

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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Gissing’s Characterisation

I. Heredity

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(This is the first installment of a three-part article whose second and third parts, “Environment” and “Temperament” will appear in later numbers of the *Newsletter*. The first parts are reprinted, in slightly altered form, from the July, 1962 number of *The Literary Half-Yearly* published at the University of Mysore, India.)

Discussion of Gissing’s characterisation is complicated by his frequent, though not total, lack of objectivity: his habit of including sympathetic semi-autobiographical characters, of idealising beautiful women and sensitive scholars, and conversely of expressing loathing of the ugly, vulgar and ignorant. Admittedly, no author, however objective his intention, is likely to see in character other than what he is predisposed to see; the objection to Gissing’s subjective attitude is not that it involves a distortion of psychological truth, for that is merely relative, but rather that it leads to inconsistency in the study of motivation. In the same book, some characters may be supplied with the best motives, offered excuses for their conduct; others, less favoured, are presented in worse lights. The author’s bias intrudes itself.

Gissing would hardly have expected his characters to be analysed so strictly according to rule as here. It was Zola’s mistake to hold that a set of rules could explain all the vagaries of human nature, and to make his characters to fit the rules. Gissing went by observation of life except when he was indulging his romantic idealism.

The character Woodstock in *The Unclassed* can illustrate this point. His unusual combination of traits can at first be explained reasonably, and we find the kind of remark from the author which indicates that:

“The man’s life had been strongly consistent from the beginning; from boyhood a powerful will had borne him triumphantly over every difficulty.” (*The Unclassed*)

– so that he behaves cruelly to those who oppose his will, generously to the obedient; a theory of behaviour suited to Schopenhauer’s ideas. But at the end Woodstock shows signs, unsentimentally

presented by the way, of developing a positive benevolence. About this additional complexity the author is noncommittal, and while several different explanations can be found which would be suited to Realistic psychological theory, to seek them would carry one into speculations about the character beyond the limits of his actual existence in the book. It is safer to turn to Gissing's own comment:

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“I assure you the man is very lifelike; the only thing is that I have ventured to draw him more *faithfully* than any other English novelist would. Human nature is compact of strangely conflicting elements, and I have met men extremely brutal in one way who yet were capable of a good deal of genial feeling in other directions.” Letter to his brother, June 23, 1884 (*Letters*, London, 1927, p. 14)

from which one may conclude that here, as in other cases, he has observed and reproduced traits that he cannot reduce to the terms of a formula.

Nevertheless, if one attempts to penetrate below this visible bias and ask what Gissing thought constituted character, it appears that he held in common with other Realists a semi-scientific view of psychology, which can be conveniently described under the three headings of heredity, environment and temperament.

He shared in the growing interest of the late nineteenth century novel in the complexity of man's consciousness, for its own sake, not only because it led to actions. He was perfectly aware that character was not so simple a matter as the traditional classical or romantic novelists, and their Victorian descendants, might believe. In such novels, characters were neatly defined, and easily recognised as symbols. Their motives were directly related to their actions and consequently to schemes of virtue and vice, or social morality. But Stendhal in particular and other Realists made clear the new trend, the realisation that the majority of people were complex and did not act from a simple set of rules derived from their character. They realised that people might do the most unexpected and contradictory things; that they were likely to be influenced by their circumstances and surroundings; that they think about their own emotions, consciously attempting to analyse them – but not necessarily acting logically from their conclusions. Even as they came to understand that people were not neatly divided into good and bad, so they realised that they were not even divided into normal and abnormal; moreover, that people's thoughts were not exactly represented by their behaviour.

The psychological theory adduced in explanation was essentially deterministic, as the science and philosophy of the time would lead one to expect. They felt that there was no free will, and actions were wholly determined by motives; consequently, they thought, could all the motives be known, then the action could be accurately forecast. The basic idea was elevated into a thesis by Zola, who placed special emphasis on theories concerning heredity. This last concept, not in itself new (though previously men had thought more of inheritance of physical features than of character), enabled writers to think of man in terms of contemporary evolutionary theory, to see him as one of a species, related to his ancestors, his relatives and the rest of the human race in more than arbitrary ways. Due attention being given to its complications, i.e., that it was no simple rule, that a man was not the sum of the qualities of his parents but a selection of those and also of more remote ancestors, it offered an explanation of things otherwise inexplicable: why men should be basically different from one another; why some should be given good characters and some bad, or indeed why they should be born with characters at all.

