

## A word for *The Town Traveller*

George Gissing is known outside the circle of the Victorian Fiction specialists, if at all, as the author of *New Grub Street*; which is, amongst other things, indispensable documentation about the first generation of what Gissing calls the “quarter educated”. Leavis told the story that in the days before fiction was (at the ancient universities) recognised as a serious art form, no novels were admitted to the library of Downing College, but an exception was made for *New Grub Street*. Any implication that *New Grub Street* is not really a novel is, I think, unfair. Gissing could be a real novelist, as one can see perhaps more from his treatment of the Yules, father and daughter, than the hero, Edwin Reardon. But much of Gissing is quite heavy going.

In *New Grub Street* itself it seems pretty clear that we are meant to sympathise with Edwin Reardon, a genuine talent ruined by commercial pressures and an ill-advised marriage, and to be hostile towards Jasper Milvain. The latter, the precursor of literary figures I expect we all know, is well judged by Gissing. But is Reardon really all that talented? We are supposed, I think, to regret that he cannot devote his mind to long novels full of psychological analysis and about what are now called “issues”. But is that what the novel as serious art does? Was Gissing himself right to think that if he was going to be a serious novelist he had to write long tales rather unrelievedly about the burning issues of the day? He can certainly see the trends that developed into our world. *The Odd Women* is remarkable. But it isn’t done with the sort of *panache* one finds in, for instance, *The Bostonians* of Henry James.

I don’t pretend to have read the whole of Gissing, and what I have read has been spread over a number of years, so that some of it is hazy. I remember *In the Year of Jubilee* as having a certain verve. But seriousness in Gissing is too often lumbering. He can take his heroes with an earnestness not easily shared by the reader. The leading example is Godwin Peak in *Born in Exile*. This is about a question perhaps more central than any of the others Gissing tackled, the undermining of religious belief by Darwinism, and about the struggles of a gifted provincial boy to become educated and join the cultured classes. The “thought” is not compelling. It is just taken for granted that nobody of any intelligence could go on taking Christianity seriously after Darwin. Anyone who pretends to is simply hypocritical, and as a boy the precocious hero equates theism with stupidity. This is a quite serious failure to understand the questions at issue, as well as a failure by the novelist to know his own world. What strikes me more is that the author seems quite unaware of how unappealing his hero is and how hard it is for the reader to sympathise. Godwin attends, at the expense of his widowed mother and an aunt whom he despises, and with the aid of a private bursary from the founder, which he is ashamed of, Whitelaw College, much like Owens College Manchester. There he does well, though not as well as he thinks he should have, but does not complete his course. Why? because an uncle decides to open a tea shop just outside the college gates. Ten years later, meeting old college friends, Godwin is still racked with anxiety lest they should associate him with Peak’s eating-house.

As one who in a later generation got to college from a working-class family I must say I find this snobbery just about incredible as well as unpleasant. Gissing, however, doesn’t seem to see anything needing explanation or excuse. Godwin Peak’s despised ordinary sister Charlotte, who actually marries an uneducated man, can’t understand why anyone is “ashamed of one’s relative just because they are in a humble position.”<sup>1</sup> Does Gissing know she is obviously right?

The self-pity in the portrait of Godwin Peak goes together somehow, though I’m not quite sure how, with the prissiness of Gissing’s style (Peak tells himself at one point that to be a real gentleman he must be—deliberately—less correct): “The by-examinations of the year had whispered presage” (p. 59) and so on. “His face [the uncle’s] bore a strong impress of vulgarity, but at the same time had a certain ingenuousness, a self-absorbed energy and simplicity, which saved it from being wholly repellent; the brow was narrow, the eyes small and bright, and the coarse lips half hid themselves under a struggling reddish growth.” (p. 24) The expression does go well with the snobbery. And do you, dear reader, know without looking up the word *sequaciousness* (p. 10) or the word *intenerates* (p. 174)?

These comments are only prefatory to the surprise of *The Town Traveller*. Jacob Korg, for many years the authority on Gissing, dismisses it as “hardly recognizable as Gissing’s work”.<sup>2</sup> Well, in one way that is true. It’s a much better novel than you expect from Gissing! though without his determinedly serious attention to social problems. He shows the lower middle classes as a novelist should, in action. Written in a few weeks, *The Town Traveller* earned Gissing more money than any of his previous laborious works. The Town Traveller, Gammon (who has a Christian name but rarely used), is just the sort of quarter-educated that Gissing usually despises,

1 *Born in Exile*, reprint, n.d. [about 1910], p. 89

2 Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: a Critical Biography* (Washington, 1963) 1965, p. 212

but the interchanges between him and Greenacre the gentlemanly private detective (as he turns out to be, and shady) are beautifully sensitive to different styles. Gissing shows that the suavity is no guarantee of truth—a fact which he sometimes seems to need to be told. *The Town Traveller* is full of life! The scene of Gammon forcing Polly Sparkes's door and carrying her downstairs to make her confront her aunt, but then even more so the epic chase about London on New Year's Eve with the dipsomaniac and dying Lord Polperro, are what you might really call action-packed and intense.

(But where is Christianity? Mrs Clover (married bigamously by Lord Polperro under a *nom de guerre* derived from his family name Trefoyle) would surely have been a churchgoer or at least chapel. Also, I suspect, Mrs Bubb, the policeman's widow who keeps the respectable dirty lodging house (so vividly rendered!), but Gissing just can't bring himself to admit the existence of the Church. All the outings in the book are on Sundays but we never get so much as a church bell!)

*The Town Traveller* does still deserve to be read.

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