

The Education of George Gissing

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My life is richer a thousand times----aye a million times----than six months ago. I am no longer ignorant of the best things the world contains. It only now remains for me to go to Greece, then I shall have all the groundwork of education. The education itself must be the work of my life.¹

George Gissing wrote these hopeful sentences to his sister from Italy in 1888. How this short passage epitomizes all the aspirations, and the frustrations, too, of Gissing's life. The education itself must be the work of his life----and it *was*, in fact. But how much he had to pay for it!

He seems to have been obsessed from his earliest days with the notion that his "little life" should be "rounded" with persistent study. A typical illustration of this can be found in a self-caricature which, according to his sister Ellen, he drew at the age of fourteen. He represented himself as "a hideous, round-backed figure sitting on a high stool, and leaning over a very small table on which a large volume is open entitled 'Ossian'"; and on the wall nearby hangs a scroll with the motto "Perseverance." "This inscription Perseverance," placed near these books, is significant as referring to the ex-

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traordinary persistence which, even at that early age, characterized his reading and studies in general."²

Here we may note the fact that the last articulate words we know to have been uttered by Gissing were "Patience, patience," murmured with a French accent on the day before his death at the age of forty-six, in a small village in southern France.³ Indeed, his whole life proved to be nothing but a continuation of patience and perseverance: nothing but a hard struggle to educate himself, and other people, too. Can these desperate, and so often futile, exertions of Gissing really be explained only by his psychological idiosyncrasies or by the *Zeitgeist* of England in the nineteenth century, the age of strenuous life and popular enlightenment? A far better approach would be to follow each successive stage and aspect of his education----from the beginning, when he

expressed his outlook on life with the boyish motto “Perseverance,” to the end, when he recapitulated his life and work with a murmur of “Patience.” So doing one may try to answer the paradoxical question: how did it come to pass that this man of perseverance and assiduity, so devoted to serious study and education, was denied the reward that the heroes of all popular success-in-life stories are sure to enjoy and found himself, after all, an obvious failure, alien to his own country, all *because of his zeal for education?*

In his diary entry for September 15, 1870, when he was still twelve years old, he gave the following extract from the book called *That's it, or Plain Teaching*, a present from his father, because he thought it “a fact worthy of attention”:

The number of eggs deposited by certain of the oviparous species of fish is enormous. The sole lays 100,000. The carp 200,000. The tench 400,000. The mackerel 500,000. The flounder 1,300,000. The cod 8,500,000. The salmon 20,000,000.⁴

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Of course it is a common thing for a studious boy to cram himself with a heap of dry information about some subject or other so that he may boast to his fellows of his own superiority. And little Gissing had, in fact, a strong inclination toward natural history, imbued and encouraged by his father, a dispensing chemist. Now, the mental state of young Godwin Peak may be identified, more or less, with that of the author as a little boy (we have every reason to believe this highly probable; for Gissing wrote, “Peak is myself---one phase of myself”⁵). And it seems as if the great zeal with which this precocious boy tried to collect information not necessarily useful for any practical purpose and to learn more from books than from life anticipated the tragic end his later intellectual development was bound for.

Godwin devoured books, and had a remarkable faculty for gaining solid information on any subject that took his fancy. What might be the special bent of his mind one could not yet discover. . . . It might be feared that tastes so discursive would be disadvantageous to a lad who must needs pursue some definite bread-study, and the strain of self-consciousness which grew strong in him was again a matter for concern.⁶

From the first he loved study, not from any ulterior motives, but for its own sake. A liberal education, which might barely enable him to get his bread in the immediate future or to promote his social status----this, truly, was to be hoped for. The aspiration was rather snobbish, however, for a liberal education was too great a luxury for a youth of his class to be indulged with, and he could never afford to educate

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himself for education's sake. He knew as much from the painful case of his father, the very man under whose influence he entertained the pure love of study. A self-educated man, his father was fairly liberal-minded for a poor dispensing chemist in a country town; well read in literature, he was very fond of Tennyson and Dürer and possessed sufficient knowledge of botany to publish a little study on ferns. It is no doubt that George loved, respected, and took pride in him, and yet the son later recollected that he could not but be struck by some palpable evidence of his father's ignorance, especially about classical languages (he did not know that Greek and Latin poetry lacked rhyme).⁷ Although understandable, these defects in the most important item of a liberal education must have appeared fatal to the son, because they clearly and ruthlessly showed the nature and the limit of his father's education, and most likely *his own*, so long as he should remain contented where he was.

