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“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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George Gissing: Positivist in the Dawn

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The Positivism which fascinated Gissing in his early years in London and which found expression in his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, was that inaugurated by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte. Initially conceived as a synthesis of scientific knowledge and emphasising the need for empirical verification, it developed into the Religion of Humanity, which encouraged a sense of belonging to the race, the only real object worthy of worship, in its historical past, its present needs and its future progress. Individuals could contribute to the moral development of the race, Comte thought, by cultivating their altruistic instincts and

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allowing their egoistic instincts to wither from neglect. The philosophical side of Positivism had achieved a certain status in Victorian Britain through the advocacy of such respected thinkers as John Stuart Mill and George Henry Lewes and a certain notoriety through a number of violent controversies in the periodical press. Its religious elements were stressed by the official leaders of Positivism, who were just recovering from their famous schism of 1878, when some of Richard Congreve’s former pupils, including Frederic Harrison, broke away from his more rigid interpretation of Comte to continue the London Positivist Society as a more liberal gathering of like-minded humanists who drew their inspiration from Comte but were not bound by his every utterance (Simon 1963; Eisen 1967: 574-90).

Gissing’s involvement with Positivism was brief but intense. As a young man in London in his early twenties he read Comte eagerly, attended the meetings of the Positivist Society and looked on the Religion of Humanity as the only hope for the future. His loss of faith in Comte, however, a result of temperamental as much as philosophical disaffinity, led to a rejection of all creeds. When the “ecclesiastical buzzards” boasted of his death-bed conversion, his friend Morley Roberts announced that he had held no “creed whatsoever” and that his “temporary Positivist pose” had been “entirely due to his gratitude” to Frederic Harrison (Roberts 1958: 221, 96). Positivism, according to Roberts, was “a disease ... rarely fatal to the young” from which Gissing had “speedily recovered” when its “plaster deity” was shattered by the reality of

London (Coustillas 1972: 209). He was later “disturbed and shocked” when presented with the evidence that he had for a time dated his letters by the Positivist Calendar (Roberts 1958: 100).

That Gissing’s faith in the Religion of Humanity was genuine, however, is shown by letters to his family which precede any contact with Harrison (Donnelly 1954: 10). Although Positivist ideas are most obviously present in his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, they can also

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be found in his later writing, on which Comte remains one of the “major ideological influences” (Goode 1978: 143). The influence is not always positive; sometimes the novels satirise the sort of “agnostic optimism” associated with Comte. The part played by Positivism in the later novels is difficult to identify with precision because it was absorbed into more general themes. But the struggle of mankind against evil which they portray takes place against a philosophical background in which the Religion of Humanity retains an important presence.

That Gissing had read Comte by November 1878 is clear from the detailed description of the positive hierarchy of the sciences in a letter to his brother Algernon full of enthusiasm for Comte’s “wonderful *résumé* of all human knowledge” as the basis for a solution to their state of social anarchy (GG to Algernon, 9/11/78, Berg; see Donnelly 1954: 42). He had to admit the following January that Comte’s hopes of preaching in Notre-Dame had been “too sanguine.” But having “pierced so deeply into the secret of history and gained so clear an insight into the future of the human race,” Comte could be excused for expecting others to be convinced by his “clear proofs and statements” (GG, *LMF* : 42). “I have adopted the Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte,” Gissing announced to his brother in May, going on to give a lengthy account of its scientific methods and humanitarian ends. The trouble with Christianity was that it attempted to answer “impossible questions as to the *origin* of the world and life, of which man *can know nothing*.” Concentrating on the essential question, “How shall I conduct my life?” Positivism constructed a synthesis of human knowledge, including a “*history of the world*,” sufficient for the regulation of the individual and society and for the “elevation of humanity” (GG to Algernon, 9/5/80, Yale; see *Essays*: 14, Korg 1963: 40). Another letter of this period expresses a belief in the subjective “immortality” to be gained by a beneficial influence on “those living in contact with us,” spreading “like the circles ... in a pool ... to the whole future human race” (GG, *LMF* : 69).

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Desperate at the lack of success of his first novel, Gissing turned to the one person he felt might “understand the spirit in which it is written,” the man whose own writing had led him to Comte, Frederic Harrison (GG to FH, 9/7/80, Pforzheimer; see Coustillas 1972: 53), who proceeded to puff the book among his influential friends. Grateful for this, and for Harrison’s encouragement, Gissing explained that the “light of Positivism” shone all the more gloriously for him since it was the first faith he had ever held. But he repeated the warning implicit in the novel, “the necessity for a personal invasion of these realms of darkness” by those who wished to impart that light to the poor (GG to FH, 23/7/80, Pforzheimer; see *Essays* : 15). Gissing himself clearly enjoyed the patronage and the meals he began to receive from Harrison, with whom he was soon boasting of “constant intercourse” (GG to Algernon, 3/11/80, Yale; cp. *LMF* : 80). The same letter records his first visit to the Positivist Society, when, as at subsequent visits early in 1881, the main topic of discussion was Home Rule (GG, *LMF* : 84, 90; cp. *LPS* 1/1, 29/10/80, 28/1 and 29/4/81). At one of these meetings he had to act as German interpreter (GG, *Essays*: 16). He began teaching Harrison’s two sons in December and Vernon Lushington’s four girls the following January. Beesly meanwhile found him a regular space in a Russian journal (GG, *LMF* : 85-88).

The enthusiasm for the Religion of Humanity which runs through Gissing’s letters to his brother of 1881 goes much further than gratitude to the Positivists. He began dating them according to the Positivist Calendar, which he explained for his brother’s benefit, at the end of January (GG, *LMF* : 90-91). He tried to restrict references to Positivism to its “*intellectual side*” rather than “press” the religion upon him. But for himself, he confessed, “its emotional side, the so-termed Religion of Humanity,” had “vast influence” and he felt “this enthusiasm for the Race to be a force perfectly capable of satisfying the demands usually supplied by creeds, confessions, etc.” (GG, *LMF* : 92). The belief that supernatural religion was necessary for humanitarian zeal

and that its abandonment would lead to unrestricted egoism was “all nonsense,” he exclaimed: “in times to come the mere enthusiasm of humanity will inspire generosity and self-sacrifice yielding in no respect to this of the religionists” (GG to Algernon, 19/6/81, Yale). A letter to his sister Margaret of September preaches a similarly Positivist belief in the twin duties of acquiring “positive knowledge” and living for others (GG, *LMF* : 104).

Gissing’s enthusiasm for the Religion of Humanity seems to have waned in 1882. He continued to be impressed by the “inexhaustible kindness” of the Harrisons, who, having heard of his illness, insisted on his having lunch with them twice a week (GG, *LMF*: 108). But a combination of domestic problems, deteriorating health and growing distaste for public meetings of any kind led him to cease attending the meetings of the Positivist Society after May, 1881, when he met Laffitte (GG, *Essays*: 16; Halperin 1982: 43-4). His doubts about the Religion of Humanity found expression in an article on “The Hope of Pessimism,” stimulated by Seeley’s *Natural Religion* (GG, *Essays*: 18), which “developed into nothing more nor less than an attack on Positivism” (GG, *LMF* : 120). The Religion of Humanity is taken as the most philosophically respectable representative of that “unconscious optimism of humanity” which so amazes “deep-pondering minds.” It is “the first serious attempt to replace the old supernatural faiths,” which were fundamentally pessimistic, with a coherent system built upon the advances of science. It is the last bastion of “philosophical optimism”: demolish this and you are left with pessimism alone (GG, *Essays*: 76-9).

