

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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Some Notes for a Study of the Gissing Phase

In Henry James’s Fiction

Adeline R. Tintner  
New York

Scholars know that Henry James read three novels by George Gissing (*New Grub Street*, *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirlpool*); that he wrote a six-page mini-essay on Gissing for *Harper’s Weekly* in 1897 but never mentioned him again in his critical works; and that when he met him he was very impressed by him. (Probably in the wake of that visit he read Gissing’s novel *Our Friend the Charlatan* which was published just then). In Henry James’s library there were at his death three

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novels by George Gissing: *New Grub Street*, 1891, in three volumes, inscribed on the fly-leaf by Henry James, “George Gissing at Lamb House with H. G. Wells,” *In the Year of Jubilee*, 1895, and *By the Ionian Sea*, 1901, an autograph presentation copy given to him at the time he met George Gissing himself. The pages are all cut so we may assume James read those very volumes all of which are first editions. (1)

As is also well known, Wells brought Gissing over to Lamb House to meet James in June, 1901. (2) There is a letter from James to Wells asking him to post a letter of thanks he had written for having received a present from Gissing of “his beautiful book,” undoubtedly *By the Ionian Sea*. James wrote that Gissing was “highly sympathetic.... But, by the same token, worn almost to the bone (of sadness). Why will he do these things?” (3)

What is more important is that James not only read him, wrote on him, met him, and owned his work, but that he used him in his own fiction. This was a narrative habit of James which he himself stated as early as 1868. “Whenever a story really interests one, he is very fond of paying it the compliment of imagining it otherwise constructed and of capping it with a different termination.” (4) He said the same kind of thing more and more frequently after 1895. Elizabeth Robins reports : “He positively could not, he said, read anything, now, for the sake of the story ... If a book interested him he wanted to rewrite it.” (5) To Mrs. Humphry Ward he wrote in 1899 : “I’m a wretched person to *read* a novel – I begin so quickly and concomitantly ... to write it rather – even before I know clearly what it’s about! The novel I can *only* read, I can’t read at all!”(6)

He keeps on saying it in 1902 : “If a work of imagination ... interests me at all ... I always want to write it over in my own way, handle the subject from my own sense of it. That I always find pleasure in.” (7) His rewriting of the fiction of others is therefore a conscious although almost uncontrollable narrative technique on James’s part, and we find him doing it in the first as well as the last of his tales and novels. If we look for it we may find also the effect of Gissing’s work on

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James’s fiction and we find it at three moments in James’s writing career.

It is very striking that aside from *The Princess Casamassima* where the hero (although brought up as a member of the lowest middle class), is still the son of a duke as well as of a prostitute, we see no tales or novels by James dealing with the lower middle class until after the publication of *New Grub Street*, which seems to have stimulated three stories. Following his reading of Gissing’s novels as recorded in his “London Notes” of 1897 three more stories seem to have been affected by the Gissing matter if not manner. However, it is not until after his meeting with Gissing that he really began to pay attention to Gissing’s world in stories written in 1902. Then, from 1904 to 1909 when he reinforced this influence by his desire to be another Balzac (who had also paid attention to this part of society as well as to other parts) there appear out of eight stories five that deal with the lower and middle class material, ranging from the suburbs of London, to New York City, to Switzerland, to an imitation Brighton in his invented Properley, a seaside resort for the middle classes. The struggle for money and the loss of class position are also implicated in these stories. James has attempted during his last period to borrow some of Gissing’s “saturation” in his milieu and in the personalities of characters formed by the social conditions which Gissing knew so well and James did not.

There are therefore four different stages of Gissing stimulation. The first is after James read *New Grub Street* in 1891. Then, for the first time, he wrote three short stories about “grubbing” in London, two of which were published in the following year. “Sir Dominick Ferrand” is about a young man and a young woman who grub their way by writing lyrics and songs; they live in a lodging house, typically Gissing in setting. “Greville Fane” is about a woman from the lower middle class who writes about the aristocracy only for the members of her own class in order to

change the class position of her children which she does and, of course, they repudiate her. "The Next Time" was published a few years later in 1895; the hero, Ray Limbert, resembles Reardon, for he wants to write a book that will be a popular hit but never can, while his sister-in-law does it every time. Also, the rigours of the living conditions for Limbert's family seem to have been influenced by *New Grub Street*.

There are other elements in Gissing's novel which would naturally interest James. In *New Grub Street* there is a discussion between Biffen and Reardon on the "art of fiction." Reardon says : "There may surely exist such a thing as the art of fiction." Biffen responds : "It is worked out. We must have a rest from it." (8) Months after Reardon's death Jasper Milvain writes an "excellent piece of writing (see *The Wayside*, June 1884), and in places touched with true emotion" (*NGS*, p. 495). This exchange has a historical basis in fact. The entire literary controversy on the nature of fiction was started by Walter Besant on the occasion of his lecture, "The Art of Fiction," delivered at the Royal Institution, April 25, 1884 (in the same year as Milvain's article), which was followed by a short essay in the *Pall Mall Gazette* by Andrew Lang, also called 'The Art of Fiction.' This was followed by "The Art of Fiction" by Henry James in *Longman's Magazine* for September 1884. This in turn called forth Stevenson's "Humble Remonstrance" in the same magazine for December, 1884. All this seems to have contributed to Gissing's manifesto of realism in *New Grub Street*.

When Biffen's book is published one of the "sages," or critics, writes that "a novelist's first duty is to tell a story." A few lines further it occurs again. "'The first duty of a novelist is to tell a story' : the perpetual repetition of this phrase is a warning to all men who propose drawing from the life" (*NGS*, p. 520). "This phrase" was the burden of Besant's lecture and it was one of the statements that James, as well as Gissing, challenged in his answering essay.

In Biffen's exposition of his "art of fiction," he says "What I really aim at is an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent (*NGS*, p. 150) ... I want to deal with the essentially unheroic, with the day-to-day life of that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance. Dickens understood the possibility of such work, but his tendency to melodrama on the one hand, and his humour on the other, prevented him from thinking of it" (*NGS*, p. 151).

The point about Dickens was so important to Gissing that he repeats it again in *New Grub Street* (*NGS*, p. 404). "Dickens goes down only with the best of them, and then solely because of his strength in farce and his melodrama" (*NGS*, p. 405).

When James came to touch on the problem of the dramatization of "the vulgar" in fiction (in his *London Notes*, for July, 1897), he uses the very words and concepts of Gissing:

But save under the immense pressure of Dickens we have never done anything so dreadful as to recognize the vulgar. We have at the very most recognised it as the extravagant, the grotesque. The case of Dickens was absolutely special ; he dealt intensely with the 'lower middle,' with 'lowest' middle, elements, but he escaped the predicament of showing them as vulgar by showing them only as prodigiously droll. When his people are not funny who shall dare to say what they are? (9)

The second stage of Gissing influence occurs just after James wrote those "London Notes" for July, 1897, when he had to counteract the atmosphere of London during the Diamond Jubilee by reading a number of novels, which included Gissing's *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) and *The Whirlpool* (1897), as well as memories and probably a rereading of *New Grub Street*.

The "London Notes" for July, 1897, constitute James's only essay on Gissing. After having read *New Grub Street* he professes "a persistent taste" for Gissing's fiction, "a taste that triumphs

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even over the fact that he almost as persistently disappoints me." He finds it is "mainly his saturation that makes him interesting ... in the sense of making him singular." Gissing "reeks with the savour ... of contact with the ... lowest middle-class, and that is sufficient to make him an authority – *the* authority on a region vast and unexplored" (*N*, pp. 438-39). But James would "wish" Gissing "to go further." Since he "overdoes the ostensible report of spoken words," the result is that "it crowds out – the golden blocks themselves of the structure, the whole divine exercise and mystery of the exquisite art of presentation" (*N*, p. 441). In other words, Gissing lacks form. After this James chides himself for not saying something more positive. "Mr. Gissing's feeling for his subject, a subject almost always distinctly remunerative to the ironic and even to the dramatic mind" must be praised. "He loves the real" which the realist in James likes, and "if he only had distinction he would make the suburbs 'hum.'" "He has the strongest deepest sense of common humanity, of the general struggle and the general grey grim comedy" (*N*, p. 443).