There is no evidence that Gissing made any close study of heredity, other than a brief mention of “Ribot’s *Hérédité Psychologique*” as the reading matter of a “progressive” woman which appears to have no special significance (*The Whirlpool*, London, 1897, Chapter III). Morley Roberts says that he made no study of technical psychology at all (*The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, London, 1912, p. 193) which seems probable. Nevertheless, as May Yates points out, he

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was sufficiently concerned with it to take care over making his characters consistent with their parentage, when it is mentioned. (Yates, M., *George Gissing, an Appreciation*, Manchester, 1922, pp. 60-62.) She instances five characters. Thyrsa, the girl of low social class who is yet refined, is provided by the author with a mother of some refinement as an explanation. (I would add that Arthur Golding, the artistic slum child in *Workers in the Dawn*, in similar fashion is made the son of a gentleman).

Clara Hewett, in *The Nether World*, is as impatient of parental authority and poverty as her father is rebellious against social conditions. Godwin Peak’s father, like his son, is of low birth but with strong impulses towards culture; he has a violent personal pride and perversity that recurs in his son’s reasons for leaving the University and his awkwardness in accepting help (*Born in Exile*). Reardon’s father betrayed the same lack of pertinacity as his son (*New Grub Street*). Richard Dagworthy of *A Life’s Morning* is an especially good example. He

“represented an intermediate stage of development between the hardheaded operative who conquers wealth, and his descendant who shall know what use to make of it.” (*A Life’s Morning*, London, 1888, Chapter VIII)

His father had been a cunning, industrious and boorish business man; Richard “had doubtless advanced the character of the stock, and [...] possessed many tastes of which the old man had no notion.” (*A Life’s Morning*, Chapter V.) The tragedy of his existence is the clash between ambitions towards gentility and refinement, aroused in him by the circumstance of inheriting wealth and consequently being brought up to what was materially at least the life of a gentleman; and the ruthlessness, independence and miserliness inherited from his father. Foreign travel was spoiled for him, for instance, because although he had an active curiosity he could not adapt himself to the unfamiliar conditions, presumably because he had not the necessary flexibility of mind; and also because he could not reconcile himself to the expense; “pursuit of money was in him an hereditary instinct.” (*A Life’s Morning*, Chapter VIII)

The result of this clash is that Dagworthy, whose ambition is to marry a woman of refinement, because he feels that this will improve his own way of life, is driven to most ungentlemanly methods to attain his end:

“A mere uneducated Englishman, hitherto balancing always between the calls from above and from below [...] he could make no distinction between the objects which with vehemence he desired and the spiritual advantage which he felt the attainment would bring to him; and for the simple reason that in his case no such distinction existed. Even as the childhood of civilisation knows virtue only in the form of a concrete deity, so to Dagworthy the higher life of which he was capable took shape as a mortal woman”. (*A Life’s Morning*, Chapter XIII)

The relation in Gissing’s mind of hereditary character and the process of human evolution is

clear.

Besides these examples given by Yates there are many more. In *The Nether World*, for instance, Jane Snowdon has the gentle nature of her grandfather, though her father is selfish. Sidney Kirkwood's father was, like his son, "an intelligent, warm-hearted man." Clem Peckover's cruelty

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and cunning is inherited from her mother.

