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THE REVOLT OF THE WORKERS IN THE NOVELS OF GISSING, JAMES AND CONRAD

The decades of the eighties and nineties of last century saw in Britain the revival of socialism which Engels foretold in his Commonweal article of March 1st, 1885 (1). In 1886, in the foreword he wrote for the English translation of *Capital,* he spoke of the moment when "the unemployed losing patience, will take their own fate into their own hands" (2). From the beginning of the Great Depression in 1874 onwards, prosperity had been fickle, unemployment a constant threat, while the first nation-wide stirrings of working-class revolt since the downfall of Chartism were being heard. "Hope was springing again among the down-trodden masses, who were organising and striking." (3).

Indeed, it was the mass character of the workers' revolt which now forced itself on the attention of intellectuals. As early as 1874 William Morris had begun to feel the need for some "great and tragical circumstances", which would arouse the nation, and thought that "perhaps the gods are preparing troubles and terrors for the world." (4). Not all the creative writers who shared this intuition of approaching strife were to take Morris's forthright step into the midst of the struggle, preferring, even when they personally knew politically involved socialists, as Meredith for example knew Hyndman (5), to remain aloof. Others did find themselves associated with the theoretical or propaganda socialist bodies which began to spring up in the eighties.

In 1881 the Democratic, later the Social Democratic Federation, with a membership drawn mostly from intellectuals and the middle class, was founded. The demagogic and opportunist character of this organisation led to the split whereby the Socialist League was formed, while the Fabian Society (1885) attracted intellectuals of somewhat less fervent socialist character. Though all these bodies formed branches in various towns throughout the country, the most striking concentration of their forces, combined with a background of working-class unemployment, misery and endless slums, was in London. Especially in the eighties, the London streets and squares seem to be the stage against which the first great challenge of the workers to capitalism in its opening imperialist phase can be seen in the most dramatic light.

The culmination of this challenge, in that more obvious form which must have struck especially the unorganised, uninformed observer, came in the years from 1885—1890. The propaganda socialist bodies, provoked by police attacks on street meetings, combined their forces and struck back at the police in the great Dod Street battle in the London slums in 1885, which ended with William Morris, who protested when the police attacked Eleanor Marx, being arrested for disorderly conduct and appearing in a police-court dock. 1886 saw Black Monday in Trafalgar Square, when "on the way through Pall Mall the ragged marchers, provoked by the jeers of wealthy clubmen, stoned the club windows" (6); while November 13th, 1887, brought Bloody Sunday with its attacks on the massed worker's processions by police and armed forces, followed later by the death of Linnell whose funeral was the occasion of Morris's moving *Death Song* — "But Lo, this dead man knocking at the gate" (7). In 1888 the mass strike movement reached elements so far unorganised — factory girls, general labourers — and in 1889 came the massive dockers' strike with its triumphant victory for the dockers' basic demands. The Paris Congress of Socialist organisations which founded the Second International in 1888 prepared the way for the International May Day Celebrations of 1890. There was no doubt that the troubles and terrors anticipated by Morris had arrived.

It was obvious to any moderately sensitive observer that the time was ripening for a decisive revolt of the British workers. Even Cecil Rhodes had felt that the unemployed workers' massed cries for bread, bread, bread could only be answered by increased colonial exploitation (8). While this, combined with boosting of emigration and stepping-up of imperialist propaganda, allowed from 1896 onwards some loosening of tension, the general tendency of the political situation in Britain continued to be marked by evidence of working-class revolt, reacting most sensitively to events of international importance such as the Russian revolution of 1905, breaking out in the 1911—1912 wave of strikes, and in general keeping the ruling and middle classes uneasily eyeing the "rough beast, its hour come round at last", that was slouching "towards Bethlehem to be born" (9).

The final phase of this period came in the years of the First World War and the October Revolution, and the General and Miners' strikes of the twenties. From then on, another phase begins. The beast was no longer so rough, nor did it slouch, and it definitely had come into the world. The reality of the new Soviet state could not be denied. The new awareness of its position on the part of the proletariat, given concrete expression through the founding of the Communist Party — however small that party in Britain might be —, affected the intellectuals drawn to the movement as well as those who felt themselves actively repelled by it (10). In neither case was the reflection in their creative work similar to that in writers of the earlier period. Now, the writer felt, there was the possibility of building

> *"right over chaos*
> *A cantilever bridge."* *(11)*

I.

We thus see that during a certain period, corresponding to the first stage of Imperialism, the worker's revolt in Britain had reached a point where no writer — unless leading an abnormally sheltered life — could ignore it other than deliberately; while it was still in the experimental, elemental, untried, untested and chaotic condition which made it incredibly difficult for any writer to understand it.