We can infer that James was so under the spell of the Gissing novels he had just read and reread that the following month when he continued his "London Notes" for August, 1897, *Harper's Weekly*, he perhaps unconsciously assimilated an icon of Gissing, that of the vision of London as a whirlpool, an image which gave the name to Gissing's novel *The Whirlpool*, which James had also mentioned he had read. He is talking in August not about Gissing but about Paul Bourget's having come to London in order to deliver a lecture on Flaubert at Oxford just at the time of the Diamond Jubilee when London was jammed with visitors. James realizes that he expresses the situation "but feebly, I know, for those at a distance from the edge of the whirlpool, the vast concentric eddies that sucked down all other life" (*N*, p. 446).

What seems to be the direct product of James's perhaps recent rereading of *New Grub Street* is his story, "In the Cage," published as if it were a novel, in book form, in 1898. There the world of

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the grocery store and its telegraph dispatch office are investigated through the consciousness of a young woman of the lowest middle class. Her fiancé, Mr. Mudge, is a grocer, and the story undoubtedly was suggested by Biffen's novel, *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*. James measures this world against the upper class world which impinges on it and examines the contrasts made by the telegraphist and her friend, Mrs. Jordan (who consorts with aristocrats by doing their flowers), with the privileged gentry.

By-products of the Gissing effect can be seen in a pair of stories of 1898 and 1899 called "The Great Condition" and "The Given Case." In "The Great Condition" 1898, James has taken one of Gissing's characters from *In the Year of Jubilee*, the mysterious Mrs. Damerel; he has, in fact, used her very name and has made *his* Mrs. Damerel suspected of having the kind of past Gissing's Mrs. Damerel had – that is, she has either run away from her husband and children, or has been involved in some domestic *faux pas*. Actually, her suitor, Mr. Braddle, refuses her "condition," namely, that he should marry her first and then after six months she would tell him her secret. Braddle also

suspects her of being poor, and he fears some “queer suppressed chapter” in her life. However, the other man who is enamoured of her is willing to marry her on her “great condition,” although it turns out that there had never been the slightest deviation on her part from normal behaviour. She was using her “condition” as her test of both suitors’ love.

The other story published in 1899 is “The Given Case,” in which a problem Gissing deals with in *In the Year of Jubilee* (if one marries a woman and does not love her, one can leave her), is made the tale’s centre. The married woman, Mrs. Despard, stays with her husband whom she has ceased to have relations with, but her friend who is only engaged, leaves her fiancé and marries another man. Mrs. Despard is jealous of the freedom society gives her unmarried friend and tries to discourage her from using it. This is clearly a Gissing situation.

There were things which were intimately involved with James’s thoughts and feelings about

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the art of fiction in Gissing’s book, but he seems to have ignored those possibilities for argument. He went to Gissing only for the “savour” of his milieu and for the characters produced by that milieu. James’s use of Gissing material was very idiosyncratic and his *données* are never to be confused with Gissing’s. James’s optimism in every case where he uses some of Gissing’s material is in striking contrast to the pessimism of the original. Yet it is not the same kind of optimism which mars the novels of Walter Besant, for it is an optimism based on the freedom of the imagination. For instance, it seems very curious that in James’s one dream story, “The Great Good Place” (1900), George Dane, the writer, harassed by interruptions in his creative work, quotes the children’s hymn “There is a happy land, far, far away,” so often referred to in *Workers in the Dawn*, a hymn to which the child, Arthur Golding, sick and “overcome with weariness.... fell asleep” after his flight to London. (10) In James’s story it appears in the same context, only metaphorically, to characterize a fatigued writer about to escape to a dream world. “George Dane sat down to his table and stared at his ragged phrase. ‘There is a happy land – far, far away!’ He chanted it like a sick child” (XI, p. 17). James’s fantasy of a happy dream land acts as a wholesome pick-me-up for the tired writer.

The next and third period when the Gissing influence seems to assert itself occurs just after Wells brought Gissing over to James’s house in Rye, in June 1901, at which time Gissing presented him with *By the Ionian Sea*. Two stories by James emerge from this period. The first, “The Papers,” written in 1901-1902 and published in 1903, handles the *New Grub Street* material now more in the Gissing manner. The opening page introduces us to the Fleet Street atmosphere of starvation, uncertainty and the ensuing feelings of bitterness which now are experienced by the young journalist, Howard Bight (the name is somewhat reminiscent of that of the novelist, Harold Biffen),

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who is truly a Gissing character. The word “savour” that James used in his “essay” on Gissing reoccurs on the first page of this story – “not quite savoury pothouse.”

“The Papers” in a sense can be considered James’s *New Grub Street* and, being his and not Gissing’s, the desperation of an unsuccessful journalist is somewhat modified. James makes it tolerable to himself by disguising it as a fable based on *As You Like It* where the hero and heroine are likened to “Jacques” and Rosalind, an original romantic pairing which is James’s correction of Shakespeare, just as the Fleet Street atmosphere is a correction or variation of Gissing. Although he does somewhat mimic the pessimism of Gissing’s characters, the young people’s “measure of their detachment, their contempt, their general irony,” which is given “in respect to the conditions of

their life,” (11) they escape upward and outward, not downward. They don’t starve, for like the characters in *As You Like It* they are always eating. The connection with Shakespeare’s play may have been inspired by the performance featured in Gissing’s *Our Friend the Charlatan* a book which had just appeared in 1901. If James’s hero is “sardonic,” he is only “softly” so. He is more like Jacques than Biffen, “railing” against society but able to detach himself without destroying himself, and, in addition, borrowing the romantic lineaments of Orlando.

“The Papers” was written right after James’s and Gissing’s meeting, along with another story, “The Birthplace,” whose hero, Morris Gedge, is even of a lower middle class origin, but he is equipped, on the other hand, with the sensibility of a “gentleman.” The latter story was written not only while James was writing “The Papers” but also “The Beast in the Jungle,” and published during the same year, 1903. Morris Gedge is a small-town ex-librarian and inheritor of the curatorship of the museum of the great “Bard.” His wife, of a somewhat lower class origin, with fantasies of moving up a notch to that of the house-keeper of a castle, causes him a little trouble, but

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she is the mere shadow of one of the lower-class wives in Gissing’s life and stories. She thus phrases their advantage in getting the job of the care of the museum: “We’re refined. We know how to speak,” the lack of which ability is the great drawback in the lower middle class climb upward. One remembers Mrs. Yule’s defects in that direction and Alfred Yule’s care that his daughter Marian did not make the same mistakes. Mrs. Gedge adds: “we know the difference between realities and shams. We hold to reality,” which reminds us of Biffen’s speech about telling the truth in writing. Here, however, Morris adds a Jamesian modification. “Allow that we hold also a little to the romance.” (12) He would pay attention to his wife “if she were such a wife as you!” he tells lovely, upper class, educated Mrs. Hayes, the wife of the rich young American who understands Gedge and his problems as the curator of the museum in which there is no real data to work with. In the crisis scene Gedge’s wife appears “like a woman of the people” (p. 461). He is more or less like the men described at the beginning of Chapter 8 in *New Grub Street*, “men with unrepresentable wives” (*NGS*, p. 106). Morris’s triumph depends on letting his art, his rhetorical skill, service a role which his sense of reality tells him is a sham. A Gissing character would not do this and still get the author’s praise for it. Morris’s compromise is redeemed in James’s eyes because he has made it into art.

In “The Birthplace,” when James wants to give a parallel in pictorial art to the situation Gedge finds himself in, he chooses a genre painting lithographed for mass distribution. “The three ... had the effect of recalling to him ... a sentimental print, seen and admired in his youth, a ‘Waiting for the Verdict’ ... or something of that sort; humble respectability in suspense about humble innocence” (p. 464).

A fourth wave of Gissing influence came in James’s final spurt of creativity when he returned to England in 1905 after his trip to the States. His lecture, “The Lesson of Balzac” had focussed his great desire to go down in history as an American Balzac. But he had not paid enough attention to

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the lowest rungs of the social ladder as his French model had, so that he had to make up that deficiency if he wished to be another Balzac. It is not without interest that Mrs. Despard in the earlier story, “The Given Case,” has the same name as a recurrent character in Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*, Madame d’Espard, a woman of the world who tried to control the behaviour of her

women friends very much the way James's Mrs. Despard did hers. It is possible even in 1898 that James thought that a fusion of Gissing material with Balzac material would thicken his own data.