"Who knows," asks Gissing, "but this lust of hers for sanguinary domination was the natural enough issue of the brutalising serfdom of her predecessors in the family line of the Peckovers?" (*The Nether World*, London, 1889, Chapter I)

It is clear, in fact, that, although Gissing laid no special emphasis on the heredity theory, it lay at the back of his thinking about character. Nor was its importance limited to these studies of descent; it contributed to a special type of consistency in character drawing, typical of Gissing. Not for him are striking changes in character, radical conversions to good or evil such as may be found in romantic novelists of the more facile kind. A slow development and alteration of attitudes can be seen in some characters, but it indicates no basic change; instead it is evidence of wisdom, of the growth in that character of wider and more balanced views of life. This is exactly according to the views of Schopenhauer, whose thinking matched that of the Realists in so many ways; he too believed that a man was born with a fixed inherited character, and that the only development of character was growth of knowledge. In Gissing, such changes are usually changes from bitterness and passion to calm and resignation – so, Gilbert Grail, for instance, who abandons his aspirations as impossible to realise (*Thyrza*). There is one striking change of character, that of Miriam Baske in *The Emancipated*, who from a religious bigot becomes a woman of calm and balanced mind; but this is the result of the growth of knowledge and experience, and the beginning of a study of art, developing potential qualities hitherto cramped by the narrow life of a religious community. The characteristics that were previously developed – sobriety and strength of will – undergo no alteration.

Examples of consistency are plentiful. The dissipated Reuben Elgar, for instance, intends to reform himself and make use of his experience:

"All the disorder through which I have gone was a struggle towards self-knowledge and understanding of my time." (*The Emancipated*, London, 1890, Chapter IV)

– but, perception or no, his basic weakness of will repeatedly prevents him from fulfilling his promise, and he falls again to dissipation.

Widdowson, in *The Odd Women*, has a possessive and jealous character that ruins his relations with his wife. Although he has himself brought about the disaster, he cannot reconcile himself even to believing that the child she bears is his own, despite his wife's statement on her deathbed. His jealousy is still uncontrollable even when the cause is removed.

Godwin Peak is the opposite to Elgar; he allows himself to be drawn into a course of deception, but when it is discovered, the strong and independent pride that he inherited from his father recurs; the exposure is almost a relief for him, and he bears it with such dignity as to seem a much better man than he was before.

Pride is the special characteristic also of Rhoda Nunn in *The Odd Women*. It lies behind her efforts towards individual independence of women. Although she does not believe in the forms of marriage, her pride of self in addition to her instinctive upbringing makes her insist that her suitor offer her legal marriage. On reconsideration of her position she decides to uphold the principle she has preached – this also from pride, and causing another clash with her suitor, who has now decided

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that legal marriage is preferable. These are examples of situations that frequently occur in Gissing's stories. There is another example that is very convincing: it is the case of the elder Mrs. Mutimer in *Demos*, whose character is one of independence and self-sufficiency. When she is suddenly raised to affluence, she is distressed by the possession of a servant and greatly prefers to continue to do her own work and maintain her own home, to the extent that she does over again the work the servant has done.

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Recent Publications

Coustillas, Pierre. *Les Carnets d'Henry Ryecroft*, Aubier, Paris 1966. A bilingual edition of the Ryecroft Papers with valuable introduction and notes in French.

---. "Some Unpublished Letters from Gissing to Hardy." *English Literature in Transition*, IX, 4 (1966), pp.197-209.

---. "Gissing's Writings on Dickens: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey." *Dickensian*, LXI (1965), pp. 168-179.

Fytton, Francis. Review of Korg's *George Gissing*. *London Magazine*, Vol. 4 (July 1965), pp. 101-103.

Gerber, H. E. and Paul Armato. Bibliography for 1966, with annotations. *English Literature in Transition*, IX, 4 (1966), pp. 220-224.

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George Gissing and Calabria

by Francesco Badolato

Calabria is one of the Italian regions situated at the top of "lo Stivale". It was once a Greek

colony, then Roman, and nowadays there are still traces of these two civilizations.

Perhaps more than one person has wondered why this region which, at the end of the nineteenth century was almost unknown to many Italians, awakened a vivid interest in George Gissing sufficient to make him travel there, where he knew that he would certainly not find a prosperous, thriving region with comfortable living conditions, but an underdeveloped area. Presumably it did not worry him that he was stopped at Cosenza and asked to pay the *dazio* on the books he had taken with him. The customs officer was, of course, astonished to see a foreigner with *tanti libri*, and Gissing tried in vain to persuade him that the contents were *not for sale*.