This Gissing proceeds to do. He describes the appeal of the “Religion of Humanity” to “practical, energetic minds” (such as Harrison’s) and even “for a season, – to less easily satisfied intelligences” (such as his own). “It is the philosophy of cheerful resignation” and accordingly worthier of respect than coarser forms of optimism. But its basic tenets, that man can eradicate his metaphysical tendencies, accept the limitations of his intellect and find rest in a

common-sense “realistic” interpretation of the universe, cultivating his innate altruistic instincts in the service of Humanity without any supernatural sanctions, are far too optimistic for Gissing, who finds them neither possible nor desirable. He cannot accept that the positive stage will be the final stage of evolution, for natural science is striking at “every moment against the barriers of the unknowable” while the mass of mankind, incapable of remaining agnostic, will find solutions to the mystery of life in mysticism, pantheism or some form of superstition. The “struggle for mere existence” absorbs so much of their energy that they are unlikely to devote themselves to abstract study or to cultivate their altruistic instincts. These high ideals falter before the facts of suffering and “the convincing metaphysics of death” (80-87).

Gissing turns with a lament to the object of Positivist devotion, the supposed stimulus to altruism:

Alas, and can we really persuade ourselves that man will ever worship man in spirit and in truth? Granting that Humanity is the highest we can ever know, that it is vain to seek after another God, are we not too fatally conscious of the distance between the utmost human goodness, and that ideal which we are capable of conceiving?

Since such an “ideal embodiment of man’s noblest faculties and attainments ... will never find its avatar in human flesh,” Gissing suggests that “our only guide” should be “our own good instincts.” And since they have proved so ineffectual to prevent the “flagrant social misery” which even the belief in a divine Father failed to prevent, he can hold no hope that our painfully excogitated philosophy” will achieve “final regeneration for all mankind.” The world, he concludes, “is synonymous with evil” and the conviction that this is the only world there is can only lead to “the strengthening of the natural forces of egotism.” The social and economic climate in which most men live, the “scheme of commercial competition” in which only the

fittest survive, hardly encourages the “heroism” involved in sacrificing one’s own share of

earthly goods for the sake of our fellows. Gissing therefore falls back upon Schopenhauer's pessimism. Egotism, the inevitable product of the will to live, can only be subdued by the "severest asceticism." The "lot of humanity" has been full of sadness and suffering. The only solution, therefore, is the extinction of the will to live and the cultivation of compassion, "the divinest feeling of which our nature is capable," combined with a keen "perception of men's weakness." The time may then come when "compassion will so far weigh against egotism as to abolish the system of competitive greed," death will be welcomed as a release from suffering and "a childless race will dedicate its breath to the eternal silence" (88-97).

Gissing, who felt understandably "uncomfortable at the thought of Harrison reading" this essay (GG, *LMF*: 120), did not even submit it for publication. The Harrisons continued to look after him, inviting him to their house in Surrey, building up his strength with daily meals and lending him money (GG to Algernon, 12/7, 2/9 and 1/10/83, Yale). But the contrast between their world and his, between their middle-class respectability and the sordid details of his daily life, between Harrison's temperament and tastes, optimistic towards life and didactic in art, and Gissing's preference for pessimism and naturalism, surfaced in fierce quarrels. Harrison's attack on "Mrs. Grundy's Enemies," which was never published, led Gissing to address the work "to those to whom Art is dear for its own sake" (GG, *LMF*: 122; Donnelly 1954: 53). He had also to apologise for the shock caused in the Harrison household by *The Unclassed*: "it all looks so like wanton disregard of your feelings and opinion" (GG to FH, 24/6/84). Austin Harrison recalled his tutor insisting "I must wallow and describe," and his father replying "No, you should regain your moral strength through social enthusiasm" (A. Harrison 1926: 84).

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These arguments seem to have reached a crisis early in 1885, when Gissing confided to his brother that his "intercourse with the Harrisons" was "as good as over." They were "so little akin. I have never met more conventional people ... in the purely social matters." To them he was merely "an enemy of society" (GG to Algernon, 31/1/85, Yale). Their relationship had undergone additional strain when a chance encounter with a former college friend forced Gissing into a full confession of his expulsion (Gettmann 1961: 230). Gissing tended at best to be "unnerved" by the high society to which the Harrisons introduced him and towards the end of 1884 opted for the squalor and loneliness of his lodgings without the demands upon his time and energy made by teaching and socializing (A. Harrison 1926: 453-63). He continued to spend the occasional day with the Harrisons in Surrey (GG, *LMF*: 167) but remained sensitive to their difference of class. When he sat down to his own "squalid meal" he would speculate on Harrison's likely reaction to it (Roberts 1958: 89). He was annoyed not only when they did not invite him to dinner properly (Donnelly 1954: 86) but also when they did, since it interrupted his work (GG, *Diary*: 146-7).

Gissing seems to have got on rather better with Ethel Harrison than with her husband, although the sympathy he received from her brought out his worst self-pity. He would describe for her benefit the symptoms of his nervous condition as well as the "glorious black depths" of London (GG to EBH, 6/7/84, 21/4/91, Pforzheimer). She sent him "two magnificent photographs" of herself and her husband (GG, *LMF*: 322) and invited him to stay (GG, *Diary*, 289). Gissing expressed his gratitude to Harrison in 1895 for fifteen years of support, assuring him that he kept abreast of his work (GG to FH, 7/11/95, Pforzheimer) but when he met the Positivist at a Cosmopolis dinner the following year, "after a lapse of 6 or 7 years," found his speech "sadly dull" and "ponderous" (GG, *Diary*: 414). They seem never to have met again. After Gissing's death Harrison undertook to write a more acceptable preface to his

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posthumously published historical novel, *Veranilda*, than that produced by Wells but his characteristically incautious remark that it was "by far the most important book" he ever wrote stirred up a storm of critical protest. Harrison claimed to have "a deep sympathy" with Gissing's "genius" (Coustillas 1968: 588-610) but maintained a private conviction that *Workers in the Dawn* was his best work (GG, *LC*: 25). He combined with Wells and Gosse, however, to provide a pension for Gissing's children.

Traces of Gissing's development away from Positivism can be observed outside his relationship with the Harrisons. As early as 1883 he told his brother that "Philosophy ... scarcely

interests me any more" (GG, *LMF*: 128), although he assured him the following year, sending him a parcel of Positivist pamphlets, that there was "much in Positivism of which you can make use" (GG to Algernon, 15/5/84). His few friends included James Cotter Morison, the wasting of whose talent, "ruined by luxury," he could only deplore (Roberts 1958: 111, GG, *LB*: 205). Certain passages in *The Service of Man* made him "nauseous," he confessed in 1887. "I cannot tell you how I loathe that positivism at present" (GG, *LB*: 4). *George Gissing's Commonplace Book*, which quotes Lecky's comment on the prostitute as "the eternal priestess of humanity" (GG, *CB*: 50), speculates on the possibility that "humanity will make place for something else, just as do the individual, the family, and the nation" (61). Quite what this larger entity might be he refuses to elaborate. For he could not accept "any of the solutions ever proposed" to the mystery of the universe (Clodd 1916: 180-81). The section on "Religion" in the *Commonplace Book* certainly ruled out Christianity, for which he could find only contempt (GG, *CB*: 47-49). But he described his early years in London as "a time of extraordinary mental growth, of great spiritual activity" (23), and Positivism, which he encountered and explored during this period, must rank as one of the most important factors in this development. It was a creed he grew away from but could not altogether forget.