He went now, therefore, again to Gissing, the one writer in English who was "saturated" with that material. "Julia Bride," a short story written soon after his return home, (13) apes, in name and in her fate never to be a bride, Constance Bride, of *Our Friend the Charlatan*, although unlike Gissing's finally independent heroine, Julia wants to, yet fails to get a husband to raise her to a position of social security and therefore fails in life completely. Money as a necessity for class location is as desperately sought for in James's story as in any tale by Gissing.

In the five stories finally published in 1910 as a suite called *The Finer Grain*, James tells us in the publisher's blurb he wrote himself that "the series of illustrations" for the "predicaments" arising in each story "considerably ranges: from Paris to London and New York, and then back again, to ambiguous yet at the same time unmistakable English, and ultra English, ground." (14) This proclaims his attempt at doing an *Etude de Moeurs*, or *Scènes de la Vie de Province* à la Balzac, a *Comédie Humaine*, in miniature. If we examine the stories, we note that there are merely two English tales in the suite, but they both tap the Gissing vein. "Mora Montravers" is James's *The Whirlpool*, where he substitutes Wimbledon for Pinner, and where Mora Montravers finally avoids the suburban fate that destroys Alma Rolfe. The story, thoroughly Jamesian, is seen through the sensibility of Sidney Traffle, the suburban aesthete who counteracts "the sense of decency" of his

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wife Jane by "perfunctory aesthetic rites." The words "vulgar" and "refined" occur as often as they do in a Gissing novel.

Although James does not, as Biffen does, "aim at ... an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent" (NGS, p. 150) but only at getting at the "savour," he gets closest to the Gissing type in "The Bench of Desolation," 1909.

The basic plot structure of the tale is so close to that of the final episode in *Isabel Clarendon* that it is hard to think that James in his story involving an obviously Gissing character had not paid attention to the one Gissing novel which has struck some readers (F. N. Lees among them) as an imitation of James's tale of *his*, Isabel, *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the last chapters of *Isabel Clarendon* Bernard Kingcote is saved by his friend Gabriel and put in charge of a bookstore in a small town. Mrs. Clarendon on a visit to him invites him to her room at the local hotel at the tea hour and offers him her fortune as restitution for what he had considered her failed love. This he rejects.

In James's tale Herbert Dodd, a lower class bookseller in a small resort town, is also visited by a woman who has caused him trouble and who has invited him to have tea with her at the local hotel. There she too offers him a fortune as restitution, only in this case the money, cleverly invested, had originally been legally extracted from him because of his breach of promise to marry her. Unlike Kingcote, James's hero accepts the woman and her money.

Herbert Dodd, the weak, ruined hero, is the out-and-out Gissing man. The word "vulgar" appears in Dodd's thoughts on the second line, and we come across it nine more times before we have finished the fifty-page story. The bitter fight between man and woman starts the tale. The "gag of battle" in the war between the sexes begins in the first paragraph and the question is of a breach of promise suit which this weak man could have challenged and would have won, had he not been a coward. The word "sordid," a Gissing word, occurs here too.

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Herbert Dodd was one of “five scattered and struggling children,” living “in the back room above the shop,” like Gissing himself. He is “over refined,” “it would all have been because he was, comparatively, too aristocratic.” (15) His instinctive taste in women is low, for the pretty girl whom he marries, “had, it was true, forms of speech ... that affected him as small, scratchy perforations of the smooth surface of such things.” This sentence seems to show a sympathy with and an understanding of Gissing’s contradictory sexual drives. But Dodd rationalizes his choice. With “all her regular God-given distinction of type, in fine, she couldn’t abide vulgarity much more than he could.” (16) However, Kate Cookham, the villainess turned to heroine, comes back as a “real lady.” She is now “refined” (p. 393). The amount of money she has made for him from what she forced from him attracts him in his “pauperized state.” She made money for him because of her “hatred of what she should be doing to him. It made me work.” (17) Herbert Dodd is controlled by the contradictions between his refinement, his love of beauty, and his need to be bolstered by such a strong woman.

In his “London Notes” James had criticised Gissing for an abuse of what he called “the blight of the colloquy,” of dominant dialogue, which ends in a failure to give “the sense of duration, of the lapse and accumulation of time” (*N*, p. 441). He adds that Balzac had not had this fault. James himself would correct this flaw in Gissing in his own story of Herbert Dodd, a member of the lowest middle class who leads what seems to be an endlessly monotonous life. In this James is following Biffen’s prescription for “honest reporting. The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life” (*NGS*, p. 151).

James in ‘The Bench of Desolation’ has proven an apt pupil of Biffen, because he does reproduce the tedium of Dodd’s life. Herbert Dodd at first belongs to “the relatively poor (who are so much worse off than the poor absolutely),” a line James read in *New Grub Street*. Herbert had been able to ape the educated classes through his private reading, his selling of books, and his

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discussion of those books with customers of a more thorough education than his own. He has taken on the “grim grey comedy” of Gissing’s novels.

After a lifetime of writing about the upper middle-class these sudden late appearances in James’s work of stories centring around the lower and lowest middle-class must be considered a tribute to George Gissing whom he saluted as “the authority ... on a region vast and unexplored” (*N*, p. 439).

1 - Personal communication, Leon Edel.

2 - *Henry James and H.G. Wells*, ed. Edel and Ray (London : Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), p.71.

3- *Ibid.*, p. 73.

4 - Henry James, a review of ‘The Spanish Gypsy: a Poem’ by George Eliot (*North American Review*, October 1868), reprinted in *Views and Reviews*, ed. Le Roy Phillips (Boston : The Bell Publishing Co., 1908), p. 127.

5 - Elizabeth Robins, *Theatre and Friendship* (New York: Putnam, 1932), p. 173.

6 - Percy Lubbock, *The Letters of Henry James* (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), vol. 1, p. 325.

7 - *Ibid.*, pp. 396-97.



- 8 - George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (New York: The Modern Library, 1926), p. 153. Future references indicated by *NGS* plus page number.
- 9 - Henry James, *Notes on Novelists* (New York: Scribner's, 1914), p. 440. Future references indicated by *N* plus page number.
- 10 - A hymn by Andrew Young (1807-1889). This is hymn No. 608 in *The English Hymnal* (London: Oxford University Press, 40th impression, 1973), p. 537.
- 15 --
- 11 - *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia : J. B. Lippincott, 1964), vol. XI, p. 13.
- 12- *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. X, p. 407. Future references indicated by page number.
- 13 - In a story written before his trip, "Fordham Castle," the dispossession of "low class" relatives by socially ambitious women could be considered a Gissing subject, except that the characters are American.
- 14 - E.V. Lucas, *Reading, Writing and Remembering* (London: Methuen, 1932), pp. 184-85.
- 15 - *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. XII, pp. 372-76.
- 16 - *Ibid.*, p. 379.
- 17 - *Ibid.*, p. 423

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*The Town Traveller* : a Comic Novel

Judith Brigley

[Mrs. Brigley is the author of an M.A. thesis entitled "The Pessimism of George Gissing : its characteristics and limitations" (University of Wales), from which the present assessment of *The Town Traveller* is reproduced.]

*The Town Traveller* is a light-hearted novel, full of intrigues, mysteries and confusions, yet even this little book contains much of the usual Gissing philosophy, and slight though it is, it deserves some attention, because within its limits it is well-written and amusing.

The hero of the novel, Gammon, is as untypical of the usual Gissing hero as one could possibly imagine. He is a commercial traveller, just into the middle-class bracket, but most unusual of all, his temperament is cheerful and optimistic:

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He had in perfection the art of living for the moment, no art in his case, but a natural characteristic for which it never occurred to him to be grateful ... To Mr. Gammon life was a wonderfully simple matter. He had his worries and his desires, but so long as he suffered neither from headache nor stomach-ache, these things interfered not at all with his enjoyment of a fine morning. (p. 20).

In fact, Gissing manages to make Gammon a very likeable character, warm-hearted, lively, with a ready sense of humour. It is partly because he is so successful that the book holds our interest.

In *In the Year of Jubilee*, Gissing had written of many of the characters in an ironic and often sarcastic tone which, though comic, showed sometimes a very black kind of humour. The tone he uses in *The Town Traveller* is often ironical but when compared with the earlier book, it seems gentler, and Gissing seems to be more in sympathy and good humour with his characters.