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This episode gives us a very clear idea of the conditions of Calabrian citizens at that time. Most of the inhabitants did not know that a person could possess so many books and this state of affairs persisted for the greater part of the first half of the twentieth century.

Gissing was not interested in the things of those days; his was an interest in all that belonged to the past in Calabria, even though only few traces remained throughout the region. This appreciation for the classical world – as is known – was not handed down to George from his father. George, as an adolescent, was aware of this gap in his father's education and the passion matured gradually in his mind and, in fact, at the age of 13, when he left Wakefield, this interest was already developed and his knowledge became progressively wider. It is a proof indeed of his interests at Owens College and his understanding of his work that throughout his books he shows a thorough knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics. Although Lenormant served him well, Homer, Virgil, Horace and other Latin poets were his best companions.

Now, on the trail of such authors, after a period of misery and changing fortunes, he was able to undertake a journey to this land, in which only a few ruins of the Hellenic splendour remained and which had been struggling against poverty, illiteracy, and humiliation, to make its voice heard in the National Assembly, ever since the unification of Italy.

Calabria, as well as Sicily and the other Southern regions, after the unification of Italy with Rome as the capital, was forced to make wholly disproportionate sacrifices towards the modernization of Italy. In the wave of industrialization Calabria, like much of the southern part of the Country, had seen its share of the appropriation of funds for public work reduced and its taxes increased in order to concentrate capital in the North, where industry had begun to develop. This same protective policy, inaugurated to support a nascent industry, had thus to face a crisis in the economy of the South.

The desires of the Calabrian people, like those of the Southern provinces, had not been adequately met by the ruling class, and so could find vent only in public revolts; and the interested interference of some groups induced the authorities to see in their demands an attempt at the unification of the whole Country. These revolts were only the disordered rioting of a mob – as Gissing has a chance to note during his stay at Crotona – rather than the action of an organized proletariat, conscious of its own force and of the end it pursued.

How bitterly ironic the words of the Central Government sounded to the Calabrians, as well as to the Southern citizens, when it issued orders to the peripheral officers exhorting them to interpret and fulfil the desires of the inhabitants and to advance arguments, in special reports, showing that the Government had no other reason to exist except for the benefit of the Nation, and protecting of the community of citizens in their rights of liberty and justice in their home country, and of independence and nationality abroad.

However, half a century after the coming of Gissing, the conditions of the Southern peasants

are still more or less the same. In fact Levi, in his work, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, brilliantly points out that the peasants have no faith in the government of Rome.

Dissatisfaction and delusion have succeeded in the souls of the Southern people, and this prevents the appreciation of what, however little, the administration is able to do. This is a state of mind analysed by Croce in his *History of Italy*, and was diffused throughout the Country when it seemed that the heroic period of the Risorgimento had followed the grey period of the "Italiotto

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di Depretis".

Soon after the great political problems had been resolved the government had to carry out those administrative operations which were regarded with less interest by public opinion; but they are as important as those fundamental problems for the creation of a strong healthy state.

Gissing did not come there to study the political and economic conditions of the region. His journey was the result of a dream of his youth to which he had been looking forward. Now, while he was visiting those places which belonged to the Greeks and Romans, he felt younger and wrote that this world was his "land of romance".

With deep genuine emotions, he stopped at Cosenza where his thoughts turned to Alaric on seeing the confluence of the rivers Busento and Crati, and came to the conclusion that "Alaric's tomb would have to be sought at least half a mile away, where the Busento is hidden in its deep valley". He realized his dream of paying a visit to the whole coast from Taranto to Reggio Calabria, and pointed out that through the Middle Ages only Taranto and Crotona continued to exist; while Metaponto retained the remains of *La Tavola dei Paladini*, but Sibari was a desolate railway station.

If we turn our attention, for a while, to the page he dedicated to the river Galeso we can really see Gissing as a student. In his recollection of Horace's verses, in his anxiety to become immersed in the environment, in his passionate walks along the banks of the "dulce Galaesi Flumen," in his asking passers-by the name of the little river which was flowing near-by, all this presents us with the picture of a man with pure and sincere mind, and it seems that the visions he had once imagined as a student became reality, with the scent of rosemary in the air.