It must be admitted that most writers did not even try to. Although we may think Kettle rather less than fair to Galsworthy when he says "You can get from The Forsyte Saga a rather more entertaining and a good deal less valuable version of what you can get in the Victoria and Albert Museum" (12), still the proletariat in Galsworthy's sequence never provides much more than appropriate noises off. To Wells the workers are expendable masses; his real interest lies in the lower-middle class (13). Other writers with a realist bent devoted themselves to limited sections of society, where the influence of the proletariat is not much felt. (Hardy, E. M. Forster) (14). The work of all these writers is of course coloured by the existence of the proletariat, but they do not take the working-class organised movement directly into account. In some other writers, isolated books reveal a background awareness of the working class, often motivated by literary fashion (George Moore in *Esther Waters*). Besides these, there are a number of novelists during this period who make, in one or more of their books, the proletarian revolt the actual or implied subject of their work. Very few of these writers are themselves of proletarian origin; the proletariat and socialism are definitely for them a *subject*. The fact that they write from outside raises peculiar problems of aesthetics, problems, which only the further development of socialist realist literature can enable us to understand more deeply. Hitherto, writers dealing with subjects beyond their personal knowledge had usually known as much about what they were writing of as did their audience (e. g. the historical romance, or tales of the Noble Savage, to take examples at random). But now we have a number of writers seriously dealing with a part of their own society *from without*, lacking intimate personal knowledge, writing on a basis of intuition and remote observation — and, from our point of view, open to exhaustive comparison and confrontation with the reality they were describing. Further, the class they wrote about was itself becoming articulate in literature, and before the end of the period we have in view had produced at least one work of considerable artistic importance in Robert Tressell's *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), which combines deep personal experience with a clear and logical political standpoint. A detailed analysis of the similarities and contrasts of Tressell's artistic approach as compared to that of the writers mentioned in the present study, will be a further step in the examination of the whole question, and is out of the scope of the present article (15).

Most treatments of this question have confined themselves to the so-called social-novel or proletarian novel — the Sozialroman or Arbeiterroman of Rotter's (16) and Weber's (17) exhaustive studies. But such treatments do not go to the heart of the matter, failing to come to grips with the problem of aesthetic value, throwing into one pile Gissing and Stephen Crane with Pett Ridge, H. A. Vachell and even less respectable writers of the magazine story level. Rotter's main fault is that he sees no difference between the conditions that produced *Alton Locke,* Morrison's *Child of the Jago* and Tressell's *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists,* and mechanically enumerates the surface likenesses, differences and "influences". This is useful perhaps for reminding us of lesser novels and pot-boilers long forgotten, but no doubt important in their time as establishing a literary "climate" and perhaps still more a publishers' climate, not always the same thing. But it does not help us to solve problems of the relationship of such novels to reality, and the artistic worth of their reflection of that reality. It is true that Weber objects to Rotter's too mechanical association of Gissing with Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (18), but he too limits himself to a mechanical conception of his subject. He fails to see that the "Social Question" cannot be considered in isolation, without a fundamental analysis of society, and that such an analysis will not be achieved by a computation of ascertained facts. Nor can Gissing's attitude to it be assessed by a cumulative quotation of all the remarks he made on various subjects at various times (19).

It will probably help us more if we try to analyse how writers dealing with the proletariat regard their material within the framework of their creative work. While artistic approach is very varied, there are two kinds of basic relationship, two main ways in which writers are affected by the events of their time and which are clearly and inevitably illustrated in their work. In the first place, becoming aware of the position and significance of the working class, they may attempt to cast off their own class, to accept proletarian allegiance, to penetrate proletarian experience and make it their own; or, in the second place, they remain outside, do not identify themselves with the workers, remain alien observers, "uncommitted" as their contemporary equivalents would put it today. In the case of these latter writers, this need not entail an entirely hostile attitude to the masses of the workers, in fact, it may often be associated with a basically humane attitude on "social questions", "the condition of the poor", and so forth; but the view-point from which they are examined in the present article is precisely that of their conscious awareness of the historical rôle of the proletariat.

In the first group, there are very few writers of the highest rank, very few writers in fact at all. The greatest of them in this period was William Morris, but as he directly dealt with the contemporary proletariat only in poetry (*Pilgrims of Hope,* 1885—1886), we cannot be concerned with his work here. Shaw, who unquestionably thought deeply about the proletariat and its rôle, nevertheless after his Bloody Sunday experience lost confidence in the idea that the workers could, at that moment, lead a revolution, and adopted the non-revolutionary Fabian standpoint which places him (until the last page of *Heartbreak House* with its echo of the guns of the Aurora) mid-way between the two groups of writers we have indicated (20).

To the second of these groups belong the writers approached in the present study: those writers, of middle-class or petty-bourgeois origin, unconnected with political theory or political organisation, who nevertheless were obliged in the course of their artistic development to devote one or more novel to a theme related to proletarian revolt. These writers are: George Gissing (1857—1903) — *Demos* (1886), *Thyrza* (1888), *The Nether World* (1889); Henry James (1843—1916) — *The Princess Casamassima* (1886); and Joseph Conrad (1856—1924) — *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911). Of these writers, the two last are generally acknowledged today as having presented a profound picture of decaying bourgeois society in the period of imperialism, and are among the writers who have deeply influenced and still influence the novelist's approach to his material. They have also been more adequately dealt with by critics, more is known about them, and hence I intend to refer to their work mainly by way of illustration. While Gissing's position in the history of the novel would perhaps be more readily questioned, both in point of achievement and in point of influence, he nevertheless was a serious, a very serious artist and it cannot be assumed that he has nothing to teach us.

