

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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The Theme of Alienation in *Thyrza*

By Herbert Rosengarten  
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(All quotations are from the one-volume edition with Introduction by Morley Roberts, published in New York by E. P. Dutton & Co. [n.d.]

Despite the general recognition that *Thyrza* is one of Gissing’s best novels, all too little attention has been paid to the significant role of its heroine in Gissing’s treatment of the theme of social and spiritual alienation. Critics readily acknowledge the power in the portrayal of Gilbert Grail, the embodiment of that intellectual frustration encountered so frequently in Gissing’s writings. Alternatively, the novel’s qualities are seen to reside in its realistic and (for once) sympathetic description of working-class life, or in its criticism of the utilitarian motives underlying educational reform. These elements undoubtedly give the book much of its strength; but too often they are stressed at the expense of the part played by *Thyrza* herself, who is usually regarded as little more than a sentimentalised ideal. One might perhaps question the psychological plausibility of her pure nature remaining so completely untouched by the grim realities of a working-class environment; yet in terms of the novel’s moral thesis, *Thyrza*’s fate is of greater significance than either Grail’s inescapable frustration or Egremont’s doomed social ideals. Like Hardy, Gissing was disturbed by the spiritual degeneration of modern society; and *Thyrza* expressed his views that in a world governed by warped and materialistic values, the extinction of the nobler elements of the human soul is inevitable. Like Hardy’s *Tess*, to whom she bears many similarities, *Thyrza* is a victim of the conflict between her own aspirations and the demands of a social order insensitive to the needs of the individual.

Both physically and temperamentally, *Thyrza* is unfitted for the unending “battle for the day’s food” which dominates the life of the working class. Her recurrent heart pains mark the fragility that distinguishes her from such sturdy and resilient work-girls as Totty Nancarrow; and she is further separated from the average girl of her class by a natural refinement, and a tendency to “sad dreaming.” *Thyrza*’s frail body is tortured by the yearnings of a passionate imagination; and, as Gissing indicates in a passage recalling the frequent expression of a similar sentiment by Joseph Conrad, imagination is not always a desirable quality:

The happy people of the world are the dull, unimaginative beings from whom the gods, in their kindness, have veiled all vision of the rising and the setting day, of sea-limits, and of the stars of the night, whose ears are thickened against the voice of music, whose thought finds nowhere mystery. *Thyrza Trent* was not of those. What joys were to be hers she must pluck out of the fire, and there are but few of her kind whom in the end fire does not consume. (ch. XXXIII, p. 396)

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She thinks to find satisfaction for her longings in an ideal and elevating love that rises above the constraints of the social code; but she must learn that her simple love is powerless against the prejudices of a society whose morality, divested of natural values, is governed by the artificial distinctions of wealth and position. Early in the novel Thyrsa is stirred by Grail's reading from a popular biography of Sir Thomas More: "...her heart throbbed with indignation at wrongs greater than any she had ever imagined" (ch. VI, p. 64). The comparison implied in this reference to a martyred saint is later echoed in the description of Mrs. Ormonde's feeling when, confronted by Thyrsa's suffering, she feels a sense of shame and inadequacy:

Egremont's perishable love, her own prudential forecasts and schemings, were stamped poor, worldly, ignoble, in comparison with this sacred and extinguishable ardour. As a woman she felt herself rebuked by the ideal of womanly fidelity; she was made to feel the inferiority of her nature to that which fate had chosen for this supreme martyrdom. (ch. XXXVI, p. 455.)

Thyrsa displays a fineness of spirit which demands admiration and compassion; but her saintly qualities, like More's, are out of place in a coarse-grained and unspiritual environment.

Although her misfortunes spring largely from the freakishness of her initial situation – a *belle fleur* blooming desolate on a city dung-heap – her spirit is finally broken through her contact with those whose life is the substance of her dreams, and who seem to offer a way towards escape and happiness. Swinnerton expresses regret at the introduction of Egremont and Mrs. Ormonde into the story of Thyrsa's personal tragedy. "It would possibly have been more true to what Gissing (quoting Lamb) called 'the quiddity of common objects' if Thyrsa had been allowed to find the tragedy of her soul without quitting her own environment" (*George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 1912, pp. 71-72.) But despite the limitation of Gissing's somewhat unsatisfactory picture of upper-class life, its inclusion is necessary in order to emphasize that there is no place in society for the "upward striving soul" in pursuit of a personal ideal. Thyrsa tries to make herself a "lady" for Egremont's sake; but the sophisticated upper-middle class to which Egremont belongs is no more capable of understanding or embracing her pure and passionate soul than the working class in which she is spiritually an alien.