So, he must get out of the environment he was born in, climb up the social ladder somehow or other, and get for himself a ticket of admission into the higher world where, he believed, the fullest scope could be allowed to his capacities. But how? The only way open for this intellectual snob would be to win some sort of scholastic distinction: "It was a great thing to learn what the past could teach, to set himself on the common level of intellectual men."⁸ Here is the beginning of his illusion that intellectual power and books would surely help him with the promotion of his social status, or, at all events, with the conquest of the handicap he suffered from, carrying him over into a "room at the top," the world of an aristocracy, not of feudal, but of intellectual power, or "an aristocracy of *brains*,"⁹ as he very often put it. Note how glad Godwin Peak felt to hear his brother call him an aristocrat:

By dubbing him aristocrat, Oliver had flattered him in tile

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subtlest way. If indeed the title were justly his, as he instantly felt it was, the inference was plain that he must be an aristocrat of nature's own making---one of the few highly favoured beings who, in despite of circumstance, are pinnacled above mankind. In his ignorance of life, the boy visioned a triumphant career; an aristocrat *de jure* might possibly become one even in the common sense did he but pursue that end with sufficient zeal. And in his power of persistent endeavour he had no lack of faith.¹⁰

The inscription on the scroll, "Perseverance," assumed a grave significance; it was the first commandment for an intellectual aspirant eagerly awaiting deliverance from the nether world of the scullery to the glorious castle---the castle for Gissing being not in Spain but in ancient Italy and Greece. Thus began his education, or more accurately, what he convinced himself was his education, namely, the pursuit of intellectual prestige (the title of "an aristocrat *de facto* of brains"), which was carried on persistently, desperately. The young "pot-hunter," as he was called, made innumerable conquests at the boarding school and at Owens College, Manchester, until the fatal and inevitable disaster completely destroyed his future.

By the term "disaster," however, I am referring, not necessarily to his liaison with a young prostitute and his consequent thefts, but rather to the disillusionment and loss of self-confidence that stole over him amidst his apparently glorious academic career. At first, he had no doubt that he was steadily making his way to a definite goal, but soon enough his overly self-conscious mind could not help noticing his false position; he studied so hard---but from some ulterior motives, namely, to get over the class barrier and grasp the chance of study for its own sake. In short, his education must be a very *practical* one so that he might enjoy a *liberal* education on some far-off day. He could no longer be sure that the end justified the means. Worse still, neither the professors nor their lectures could satisfy his spiritual hunger. According to Morley Roberts, his college mate and lifelong friend, Morhampton College in those days was not a uni-

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versity in the strict sense of the word, but "could only be regarded, for a boy of his [Maitland's] culture, as a stepping-stone to one of the older universities, probably Cambridge."¹¹

[Godwin Peak] understood that college learning could not be an end in itself, that the Professors to whom he listened either did not speak out all that was in their minds, or, if they did, were far from representing the advanced guard of modern thought. With eagerness he at length betook himself to the teachers of philosophy and of geology. Having paid for these lectures out of his own pocket, he felt as if he had won a privilege beyond the conventional course of study, an initiation to a higher sphere of intellect. The result was disillusion.¹²

On the other hand, there were many students around him who, scornful of the teachers and quite indifferent to the college instruction, had about them an air of culture and refinement which they had acquired without effort as a natural and genuine fruit of the liberal education they had enjoyed. It was true that they were of much lower rank in the academic competition, but he felt himself inferior to them:

. . . he often regarded with bitter envy those of his fellow-students who had the social air, who conversed freely among their equals, and showed that the pursuits of the College were only a part of their existence. . . . Some of them Godwin could not but admire, so healthful were they, so bright of intellect, and courteous in manner,----a type distinct from ally he had formerly observed.¹³

However hard he might try, he could scarcely expect to be on the same level with them, to win the title of “an intellectual aristocrat *de facto*”; the most he could wish for was to become “an intellectual

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aristocrat *parvenu*.” His incessant study with “perseverance” had, instead of helping him to overcome the handicap, served only to make it greater and to make him aware that education meant more than mere persistent study of books.

This revelation must have been most crushing. The many prizes and scholarships he had won must have seemed to be but vain trophies, and perhaps he even lost his confidence in education itself, his last resort. But then, what else could he have to believe in and live for? Hitherto he had been so arrogant and sure of himself, so far above the other students, and his professors for that matter, that he studied for himself and by himself nothing but “what the past could teach him,” never doubting the moral

support that books would give him. He had no chance, or rather could not afford, to have his mind cultivated through personal contact with friends and teachers who might have subdued his arrogance and undeceived him of the illusion. These circumstances well explain the fact that, always lonely and avoiding his fellow students, he sought human companionship in a poor girl in the street and, short of the money to save her from the slough, committed many thefts in the common room and the locker room. Such desperate conduct could be ascribed to his sexual and psychological idiosyncrasies, his inferiority complex, his shyness with or rather abhorrence of women of ordinary middle-class families, his idealism and lack of practical sense, and so on. That is no doubt true, to some extent. But he was *not* of abnormal mind. If he had not been aware of the futility of his education, he might have known better; he might have pursued his studies for some practical purpose, or even from some worldly motives. As it was, he could entertain no hope for “room at the top” and, what was worse still, he had grown too proud to be content with the original circumstances he was born in, having already eaten some fruit of temptation. Thus he found himself belonging nowhere, an exile in both the social and the spiritual senses of the word---one of “the unclassed,” as he later put it.¹⁴

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In this sense he may be said to anticipate the tragedy of Leonard Bast, the humble clerk, mere scum in the flux of modern London, whom E. M. Forster introduced in *Howards End*.

He felt that . . . if he kept on with Ruskin, and the Queen’s Hall Concerts, and some pictures by Watts, he would one day push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe. He believed in sudden conversion, a belief which may be right, but which is peculiarly attractive to a half-baked mind. But of a heritage that may expand gradually, he had no conception: he hoped to come to Culture suddenly, much as the Revivalist hopes to come to Jesus.¹⁵

So it was inevitable that Gissing was soon struck by the barrier between himself and the refined world which he could never rise to, “not if he read for ten hours a day.”¹⁶

Oh, it was no good, this continual aspiration. Some are born cultured; the rest had better go in for whatever comes easy. To see life steadily and to see it

whole was not for the likes of him.¹⁷

What he could do was to find compensation in taking a condescending attitude toward Jacky, his wife, who came of an even lower and further morally degraded class and whom he promised never to forsake. I do not know whether E. M. Forster had Gissing in mind in portraying Leonard Bast, nor do I think that Leonard is among the most important characters in *Howards End*. But the comparison of Gissing with Forster, which I will return to later, would be well worth further study.¹⁸ What Gissing reveals to us is the real destination of the spiritual self-education of an aspiring youth: his only reward is futility and alienation, quite contrary to the gospel of

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many success-in-life novels or of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*, the educational Bible of an age of strenuous life. And such alienation following upon disillusionment with education is a problem that we university people in the twentieth century are now compelled to recognize with graver significance. Besides, he reveals it to us, in terms not of social issues but of those human relationships Forster regards as the essential theme of his novels.