This article, then, is an attempt to explore the positive values of some of the outstanding novels of the period indicated, in which the revolt of the proletariat has forced itself upon the writer as a theme, even in those novelists where one would least expect it, even in those writers who have apparently least in common with, least knowledge of the working class, its thoughts, needs and desires. The aesthetic problem raised is that of the creative artist's approach to a theme which is alien, which he almost fears and almost hates, but which forces itself on him; can literature in these circumstances ever be a true reflection of reality — and in what sense?

Light is thrown on the whole problem if we consider the period as one of crisis in the novel. "By the second half of the 19th century, I would suggest, it had become impossible for a novelist to operate adequately within the framework and assumptions of bourgeois society. To put it crudely, it was no longer possible to be honest enough to be a great writer without being in some sense a revolutionary. To achieve a necessary sense of the vigour and potentiality of life, to bring a full humanity and vitality to literature, it was necessary to go outside the contracting or decaying bourgeois framework" (21). As Kettle points out, the search for a hero led the honest writer to face "the big issues of his time", and these could be found only in the anti-imperialist national liberation movements on the one hand or in the growing working-class socialist movements on the other (22). The question raised in this article is that of the extent to which the writer's objective misunderstanding of his theme prevented his attaining the most lasting and profound artistic values (23).

II.

George Gissing is still a problem for biographers and critics. *The Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family* published in 1927 (24), a book which contains some supplementary material from his Diary, and less than a minimum of connecting comment by the editors, does, it is true, give an outline of mental and spiritual development. But the completeness of the letters is very doubtful (25). Gissing's friend and fellow-student, the minor novelist Morley Roberts, wrote in *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912) a disguised biography of Gissing (24a), and Gissing himself wrote a "disguised biography" or rather comment on his own life in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903). But this type of idealised and escapist autobiography cannot be taken as exact biographical data, any more than Gissing's own biographical novels, *New Grub Street* (1891) and *Born in Exile* (1892) can do more than show us his attitude as a creative writer to certain aspects of his own life. The purpose of biography here is not to satisfy gossip-mongers, but to provide a basis for critical assessment (26).

Gissing belonged to the lower middle-class, his father keeping a chemist's shop. But the cultural outlook of the family was by no means narrowly petty bourgeois, and Gissing's father himself was devoted to scientific pursuits (27). Poverty and intellectual pride, respect for learning were characteristic of Gissing's early surroundings. His early academic promise was obscured by his own defiance of conventional petty-bourgeois society, his year or so of wanderings in America, his disastrous first marriage; he returned in the late seventies to London without any prospects, and endeavoured to make a living by literature and by tutoring. It was the latter activity which involved him in the endless walks over miles of London streets, which were so much a feature of his experience, and in a sense its realest part. There is no doubt about the degrading poverty in which Gissing lived for many years, just as there is no doubt of his persistent clinging to standards of culture and education as the only way out. The expression of these two experiences are among the most valid elements in his novels (28). By the time he wrote *Henry Ryecroft*, he was able to say, from the comparative prosperity he had landed in, that he could look back without bitterness. But by that time he had put much of the bitterness into his novels; and could extract an intellectual snob-value from the recollection of how he chose between a midday meal and a copy of Tibullus, or how he dragged the whole immense first edition of Gibbon in two journeys across half London to his miserable lodgings from the second-hand bookshop where he bought it. The idea of young Gissing actually doing these things is somehow much pleasanter than that of Henry Ryecroft complacently recording them in the "exquisite quiet" of his room. There is a falsity of tone about Henry Ryecroft, a keeping up of cultural appearances, which occurs also in what Thompson (29) in his short consideration of Gissing with reference to William Morris, neatly characterises as the "portentous" tone of Gissing's letters. This is much less tolerable in real life or in the escapist compensatory life which Gissing was imagining for himself in *Henry Ryecroft*, than when it is transmuted in the novels. Gissing in his novels is not so afraid of revealing himself and his feelings as he is in his letters and essayist writing. However, it would not be correct to attribute this to insincerity on the part of Gissing who, in his conscious outlook, is a lingering provincial victim of heavy Victorian culture (30). Although he tempts us to laugh at his solemnity, it is perhaps not quite fair to do so. He was in thrall to his poverty and the provincial English system of education.

The books we are interested in sprang directly from the experience of the London streets and London lodgings. After 1890 his books take another line. "Little by little," he wrote to his brother, "the subjects of my books will probably change a good deal." (31). He turned away from contemplation of the working class. "I experience at present a profound distaste for everything that concerns the life of the people," he wrote in Paris in October 1888. "All my interest in such things I have left behind in London. On crossing the Channel I have become a poet, pure and simple, or perhaps it would be better to say an idealist student of art." (32). This is partly the expression of a holiday mood, of course. Gissing in fact never completely lost his interest in social problems, but ceased to deal with the working class in his books on the scale he had done hitherto. He was more and more concerned with problems of art and the relation of the creative artist to capitalist society, and in *New Grub Street* (a book, he thought, with "savage truths in it") (33), he made this problem the central theme of the book. *Born in Exile* deals with his own petty-bourgeois background and his later books are directed to middle-class problems. He apparently thought that in these books he embodied the "new spirit in fiction" (34) by which he meant the more indirect methods of dealing with plot and theme, "a vast improvement on the old worn out processes". But he never dealt with working-class themes by this new method — by the time he arrived at this stage of experiment, his interest in the working class as a subject for fiction had declined. In the letter just quoted, he is very explicit about his attitude to "the social revolution that is in progress... We cannot resist it, but I throw what weight I may have on the side of those who believe in an aristocracy of brains, as against the brute domination of the quarter-educated mob".