The very first chapter of the novel sets the pattern for the rest of the book. In Mrs. Bubb's Boarding House, we meet two of the main characters, Gammon and Polly, both in their usual roles. Their different attitudes towards Moggie the servant reveal much. Gammon orders his breakfast cheerfully and does not mind repeating his instructions when the unfortunate Moggie forgets. Polly, on the other hand, shouts for her hot water, which Moggie certainly resents: "Smack her face would she? What next? And all because she said the water would have to be 'otted'" (p. 8). Gissing's ear for dialogue in this book is particularly good; the dialogue is presented naturally with little or no comment. The way he describes Polly's attitude in this chapter is delightful, the tone mocking, not harsh yet very amusing:

Meaning to pass an hour or two quarrelling with Mrs. Bubb she had arrayed

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herself thus early with more care than usual, that her colours and perfumes might throw contempt upon the drabble-tailed landlady, whom, by-the-bye, she had known since her childhood. (p. 11)

The names of the characters are used in Dickensian fashion, and help along the atmosphere of the book. The hero with his healthy appetite for life is Gammon; Polly with her sharp temper is Miss Sparkes; and the landlady delights in the suggestive name of Mrs. Bubb. It is worth mentioning that this habit of using names is typical of Gissing's method but very often in the more serious novels it fails because it is too obvious, e.g. Mrs. Strangeways in *The Whirlpool*. But here the very obviousness is humorous.

Although the plot of *The Town Traveller* is extremely far-fetched and absurd, Gissing uses the story to poke fun at many of the manners of his time. What he is ridiculing is rising middle-class aspirations and ideas. Thus when Gammon goes to visit his 'doggies,' Gissing comments that:

When at Dulwich Mr. Gammon fancied himself in completely rural seclusion; it seemed to him that he had shaken off the dust of cities, that he was far from the clamour of the crowd, amid peace and simplicity; hence his rustic attire, in which he was fond of being photographed with dogs about him. A true-born child of town, he would have found the real country quite unendurable; in his doggy rambles about Dulwich he always preferred a northerly direction, and was never so happy as when sitting in the inn-parlour amid a group of friends whose

voices rang the purest cockney. (p. 14)

The rural dream of the city-dweller is seen for what it is, the purest fantasy. As Gissing points out, for Gammon enjoyment of the countryside means Dulwich, the in-between place, and it is just as

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good because, as Gissing observes, most town-dwellers would hate the real countryside.

What is so pleasant about the book is that Gissing does not despise his characters for being as they are; in fact, he prefers them to be so rather than pretentious. The hatred which he felt for the sham in life is evident in the novel. Gammon is likeable, particularly because he is so honest, so that when he drives the cart for Greenacre:

He was not troubled by any sense of indignity; unfailing humour and a vast variety of experience preserved him from such thoughts. (p. 44)

Polly tries to be “stand-offish” and “lady-like” but she is more herself when she hears:

Mr. Cheeseman’s voice chanting a popular refrain ... Polly could not resist this invitation. She looked in at the Cheesemans’ sitting-room and enjoyed half an hour of friendly gossip before going to bed. (p. 39)

All this after she has quarrelled with them all and thought herself better than any of them. Of course, there is plenty of ironic humour in Gissing’s treatment of Polly generally, but Polly is more likeable at the moments when she stops pretending. For once, Gissing’s humour is indulgent in dealing with Polly, but we are left in little doubt that she would be a pretty fearsome person to meet in real life.

Yet it says a lot for Gissing’s characterisation that we do not dislike Polly and even at times feel sorry for her. We are reminded of Gissing’s own comment on Dickens’s characterisation, about our liking characters despite their obvious bad points:

In Dickens we always feel a sympathetic understanding, a recognition of the human through whatever grotesque disguise. (*Charles Dickens, a Critical Study*, Blackie, 1898, p. 37)

The setting of the book is quite important, as the title tells us. In his travels Gammon takes us to many parts of London. We are given details particularly about eating places which give Gissing an

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opportunity to make fun of another aspect of the period. But first of all, when Greenacre and Gammon go for a meal together, they go to an old-fashioned coffee-house:

There, on the narrow seats with high wooden backs, as uncomfortable a sitting as could be desired, with food before him of worse quality and worse cooked than any but English-speaking mortals would endure, he always felt at home, and was pleasantly reminded of the days of his youth. ... Sweet to him were the rancid odours, delightfully familiar, the dirty knives, the twisted forks, the

battered teaspoons, not unwelcome the day's newspaper, splashed with brown coffee and spots of grease. He often lamented that this kind of establishment was growing rare, passing away with so many other features of old London. (pp. 46-47)

This is very entertaining, especially since it is related in such an elevated tone ; and the point is underlined when Gissing points out:

More fastidious, Greenacre could have wished his egg some six months fresher, and his drink less obviously a concoction of rinsings. (p. 47)

But the scene also evokes the coffee-shop extremely well, giving us a real sense of what it was like to be there.

There is a whole chapter, "The Head Waiter at Chaffey's" about the veneer of respectability necessary to go with cheap prices. Mr. Sparkes grieves, as perhaps Gissing does too, for the passing of this older type of restaurant: "In those days Chaffey's was an eating-house of the old kind, one long room with 'boxes'; beef its staple dish" (p. 53), but:

In place of the homely eating-house there stood a large hall, painted and gilded and set about with mirrors, furnished with marble tables and cane-bottomed chairs ... The new proprietor aimed at combining foreign glitter with the prices

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and the entertainment acceptable to a public of small means. There was a bar for the supply of alcoholic drinks ... and frivolities such as tea and coffee were in constant demand. (pp. 53-54)

The inflated use of the word "frivolities" at the end of the passage shows that Gissing's nostalgia is not too heavy-handed. But if we are to believe the distraught Mr. Sparkes, this is just another example of sham in everyday life, for if prices have gone down so have standards; "Roast fowl! An old 'en as wouldn't be good enough for a real rest'rant to make inter soup." (p. 55)

Mr. Sparkes reveals all this to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Clover, and Gissing comments:

There was much of the right spirit in both these persons, for they sincerely despised shams, though they were not above profiting by the snobberies of others. But Mrs. Clover found amusement in the state of things, whereas Mr. Sparkes grew more despondent ... (p. 56)

It is tempting to say that in this book, for a change, Gissing takes the same stance as Mrs. Clover.

The mock-heroic tone, characteristic of the book, works on the assumption that what is being described is hilariously distant from such a tone. Thus the scene where Gammon breaks down Polly's door occurs in the chapter entitled "The Storming of the Fort." The competition in which one looks for the missing word is typical of this technique, for Gissing tells us:

It was an amusement worthy of our time; it appealed alike to the villa and the humble lodging, encouraged the habit of literary and logical discussion, gave an impulse to the sale of dictionaries. High and low, far and wide, a spirit of noble

emulation took hold upon the users of the English tongue. (p. 256)

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The opening sentence, with its suggestion of advertising jargon is beautifully done, and a great deal of humour is supplied by the words that the characters think of. The fact that “hygiene” should be the winner reminds us of an earlier scene where Gissing pokes fun at yet another middle-class “hang-up,” when poor Christopher’s family insist upon talking about germs just as everyone is settling down to eat dinner.

Greenacre, with his blackmailing zeal and yet respect for the aristocracy, is not only a figure of pure fun, in spite of his strange place of abode, his mysterious relationships with aristocrats, and his far-fetched stories. His interest in genealogy is yet another instance of Gissing mocking the “jumped-up” middle-class habit of trying to find links with the aristocracy. So, Greenacre tells a bemused Gammon that: “everyone of us, however poor, has some wealthy relative if he could only be found” (p. 48). Greenacre’s meddling in affairs is all rather improbable, just like the plot itself but it is in keeping with the spirit of the book, that feeling of the absurdity of modern life which Gissing seems to be describing.

The exchanges between Gammon and Polly are very well rendered. They are both quite astute, both full of pride and both high-spirited. And all of this leads to some hilarious scenes of banter. In tracing their relationship Gissing uses opportunities to bring out other aspects of modern life which he dislikes. Advertising is his old enemy:

The water-bottle on the table was encrusted with a white enamel advertisement of somebody’s whisky, and had another such recommendation legible on its base. The tray used by the girl in attendance was enamelled with the name of somebody’s brandy. On the walls hung three brightly coloured calendars, each an advertisement: one of sewing machines, one of a popular insurance office,

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one of a local grocery business ... A clock on the mantelpiece (not going) showed across its face the name of a firm that dealt in aerated waters. (p. 118)

The piling up of such details saves Gissing from commenting – he shows us the grasp of advertising. And the fact that this is, in a sense, the place of a romantic meeting serves further to underline the point.