The names of the great men associated with the places were vivid in his mind while he moved from place to place: Hannibal as a warrior; Plato as a philosopher, who paid a visit to the School of Taras (Taranto); Pythagoras as a mathematician, and others. But during his stay at Crotona he was prevented by his illness and by the bad weather from rendering homage to the ruins of the great temple of Hera on Locri promontory, which Zeuxis had once adorned with his paintings. Gissing was not able to realise this visit, and the vision that he once had could not be attained, and he was for the rest of his life afflicted by a great desire. He had to be content with the mere description given to him by his practitioner, Dr. Sculco. We can also attribute his failing to visit the *Locride* to his bad health.

Gissing emerges, during his journey, not only as a classicist, but also a man full of sensitivity, a human being who knew the needs of the poor people, the desires of the Calabrian inhabitants (particularly when he tells us about the servant of the hotel "Concordia"), even though he thought that the misery he saw was more moderate and less immediate than in those lands not fortunate enough to be washed by the Ionian Sea.

But Gissing knew that the misery of the Calabrian citizens was the same as that experienced by men living in poverty in other parts of the world. Thus he is not only proficient in the field of archaeology, but also in that of sociology, and we can understand from his work how his human warmth showed itself, when he met poor people along his way.

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Two Notes

by P. F. Kropholler

1. George Gissing and Hugh Walpole

Gissing's works play a certain part in Hugh Walpole's novel *The Killer and the Slain*.

In the first part the principal character is depicted as a retiring, mild-tempered and thoughtful man. His love of Gissing's work serves to bring out these characteristics as appears from the following quotation: "I had been long fascinated by the life, personality and works of George Gissing; [...] He seemed like a brother of mine. I felt that if I had known him I could have comforted him, brought him perhaps to Seaborne and cared for him. The grey dreariness of his novels was akin to me: his obsession with women I understood. I loved the man and greatly admired his art, which seemed to me a unique thing." (p. 34)

The point of the novel is the development of the hero into a coarse extrovert. Accordingly he comes to dislike Gissing's novels. When subsequently asked for his opinion, he says he has "grown out of them."

As a novelist Hugh Walpole considered himself to be in the same category as Gissing, that is the kind of author who will be "mentioned in a small footnote to (his) period in history." In his *Journal* in 1937 he placed Gissing and himself among the "third class goods in the shop."

Twenty-six years after Walpole's death we must say, however, that Gissing has stood the test of time a good deal better than Walpole, who, after being extremely popular during his lifetime, has sunk into almost complete oblivion.

II. *The Commonplace Book*

On page 33 of Mr. Korg's edition, apropos of the following sentence from Samuel Johnson "[...] hopes of excellence which I once presumed, and never have attained [...]," Gissing comments as follows: "notice the use of 'presumed' here, which of course refers to 'excellence' not to 'hopes'. At least, I think so. If not, that sentence is rather loose."

In fact, "presumed" very likely refers to "hopes." The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* quotes the same sentence and explains "presume" here as "to take upon oneself, undertake without adequate authority or permission: to venture upon". Johnson ventured upon certain hopes, which remained unrealized.

On page 41 appears a remark to the effect that "You that" is used as a plural, whereas "You who" is addressed to one person. It seems to me that Gissing's linguistic feeling was at fault here. O. Jespersen (*A Modern English Grammar*, Vol. III) quotes from Jane Austen: "You that have been the greatest comfort to me in the world," where "you" refers to one person. Similar quotations with "You that" addressed to one person are given from Shakespeare, Jonson and Milton. "You that" is probably preferred for reasons of euphony.

On the same page occurs a reference to the 18th century use of "literature" for "culture." This corresponds to a remark by Alfred Yule in *New Grub Street* (Ch. XXIX). Curiously enough, Gissing used the word in this sense himself in *Born in Exile*: "He (sc Bruno Chilvers) had brains and literature."

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