense of fate which gives the novel a pessimistic and pathetic rather than tragic colouring – may be connected with a statement of Gissing's recorded by Gabrielle Fleury at the end of his *Commonplace Book*: "If I hold any religion at all, it is Manichaeism". The forces of good and evil, he implies, are not as easy to distinguish as some simple-minded moralists imagine: how many good intentions in the novel prove anything but beneficial to their recipients? Conversely, good may result from what is apparently bad. What

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Egremont says of Cornelius Vanderbilt would certainly have been endorsed by Gissing, as it was implicitly applauded by Gladstone in his notes on the novel: "Personally he was a disgusting brute; ignorant, base, a boor in his manner, a blackguard in his language.... Yet the man was a great philanthropist." Gladstone observed that it was the Dalmaines, not the Egremonts, who cause the world to progress. The truth is probably that both public-spirited capitalists and disinterested, generous enthusiasts, however unpractical, have contributed to the advance of humanity. That Gissing does not acknowledge this point of view in *Thyrza* (he is nearer to doing so in *The Crown of Life*) hardly implies a political stand; it is rather a sign of indulgence in pessimism and irony. Yet, as Jacob Korg points out, Gissing still clings in this novel, "though without much conviction, to the belief that one must continue 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,' even in a universe hostile to such efforts." *Thyrza* "does not exhibit the grandeur of effort that exalts itself in striving against

the resistance of the absolute, but rather the sorrow of lives that imperfect conditions have rendered vain and purposeless.” And surely this is an attitude which is very much the same as that expressed in the last lines of *The Nether World*.

The gentleness of *Thyrza*, compared with the tenser and heavier atmosphere of *Demos* and *The Nether World*, was acknowledged by Gissing in a way which finds a material expression in his diary. In the few years before his second marriage, *Thyrza* was the story which he would choose when he wanted to introduce members of the fair sex to his own work. We find him lending or giving copies of *Thyrza* to Miss Curtis of Eastbourne, to the Jollys of Acton, to Connie Ash of Wakefield, and when his own cousin Mary Bedford of Broadway, Worcestershire, married, an inscribed copy of the novel was one of the wedding presents he sent her. Jacob Korg does not mention such details, yet his editing amounts to much more than a solid and pertinent introduction. The volume begins with a bibliographical note on the manuscript, the various editions and transla-

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tions of the novel as well as its revision, to which C. J. Francis devoted an article in the *Newsletter* for October 1971. The story itself is followed by useful notes to the text and a bibliography of books and articles dealing with the novel. The American edition is published by Associated University Press, of Cranbury, N.J. – Pierre Coustillas

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#### Notes and Queries

Alfred M. Slotnick, of Brooklyn, N.Y., reports that he has found – loosely inserted in a book – a press-cutting consisting in an unrecorded article by Andrew Lang on Gissing entitled “The Bookman’s Character.” Unfortunately the title of the newspaper appears nowhere on the cutting. A close inspection of the “shipping intelligence” on the verso of the cutting shows that the newspaper was a London daily and that the date was Friday, October 9th. As Lang refers to “the late George Gissing,” it would seem – if perpetual calendars can be trusted – that the only possible years are 1908 and 1914. Does any one know to what papers Lang contributed at the time? His attitude to *Henry Ryecroft* was as unfriendly as that of William McFee or Douglas Goldring.

An article by Jacob Korg reprinting the cancelled passages from the first edition of *The Unclassed* is to appear before long in the *Bulletin* of the New York Public Library.

While working at the British Library last June, Pierre Coustillas came across a series of full-page reviews of Gissing’s later works in the *Sunday Sun and Weekly Sun*. The most interesting of these reviews was one of *By the Ionian Sea* by Somerset Maugham. It appeared on August 11, 1901, p. 1. Are any other reviews of Gissing’s work by Maugham on record?

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Recent Publications

Volumes

- Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975, pp. xi + 231. £7.95. Green cloth. The jacket-design by Glenn Carwithen incorporates a photograph of Gissing which originally appeared in *The Album* on February 25, 1895.
- George Gissing, *Un'Ispirazione ed altre novelle*, Novara: Edipem, 1975, pp. 202. Translation and introduction by Francesco Badolato. Lire 1800. Blue cloth. This is volume 96 in "La Nostra Biblioteca Classica."

Articles, reviews, etc.

- D. R. Cherry, "Humanities," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Summer 1973, pp. 402-03. A review of *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*.
- [Clifford Brook], "Professor Probes," *Wakefield Express*, August 8, 1975, p.19. A few paragraphs on Pierre Coustillas' stay in Wakefield at the end of July.