When Gammon visits the Music-hall, he becomes a victim of sentimentality brought on by hot scotch and by:

A damsel, sparingly clad ... singing in the seriocomic vein, with a dance after each stanza. As he sipped his whisky, and watched and listened, Gammon felt his heart glow within him. The melody was lulling; it had a refrain of delicious sentiment. The listener’s eyes grew moist; there arose a lump in his throat. Dear Polly. Lovely Polly. (p. 183)

This is beautifully done for Gammon gets carried away in this relationship. He is such a goodhearted fellow that very often his feelings get the better of him.

But eventually Gammon sees that Polly is not for him and he proposes to Mrs. Clover. Mrs.

Clover is a positive, sensible character in the book. We are told that in social class she is not much above Mrs. Bubb but the landlady treats her as a natural superior.

When Gammon begins to feel restless at the boarding-house, we are given a very graphic picture of the view from his window:

Beneath lay parallel strips of ground, divided from each other by low walls. These were called the “gardens” of the houses in Kennington Road, but no blade of grass ever showed upon the black, hard-trodden soil. Lank fowls ran about among discarded furniture and indescribable rubbish, or children – few as well-tended as Mrs. Bubb’s – played and squabbled under the cropping soot.

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Beyond rose a huge block of tenements, each storey entered from an external platform, the levels connected by flights of iron steps; the lofty roof, used as a drying ground by the female population. (p. 277)

This is so well presented, so depressingly real that it says a lot for Gammon and some of the others that they manage to be cheerful at all.

Gissing does show us some positive things emerging even in this environment. Mrs. Bubb is a likeable if vulgar woman who shows care and concern for her children. And if her boarding-house is not scrupulously clean, we do have a real sense of comfort there, so that when Polly quarrels with the others, she misses going down to the kitchen:

She had to seek her meals in the nearest coffee-shop instead of going down into Mrs. Bubb’s kitchen and gossiping as she ate at the family deal table, amid the dirt and disorder which custom had made pleasant. (p. 68)

The pleasantness of custom is perhaps a key to understanding Gissing’s attitude towards the lodging house because it is obviously an unpleasant place in which to live:

Sunshine through a landing window illumined the dust floating thickly about the staircase and heated the familiar blend of lodging-house smells – the closeness of small rooms that are never cleaned, the dry-rot of wall-paper, plaster and old wood, the fustiness of clogged carpets trodden thin, the ever-rising vapours from a sluttish kitchen. (p. 11)

It seems as if Gissing is not just describing Mrs. Bubb’s kitchen here, but the archetypal boarding-house, the sum of all the boarding-houses he has experienced and the result is a kind of inbuilt ambiguity of attitude because, although the environment is horrible, it is also familiar and its

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very familiarity hints at a kind of nostalgia, not of affection but of something which was part of his everyday experience. This is not adverse criticism because the scene is brilliantly evoked and that sense of getting used to even the worst environment and accepting it is an important point, for as Gissing says in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*:

I have always regarded as a fact of infinite pathos the ability men have to subdue themselves to the conditions of life. (p. 160)

It may seem strange that Gissing, who so often calls down scorn upon the *nouveaux riches* and on the vulgarities of the working-class in his novels, should treat the characters of *The Town Traveller* with some indulgence but as he writes in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* : “Take a man by himself and there is generally some reason to be found in him, some disposition for good,” but he adds that:

Mass him with his fellows in the social organisation and ten to one he becomes a blatant creature, without a thought of his own, ready for any evil to which contagion prompts him. (p. 42)

Thus in *The Town Traveller* New Year’s eve is shown to be an excuse for all kinds of silly and dangerous behaviour. And it confirms that, although this is an example of Gissing’s fear of people *en masse*, it is here not unreasonable. People grouped together like those described can indeed be frightening and it is foolish to write it off as prejudice or irrational fear. Only to be at a football match or a demonstration is enough to understand the frightening forces at work when people group together.

And so *The Town Traveller* is a very absorbing book full of social comment and Gissing’s characteristic humour, which is both perceptive and ironic. What is more, the book is very readable, in a way that some of Gissing’s more ambitious works are not. Within its limitations, it is in fact a

Gissing success.

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A New Source for *Born in Exile*?

M. D. Allen

“Peak is myself – one phase of myself” wrote Gissing to Bertz, (1) and certainly one can see similarities both of personality and circumstance between the central character of *Born in Exile* and his creator. The young Gissing was a poor, gifted, ambitious, and hard-working student with a scorn for the unlettered – as is the young Peak (although biographical evidence indicates that Gissing’s scorn for his peers was less thorough-going than is Peak’s for his). Peak’s enforced abandonment of academic life was obviously suggested by the best-known incident of Gissing’s early life. But as Coustillas points out in the introduction to his edition of the novel, Gissing could not transcribe directly from life when confronted with the problem of removing Godwin Peak from Whitelaw College.

As Gissing could not use the circumstances of his own disgrace in the late Spring of 1876 – his youthful liaison with Nell, his arrest and short term of imprisonment – another form of disgrace, a purely imaginative one, had to be contrived. He turned to account his reminiscences of his uncle Paul Rahardt (married to Maria Gissing), a lower-class individual some of whose doings are recorded devastatingly in George’s letters to his brother Algernon in the days of *Workers in the Dawn*. Rahardt did not open an eating-house in Manchester, but a grocer’s shop at Peckham Rye. If Gissing is to be believed – and his letters contain revealing anecdotes about the man’s pretentious stupidity – Rahardt was

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an untaught vulgarian, though not a cockney like Andrew Peak, as he was of German origin. He fatuously called himself a gentleman, and found evidence that he was one in the fact that strangers raised their hats to him in the street. For the formal opening of his shop – the Noted Little Provision Shop – he thought it clever and original to engage a band. Gissing could all too easily imagine how humiliated he would have been at Owens by the presence near the College door of an uncle’s shop advertising his name to the world and offering cheap food to his fellow-students. (2)

I have not had the opportunity of reading the letters to Algernon in which Paul Rahardt is mentioned, (3) and so do not know if any particular remarks of Gissing’s or incidents reported by him make Coustillas’ identification of Rahardt as the source for Andrew Peak unassailable. Gissing’s vulgar trading uncle very probably had some part in suggesting Godwin’s vulgar trading uncle. But I wish to put forward a literary source that may well have produced Andrew Peak, “Peak’s Refreshment an’ Dinin’ Rooms” (or “Peak’s Dinin’ and Refreshment Rooms”) and the consequent hasty removal from Kingsmill of the poor but proud Godwin.

The reader of Charles Lamb’s “Christ’s Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago,” one of the *Elia* essays (1823), comes across a suggestive paragraph.

Next follow two [of my former fellow-students] who ought to be now alive, and the friends of *Elia* – the junior Le G---- and F----; who impelled, the former by a roving temper, the latter by too quick a sense of neglect – ill capable of enduring the slights poor Sizarers are sometimes subject to in our seats of learning – exchanged their Alma Mater for the camp; perishing, one by climate, and one on the plains of Salamanca: – Le G----, sanguine, volatile, sweet-natured; F----

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dogged, faithful, anticipative of insult, warm-hearted, with something of the old Roman height about him. (4)

Gissing would have inferred without editorial matter that the F---- of this essay is the same person as the W---- of “Poor Relations,” one of the *Last Essays of Elia* (1833). (The two sets of essays were, and are, often printed together, or course.) We learn more about Joseph Favell, to give his real name, in the later essay. He was a promising scholar with an excess of pride in his make-up, who went from Christ’s Hospital to Oxford. When a student at the former institution he had refused to avoid the main streets of London when wearing the school’s uniform; but at Oxford he became unnaturally sensitive about his “servitor’s gown” (i. e. his sizar’s gown, a sizar being one paid an allowance by his college, formerly in return for certain duties – the term is more properly used in connection with Cambridge University, or Trinity College, Dublin, than Oxford – *OED*). “He found shelter among books, which insult not; and studies, that ask no questions of a youth’s finances.” Then, says Lamb, Fate struck a second and more grievous blow.