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The Religion of Humanity looms large in Gissing's first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, which was written "to show the nobility of a faith dispensing with all we are accustomed to call religion, and having for its only creed a belief in the possibility of intellectual progress" (GG, *LMF*: 73). The plight of the poor, graphically illustrated in the very first chapter of the novel, could only be remedied by the "inculcation of humanitarian enthusiasm which 'Boycotted'" the economic system responsible for it. "Think what a force this same public opinion was in the best time of the Roman Republic" (GG to Algernon, 19/6/81, Yale). This is a classically Positivist solution to the social problems of the East End and the character in the novel who does most to alleviate the suffering of the poor is motivated by her Positivist faith.

Helen Norman returns to England from abroad, like Clym Yeobright, with "the unmistakable impress of thought" upon her forehead (GG, *WD*: I, 266). Introduced to Comte's work by her German mentor, Dr. Gmelin, she is immediately attracted by his principle that "the true destination of philosophy must be social" and by his insistence "upon the development of sympathetic instincts for the human race at large." Four months study of the *Cours* leaves her convinced of the need to abandon metaphysics, "delighted ... with his masterly following of the history of mankind," eager to help with "the progress of humanity" through the "re-modelling of all social theories in a purely scientific spirit" and altogether anxious to play her part "in the service of that true religion, the Religion of Humanity" (I, 325-92). "I have faith in Humanity," she declares, a faith, bolstered by Schopenhauer and Shelley, in which Comte's "lucid unfolding of the story of the world" occupies a central position (I, 333-35). This faith, of course, is tested by the squalor and vice of the London slums but her enthusiasm is upheld by the belief that the "greatest men that the world has known have ever retained to the last a vivid faith in humanity" (II, 8). She admits to the liberal-minded Dissenting minister Mr. Heatherley that his faith offers

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more "sources of consolation" but chooses for herself "the million glorious possibilities which humanity sees before it" in this world (II, 223).

Helen is "the goddess" first of Edward Norman's hearth (I, 27) and then of Arthur Golding, who compares her to Raphael's Madonna (I, 384) and makes his own portrait of her as a "Madonna" or "goddess" (II, 91-93), a sketch which plays a part in his private devotion, "the embodiment ... of all that is loftiest and most worthy of pursuit in life" (II, 188), "a never-failing source of courage and inspiration" (III, 221). She becomes "his patron saint" (III, 369), continuing to grace "the undefiled sanctuary of his soul" (III, 382). Under her influence and that of the printer, Mr. Tollady, who treats him as "a young and promising bud on the great tree of humanity" (I, 179), teaching him to abandon theology for history and to admire only those heroes "whom fate has ordained as instruments to *advance* humanity" (I, 242), Arthur becomes something of a Positivist. But his attempts to educate Carrie Mitchell and to render her "more worthy of his devotion" (II, 359) are markedly unsuccessful. She refuses to become a Goddess of Humanity, preferring to remain a "Priestess of Venus." Her occasional moments of

repentance reveal “a genuine gleam of womanly nature ... amid the foul gloom of a desecrated humanity” (III, 364) but she has more power to drag him down than he to raise her (III, 374).

The struggle between the altruistic and egoistic instincts, a central feature of this novel and of Gissing’s later work, is portrayed in terms of Positivist cerebral theory although Gissing remained less optimistic than Comte about the power of good to overcome the massive obstacles in its path. The problem is posed at the very beginning of the second volume, when Helen’s ardent humanitarian ideals are tested by the realities of East London. The bathos of the opening sentence underlines the difficulty of putting the Religion of Humanity into practice:

With a heart full of the noblest phantasies, the most lofty aspirations;
purified of that popular egotism which makes the self-conscious striving for

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one’s salvation antecedent to every other aim of life; beating high with an all-embracing affection for earth and the children of earth, bred of a natural ardour of disposition and nurtured upon the sweet and mighty thoughts of all great men; with a heart ... desirous of nothing more than to efface the recollection of self in complete devotion to the needs of those million sufferers whose voices had long cried to her with ever-growing pathos, Helen Norman had set foot once more upon the shores of England. (II, 1)

Her guardian takes a grim delight in taking her through the streets of London and pointing to the evidence of “self-brutalization,” of physical and mental “degeneration.” The “fine organs of virtue,” he explains, “have absolutely perished from their frames” (II, 6). They have atrophied from disuse while the egoistic instincts have strengthened through exercise.

Golding himself experiences the volatility of human nature, its talent for increasing its innate capacity both for good and for evil. He is forced to admit “how much of the sincerest love is pure egotism” (II, 162) and, in despair, attempts “to brutalize his own nature” (III, 123). It is a process that has already taken place among the impoverished inhabitants of East London where the “depths of human depravity” seem to confirm the cynic in his belief “that from the roots of humanity spring the seed of evil” (I, 106-07). The very word “humanity,” used to describe the Pettindunds, seems “grossly inappropriate” (II, 298). Even the angelic influence of Helen Norman fails to survive her death, the news of which deprives Arthur of his remaining will to live. Schopenhauer can be seen to be replacing Comte even in this novel, which contains the seeds of his later “disillusion with Comtism” (Francis 1960: 58; cp. Poole 1975: 63).

Some of the characters in Gissing’s later novels struggle to preserve a faith in humanity in the face of bitter experience. Osmond Waymark, the hero of *The Unclassed*, is a conscious

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backslider, speaking with distaste of his early enthusiasm for “The Gospel of Rationalism” (GG, *Unclassed* 54) into which he used to sublimate his “starved passions” (201). He finds Christianity too pessimistic, Christ “representing Humanity” in abnegation and self-denial, in contrast with Prometheus, who affords a more attractive type of “the triumphant aspiration of Humanity” (214). Of the unholy trinity which inspired Helen Norman, it is Shelley rather than Comte and Schopenhauer who seems to have had most impact on Waymark. In *Isabel Clarendon* Ada Warren actually reads “a volume of Comte” although she denies any adherence to Positivism (GG, *IC*: I, 61). The heroine of *Demos*, however, finds “work in the cause of humanity other than that which goes on so clamorously in lecture-halls and at street corners” (GG, *Demos*: 470), seeing more hope for moral improvement in art than in politics or religion.

The heroes of Gissing’s later novels tend to be “ashamed of the connection with street-corner rationalism” brought about by their rejection of Christianity (GG, *BE*: 132). Walter Egremont expresses similar distaste for “vulgar propagators of what is called free-thought” (GG, *Thyrza*: 14), such as the obnoxious Bunce, who forces his children to recite “a secularist’s creed” every night (24) and protests, “We want no religion,” as soon as Egremont speaks of the beauty and “spiritual significance” both of Christianity and of “all religious schemes which man had devised to replace it” (171). Egremont draws his own enthusiasm from minds fired with the “thought of the scientific and humanitarian age” (76). The lectures he delivers amount to

“preaching a religion” (87), falling into a form of “apostolicism” (143). He wants to revive “a religious spirit,” (93) a love of moral and intellectual beauty, which has clear affinities with the Religion of Humanity. But his philosophy, proves to be “a sham, a spinning of cobwebs for idle hours,” powerless to protect him against his passion for Thyrsa (253). Working-men such as Luke Ackroyd reject his attempt to make them “priggish and effeminate” in the face of “the

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hard facts of life” (410) and he himself adopts a more robust faith embodying a zest for life derived from Whitman, whose powerful soul “may stand for Humanity itself” in contrast with “the contemptibleness of average humanity” (421-24).