The attitudes of Mrs. Ormonde, Thyrsa's self-appointed guardian, reveal how far the workings of the social instinct may impair the imagination and sensibility of even a cultured and sensitive mind. Mrs. Ormonde's interference has been criticized as warping the natural development of the plot; but despite possible weaknesses in her characterization, her action in stepping between Thyrsa and her dream is an integral part of Gissing's conception. She is representative of all the better qualities of the upper classes: refined, liberal, humane; yet she is no more able to comprehend the nature of Thyrsa's passion than the uneducated Lydia. Class tradition dictates that Lydia, on learning of her sister's love for Egremont, should immediately regard the latter as a typical upper-class seducer: "A gentleman did not fall in love with a work-girl, not in the honest sense"; she is led to this conclusion by the "prejudices of her class" which force her to argue "from her predisposition regarding the class of 'gentlemen'" (ch. XXIII, p. 272.) The prejudices of class may not be so readily apparent in the reactions of Mrs. Ormonde; but they still influence her assessment of the probable outcome of Egremont's association with a girl from the slums. She sincerely believes that, despite Thyrsa's undoubted superiority among those of her own class, the girl could "never by any possibility be a fit

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companion" for Egremont (ch. XXVIII, p. 342). Her class instinct tells her to protect him from the consequences of what she can only consider as a rash and foolish infatuation. Mrs. Ormonde's misinterpretation of Thyrsa's equanimity during the lovers' enforced separation is again prompted by a traditional response to experience; practical common sense tells her that Thyrsa must have outgrown her passion and learnt to accept her limitations. Only when Thyrsa

reveals the undying flame of her love does Mrs. Ormonde realize how inapplicable her standards were to a passion “very near madness.” Yet even a sense of shame is not enough to shake her adherence to the code by which she has acted: “...there was something *repugnant to her instinct*, something impossible, in the thought of undoing all she had done. Egremont’s position would be ignoble. Impossible to retrace her steps!” (ch. XXXVIII, p. 450; my italics). In her willingness to sacrifice Thyrza for the sake of Egremont and Annabel, Mrs. Ormonde shows an ingrained acquiescence in the law of propriety and social acceptability. She is not unfeeling: she is merely realistic.

Egremont is governed by the same laws, despite his intelligence and warm sensibility. He agrees to Mrs. Ormonde’s proposal of a two-year separation because his passion is not proof against his breeding; he is unwilling to forgo his friendship with this charming and sensible woman, because the bond of a common background and outlook is too strong. Later, during his exile, he is hardened by his contact with the rough-and-tumble of business in America, where, as he himself admits, much of the humbug and self-conceit is knocked out of him. His attitudes become more worldly and practical as he learns to moderate his views and adapt himself to his social environment. His passion for Thyrza is similarly tempered by experience, eventually dying completely; and his return to England is prompted only by a sense of obligation towards Thyrza which Mrs. Ormonde soon convinces him is mistaken. Egremont is perplexed by the report that Thyrza is happy without him, but at the same time it answers his secret hope; and his new-found common sense tells him that to marry the girl under such circumstances would be “to incur a wholly needless risk” (ch. XXXVII, p. 444.) Though he has sometimes been troubled by the thought that he was not born to gentility, the tendency of his social and intellectual growth is towards that sphere; and in reuniting himself with Annabel Newthorpe, Egremont tacitly acknowledges the gap that must always separate him from Thyrza.

Thyrza’s role is thus emphasize the spiritual inadequacies of those around her. She alone is not moulded and fixed by the traditions of a class-conscious society; and unlike the sorrowful Grail, she cannot learn to accept the material limitations imposed on her by birth and environment. Her aristocratic nature transcends the artificial barriers of class, money, education; but her aspirations are hopeless of fulfillment, since they cannot awaken a like response in those who have been conditioned by society, and who are thus unable to advance beyond customary modes of feeling.