Gissing's letters of the later seventies and early eighties show that there was every probability of his being caught up into the Socialist movement. He was following political events and was studying positivism, the precursor in Britain of the socialist theory of the eighties. One of his early patrons was Frederic Harrison, the positivist and publicist. He had been recommended by a London University College professor to Turgenev as being capable of writing "a quarterly article of some thirty pages on the political, social and literary affairs of England for a paper published in Petersburg and called Le Messager de l'Europe" (35). The preparation of these articles required considerable acquaintance with political and cultural developments, and Gissing took this very seriously, as in fact he took all literary work. No more than James or Conrad could he be the "literary man of 1882" who could "supply the market" without becoming emotionally involved (36). But although he reached the length in 1881 of being "connected" with a society whose object was "an attempt to educate the working classes in some degree by means of lectures at their various clubs" (37) and even writes of preparing a lecture on the "Practical Aspects of Socialism", he was moving away from the Comtist-positivist position and in 1883 contemplated a "preface" to a novel which only reached the printers but was not published: "This book is addressed to those to whom Art is dear for its own sake. Also to those who, possessing their own Ideal of social and personal morality, find themselves able to allow the relativity of all Ideals whatever" (38). Gissing at this period was getting over his worst poverty and settling down to regular literary production. "I am by degrees getting my right place in the world. Philosophy has done all it can for me, and now scarcely interests me any more. My attitude henceforth is that of the artist pure and simple. The world is for me a collection of phenomena, which are to be studied and reproduced artistically. In the midst of the most serious complications of life, I find myself suddenly possessed with a great calm, withdrawn as it were from the immediate interests of the moment, and able to regard everything as a picture. In the midst of desperate misfortune I can pause to make a note for future use, and the afflictions of others are to me materials for observation... Brutal and egoistic it would be called by most people. What has that to do with me, if it is a fact?" (39). But in spite of this announcement of detachment, at this stage of Gissing's development it was rather an expression of what he considered to be the correct professional attitude of the writer, than of his actual approach. He is still acutely conscious of class determination of outlook, and in 1883 writes of Ruskin: "Well, he is, and always has been, rich and comfortable. Had he been poor, and with the necessity of struggling through a wretched existence of toil, his socialistic fervour would have, ten to one, exhibited itself in furious revolutionism, instead of this calm, grave oratory. Which of the two is ultimately better, I know not. Only this, I am growing to feel, that the only thing known to us of absolute value is artistic perfection. The ravings of fanaticism — justifiable or not — pass away; but the works of the artist, work in what material he will, remain sources of health to the world." (40) He found it difficult in the England of the eighties to stick to this viewpoint. By 1884 he has reached the stage of stressing "the necessary union between beauty in life and social reform. Ruskin despairs of the latter, and so can only look back on by-gone times. Younger men (like W. Morris) are turning from artistic work to social agitation just because they fear that "Art will be crushed out of the world as things are" (41). Within less than two years (November 1885) he had started to write *Demos: A Story of English Socialism.* For the writing of this novel Gissing deliberately and as always a little too solemnly prepared himself. Henry James, whose *Princess Casamassima* was published in the same year, stressed his opposite method: "I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no authentic information" (42). Gissing, however, wanted to present a full-scale picture and required "inside" knowledge, and for a time moved behind the closed doors. When he had got what he thought he wanted, however, he banged the door shut behind him and shook the dust of its threshold off his feet. In doing so, while he retained his humanistic sympathy for the lot of the poor, he lost forever his chance of expressing, as he hoped to, the full reality of the workers' revolt.

Thompson in a few trenchant asides from his main theme adduces the evidence from the letters and novels that Gissing's intellectual position made him "an unfriendly critic", and that he knew an "animal fear" of the people. In support of this he quotes a passage from "an early novel, Workers in the Dawn" (43). But such passages are by no means uncommon in Gissing and represent a normal feature of his attitude to the workers; he did not require to be "off his guard" to write it. Similar passages could be duplicated from *Demos, Thyrza,* and especially *The Nether World.* It was a peculiar horror, the horror of the man who has been there without seeing the way out, and it is rather an artistic failure than an unconscious revelation of prejudice which causes him in the passage quoted by Thompson to speak of the "rottenness of the human heart". Gissing did not altogether succeed, as Dickens in his later novels had succeeded, in expressing the rottenness at the heart of society by means of the whole atmosphere and texture of his books. It is from the point of view of artistic inadequacy that we can best criticise Gissing. He did not succeed in giving perfect expression to his Story of English Socialism, because he failed to find the point of union between his hatred of capitalism and his ambitions for humanity. It was not lack of heart, lack of feeling for the people, but lack of knowledge, lack of historical perspective, which inhibited his artistic expression and made him commit the crudities characterised by Thompson's quotation.