In *The Nether World* Michael Snowdon encourages his grand-daughter to read the Bible “as a source of moral instruction” of “a purely human significance.” “Sensitive to every prompting of humanity,” she prefers meditation upon “those beings amid whom she lived her life” to any form of theistic prayer (GG, NW: 151-52). The lessons of compassion and of service which she learns from his “religious teaching” lead her “to exercise all human and self-forgetful virtues” and to consecrate herself “to a life of beneficence” (227). The kind of “altruism” she is supposed to acquire from Miss Lant, however, smacks of the zeal which comes from perverted “natural satisfactions” in spite of its “purely human” sanction (229). Her grandfather becomes fanatical in his attempt to make her a “sort of social saint” (236), undergoing the “dehumanisation which threatens idealists of his type” are suspect (255). The “burden of duty” which she is called upon to bear and the ideas she is made to contemplate prove beyond her scope (312). She catches “a gleam of hope in renunciation itself” while Sidney Kirkwood is still with her (318) and treasures her grandfather’s memory. “In her,” she resolves, “his spirit must survive, his benevolence still be operative,” in a form of subjective immortality (348). The novel ends with the vestiges of a faith in humanity. Jane and Sidney face sorrow and probable defeat even in their “humble aims” but their lives remain “a protest against those brute forces of society which fill with wreck the abysses of the nether world” (391-92).

The impoverished novelist in *New Grub Street*, Edwin Reardon, has been called “an up-to-date Positivist of the eighties” (Bergonzi 1968: 17). He retains an “obstinate idealism” impractical and ineffectual, which his friends ridicule and rebuke (GG, NGS: 477). He cultivates “altruism,” which he defines as a “rarefied form of happiness” requiring “twice as much faith”

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as the Athanasian Creed (378), and is seen to have “worshipped” his unworthy wife (532). Godwin Peak comes even closer to Comtism (Korg 1968: 139; cp. Poole 1975: 173). The lectures at Whitelaw College disappoint him because they fall short of “the bold annunciation of newly discovered law, the science which had completely broken with tradition” (GG, BE: 53). He writes “several papers of sociological tenor” to “‘advanced’ reviews” (142), limiting his knowledge to “the mere relations of phenomena” as opposed to any “absolute faith” (185). He confesses to the French-reading Sidwell Warricombe, who is interested in “systems of philosophy which professed to establish a moral code, independent of supernatural faith” (244), that he too, in his “stage of optimism,” had harboured hopes for “the conversion of the educated to a purely human religion” (292). He tells a friend of hers to be “more positive” but not to “become a Positivist” (350). He retains his contempt for all forms of neo-Christianity, the “pious jugglery” that attempts to reconcile science and religion (127), writing, like Harrison, an outspoken critique of “The new Sophistry” (153) and attacking the “vague humanitarian impulse” behind Mr. Chilvers’ lecture on “Altruism” (289), ostensibly from the point of view of an orthodox Christian but actually from a more rigorously sceptical position.

The relationship between Rhoda Nunn and Everard Barfoot in *The Odd Women* has been labelled “an ideological struggle between Comte and Schopenhauer” (Goode 1978: 155). Rhoda, however, displays little of the positive spirit. She mocks the belief in “the essential human spirit” of religion expressed by Mary Barfoot, who accuses her later of being cold and “inhuman” to weaker women (GG, OW: 77, 195). She ends the novel by preaching the need to live in hope and think of others (451-2) but there is nothing to link her more specifically with Comte. Her work for the emancipation of women is directly opposed to Positivist principles. The French social theories propounded by Dyce Lashmar in *Our Friend the Charlatan* derive from Jean Izoulet rather than Comte, while Huxley’s more pessimistic view of evolution finds

expression in Lord Dymchurch (Korg 1963: 236-8). None of Gissing's characters after *Workers in the Dawn* can properly be called Positivist even if some of them retain a faith in humanity and the cultivation of altruism.

Gissing's novels, however, do portray a struggle between humanity and animality, altruism and egoism, which owes something to the Religion of Humanity. The difference between the real and the ideal, evident in his first novel, returns at the very beginning of his second. The second chapter of *The Unclassed*, entitled "Mother and Child," violently subverts the Positivist picture of the family. The mother drinks and walks the streets while the child nearly murders a classmate. When Lotty Starr visits her father with Ida in her arms, the very symbol of Humanity, she is turned away. She has a primitive "maternal instinct" to keep her child but Ida's passionate devotion to her mother only illustrates the little regard nature has for "social codes" (GG, *U*: 23-5). The hero of the novel has even less regard for conventional morality. His early idealization of the virtuous Maud Enderby as a "being from a higher world" who occupies for a time "the sanctuary of his imagination" (80-81) soon gives way to the more "passionate imaginings" aroused by Ida's beauty (107). He remains for a long time unattracted by the prospect of a conventional marriage with Ida, who is associated with his "least noble instincts," in contrast with his "good angel" Maud (224), but Ida does in the end win both his respect and his hand.

Nowhere is the battle between humanity and animality more fiercely fought than in *The Nether World*. The quality of humanity, that compassionate concern for others which Comte saw as raising men above animals, is only noted at the beginning of the novel for its absence (GG, *NW*: 1, 5). Gissing lingers with fascinated repulsion over the "animal" nature of the masses and ponders over the changes required to "humanize the multitude" (109). The slums of

Shooter's Gardens teem with the "hapless spawn of diseased humanity" born only "to embitter and brutalise yet further the lot of those who unwillingly gave them life" (130). Clem Peckover is constantly called "brutal" (6, 8, 260) and even Sidney Kirkwood is subject to "brutal" and "animal instincts" (92, 118). Clara Hewett's arguments with her father about leaving home bring out "all the selfish forces of her nature" (28) while her quarrel with Sidney Kirkwood, which pierces his "core of love and pity," only exasperates her "egotism" (93-95). She soon becomes "abandoned to a fierce egoism" in which all "noble feeling was extinct" (203). She has sufficient "tender emotions" to make a last desperate bid for Sidney's hand, an act of "supreme egoism" which the narrative refuses to condemn since it has been predetermined (293-95), but her "egotism" continues to resist Sidney's patient persuasion even after their marriage (379).

Gissing's low view of mankind emerges all too clearly in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, whose combination of "despairing agnosticism" and "tentative positivism" can be taken for his own (Korg 1963: 243-4). Ryecroft, who sees man as anti-social, "by nature self-assertive, commonly aggressive" and always hostile to anything unusual (GG, *HR*: 92), turns his back on the "well-millinered and tailored herd" (114) to live in splendid isolation in the country, where he finds the life of the birds "far more reasonable, and infinitely more beautiful, than that of the masses of mankind" (221). "History is a nightmare of horrors," he announces, holding out just as little hope for the future, in which science will not be the saviour but "the remorseless enemy of mankind" (265-68). The ideals he retains are those of the Religion of Humanity very much watered down. He looks to bloodless solutions to future international quarrels, although tempted to indifference by war-mongering newspaper articles (95-97). He deplores the esoteric spiritualist cults he observes springing up in reaction to "scientific positivism" and "agnosticism," which were "far too reasonable to endure" (174-75).

But he derives some comfort from contemplating the possible, if unlikely, dawning of "the age of true positivism," a "rationalist millennium" to be fostered by "the habits of thought favoured by physical science" (181-82). The book ends on a relatively optimistic note. For although Ryecroft himself remains frightened of the world he retains great admiration for those "bright souls" who form "a great brotherhood, without distinction of race or faith" in the service of

humanity. They “constitute the race of man, rightly designated, and their faith is one, the cult of reason and of justice” (289). Ryecroft’s tentative affirmations are all that seem to have remained of Gissing’s youthful faith.

Abbreviations and References

Manuscripts

For permission to publish passages from Gissing’s letters I would like to express my thanks to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; the Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation, Inc., for documents in possession of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library, New York; the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; also to the British Library of Political and Economic Science for the reference to the papers of the London Positivist Society (LPS).