In this central theme of spiritual alienation, *Thyrza* reflects the “frustrated utopianism” discussed by Mr. Jack Zucker in his article on “Gissing’s Tragic Thought” (*Newsletter* II, April 1966, 1-3.) Mr. Zucker notes the struggle between Gissing’s love of idealism and his consciousness of a rampant and destructive materialism: an inner division which sometimes leads to a subjective vindication of the defeated idealists with whom he identifies so closely. However, the disparity between the real and the ideal does not produce the tone of self-pity identified by Mr. Zucker in such novels as *New Grub Street*. Nor does Gissing’s pessimism find

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relief in violent condemnation of those immediately responsible for Thyrza’s fate; Egremont and Mrs. Ormonde are sympathetically presented throughout the novel. Certainly there is unequivocal contempt for those figures like Dalmaine, the calculating politician who reduces everything to the principle of self; but there is a deeper irony in Thyrza’s situation in that her nobility is imperfectly perceived by characters who in other ways are admirable representatives of those humane values cherished by Gissing himself. The problem is that they are in and of the world, governed – however involuntarily – by the inhibiting pressures of their environment, whereas Thyrza’s ardent spirit moves on a different plane, inspired with an unmistakably romantic appeal; but though it is evident that her plight reflects his own sense of frustrated idealism, he succeeds in presenting her inevitable defeat without undue sentimentality. As Thomas Seccombe shrewdly commented in his early survey of Gissing’s work, the pathos in this novel is “untainted.”

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A significant allusion to Gissing occurs in the "Speaking of Books" column by Edward Dahlberg in the *New York Times Book Review* of June 12, 1966. Writing about "the writer's plight," Dahlberg says, "Since my callow youth I was a zealot for erudition. It was not unusual for me to eat one meal a day in order to purchase a second hand copy of Gissing's 'By The Ionian Sea,' Tolstoy's 'What is Art?' and Goncharov's 'Oblomov.' A true writer is a learned reader. One wise man will conduct you to another...."

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### The Character of Earwaker in *Born in Exile*

by P. F. Kropholler  
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It has frequently been pointed out that some of Gissing's characters are really reflections of his own personality. It seems to me that on the other hand Earwaker in *Born in Exile* represents the sort of person he could not help envying.

Among the dozen or so major characters in this novel Earwaker does indeed occupy a special position. While most of the other men tend to be weak, Earwaker stands firm as a rock.

The most obvious comparison to make is, of course, with Godwin Peak, with whom at the outset he has something in common. Both are physically ungainly and their backgrounds are similar. If anything, Peak is of somewhat higher birth than Earwaker, whose father is a plain working-man.

At the prize-giving Peak's success shows that he may have a more brilliant mind. Earwaker concentrates on the literary line, in which he obtains prizes for poetry and essay-writing.

True, Earwaker has not the handicap of a Cockney uncle opposite the college, but one feels somehow he would have coped with the situation more effectively than Peak.

Earwaker plans his career methodically. By way of provincial journalism he ends up as editor of a respected London weekly. As Christian Moxey observes to Peak: "There's nothing like having a special line of work and sticking to it vigorously." In fact, Earwaker is the only character in *Born in Exile* to observe this sensible rule.

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Earwaker is not ashamed of his low birth. He is glad to support his parents in their old age and without embarrassment he introduces his father to Moxey, who is definitely middle-class.

Earwaker's secret is his stolid character, which is partly due to his ability to steer clear of amorous entanglements.

It is not surprising that whenever the other characters in *Born in Exile* are in trouble they immediately turn to Earwaker.

Thus, Malkin expects and receives Earwaker's help throughout his imbroglios with the Jacox family, and when he feels puzzled after the fatal meeting with Buckland at the Moxeys' he is "vastly impatient" to see Earwaker.

Similarly, after his downfall Peak first of all turns to Earwaker, who "would help him to recover his mental balance," and though Earwaker has been treated rather cavalierly by his friend he receives him with kindness and understanding.

That Gissing considered him a happy man appears from a discussion on happiness in chapter IV of Part III: "The exemption of painful shock (is) in itself a happiness, to be rated

highly in comparison with most of those disturbances known as moments of joy,” and Peak finally pays an unconscious tribute to Earwaker when at last he realizes the homespun worth of his own humble relatives.

Earwaker’s “calm of mind, all passion spent” might be derived from the teaching of the Stoics. As Marcus Aurelius – a favourite of Gissing’s – said in his *Meditations*: “If thou workest at that which is before thee, following right reason seriously, vigorously, calmly, without allowing anything else to distract thee...thou wilt live happy.” (Long’s translation)

This state of mind reminds us of Ryecroft and also of the monks of Mt. Cassino (in *Veranilda*): “On all (faces) was manifest a simple contentment... And then there suddenly flashed upon his mind what seemed an all-sufficient explanation of this calm, this happiness. Here entered no woman.”