The father of W---- had hitherto exercised the humble profession of house-painter at N----, near Oxford. A supposed interest with some of the heads of the colleges had now induced him to take up his abode in that city, with the

hope of being employed upon some public works which were being talked of. From that moment I read in the countenance of the young man, the determination which at length tore him from academical pursuits for ever. To a person unacquainted with our Universities, the distance between the gownsmen and the townsmen, as they are called – the trading part of the latter especially – is carried to an excess that would appear harsh and incredible. The temperament

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of W----'s father was diametrically the reverse of his own. Old W---- was a little, busy, cringing tradesman, who, with his son upon his arm, would stand bowing and scraping, cap in hand, to anything that wore the semblance of a gown – insensible to the winks and opener remonstrances of the young man, to whose chamber-fellow, or equal in standing, perhaps, he was thus obsequiously and gratuitously ducking.

Favell took a commission in the army and “perished before the walls of St. Sebastian” in 1812 (5).

The resemblances of person and situation between Favell and Peak are obvious. Of the descriptive phrases about Favell in the earlier essay, all could easily apply to Peak (only “warm-hearted” gives us momentary, but only momentary pause) – even the physical description might readily fit as Peak has “long arms and legs” (6). Robert L. Selig has pointed out in an illuminating article (7) that the demands of his plot obliged Gissing to give Whitelaw – a new institution beyond the Oxbridge pale in a dreary manufacturing town – a somewhat unlikely prestige, for the wealthy Buckland Warricombe as well as Peak must become a student there. The chasm between town and gown detailed in “Poor Relations” is thus observable in Kingsmill; at any rate, Godwin partakes somewhat of the Oxonian attitude (“He felt ashamed when he saw [Oliver, his brother] at work in the shop, and had small patience with the comrades to whom Oliver dedicated his leisure”) (8). In fact, if we substitute “uncle” for “father” and “café-proprietor” for “house-painter,” then we have almost exactly the situation found in the early chapters of *Born in Exile*. Plainly, this is what Gissing remembered when searching for an objective correlative for his own disgrace.

For Gissing had read *Elia* and therefore, almost certainly, the *Last Essays of Elia* and moreover had read the essays the year before he wrote *Born in Exile*. “Preparatory work for the novel was

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begun in December, 1890” and the book was completed on 17 July, 1891 (9). There is on p. 24 of Gissing's holograph *Commonplace Book*, now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, a reference to “On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century” (*Elia*): “Lamb defended Wycherly (sic) &c by saying that we did not believe in reality of the people, pure fantasy.” Jacob Korg has shown that one entry on p. 23 of the *Commonplace Book* was made on 3 April, 1890; that two entries on p. 25 were made on 7 June and 23 December of that year (10). Therefore, it is very likely that the entry containing the reference to “On the Artificial Comedy...” was made between 3 April and 7 June, 1890. Furthermore, there are sundry other references to Lamb in various places that make it clear that Gissing was generally familiar with his writings. (11)

It is no coincidence that *Born in Exile* contains an overt reference to another of the *Elia* collection of essays, namely “My First Play.” Godwin is waiting for the theatre to open: “To stand

thus, expectant of the opening doors, troubled him with a sense of shame [but] to be sure he was in the spiritual company of Charles Lamb, and of many another man of brains who has waited under the lamp" (12).

Finally, it may be observed that "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago" and "Poor Relations" are sometimes pure Gissing in subject-matter. We have already examined the typically Gissingesque collocation of intellectual gifts and poverty; compare, too, young Peak's meagre diet with that of the inmates of Christ's Hospital (13); and compare "Elia's" lament ("I was a poor friendless boy. My parents and those who should care for me, were far away") with Gissing's description of Peak's situation ("An impartial observer might have wondered at the negligence which left him to arrange his life as best he could, notwithstanding youth and utter inexperience. It looked indeed as if there were no one in the world who cared what became of him.") (14)

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Rahardt would not have been "advertising [Gissing's] name to the world" (Coustillas' Introduction) but his own; perhaps the inspiration for Andrew Peak is more literary than personal? And (again I must make it clear that I have not seen the Rahardt letters, and so am relying uniquely on Coustillas' short account of their contents) although Andrew Peak manifests "stupidity," surely he does not show pretensions to gentility in the Rahardt manner?

Outright lack of money or genteel poverty, lack of friends and influence, combined with pride and intellectual ambition – Gissing would have recognised some of his characteristic preoccupations in Lamb's two essays. His ready sympathy with the intelligent outcast enabled him to understand Favell's suffering, make artistic use of it, and render comprehensible what might otherwise seem only absurd. (Surely Selig is mistaken in claiming that Part I of *Born in Exile* is "a private and ironic joke," properly understood only when we know the young Gissing's story, and that Andrew Peak's setting up shop in Kingsmill and its effect are hard to take seriously (15) : we are meant to understand that Godwin's life at College would be unliveable after the arrival of his uncle.) The tragic Gissingesque figure of Captain Joseph Favell, sometime "sizar" at Oxford University, and, like Peak, born in a metaphorical sense and dead in a literal sense in exile, furnished Gissing with a key part of the plot of an important novel.

1 - Arthur C. Young, ed., *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 1887-1903* (New Brunswick, N. J. : Rutgers University Press, 1961), p. 153.

2 - Pierre Coustillas, Introd., *Born in Exile*, by George Gissing (Hassocks : Harvester Press, 1978), p. xii.

3 - In the following collections : Berg Collection, New York Public Library (letters to Algernon Gissing, 12 January, 1878 to 14 March, 1902); Yale University Library (86 postcards and

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letters to Algernon Gissing, 1878-91); Carl H. Pforzheimer Library (Gissing collection, miscellaneous letters to Algernon Gissing). See "Chief Manuscript Sources," Jacob Korg, *Gissing : A Critical Biography* (London : Methuen, 1965), pp. 302-3. *Workers in the Dawn* was published in 1880.

4 - E. V. Lucas, ed., *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II (London : Methuen, 1903), p. 22.

- 5 - *Ibid.*, pp. 160-1. See pp. 323, 409-10 for Lucas's editorial notes.
- 6 - Coustillas, *Born in Exile*, p. 15.
- 7 - Robert L. Selig, "Part I of *Born in Exile* : Peak (and Gissing) at College," *Gissing Newsletter*, 7, No. 4, pp. 1-6.
- 8 - Coustillas, *Born in Exile*, p. 53.
- 9 - *Ibid.*, p. x.
- 10 - Jacob Korg, ed., *George Gissing's Commonplace Book : A Manuscript in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library* (New York : The New York Public Library, 1962), pp. 17, 35.
- 11 - E. g., "I am reading Crabb Robinson's *Reminiscences* (1869), a book you would enjoy. It abounds in stories regarding Coleridge, Lamb, Wordsworth, etc. Lamb he was particularly intimate with. There is one entry 'Looked over Lamb's library, in part. He has the finest collection of shabby books I ever saw; such a number of first-rate books in very bad condition is, I think, nowhere to be found.'" Letter of 5 August, 1885 to his brother in *Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family*, ed. Algernon and Ellen Gissing (London: Constable, 1927), pp. 161-62. In Gissing's Diary are to be found the following notes: "Read a little Lamb"

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(17 August, 1889) ; "Tried to read some of Lamb's letters" (5 August, 1890) ; "Reading through *Elia* in these days" (8 April, 1892). The last note was made after the completion of *Born in Exile*. See Pierre Coustillas, ed., *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England : The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks : Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 159, 223, 275. See also letter of 6 July, 1902 to Edward Clodd : "I shall rejoice – quite sincerely rejoice – when I hear that, like Lamb, you have gone home for ever" (Gissing is urging Clodd not to postpone his retirement) : in Pierre Coustillas, ed., *The Letters of George Gissing to Edward Clodd* (London : Enitharmon Press, 1973), p. 85.

- 12 - Coustillas, *Born in Exile*, p. 57.
- 13 - Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 48-49, Lucas, p. 12.
- 14 - Cf. Lucas, p. 13, Coustillas, *Born in Exile*, p. 48.
- 15 - Selig, p. 5.

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#### A Second View of *The Alien Art*

[Dr. David Grylls, author of *Guardians and Angels : Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Faber, 1978) sends the following comments on Michael Collie's *The Alien Art*, which

was reviewed in the April number of the *Newsletter*.]