Works by George Gissing (GG)

- CB* *GG’s Commonplace Book*, ed. Jacob Korg, New York, 1962.
Diary *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of GG, Novelist*, ed. Pierre Coustillas, Brighton, 1978.
Essays *Essays and Fiction*, ed. Pierre Coustillas, Baltimore and London, 1970.

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- LB* *The Letters of GG to Eduard Bertz, 1887-1903*, ed. Arthur C. Young, London, 1961.
LC *The Letters of GG to Edward Clodd*, ed. Pierre Coustillas, London 1973.
LMF *Letters of GG to members of his Family*, ed. Algernon and Ellen Gissing, London, (1927) 1931.
BE *Born in Exile*, Nelson’s Library, (1892) n.d.
Demos *Demos*, Brighton, (1886) 1972.
HR *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, London, (1903) 1914,
NGS *New Grub Street*, Harmondsworth, (1891) 1968.
NW *The Nether World*, London, (1889) 1973.
OW *The Odd Women*, Nelson’s Library, (1893) n.d.
Thyrza *Thyrza: A Tale*, London, (1887) 1927.
U *The Unclassed*, London, (1884) 1930.
WD *Workers in the Dawn*, 3 vols., New York and London, (1880) 1976.

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Andrew Lang on Gissing
A Late Victorian Point of View

Marysa Demoor, Ghent University,
and Pierre Coustillas.

“Saw Andrew Lang for the first time, but no speech with him”; in these simple terms, Gissing records his first view of Andrew Lang on June 25, 1896.¹ There is, of course, nothing unusual about two men of letters attending a dinner at the Savoy in honour of *Cosmopolis*. In fact, one is surprised at finding that they met, or at least, they came across each other so late as that. Gissing – though still a highly controversial author, and not exactly basking in popular acclaim – could already look back upon a literary career of fifteen years and the publication of seventeen novels. Lang, on his part, had been in the forefront of literary critics from the latter half of the seventies onwards. Both were, indeed, nearer the end than the beginning of their professional careers. Yet, stranger still is their failure to talk to each other in spite of Gissing’s

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apparent willingness to do so. A common characteristic seems to account for this. Both were shy men, and both impressed their contemporaries as being rather aloof and reserved. The assumption is confirmed when, a week later, there followed another and better opportunity to exchange a few words at the National Club where the two men were invited to dinner and introduced to each other by Edmund Gosse. Gissing’s first impression was far from enthusiastic. “Lang justified his reputation of being crusty to new acquaintances,” he remarked in his diary, adding that he did not think him an “agreeable type: lolling and languid.”² Apparently, the occasion was of little moment to Andrew Lang, who did not refer to it in any of his letters.³ Lang did not think this new acquaintance of his would interest any of his friends, or, at all events, he did not consider Gissing’s name worth mentioning.⁴

Two years later, however, George Gissing’s status had changed substantially, and Lang devoted the greater part of his monthly column in *Longman’s Magazine* for September 1898 to a favourable review of Gissing’s book on Dickens.⁵ *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* presented a discriminating but sympathetic approach to an author whom it was fashionable to disparage and ridicule at the time. Lang’s earliest comment on it is to be found in a letter to Brander Matthews dated August 4, [1898]: “Did you look at Gissing’s book on Dickens, it interested me, though I don’t always agree.”⁶ To Lang, as to many other reviewers, the volume revealed another Gissing, quite different from the depressing, realistic novelist. Gissing, Lang was happy to observe, did not relentlessly condemn his predecessor.

One might have expected Mr. Gissing to be severe in the modern way, on Dickens’s failings ... But Mr. Gissing is *not* severe. He sees, but declines to chastise with scorn, these failings of the master. (p. 468)

How good, how unique, how rich his best is, nobody has shown better

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than Mr. Gissing, from whom *a priori*, we had expected a different kind of verdict. (p. 470)

Lang, obviously, was himself an advocate of that attitude which acknowledged the blemishes in Dickens’s work but did not think these impaired or diminished the lasting value of the latter’s great novels. Just as for Gissing, Dickens’s *oeuvre* was part and parcel of Lang’s literary background. One could not possibly forsake an author to whom one owed so many delightful hours in one’s youth, and whose characters continued to haunt one’s imagination. Gissing had shown himself to be a fellow-spirit. Lang, probably, also felt some relief when reading this congenial analysis of Dickens’s tales; he himself had been faced with the problem of writing a series of introductory essays to the Gadshill edition of Dickens’s works the previous year. He had clearly experienced some difficulty in trying to strike a balance between the two

extremes of unconditional admiration versus total repudiation. The new critical study now largely matched his own spontaneous response to Dickens. It was, therefore, with obvious pleasure that he referred to Gissing's book in his general essay contributed to the Gadshill edition when it was reprinted in the *Fortnightly Review* later that year.⁸ Mr. Gissing's "most interesting study" – as he labels it there – goes even beyond Lang's own appreciation, for instance, in its evaluation of the story of *Little Dorrit*:

Mr. Gissing can praise it, in a commendable spirit of loyalty, just as another authority has praised *Count Robert of Paris*. But the conduct of *Little Dorrit* is so bad, the interests are so many, and, often, so weak, and so apt to interfere with and obscure each other, that the cases on which Mr. Gissing broods fondly cannot reconcile me to the book ... it is not all twaddle, by any means, Merdle is good, old Dorrit deserves Mr. Gissing's enthusiasm, Flora

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almost makes us pardon her origin, the Patriarch is excellent, but the book fatigues. (pp. 956-57)

Lang's review in *Longman's* did not pass unheeded. "Clodd tells me that Andrew Lang praises my 'Dickens' in *Longman's*," Gissing noted in his diary.⁹ He promptly replied to Clodd's pleasant piece of news with not unwarranted pride:

Many thanks for letting me know of *Longmans*; I heard nothing of it, and it is really curious how little I care nowadays to read printed comment on my books. But this kind of thing helps to keep one out of the workhouse, no doubt.

Thackeray? I suppose Lang suggests a companion volume?¹⁰ Blackies did the same, and I declined; simply because I could not afford to work for six months or more for the very trifling payment they suggested. I should *like* to try my hand at Thackeray, who, be it said between us, appeals to me much more strongly than Dickens.¹¹

Lang's review was one of the numerous commendatory notices¹² by critics who had formerly professed an intense aversion to Gissing's fictional work. Morley Roberts's analysis of the situation, as he gives it in his disguised biography of Gissing, is that

there are at least two classes of Maitland's [Gissing's] readers, those who understand the man and love his really characteristic work, and those who have no understanding of him at all, or any deep appreciation, but profess a great admiration for this book [*Charles Dickens*] ... Probably Andrew Lang was one of these, judging from a criticism that he once wrote on Maitland.¹³

The criticism Roberts was probably thinking of is Lang's article on *New Grub Street*

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which appeared in the *Author* for July 1, 1891. Actually, the review was a rejoinder to Walter Besant's appreciative note in the previous issue of the periodical. Besant had welcomed Gissing's new novel as a faithful picture of "a form of literary life which has long been known to all who have penetrated into the by-ways and slums of this many-sided calling." Lang, on the other hand, denied there was a Grub Street such as that described by Gissing. He wondered at this realism which, according to him, fails to reflect reality at all:

To myself it seems a perverted idealism, idealism on the seamy side. In Grub Street there are many mansions; they are not all full of failure, and envy, and low cunning, and love of money, and hatred of success ...