From 1881 onwards, then, Gissing was moving as an observer on the outskirts of the propaganda socialist bodies, and in 1885—1886,while writing *Demos*, he was deliberately studying Morris against the background of the group of Socialist League anarchists and the Hammersmith Branch. His picture of Morris is very inadequate. It is obvious that he had no comprehension either of Morris's greatness or of Morris's teaching. Mr. Westlake in *Demos* might have been any one of a dozen vaguely socialist men of letters (43a). Gissing of course cannot be too much blamed for this, since the whole of the British Socialist movement itself went astray on this question for many years (44). The question here, however, is not only that of Gissing's understanding of Morris's class-conscious attitude, but also of Gissing's own incomplete acceptance of the English radical cultural tradition. Had he been less contemptuous of the writers valued by his hero Mutimer (see later, p. 130), he would have arrived at a completer evaluation not only of the socialist movement but also of the potentialities of the proletariat, and, further, of the true greatness of William Morris. Gissing had failed, both on the level of conscious thought and on the artistic level, to apply Morris's lesson: "Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay, But one and all, if they would dusk the day" (45).

Where Gissing's penetration is remarkable is in his characterisation of the weaknesses which actually existed in the Socialist movement at the time: the endless quarrels of the anarchist element, the "theoretical" nature of the Hammersmith audiences (46). But Gissing was not so much concerned with depicting the detailed weaknesses and follies of the movement. His artistic purpose in *Demos* is to give a full-length character study of the type brought to perfection in the British Labour Movement — the proletarian workers' leader whose ambition leads him astray. Though details of the story are absurd and unhistoric (we might instance the Utopian community which Mutimer tries to found, and which belongs to the era of Owenist socialism fifty years before, as well as the puerile Savings Bank scheme), nevertheless the main thesis is clear: the man who tries to make socialism the instrument of his own career is doomed.

Thomas Seccombe, author of the Dictionary of National Biography article on Gissing (47) and also of the Introductory Survey to *The House of Cobwebs* (48) gives in the latter his "impression" that *Thyrza* "was written before *Demos*, but was longer in finding a publisher; and it had to wait till the way was prepared by its coarser and more vigorous workfellow" (49). But Gissing's Letters (not published when Seccombe wrote) make it quite clear that he was writing *Thyrza* in 1886 after *Demos* had been published (50). While writing *Thyrza* in 1886 Gissing was convinced that it was the best book he had done (51), but this may be because he felt himself more emotionally identified with the characters and hence under a greater emotional strain. ("The last chapters drew many tears") (52). But when the creative fever had passed off, he saw the two books in a different perspective and wrote: "Thyrza will be thought far more of than Demos, yet I assure you there is nothing like the same power in the book. It will be a long time before I do anything better than Demos artistically . . ." (53)

We thus see that Gissing made high claims for *Demos* artistically. His aim in course of writing he defined as to produce "rather a savage satire on working-class aims and capacities" (54). In form, it is still a novel with a plot in the Dickensian sense, with sub-plot complications, comic characters and the rest. In the Gaskellian way it alternates between peaceful countryside, elegant drawing-rooms, and slum kitchens. There is a scheming villain, a death-bed scene, a lost will. But while all this might seem mere conventional furniture, what is new is the material of socialism itself, something recognised as existing, a phenomenon with its own laws; above all the full-length figure of Mutimer, a tribute to Gissing's penetration. The plot is absurd; but it allows us to see Mutimer at the height of his attractiveness, showing "the best and weakest of his points" (55) — the capacity and vigour, and characteristic "swagger"; then in the moment of incipient decay — when he hears of the legacy that fires his ambition; and finally his moral downfall when ambition and personal vanity have blinded him to his original purpose.

There is no denying the power and the truth of this portrayal: it is only too well justified by facts. The weakness of Gissing's conception of the book as a "story of English socialism" lies in the fact that by portraying Mutimer he thought he had dismissed English socialism. "In the revolutionary societies of the Continent there is something that appeals to the imagination. A Nihilist, with Siberia or death before him, fighting against a damnable tyranny — the best might sacrifice everything for that. But English Socialism! It is infused with the spirit of shopkeeping... it is stamped commonplace, like everything originating with the English lower classes. How does it differ from Radicalism... except in wanting to hurry a little the rule of the mob" (56). This remark is made by Hubert, the upper-class "hero" who wins the heroine in the end, and it must not be taken as representing Gissing's considered opinion, though it has much in common with various splenetic remarks in his letters. We are probably intended to accept the more friendly tone of the once-socialist clergyman Wyvern in this conversation (57). But nevertheless Gissing does want to emphasise the limitations of the English socialist movement as he had observed it.

It appears from the above conversation, then, that it contains what Gissing wants us to "learn" from the book on the theoretical level: life in the slums has as much enjoyment as life in the palace; true suffering is mental suffering; the most unfortunate are those educated sufficiently to have "intellectual needs" without the means of satisfying them; the idea of progress must be accepted as a universal fact, but it is not to be welcomed — "Progress will have its way, and its path will be the path of bitterness"; the proletarian socialists are not capable of carrying through a revolution, the equality of men is childish, and only sympathy and humanity are qualities worth encouraging, even if it means that one must associate oneself with socialists.