Michael Collie's critical book on Gissing is less colourful than his biography: it contains nothing about the novelist marrying a fourteen-year old girl or beating both his wives with a stair rod. Though lacking such diversions, the book is well up to Collie's previous standards: perverse, pugnacious and inaccurate, it overflows with illogic and error; as both scholarship and criticism it is

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burstingly deficient. Three kinds of weakness infest the book: bad arguments; misreadings; and factual misstatements. Yet Collie continually snaps at others for perpetrating just such mistakes.

I - Take first the standard of argument. An early warning signal of Collie's methods occurs at the end of Chapter One. Arguing that the published material is unreliable, Collie writes: "Unpublished autograph letters from Gissing to members of his family survive in large numbers; many of them, however, were omitted from *The Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family*, while many others, perhaps a much larger number, were suppressed" (p. 18). A curious statement: according to Collie, the "unpublished" letters must fall into three groups: those that were published, those "omitted" from a published collection; and those that were positively "suppressed." But an "unpublished" letter is by definition not published; and what could be the difference between "omitted" and "suppressed"? Nor is Collie even careful to observe his distinction between published and unpublished letters. On p. 184, footnote 2, he cites an allegedly unpublished letter which is in fact included (slightly cut) in the 1927 edition of the *Letters*. On p. 51 he quotes from this edition without realising that the original letter (at Yale) is different from the published version.

Factual confusions and fallacious arguments also warp Collie's textual criticism, his study of Gissing's revisions. Take, for example, his commentaries on *Workers in the Dawn* and *Born in Exile*. I cannot agree with Robert Selig (*Gissing Newsletter*, vol. xvi, No. 2) that Collie's chapter on *Workers* is his "very best": it seems to me one of his worst. What Collie says about Gissing's emendations of the original manuscript is plausible enough; but his account of Gissing's later revisions is incurably confused. As Robert Shafer explained in his 1935 edition of *Workers*, Gissing at some time undertook a revision of the novel "which he carried out to the end of the first volume, and then abandoned": the revision was never completed. Collie is reluctant to accept this fact; though perfectly aware of Shafer's information, he keeps talking about "the revised novel" (as if

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Gissing revised all of it) and tries to argue that "Gissing had to alter the early part of the novel, but not the rest" (p. 37). The argument soon became thick with contradiction. On p. 36 Collie is stressing that "the point at which Gissing introduced Carrie Mitchell into the novel (a point identifiable in the manuscript) was also the point at which the revision for the second edition ends." We don't of course need the manuscript to tell us when Carrie enters the novel; but the interesting twist is when Collie observes: "Some critics have written as though Carrie were the cause of Gissing's difficulties. This is not in fact how Gissing presented the matter, least of all in the novel as it was eventually restructured" (p. 40). But Gissing didn't "restructure" any of the sections in which Carrie appears – as Collie's own previous statement admits. Gissing revised only the first volume, and Carrie doesn't appear until the second.

This is only one of the scrambled arguments in the sections on Gissing's texts. With *Born in Exile* Collie reverts to his fancy that the novel was begun in the early 1880s. On the basis of laconic diary entries of early 1888 ("Resumed writing ... Finished ... the Chapter of Peake's antecedents")

he erects a fantastic edifice of conjecture and non-sequitur (pp. 134-36). It would take too long to survey this crazy structure; suffice it to say that, once again, Collie has failed to perceive that this "Peake" was a character from the unfinished story *The Insurgents*: the continuity of the diary entries demonstrates this clearly. Collie's account of Gissing's revisions betrays a bizarre incapacity for accurate argument. A few examples: on p. 58 he attacks Bentley's report on *The Unclassed* by referring to the "revised version of the novel"; but the reader's report was on the first edition. On p. 119 he catalogues *Isabel Clarendon* as a novel that was completely revised; but Gissing revised only the first sixteen pages. On p. 141 he describes an extract from *Born in Exile* as "this passage from the unrevised novel": in fact it's from the revised, i.e. published novel – as Collie's own foot-

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note indicates. Nor are these fits of confusion confined to matters of textual revision. Defective arguments break out everywhere; Collie is not held back by logic. On p. 73 he calls Richard Mutimer "the intelligent, sensitive, at first idealistic working man." On p. 74 he adds, "In the case of Mutimer, Gissing's initial portrait of him was so harsh that only someone as naive as Adela Waltham could have been taken in."

II - As well as being unable to argue, Collie is unable to read: he habitually misconstrues plots and motives, and fails to respond to tone. His view of Amy Reardon shows spectacular distortion. Gissing's description of her, he says, "is not of the kind that one would expect in a romance. Her 'shoulders seemed rather broad in proportion to her waist and the part of her body below it'; ... and though she had a 'magnificently clear-cut bust,' her manner was controlled" (p. 115). Here are the relevant sentences from *New Grub Street* (Chapter 4):

"her shoulders seemed rather broad in proportion to her waist and the part of her figure below it ... In harmony with the broad shoulders she had a strong neck; as she bore the lamp into the room a slight turn of her head showed splendid muscles from the ear downward. It was a magnificently clear-cut bust; one thought, in looking at her, of the newly-finished head which some honest sculptor has wrought with his own hand from the marble block."

It seems a splendid missing of the point to uncover in this passage, as Collie clearly has, a reference to Amy's bosom; his assumption that a woman with outstanding breasts is likely to have an uncontrolled manner is a piquant comic bonus. The misquotation of "figure" as "body" has no doubt helped to unfocus his reading. Given such a level of local perception, we can hardly be surprised by his larger pronouncements on *New Grub Street* and other novels. Reardon, he tells us,

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"is not in the least like Gissing" (p. 175)." "Gissing himself could much more easily have shared the ideas attributed to Milvain than those expressed by Reardon" (p. 114). The novel itself refutes such absurdity; but we might also note Gissing's letter to Bertz of 21 September 1891: "Reardon has the *beau rôle*: opposed to him are only worldly and ignoble people." *New Grub Street*, according to Collie, has almost nothing to do with publishing: it contains no publishers whatever, nor any reference to successful authors. So Jedwood and his wife are swallowed up by Collie's critical amnesia. Elsewhere at least six other books are badly misrepresented. To expound the full details would be tedious; but definite misinterpretations may be found of all the following novels: *Workers*

*in the Dawn* (p. 178); *The Unclassed* (p. 50); *Demos* (pp. 71, 73); *Thyrza* (pp. 72, 80-84, 91, 93); *Born in Exile* (p. 131); *In the Year of Jubilee* (p. 155). Accompanying all these specific misreadings are numerous incorrect generalisations. We are informed, for instance, that in *Demos*, *Thyrza* and *The Nether World* “characters are rarely motivated by greed, avarice or ambition, or indeed by any desire for a realizable material end” (p. 70). Mutimer, Rodman, Dalmaine, Joseph Snowdon, Clara Hewett... ? The counter-evidence to Collie’s assertion could hardly be more extensive.

III - Collie’s poor arguments and careless readings entail and depend upon factual misstatements. Several of these are biographical. Collie has a theory that Gissing in his twenties was both successful and cheerful; at one point he attacks Jacob Korg for suggesting otherwise. This is how Collie marshals his facts. He begins by quoting Korg’s remark that by the time *The Unclassed* was accepted Gissing was “accustomed to genuine failure,” he then appends a footnote, with an incorrect citation, reproaching Korg for factual inaccuracy (p. 179). Collie says: “This is surely an unjustified exaggeration. Not many writers have three novels accepted for publication by the age of twenty-six and a young writer disappointed by the reception of his first book cannot be

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said to be ‘accustomed to failure’” (p. 46). This rebuttal overlooks the fact that (a) Gissing himself had paid for the publication of *Workers in the Dawn*; (b) *Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies* had been accepted but not published – and never was published; (c) Bentley had rejected *The Unclassed*. Collie then moves on to *Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies*: “Bentley offered £50 for it, less than two years after the publication of *Workers in the Dawn*. Not unnaturally Gissing was jubilant” (p. 46). Gissing expressed his jubilation – as Collie’s own note correctly states – in a letter of 26 December 1882: not “less than two years,” but more than two and a half years after the publication of *Workers*. Collie concludes his rebuttal of Korg: “He sent the book to Bentley and had to wait about two months for a decision. At Christmas 1882, when the book was accepted, his morale must have been high indeed” (p. 46). Perhaps so; but the event that Korg referred to was in March 1884.