There are plenty of jolly people in Grub Street, only Realism averts her blue spectacles from them ...

In real life, the unlucky hero of Mr. Gissing would have had a devoted wife, who believed in her husband's genius; but to give him such a wife would not be Realism. It would be romance, or something improper of that kind.¹⁵

Gissing knew about both reviews in the *Athor*, and reports to have read them in a letter to Eduard Bertz. Naturally, Gissing disliked Lang's reaction, but, quite surprising is his equal displeasure at Besant's contribution:

You will notice how very imperfectly Besant has understood the book. His description of Reardon is ludicrous. Then again, you will find Lang makes a mistake which proves that he has not read the story with anything like serious attention.¹⁶ These things are natural enough. Such overworked men *cannot* read books with close thought; they only skim even those which they think interesting.¹⁷

Curiously enough, Gissing does not even hint at the fact that Lang objected to the

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treatment of the subject which, of course, constituted the real reason why the latter merely browsed through the story. Lang was the champion of the romance, the novel of adventures as it was practised by authors like H. Rider Haggard and Robert Louis Stevenson. He believed fiction had to be an anodyne, had to free the reader from a dismal reality and take him into a better world. He especially shunned the so-called "new realism." His undeniably great influence on the public's literary taste was employed in the service of the romance, and he advised his readers to avert their eyes from the immoral writings of a Zola, the drab and tedious realism of a Howells, the pessimistic novels of the great Russian authors. In such a way, he became, indirectly, one of the main stumbling-blocks on Gissing's way to fame and success. Of the Russian realists he wrote in June 1891: "They deserve the punishment which Dante assigns to those who deliberately seek sadness."¹⁸ Concerning *Crime and Punishment*, one of Gissing's favourite novels, Lang once observed: "it is too powerful for me. I read in that book till I was crushed and miserable; I emerged, feeling that I had enough of M. Dostoieffsky for one lifetime." One could hardly expect him to like a novel in which Gissing, with characteristic pessimism, dealt with Lang's own professional milieu, i.e., that of the man of letters.

Another factor which may have induced Lang to comment on *New Grub Street* is Gissing's outspoken contempt for the prolific, popular author who considers himself to be a mere commodity. Indeed, it may not be too far-fetched to assume that Lang did attentively read the description, given at the beginning of the novel, of one Ralph Warbury, whose uncommonly flourishing career has been said to resemble Lang's own.²⁰

He's a clever, prolific man; ... he began with money and friends; he came from Oxford into the thick of advertised people; his name was mentioned in print six times a week before he had written a dozen articles ... Men won't

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succeed in literature that they may get into society, but will get into society that they may succeed in literature.

Moreover, the "villain" of the story, Jasper Milvain, is another example of the literary hack who adapts his wares to the public's taste, so as to make as much money as possible out of it. Lang could have felt that he had been aimed at, or, at least, caricatured in the novel.

And then again, over a decade later, with Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, there was no reason at all why he should feel offended, yet, we find Lang unable to appreciate fully his fellow-writer's work. In an article for the *Morning Post*, about five years after Gissing's death, when the book was a confirmed best-seller, Lang analyses the character of Henry Ryecroft, relating it to his own person and to Gissing himself. Thus, for instance, he writes:

Of the creator of the character of Mr. Ryecroft I know nothing, except that he was a true lover of books, in adverse circumstances; one who would go without food to buy a copy of Gibbon. That is a length to which, I trow, this other born bookworm who writes could never go – not for Gibbon, at all events!

His overall estimate appears plainly from the concluding lines:

In a flash of insight Mr. Ryecroft remarked “Within my nature there seemed to be no faculty of rational self-guidance ... Something, obviously, I lacked from the beginning, some balancing principle granted to most men, in one or another degree.” May I guess at what it was that Mr. Ryecroft lacked? It was the sense of humour, but I by no means aver that in this Mr. Gissing was deficient. His book on Dickens saves his character for appreciation of humour.

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To be sure, after having perused Lang’s reviews of Gissing’s *Ryecroft* and *New Grub Street* one is led to conclude that it was quite impossible for him to speak well of the novelist’s fictional works. And yet, there is the most extraordinary and generally overlooked fact that Lang, in 1889, tentatively recommended Gissing’s bitterest novel of working-class life, *The Nether World*. Admittedly, the larger part of the notice elaborates and refutes the narrator’s proposition, that man should destroy everything so that a new civilization should be raised by means of “music the holy.”²³ But the critic’s final sentence reads: “all this is no reason why Mr. Gissing’s studies of ‘The Nether World,’ should not be read and meditated.”²⁴

The last-mentioned review obviously complicates any possible interpretation of Lang’s writings on Gissing. Lang knew that a favourable mention of a new work in his extremely popular causerie “At the Sign of the Ship” in *Longman’s Magazine* positively influenced the sale of that particular book. His notice of *The Nether World* was not exactly laudatory, but it did show some respect. His attitude was clearly a benevolent one, he wanted to give this new writer a chance. His two later reviews of Gissing’s artistically most praiseworthy works are much more critical, though these books, one should think, are far less provoking. The only plausible explanation for the difference in treatment is to be found in Lang’s impressionistic approach to literature. He always explicitly refused to apply objective criteria when judging a piece of art, trusting that his own taste and feeling would suffice to determine the quality of the work. When one realises that his taste was all for the popular and escapist adventure story, it is more than remarkable that he commented on *The Nether World* with some deference, and, indeed, that he commented on the book at all.²⁶ Lang’s having no rigid theoretical system, however, sometimes allowed for a certain elasticity, which should account for that exceptional article. Somehow

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Gissing’s picture of the lowest classes of the British people had excited his interest despite its grim and unpalatable character. Lang’s attitude towards *New Grub Street*, supposedly a rendering of his own familiar environment, was necessarily different. He disbelieved that there existed a literary world such as the one depicted by Gissing, or, in any case, he did not want it to be represented as Gissing had done. Neither could he identify himself with or find pleasure in the philosophy of life advocated in the *Ryecroft Papers*. The subject was manifestly not engaging enough beside its being, among other things, a record of the dreary reality.

1. *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1978), p. 414.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
3. Cf. Marysa Demoor, “Andrew Lang’s Letters: A Descriptive Checklist” (Diss. Ghent Univ., 1983), II.

4. The following quote from a letter to Lang's lady-friend Mrs. Hills intimates no less: "I have had an awful week of dinners with dullards, the off-scourings of our race. I cannot bear to reflect on them, but would unfold a tale." (June 27, [1896], unpublished ALS in St. Andrew's University Library).
 5. "At the Sign of the Ship," *Longman's Magazine*, XXXII (Sept., 1898), pp. 467-71.
 6. Unpublished ALS in Columbia University Library.
 7. To be sure, it would have been more natural for Gissing to align himself with G. H. Lewes's well-known criticism on Dickens of 1872. For a comparison of the two standpoints, see George H. Ford, *Dickens and his Readers* (New York: Norton & Company, 1965), pp. 149-55, 245 ff.
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8. "Charles Dickens," *Fortnightly Review*, LXX O.S., LXIV N.S. (December 1898), pp. 944-60.
 9. Entry for September 3, 1898, *op. cit.*, p. 501.
 10. Lang did suggest something of the kind: "Now that Mr. Gissing has treated so excellently of Dickens, one hopes that he will go on to Thackeray. And why not to Fielding and Scott? examining them, as here, in their relation to social evolution. But it may be cruel to suggest such an invasion of a novelist's time" (pp. 470-71).
 11. *The Letters of George Gissing to Edward Clodd*, ed. and introd. by Pierre Coustillas (London: Enitharmon Press, 1973), p. 51.
 12. Some sixty reviews of the first English and American editions have been traced. See in particular Pierre Coustillas, *Gissing's Writings on Dickens* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969).
 13. *The Private Life of Henry Maitland: A Portrait of George Gissing*, ed. and introd. by Morchard Bishop (London: The Richards Press, 1958), p. 163.
 14. "Notes and News," *Author*, II (June 1, 1891), p. 15.
 15. "Realism in Grub Street," *Author*, II (July 1, 1891), pp. 43-44. The Besant-Lang controversy which consists of Besant's article, Lang's reply and Besant's reply to Lang is reprinted in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas and Colin Partridge (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 181-85.
 16. Lang had wrongly attributed Reardon's plan to write on Diogenes Laertius to Alfred Yule.
 17. *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz*, ed. by A. C. Young (London: Constable, 1961), p. 128.
 18. "At the Sign of the Ship," *Longman's Magazine*, XVIII (June 1891), p. 109.
 19. "Realism and Romance," *Contemporary Review*, LII (Nov. 1887), pp. 685-86.
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20. Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 141.
 21. *New Grub Street*, Penguin edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 60.
 22. "The Bookman's Character," October 9, 1908, p. 7.