These ideas occur again and again in Gissing's books, and not only expressed as ideas, but woven into the fabric of his novels. *Thyrza* is a book which soon becomes overlaid with plot, but besides the main theme illustrating Thyrza's character as the "girl of the people" who has more inherent culture than the fine ladies, its most important thesis is the longing of the unskilled factory-worker Gilbert Grail for books, culture and education, and the impossibility of his satisfying it. The point made by *The Nether World* is that discharging day to day duties is of more use than reforming the world.

The great weakness of *Demos* as a picture of the socialist movement is the lack of positive figures. The only admirable figures in the socialist scenes are Westlake, whose falsity has been demonstrated by Thompson, and perhaps Daniel Dabbs, the honest working man, who is not really a socialist, nor in the end even a working man. Here Gissing remained far below the level of reality. It seems strange that when he could penetrate to the reality of Mutimer's betrayal, and show it in the coarsening of the whole man, when he could achieve the delicately-drawn figure of Emma Vine, the working-girl whom Mutimer wrongs, he could not have sensed something of the "heroic" in the socialist meeting she attended. When he was writing *The Nether World* in 1888 he went to Mile End Waste "for a strike meeting of Bryant and May's match girls. Very few of the girls themselves present. Speeches from Mrs. Besant, Burrows, John Burns, Cunninghame Graham... etc." (58). This strike was part of the campaign for organising the unskilled workers, which was a feature of socialist, and especially Marxist socialist activity from 1886 onwards, leading to the Gasworkers' and Dockers' strikes of 1889. A leading part in this movement was played by Eleanor Marx in association with Tom Mann, the workers' leader. It is those two figures who are "typical" for the socialist movement in Britain at this time. Gissing must have encountered Eleanor in the days when he was observing Morris. But her heroic and tragic figure was beyond his comprehension; only a writer of genius with a Marxist understanding of society could adequately portray such a heroine. That no English writer has ever done so may suggest some justification for Gissing's disgust at the "shopkeeping" character of the English movement.

Gissing was searching for nobility of character, for the specific heroism of the age, and this is shown in his heroines rather than in his heroes. As literary types, they contain elements of Dickens, George Eliot and Meredith (*Rhoda Fleming* rather than *Diana*). That they are "typical" is indicated by their likeness to the heroines in Shaw's early novels, which deal with a very similar level of English middle-class intellectual society, on the verge of poverty and bohemianism, in the same period (59). But when he tries to raise this type to the heroic level demanded by the background of late 19th century socialism, his figures become hopelessly inadequate and sentimentalised. Both in *Demos* and in *Thyrza* he contrasts an upper-class but noble-minded heroine (Adela in *Demos* and Annabel in *Thyrza*), representative of "culture", "disinterestedness" and other virtues he believed in, with a "girl of the people" (Emma Vine and Thyrza, respectively). It is with the latter characters that he is successful and, within limits, truthful. Some of the most honest pieces of writing in Gissing are those passages where he describes the daily life of Thyrza and her sister. This was the heroism Gissing could admire without reserve, and he is conscious that in denying these girls happy fulfilment he is missing something. Significant is the "happy ending" of *Thyrza*, where the sentimental idealist Egremont and Annabel come together after Thyrza's death. Marriage with Thyrza had represented Egremont's opportunity of true greatness, and he, deliberately and of choice, gave her up. Annabel tells him that in this way he has missed fulfilment, and that she herself no longer loves him as she did, though she is willing to marry him. Together they go out to the cliff-top over the sea.

> „Shall we go up to the Head?" Egremont asked.
> "No higher".
> She said it with a significant look, and he understood her (60).

Gissing himself could go "no higher", because he had failed to identify himself with the workers. Although in his own person he remained loyal to those members of the working-class with whom his life was involved (by his first and second marriages), he could not, by an extension of this loyalty, bridge the gap which separated him from the militant workers. Thus he could have no faith in the capacity of the proletariat *itself* to achieve social progress. This led to artistic uncertainty in his novels, to a lack of precision in his depicting of the proletariat and of the socialist movement. When he tried to depict the highest type of socialist devotion, his depiction is sentimental and weak. The character of Westlake's wife Stella, in *Demos*, copied as far as external appearances go from Janey Morris and her Pre-Raphaelite gowns and attitudes, produces an effect of unreality and strain. A "high-throned poet-soul" on whose brow "was visible to all eyes the seal of election" (61), is a poor substitute for the real people that Gissing was brushing shoulders with when he visited the little meeting-hall in Hammersmith.

Other disastrous weaknesses of the book as a story of English socialism are only too easily picked out. He started *Demos* in August 1885 (62) and in September 1885 occurred the Dod Street battle and Morris's appearance in court, which Gissing found so "painful", asking rather plaintively "Why cannot he write poetry in the shade?" (63). That Gissing had considerable mind-searchings over this incident we cannot doubt. But instead of the clash between workers and police which we might legitimately expect in a picture of English socialism in 1885, we get a hostile account of a riot of the workers among themselves, when they turn and rend Mutimer. "Demos was roused" (64). Here again Gissing exposes "his animal fear" of the workers. This is the great structural lack in Gissing's novels — an adequate, an objective depiction of the might of the proletariat. It is the absence of this which weakens the structure of Gissing's books and prevents them from fulfilling even the purpose he intended for them.