It is not even true that, as Collie insists, Gissing was quite happy “in the spring of 1883” about the fate of *Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies*: several letters in the Berg Collection (especially of 7 March and 16 March, 1883) bleakly refute this suggestion. Collie quotes part of a published letter (to Algernon, 14 February 1883) and triumphantly concludes that here Gissing “acknowledges, obliquely, the arrangement that had been made with the publisher, at the same time showing he was not unduly upset by the delay” (p. 47). Yet the very next sentence in this letter reads: “I am somewhat low-spirited about the matter at present.” And Gissing ends by saying that his next book will probably be called *The Burden of Life*.

Suppression, distortion, rank inaccuracy – these are the methods employed by Collie in his confident dismissal of Korg. They are not restricted to biographical matters; errors swarm all over *The Alien Art*. Here are some (by no means all) of them: p. 49, the letter allegedly written to Ellen was actually to Algernon; p. 98, Barclay for Bartley; p. 110, Biffin for Biffen; p. 120, Mrs. Edmund

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Yule does not discuss Amy “with her husband” : her husband is dead (Collie means her son); p. 124, Reardon’s book is not *Margaret Horne* but *Margaret Home*; p. 130, Janet Moorhouse for Sylvia; p. 137, it is quite untrue that Gissing “never returned” to working-class subjects after 1891; p. 147, *passim* Beatrice Peachey for Beatrice French; pp. 148-49, it is absurd to say that “Gissing’s characters rarely compete with each other” and “There are few criminals in Gissing’s novels”;

p. 149, "Tarrant's brothers did not have to misrepresent him": presumably Lionel Tarrant (of *In the Year of Jubilee*) has been confounded with Piers Otway (of *The Crown of Life*); p. 150, Walworth Street for Walworth Road; p.152, two misquotes in the extract from *The Odd Women*; p. 155, Barnaby for Barmby; p. 159, Dyce for Dymes; p. 171, *passim*, Collett for Collet (though Collie deviates into correctness on p. 186); p. 177, the title of the *Diary* is misquoted; p.185, "ahem!", for "eheu!"; p.189, *Will Warburton* and *Veranilda* are printed out of chronological order in Collie's "Chronological Listing."

*The Alien Art* is the third book on Gissing that Michael Collie has published. In a well-known letter to Morley Roberts (10 February 1895) Gissing himself stated clearly: "I want to insist that if people think it worth while to write at length about my books, they must take the trouble to study them seriously." Collie has written "at length" about Gissing, but can scarcely be said to have studied him "seriously." For Collie, indeed, the "alien art" would appear to be literary criticism.

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A Note on Shorthouse and Gissing

Martha Salmon Vogeler  
California State University,  
Fullerton

*J. H. Shorthouse*, a new volume in Twayne's English Authors Series (Boston, G. K. Hall, 1979), by F. J. Wagner, a Canadian, compares the once-famous author of *John Inglesant* to a number of contemporary novelists who, like him, reflected "The religious ferment of the time and indicate some of the pressures on the Victorians" : Samuel Butler, Mrs Humphry Ward, Walter Pater, William Hale White – and George Gissing.

In his Prologue Wagner notes that Shorthouse and Gissing died in the same year, and he later devotes three pages to Gissing, mostly to show that he and Shorthouse had "little in common" in their religious and social attitudes. Gissing began "without religious conviction of any kind," but in reading German philosophy and Comte he "fought his way to a purely intellectual conclusion." In *Workers in the Dawn* (the only Gissing novel discussed) he was "half-heartedly preaching Positivism." But his voice "quavers with uncertainty." He offered "really no answer" to the questions raised in the novel, "or at best a wistful hope." And his "rough handling of the Anglican clergy" suggests that he thought "organized Christianity ... no alternative to the religion of Humanity."

*John Inglesant*, on the contrary, is an "oblique record" of Shorthouse's own conversion from the Quaker faith to a culturally richer and, to him, religiously more satisfying Anglicanism. The novel's hero is a Cavalier in the English Civil Wars who, after diplomatic and military adventures in England and on the Continent, eventually finds peace in the Church of England.

Wagner concludes his comparison by observing that Shorthouse, a Birmingham manufacturer,

lived in "patrician Edgbaston," and was "always comfortable" – not, like Gissing, in a London slum. "By temperament and experience different, Shorthouse could not sing the same tune as Gissing no matter where the truth lay."

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Notes and News

Gillian Tindall, author of *The Born Exile*, will give a lecture on "Gissing" : the interaction between his life and work" on Friday, August 1, at 10am at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London. This lecture is scheduled as part of the Summer School on "Victorian Literature and the Arts in London."

Several correspondents have reported significant allusions to Gissing in recent publications. The *Daily Telegraph* for 29 September 1979 had an article by Carol Sloan on Frank Swinnerton, who is

now 95, and cannot forget that his book on Gissing, published in 1912, drew “extravagant praise” from H. G. Wells. “Extravagant” is the appropriate word. Nigel Dennis, the novelist, who reviewed several Gissing publications in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1968, rightly takes V. S. Pritchett to task in the same paper (20 April 1980, p. 12) for observing in *The Tale Bearers* that in Baron Corvo “one spots a Gissing turned inside out.” The letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, entitled “Civilised Cigarettes,” which quoted a passage from a letter to Bertz about students smoking during a lecture at the University of Athens (see April number of the *Newsletter*) was followed on 29 April by a letter from another reader who supplied the end of Gissing’s comments on smoking. An Italian journal entitled *Pianadomani* (June-July 1979) mentioned Gissing as a pioneering traveller in Calabria. More recently, Sir William Haley mentioned Gissing’s visits to Meredith at Box Hill in “The Geography of Authorship,” a review of *Literary Britain: A Reader’s Guide to Writers and*

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*Landmarks*, by Frank Morley (*Times Literary Supplement*, 9 May, p. 525).

As a consequence of the reissue of *The Odd Women* by Virago, the Harvester Press has decided to postpone the publication of its new critical edition of this novel. The new edition of Jacob Korg’s critical biography in paperback and hardback (Harvester Press), first published seventeen years ago, is announced for July.

#### Recent Publications

##### Volume

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, with an introduction by Margaret Walters, London: Virago, 1980, 352 pp., paperback, £2.50.

##### Articles, reviews etc.

- Francesco Badolato, “Rus in urbe oppure urbs in rure,” *Italia Intellettuale*, October-December 1979, pp. 5-6. Review of *Victorian Writers and the City*.
- Patrick Parrinder, “Reviews,” *Notes and Queries*, December 1979, pp. 592-93. Review of *Hubert Crackanthorpe and English Realism in the 1890s*. Mentions Gissing and asks: “Was he Crackanthorpe’s tutor?”
- Jerome Bump, “American and English Literature,” *Reprint Bulletin-Book Reviews*, XXIV (1979), no. 3, p. 19. Review of Gissing’s *Diary*.
- Anon., “Yesterday’s News : 50 Years Ago,” *The Express* (Wakefield), 21 March 1980, second section, p. 15. In its number for 22 March 1930, the same paper reported the death of Margaret Emily Gissing, George’s sister, at Aysgarth.

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- Pierre Coustillas, "Comptes Rendus," *Etudes Anglaises*, January-March 1980, pp. 92-95. Review of the Harvester editions of *The Unclassed*, *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirlpool*. The same number contains a note on the Gissing Centre, p. 112, and a notice of *La Nouvelle Bohème* by John Fletcher, p. 109.
- Peter Keating, "Reviews," *Victorian Studies*, Spring 1980, p. 401. Review of *Victorian Writers and the City*.
- Philip Collins, "Little Dorrit : The Prison and the Critics," *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 April 1980, pp. 445-46. Contains a short passage on Gissing.
- Irving Howe, "Down and Out with Eric Blair," *New York Times Book Review*, 20 April 1980, pp. 1 and 28-29. Review of *Orwell : The Transformation*, by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, with a paragraph on Gissing.
- Pierre Coustillas, "Pessimism in Gissing's *New Grub Street*," *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* (University of Montpellier), No. 11, April 1980, pp. 45-64.
- John Lucas, "Shall we join the ladies?" *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 May 1980, p. 574. Review of *The Odd Women* and three other Virago reprints.