23. Lang was referring to the passage on music in Ch. XII, "Io Saturnalia."
24. "At the Sign of the Ship," *Longman's Magazine*, XIV (Sept. 1889), p. 554. Gissing seems to have been ignorant of this review since he does not allude to it in any of his writings.
25. Cf. Forrest Reid, "Minor Fiction in the 'Eighties," in *The Eighteen-Eighties*, ed. by Walter de la Mare (Cambridge: University Press, 1930), p. 116.
26. On several occasions he promised never to write on books he disliked unless he felt urged to do so when the novel was being boosted from all sides.

Reviews

George Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, with a new introduction by Gillian Tindall, London: The Hogarth Press, 1984.

To the best of my knowledge, no critic has ever claimed that *The Whirlpool* is Gissing's best novel, but as Gillian Tindall writes in the introduction to this welcome new edition, he published at least half a dozen novels of considerable stature besides *New Grub Street*, which is usually regarded as his best. The book's history would seem to confirm this. It was widely acclaimed as one of his most significant stories on publication both in England and America

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and it sold well for a Gissing title. The first three editions published by Lawrence and Bullen are dated 1897 and four editions were issued by the Frederick A. Stokes Company in quick succession in 1898. When Sidgwick and Jackson in 1911 and 1948 tried to revive interest in the novelist's work, they chose *The Whirlpool* among other titles. The author himself held this book in comparatively high opinion: he is not known ever to have discouraged any friend or correspondent from reading it, and when Gabrielle Fleury called on him on 26 July 1898 *The Whirlpool* was one of the volumes he gave her.

A glance at the many reviews of the first English and American editions also convinces me that Gissing's achievement was acknowledged warmly. Of course there were a few finely idiotic statements, like that of the *Sketch* which complained that there was too much truth in it, but they make the enlightened appraisals of the leading newspapers and reviews look more perceptive in retrospect. Edmund Gosse in the *St. James's Gazette* and Arnold Bennett (pseudonymously) in *Woman* stressed the many strong points of the novel. "The character of Alma," Bennett wrote, "is possibly the best thing that Mr. Gissing has done. I have seen Alma many times at St. James's Hall, at vegetarian restaurants, at schools of art, and adrift in Continental cities. There are hundreds of her in London – ineffectual women; women whose very birthright is an impulsive futility; fitful, feverish women. Mr. Gissing exposes and expounds her with rare courage and lucidity."

This is a fact of the story which is discussed briefly by Gillian Tindall in her introduction, with the – by now – mandatory reference to Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary, from whom she differentiates Alma, "a sexually dormant, bread-and-butter English version of the type," we are told. And this is, I think, the only statement with which I cannot agree in this stimulating,

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well-informed introduction. To me Alma is not more sexually dormant than Piers Otway (in *The Crown of Life*) before his marriage to Irene Derwent. Nor is she depicted as a bread-and-butter miss at any time. What Gissing calls "the curse of sex" of course applies primarily to men, but Alma is not the kind of sexless creature that Godwin Peak so much disapproves of in *Born in Exile*, nor is she represented as a mother-ridden young lady before her marriage.

The seven-page introduction is mainly a discussion of the autobiographical strain in the story and of the problem of the relations between the sexes. That a number of familiar Gissing

situations are reassessed here may not be of much interest to the general reader, who has not made a study of Gissing's copious meditations on the kaleidoscopic variety of heterosexual relationships, but Gillian Tindall's introduction will certainly help anyone who wishes to investigate the specificity of the novelist's approach to life. Perhaps the dominant theme is that of marital incompatibility – some readers will see only this in the story. Yet there is much more material to be found in this exceptionally rich novel. The Zolaesque title itself is suggestive of the dichotomy between the idealised countryside in which the Rolfes live in peace for a while and of the urban maelstrom with its atmosphere of financial scandal, shady journalism and artificial culture. Rather than the difficult relationships between the sexes (studied through many cases, as Gissing had done in that other fine novel, *The Odd Women*), the major theme, of course not so noticeable on the level of the plot, might well be the destructiveness of social pretence. This it is which triggers the major catastrophes in the story and which the wisest characters steer clear of as leading to the brink, then to the very centre of the whirlpool. In other words the novel is Gissing's version of *The Way We Live Now* and I wish the book in this new edition no worse luck than finding as large an audience as Trollope's novel.

When this particular edition is reprinted, I suggest that a few corrections be made in the

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introduction: Gissing returned from America in 1877, not in 1878 (this error also occurs on the back cover); he was loath (not loathe) to leave his children; he never lived at Ewell (though Maitland did) but at Epsom; he wrote Sibyl's name in a different way from Disraeli's heroine, Sybil, and he chose to call Morphew Cecil, not Cyril. The publishers wisely took as copy-text the first English edition, the proofs of which were read by the author, a choice which will be appreciated by scholars. But this text is not perfect. Is it unreasonable to hope that the printers will correct the few misprints that Gissing failed to see? A short list, which does not claim to be exhaustive, has been compiled. – Pierre Coustillas

W. S. Banks, *Walks about Wakefield*, with an introduction by John Goodchild, Wakefield : Wakefield Historical Publications, 1983 (£10, or £11.80 including postage, from the publishers, Seckar House, Seckar Lane, Woolley, Wakefield, West Yorkshire, WF4 2LE).

This is a facsimile edition of *Walks in Yorkshire: Wakefield and its Neighbourhood* by one of T. W. Gissing's closest friends, and both titles are misnomers as the work is a topographical and historical account of the area around George Gissing's hometown, not a step by step guide along the paths that Banks and the two Gissings would have known so well when "grubbing about in hedgerows," as Henry Hick put it.

The original contained many woodcuts of local interest and the value of this new edition is further enhanced by fifty-nine contemporary photographs by the firm of G. & J. Hall of Wakefield, found interleaved in a copy of the book now held at Wakefield Public Library. It is noteworthy that the first edition was issued in the two years between the deaths of George Gissing's father (aged 41) and that of the author (aged 52), more exactly five months after

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George left Wakefield to be educated at Lindow Grove School; so it can be said to describe the Wakefield he knew.