Gissing excels, however, in painting those who have been broken in their devotion to the workers' revolt. Gilbert Grail, whose thirst for knowledge drove him to spend sleepless nights in reading, in the end reaches "that point of resignation at which a man dreads to be disturbed". He no longer cares for the pursuit of knowledge: "It is enough for him to read the books he likes" (65). John Hewett, in *The Nether World*, is in the end incapable even of disciplining his unruly children. "He would have made a poor figure now upon Clerkenwell Green... He could no longer speak or think on the subjects which had fired him through the better part of his life... He was one of those born to be defeated. His failing energies spent themselves in conflict with his own children" (66). Those who preserve their integrity are the humble dischargers of human duty, such as Sidney Kirkwood and Jane. "Unmarked, unencouraged save by their love of uprightness and mercy", they are of more use than the "idealistic social reformer". "At least their lives would remain a protest against those brute forces of society which fill with wreck the abysses of the nether world" (67).

This was Gissing's own belief, which he practised in his own unenviable life. But he was, at times, conscious of its inadequacy, even when he had ceased to write of the workers. As late as 1893 he was still trying to treat problems of socialism in his work (68), and his anti-war feeling was exceedingly strong, especially at the time of the Boer War, when he felt moved to write about it in a letter to his little boy (69). But he had no idea of how war might be stopped, other than by the expression of pacifist sentiments. His own suspicion of his inadequate understanding may perhaps have been one reason for the creative agonies he underwent. The Mile End Waste meeting already referred to seems to have produced an acute creative crisis. "On the way home had an experience familiar enough and horribly distressing; of a sudden, like the snapping of a cord, I became aware that the plot of my story, as arranged for the next few days, would not do. Sat late brooding, and had a troubled night. *July 9.* Woke to the most miserable distress, striving vainly to see my way in the story. Seldom have I suffered keener mental pain. Thought, thought at the rate of a hundred thousand miles an hour. Dressed in a suicidal mood... *July 10.* To get story in order, had to go back and re-write two pages at end of Volume II, and four early in Volume III... I think I can go on to the end now." (70). The story was *The Nether World.* It is difficult to suppose that there was no connection between Mile End Waste and his need to revise what he had written.

Although in time *Demos* belongs to the period when Henry James was evolving new ways of expression for the novel in English, it still follows in the main the Dickensian tradition of writing. Gissing was consciously seeking for new artistic methods, bound up as they were with the possibility of breaking through the publisher lending library tradition of three-volume novels, which demanded padding and exhaustive detail. Gissing dealt with this problem in *New Grub Street* and refers to it in his letters. "One volume is becoming commonest of all. It is the new school, due to continental influence. Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length, and with profusion of detail; their plan is to tell everything, and leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic I think is the later method, of merely suggesting; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life, hinting, surmising, telling in detail what *can* be so told and no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment." (71). Commenting on this statement, Gilbert Phelps 72) remarks on the Russian influence on Gissing. Contrary to general assumption, he says, the influence of Turgenev is greater on Gissing than is that of Dostoevsky. Gissing "reveals little of Dostoevsky's emotional and imaginative identification with poverty, suffering and evil, and his pity and understanding in consequence are nothing like so profound". But in spite of Gissing's acquiring in 1884 German translations of several of Turgenev's novels (73) we may doubt if he was influenced in more than a very general way by any contemporary writer in the period of writing *Demos* and *Thyrza.* The main influence is still Dickens, transformed by the facts of Gissing's own experience and observation. This is after all Gissing's peculiar value. Conrad and James had other than English backgrounds, and if Gissing's approach is so "characteristically English" as Phelps suggests, that may be precisely its worth for the English novel (74). He was adapting the novel of Fielding and Dickens to circumstances beyond the knowledge of these writers, and certainly was a bolder pioneer in directing the English tradition towards working-class themes than was either Wells or Galsworthy. Gissing may not have identified himself with the working class, he may even have feared it and hated it. But he insisted on its existence, even when his failure to realise its full capabilities lessened the artistic value of his novels, simply because the reality which they reveal is incomplete.

Gissing wrote a whole novel on the problems of literature in his own day *(New Grub Street).* It is one of the very few successful novels ever written about writers and their problems. It is in essence a bitter condemnation of the position of the artist in bourgeois society, illustrated by the fate of Reardon, the creative writer of honest, rather than brilliant talent, whose serious approach to his work prevents his acceptance of the slick modes of contemporary expression and whose family life is destroyed by poverty; of Milvain, the literary careerist who excels in availing himself of these modes; of Yule, the "solid", but out-dated man of letters; and Biffen, the dedicated uncompromising "realist" who, driven by destitution and the lack of understanding with which his painfully written work is met, commits suicide. The impulse to suicide Gissing himself had felt, and it was by no means an unknown ending for the writer of the period who tried to achieve realistic expression of the social scene, whether in poetry or prose, as did for example Gissing's friend John Davidson, who, driven by poverty, illness and neglect, drowned himself in 1905 (75).