Love might be the “crown of life,” but as Shakespeare reminded us in another context: “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.”

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### Information Wanted

Since I am preparing an edition of the collected correspondence of George Gissing, I am interested in hearing from any readers who may own or have information about holdings of Gissing letters. I am particularly anxious to find the originals of those printed in the 1927 edition of family letters, a number of which I have not been able to locate.

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### Ryecroft in French

By Jacob Korg

*Les Carnets d'Henry Ryecroft* par George Gissing. A bilingual edition of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* with French translation, introduction and notes by Pierre Coustillas. Collection bilingue, Aubier, Paris, 1966.

This edition makes Gissing and his most popular book accessible to the French public, but everyone interested in Gissing who reads French will want to see it, for it contains much fresh information and valuable critical analysis. Before long we hope to publish a review by a critic who is in a position to evaluate the translation, but in the meantime the appearance of this unusual contribution to Gissing studies cannot be allowed to pass without a report to *Newsletter* readers.

Mr. Coustillas has provided an extensive apparatus to his text, so that his book is at once a thorough annotation of the Ryecroft papers and an introduction to Gissing as a figure in English literature. The introduction contains a detailed biographical summary, a critical review of Gissing’s work describing each of his novels, and an account of the composition, publication and reception of the Ryecroft papers. An important feature of this introduction is the description of a manuscript version of the Ryecroft papers (bearing its original title of *An Author at Grass*)

newly discovered by Mr. Coustillas which differs considerably from the published book. In this early draft, Ryecroft lives in Wells rather than Exeter, and is killed by a bolt of lightning while taking a walk. This manuscript is compared in detail with the final version, and it is particularly interesting, of course, to see the rejected sections, which are here published or summarized for the first time.

The critical evaluation with which the introduction ends sets *Ryecroft* against the background of the various traditions to which it may be assigned. Mr. Coustillas examines it as an example of the genre of the fictional journal, as an expression of opposition to the city and the scientific spirit, and a representative of the essay form.

The text and translation are followed by exceptionally thorough and informative detailed notes which identify quotations, allusions and persons referred to, points out parallels in Gissing's other books, and establish significant relations between passages in the Ryecroft papers and Gissing's own life and thoughts. The working papers of *Ryecroft* included not only the early draft, but Gissing's *Commonplace Book*, and a manuscript Memorandum Book recently acquired by the Huntington Library, and Mr. Coustillas has traced numerous passages to sources in these manuscripts. A good example of the thoroughness of these notes is the one appended to "Winter XXIII." This section contains six reminiscences of the English countryside, and Mr. Coustillas has been able to relate each of them to a specific date and occasion in Gissing's life.

How does *Ryecroft* sound in French? Here is an example, the whole of the very short section, "Spring VI" in Mr. Coustillas' translation

Combien de printemps puis-je encore espérer voir? Un tempérament optimiste dirait dix ou douze ; humblement, laissez-moi espérer en voir cinq

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ou six. C'est beaucoup. Cinq ou six printemps accueillis avec joie, contemplés avec tendresse, de la première chélidoine au bourgeonnement de la rose ; qui osera parler de faveur chichement dispensée ? Cinq ou six fois le miracle de la terre de neuf vêtue, cette vision de splendeur et de beauté qu'aucune langue n'a encore su décrire, placée sous mes yeux ravis. Je crains, lorsque j'y pense, de trop demander.

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### Our Italian Journey

#### Part III

by Hélène Coustillas

Rain and storm kept us in our room for the whole of the next morning. It cleared slightly and we started for Naples, but had to stop twice; rain was pouring so heavily, the screen-wiper was quite useless, and we could not see what lay before us. We reached Naples at last, and spent most of our time in the National Museum, looking at the statues, paintings, mosaics, bronze, gold, silver, brass, glass, jewels and utensils, weapons and pottery treasured there, from Herculaneum and Pompeii. After which we went in search of the Casa di Luca, where Gissing had stayed, and a difficult search it proved, particularly as the street name has been changed from Vico Brancaccio to Viale Nicola Fornelli. Up flights of stairs, down narrow streets, enquiring from six different people, we managed at last to find the old, tall house, in a kind of blind alley fairly high up on a hill. In Gissing's time it must have been quite a decent place, but has grown by now a bit shabby. However, we were delighted to have found it.