William Stott Banks and T. W. Gissing had many interests and activities in common: these were concerned with the Liberal Party, the Mechanics' Institution, the Wakefield Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition and the school created from its profits, and the Lancasterian School. They went on walking holidays together with Samuel Bruce and Frederick Thompson, and they also produced a manuscript volume of pressed plants which they sold to bring in funds for the newly re-opened Lancasterian School. It has been said that the Gissing family had few contacts with local people, partly because most of Thomas Gissing's friends were unmarried or at least childless, but this is not quite accurate: not only have we Henry Hick's record that George came to play at his house – a connection being that T. W. Gissing had bought M. B. Hick's pharmacy and the two men remained friends – but we have evidence that the Bankses also visited the Gissings. In a scrapbook George wrote: "Little Roland [Campion] Banks' great

ambition was to live to 'be on a committee.' He and Nelly [Gissing] playing at Committees." Incidentally W. S. Banks was married to M. B. Hick's sister.

The author was born in Wakefield and though "the son of humble parents, Mr. Fox [the headmaster at the Lancasterian School] had a high opinion of him." "One day the late Mr. Berry, solicitor, went to Mr. Fox and asked him if he could recommend a sharp lad to him on which Mr. Fox at once named the young William Banks." From this start he became one of the town's most respected lawyers and Clerk to the Justices when Wakefield was given its own Magistrates' Court.

In the book he mentions many features of interest to Gissing students: the Mechanics' Institution; the Corn Market where the Gissings lived; the new Corn Exchange and Great Bull Hotel which faced T. W. Gissing's shop; Wakefield Parish Church, now Wakefield Cathedral,

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where George Gissing and all the Banks' children were baptised; Sandal Castle and Wakefield Cemetery (both provide scenes in *A Life's Morning*), and the villages of Heath and Crofton (George said that the walk from Heath to Crofton was one of his favourites). The photographs and woodcuts include: the Corn Exchange, illustrated on the Corporation seal, page 89; the Parish Church; R. B. Mackie's house, the Baxendales' of *A Life's Morning*; Wakefield Cemetery Chapels, taken from approximately the site of T. W. Gissing's grave; Wakefield Vicarage, very like the vicarage of "A Quarry on the Heath"; the Manor House, Heath, Dagworthy's home in *A Life's Morning*; Sandal Castle Ruins and Moat; and the Flounder's Institute, Ackworth, where James Wood, who was Headmaster to the Gissing boys at Lindow Grove, was trained as a teacher.

All in all this is a very handsome production of a book which, if it has been out of print for a hundred years, has always found a ready market at local auctions and second-hand bookshops. — Clifford Brook

Notes and News

Recent numbers of *The Times Literary Supplement* have mentioned Gissing in various contexts: Christopher Hitchens drew our attention to comment on him by Elaine Showalter in the *Raritan Review*, (*TLS*, 6 January 1984, p. 12); Redmond O'Hanlon, in a review of several books on Conrad, mentioned Gissing among people who were invited by Conrad to his parties "in the various houses which he rented at different times around Kent" (*TLS*, 24 February 1984, p. 186); and Jennifer Uglow, in her article on "The Revival of the Hogarth Press" (*TLS*, 2 March

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1984, p. 218) mentioned *The Whirlpool* in Chatto & Windus's new trade reprint series, with initial print runs of 6,000 to 10,000 copies.

A very good advertisement for *Sleeping Fires* in the *New York Review of Books* for 2 February 1984 was sent by Shirley Slotnick. The column is headed by the Rothenstein portrait followed by these words: "Increasingly over the twentieth century George Gissing's novels of late Victorian English life have been praised for their characters, who find themselves exiled in the masses of modern urban life, but fight on. First published in 1895, *Sleeping Fires* treats a subject neglected by most fiction: love renewed in middle age" (iv + 101 pages, Paper BB852, \$4.95). The same correspondent has sent a xerox of the introduction to *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, edited by Alan Lelchuk and Gushon Shaked (Meridian). Lelchuk writes that Nahum Hagzar in Gnessin's *Sideways* "is a moving portrait of the stymied scholar and critic, a self-defeating creature of morbidity and asceticism, whose closest literary brother may be George Gissing's Edwin Reardon of *New Grub Street*."

The Times for 22 November 1983, p. 28, listed Gissing among the birth anniversaries for the day.

Gillian Tindall gave a lecture on "The Haunted Books of George Gissing" at the Royal Society of Literature on 20 October 1983. This was the Don Carlos Coloma Memorial Lecture. It will be published later this year in *Essays by Diverse Hands*.

By the Ionian Sea is one of the few books by Gissing which are not available new from some publisher or other. This is a great pity since it is one of his most engaging narratives. We may perhaps look forward to a new edition before long as there is currently a revival of interest in travel books. Virago is reprinting forgotten titles by Mildred Cable, Beryl Markham and Isabella Bird, the last of whom (1831-1904) was read by Gissing.

Of equal interest are the new editions of two volumes in which he himself appears, *Siren Land* (Penguin, 1983) and *Old Calabria* (Century Publishers, 76, Old Compton Street,

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London W1V 5PE, a firm founded in 1982). *Siren Land* is also available in an edition published by Secker and Warburg in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1982.

Recent Publications

Volumes

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, with an introduction by Marcia R. Fox, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company (1983). Black and blue pictorial paperback. This is the eighth impression of the present paperback, first published in 1971. \$3.25.

George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, edited with an introduction by Bernard Bergonzi, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1983. Orange and blue pictorial paperback. This is the sixth impression of the present paperback, first published in 1968. £2.50. Various errors in the text and in the introduction have been corrected, as indicated in an editorial note, p. 26.

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, with an introduction by Elaine Showalter, New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library (Meridian Classics), 1983. Pictorial paperback. \$3.95 (\$4.95 in Canada).

George Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, with an introduction by Gillian Tindall, London: The Hogarth Press, 1984. Pictorial paperback. £3.95.

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Articles, Reviews, etc.

Myra Barrs, "The Persistent Normal Dream," *Times Educational Supplement*, 1 August 1980, p. 16. Review of *The Odd Women* together with other Virago reprints.

Alice B. Markow, "George Gissing's *The Unclassed*: A Thematic Variation of the Dissociative Pattern," *Literature and Psychology* (Teaneck, N.J.), vol. 30, nos. 3-4, pp. 182-91.

Humbert Fink, *Südtalien: Tränen unter der Sonne*, Frankfurt/M, 1981. A short passage on *By the Ionian Sea*, pp. 116-17.

Barry Jones and M. V. Dixon, *Macmillan Dictionary of Biography*, Macmillan, 1981. A short entry on Gissing is printed on p. 324.

Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*, Cambridge University Press, 1981. A paragraph on Gissing appears on p. 58.

Boris Ford (ed.), *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol. 6, From Dickens to Hardy*, 1982. Contains various mentions of Gissing, besides the well-known article by R. C. Churchill. Vol. 7, published in 1983, also contains a few passages on Gissing.

J. R. Hammond, *A George Orwell Companion*, Macmillan, 1982. *Passim*.

Fumio Hojoh, "Pupils without Masters: George Gissing's Gallery of Women," *Essays and Studies* (Tokyo Woman's Christian University), September 1983, pp. 17-48, with abstract on pp. 243-44.

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P. J. Waller, *Town, City and Nation: England 1850-1914*, Oxford University Press, 1983. Short passages on *Demos* and *Henry Ryecroft* on pp. 149 and 213.

Michael Stapleton, *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*, Cambridge University Press/Newnes Books, 1983. Entries on Gissing (p. 346), *New Grub Street*, (p. 635), *The Odd Women* (p. 648) and *Henry Ryecroft* (p. 724).

Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*, Longman, 1983. A few lines on "The Foolish Virgin," p. 223.

- Dale Kramer, "Book Reviews," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 1, Winter 1984, pp. 121-22. Review of *Gissing: A Life in Books*.