Gissing, for all his interest in the problems of creative writing, for all his serious attitude to his work, and his essential honesty in spite of his cultural and genteel solemnities, did not succeed in writing the "book in my head which no one else can write" (76). It was basic understanding of the workers' revolt which prevented him: lack of understanding on the theoretical, philosophical and historical level, and lack of complete identification on the emotional, personal, artistic level. He could identify himself emotionally with Emma Vine or Gilbert Grail or Sidney Kirkwood. But Morris, Eleanor Marx and Tom Mann were beyond his comprehension; still more so the organised workers who listened to them. He utterly failed to apprehend the revolutionary strength of collective organisation, he had no knowledge of trade union activity and its significance. This was the sort of knowledge that no rising at 3.30 a. m. to walk through the streets, no sitting in at socialist meetings, could replace. By subscribing to the cultural values of Owens College, Manchester, and the London University exams, Gissing obscured for himself one important line of the English cultural tradition, which he otherwise, as the pupil of Fielding, Hogarth and Dickens, admirably continued. This was the revolutionary line, which he deliberately rejects as of no cultural significance. This is clearly shown in his characterisation of the cultural background of Richard Mutimer. "The books which a bright youth of fair opportunities reads as a matter of course, rejoices in for a year or so, then throws aside for ever, were here treasured to be the guides of a lifetime. Certain writers of the last century, long ago become only historically interesting, were for Richard an armoury whence he girded himself for the battles of the day; cheap reprints or translations of Malthus, of Robert Owen, of Volney's *Ruins*, of Thomas Paine, of sundry works of Voltaire, ranked upon his shelves." Gissing refuses to take a stand on culture, in fact he considers that culture must always be non-partisan, absolute. "The chosen directors of his [i. e. Mutimer's] prejudice taught him to regard every fact, every discovery, as *for* or *against* something." (77). In culture, as in life, Gissing denies the class war; and it is this denial that weakens and distorts the three novels *Demos*, *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*. It is the denial of the greatest values in the English cultural heritage that made the real Exile in which Gissing was born.

III.

When assessing the artistic value of Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima*, it must be taken into account that this work of polished artistry was published in the same year as Gissing's *Demos* and precipitated by the same social conditions and social scene. No two books could be less alike: *Demos* — diffuse, discursive, explicit, traditional; *The Princess Casamassima* close-knit as a fugue, enigmatic, allusive and elusive. The purpose is also different. Gissing's is to write a bold and strong study of the socialist movement as a whole, James's to express the reality he imagined lay behind the London streets. Gissing's purpose is at least partly satirical; James's is to penetrate with understanding to a reality he knows he cannot express other than by intuition.

James explains in his Preface (78) written years later, how the book evolved; and here we have the curious parallel with Gissing that both books are in large measure the fruit of their authors' perambulations in the London streets. But James's idea of Hyacinth Robinson, "small obscure but ardent observer of the 'London world'", grew out of the question James posed to himself during his walks of how the shut doors of wealthy London must look to one who could not get behind them. From that postulate he deduced Hyacinth's revolutionary devotion, and then gave the further "turn of the screw". "His being jealous of all the ease of life of which he tastes so little, under this exasperation with an aggressive, vindictive, destructive social faith... might be as vivid a picture as one chose, but would move to pity and terror only by the aid of some deeper complication, some imposed and formidable issue." This issue is to be "that he should fall in love with the beauty of the world, actual order and all, at the moment of his most feeling and most hating the famous iniquity of its social arrangements; so that his position as an irreconcilable enemy to it, thus rendered false by something more personal than his opinions and his vows, becomes the sharpest of his torments". He is to be in the "deep dilemma of the disillusioned and repentant conspirator".

James expresses doubts as to his capability of describing this "socialist" world, but decides that he did not need to seek special knowledge apart from the "information" achieved by his haunting of the London streets. More intimate acquaintance he did not require, as his information was enough to "piece together a proper semblance of those things". That he knocked at no closed doors we have already noted. He defends the fact of his not seeking exact information from the artistic position that he wanted deliberately to give the impression of ignorance, of unknown secret activities — "the value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were precisely those of our not knowing, of society's not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what 'goes on' irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface" (79). He considered that detailed knowledge was of no use to him. "If you haven't, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven't the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured: but... if you *are* so armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal."

Whatever we may think of this confession of artistic method, we cannot deny that it produced a book of sombre brilliance. Of course, James made the common mistake, which Conrad to some extent shares in *Under Western Eyes*, of confusing revolutionary socialism with anarchist terrorism. We could forgive him this, which was a common confusion in the socialist movement itself, only that the assumption vitiates the whole thesis of the book, by making the choice lie between terrorist assassination and aristocratic associations, instead of in the more actual problem on which Gissing had to make up his mind — working-class revolt versus middle-class culture.

Although James's method was a fully developed "new" way of writing, by means of hints, suggestions, indirect presentation, he reproduces in a curious way the same types that appear in Gissing. Paul Muniment is a tall, strong proletarian eminently comparable to Mutimer, rather more refined and even more magnetic — also with the hint that he may prove a traitor. The Princess is rather more real than Gissing's Annabelas and Adelas; she is more brilliant and less provincial, but also condemned like these heroines to sit over a "heavy volume on Labour and Capital". Hyacinth