The whole of the next day we spent in Naples. The traffic was tremendous (buses,

trams, cars, cabs, foot-passengers, bicycles, fought their way in the narrow streets often blocked by works going on) and it took us a long time to reach the Pinacoteca at the Museo de Capodimonte, in a vast palace amid a large park. We wandered for hours in the rooms where are gathered the works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian painters, rooms with richly decorated ceilings, royal apartments with portraits of the Bourbon family, of Napoleon and other people of his period, numberless rooms crammed with exceptional collections of vases from all ages and all countries, of weapons and armour, and tapestries of gigantic size – and at last came to the Renaissance rooms where we got a bit tired of Madonnas and Saints, and still lifes of all descriptions: flowers, fruit, game, fish, etc... In fact, to take it all in, we should have gone several times, instead of wanting to see everything on a single visit. We then walked the best part of the afternoon, past the San Carlo theatre, along the busy via Chiaia, through a maze of narrow – and often sordid – streets and flights of steps, to the Castel Sant' Elmo and the Charterhouse of San Martino overlooking the town. We couldn't go into either, but from the terrace glimpsed the wide and beautiful view over the town, the sea, and faithful Vesuvius. Begging little urchins ran after us on the way down.

Maybe we did not stay long enough to get to like Naples as much as Gissing did. And of course, we did not see *all* of it; in particular, we did not go into a single one of the numerous churches. But the noise, the traffic jams, and the sad-looking, dark streets somehow put off the 20<sup>th</sup> century city people that we are. In spite of the sunshine and the setting, we did not like it as

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much as Amalfi, or Siena, or Catanzaro, which, besides being also sunshiny and picturesque, were far more restful.

On again next day to Taranto: 350 km of winding, narrow mountain roads over which we drove for 7 ½ hours, cutting through the peninsula; Salerno, Battipaglia, Eboli, Vietri di Potenza, Potenza, Tricarico, Matera, Laterza, Castellaneta, Massafra, Taranto. Between Eboli and Matera in particular, we crossed beautiful country; mountains and uplands, very often bare, or tilled to their very top, small plains and valleys, stretching for miles without a single village, without a single house, all shades of yellow and brown and deep blue, the towns where the population is collected, whitish-gray and crowning the steepest heights in fantastic shapes. Very few cars and very few people on the narrow road, but here and there some peasants – men or women – in old-fashioned garb, astride their mules or standing on narrow, very high, wooden carts, with enormous wheels. From Matera we lost height gradually to reach the level plain of Taranto, the towns with their white square houses assuming a very North African look. Olive orchards and vineyards were here enclosed by low stone walls.

We liked Taranto very much. The flat sea-shore gives an impression of boundless space you don't get where mountains shut in the view. The "lungomare," planted with tall graceful palm-trees, wide and lined with elegant buildings, is very pleasant in the evening. There were oyster beds in the Mare Grande, which we could see from our hotel room, and more oyster beds in the Mare Piccolo, as in Gissing's time. The old town can't have changed much since his day and there are still streets – mere alleys – where you can stretch your arms and touch the houses on each side without any effort. On the Mare Piccolo side of the old town is a small fishing harbour where we spent some time watching with pleasure the yellow and green boats (with big round lamps fitted on their stern for night fishing), the fishermen bringing in their fish or shell-fish and selling them immediately on the quay, a highly colourful picture of activity. We also went into the Duomo and saw San Cataldo chapel, with its rich multicoloured marble decorations.

The new town, with its straight, regular streets, cutting each other at square angles, did not shock us as much as they did Gissing. It was a change from the close-packed, dark usual places; and the shops were more inviting. We also found the people were – as we also found they were in Calabria – much more kindly and ready to help than they are in and around Naples. We spent one whole morning in the Museum, newly built and pleasantly arranged, looking once more at numberless ancient vases of all shapes and decorations (ochre with black designs or black with

ochre designs), jewelry, mosaics, statues, coins, and even prehistoric findings. Also the sarcophagus of a winner at the Olympic games, with the skeleton and mortuary vases still in and very much as if nothing had ever been touched. All of the items date from the 6<sup>th</sup> C. B.C. to the first centuries of our era, but most of them were collected after Gissing was there in 1897. (To be continued)

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