One instance of such human relationships, or rather of failure in, or the absence of them, is shown in that very interesting short story "A Lodger in Maze Pond," which deals with a man foolish enough to be married twice to a poor, uneducated girl of the lower class, just like the author himself. His remark sounds as if it were made by Leonard Bast: "Unfortunately I am not a rascal: I can't think of girls as play-things; a fatal conscientiousness in an unmarried man of no means."¹⁹ This "fatal conscientiousness" can be replaced by some other phrase, namely, his wish, or rather obsession, to *educate* a poor girl---to develop her natural and dormant disposition. He thought "he would educate" his first wife because "she had excellent dispositions";²⁰ and---though he had to pay so dearly for his foolish attempt---after the death of his first wife, he could not help proposing marriage to another girl of much the same position as the first, "making plans for the future---for her education, and so on."²¹

In fact, driven by the emotional desolation described previously, Gissing tried to reclaim a young prostitute, Marianne Helen (Nelly) Harrison, and gave her the money with which she might buy a sewing machine and get an honest living; finally he *promised to marry her*, as if that were one item in his system of education! Did he,

having failed in educating himself, wish to find compensation in the successful results of the education he gave her? A victim of a “Cophetua complex,”²² he was now as eager and patient as ever to carry out his

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mission of enlightenment in somebody inferior to him both socially and intellectually, somebody whom he could educate as he would like to, so that he might enjoy vicarious satisfaction, and from whom he might expect the gratitude due to a savior. But here again, he was mistaken. Only disappointment awaited him.

And that was not surprising; for his was the most foolish way to reclaim such a woman, since it served only to make her more conscious of her own inferiority and to create a serious gap between them, as he later realized and showed in the scenes between Arthur Golding and Carrie Mitchell in his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*. Yet, he seems no more cured of his obsessive sentimentalism about education than the hero of “A Lodger in Maze Pond,” and after deliverance from his first wife, for whom he suffered so much and so long, he found another uneducated girl of the working class, Edith Underwood, who, he hoped, would satisfy his passions, sexual and educational, at once. See how he described her: “The girl is peculiarly gentle and pliable, with a certain natural refinement which seems to promise that *she might be trained to my kind of life*.”²³ Of course he was too optimistic in his hope of a new education, and there is no need to give a full account of their tragic married life. But, to do her justice, she was no hypocrite; she did not pretend to be gentle and pliable enough to be trained successfully in his system. It was Gissing who failed in realistic insight, who was the more to blame. I venture a conjecture (a very tenuous one, I admit) that if he had not tried to educate his two wives at all, or if he had known a suitable way to educate them, one, at least, might have become a gentle wife, or a less abominable shrew. Nelly might have had re-

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course to drink less often, and Edith might have had fewer fits of madness. As it was, his attempts were misguided.

Emily Hood, the somewhat idealized heroine of *A Life's Morning* and governess of ten-year-old twin sisters did know how to make a successful impression on her pupils.

The twins were not remarkably fond of their lessons, but in Emily's hands

they became docile and anxious to please. She had the art of winning their affection without losing control over them. . . . The twins were in truth submitting to the force of character. They felt it without understanding what it meant.²⁴

This would be the best way to educate innocent children, and for that matter ignorant wives, if their education were necessary. But this seems to be what Gissing was quite incapable of. We know of several instances of his behavior in private tuition, two of which bear mention here: one is a little scene between him and Frederic Harrison's two sons, whom he once tutored, and the other is an extract from his letters to his brothers and sisters.

As one of these two sons, Austin Harrison, bore witness, Gissing was a very gentle, patient, and impressive teacher like Emily Hood, loved and respected by his pupils, who were "lazy and impish enough."²⁵

At first we behaved abominably and once started singing, but he stopped that summarily by suddenly rising and quitting the house----without a word but with a look that appalled us. We rushed out into the street and implored him to return, yet he was adamant. After that we were much better behaved. I can distinctly recall *how pathetic* he seemed to me.²⁶

He succeeded, however, in making his naughty pupils repentant

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not by "the force of character," but by his "pathetic" look, which would move only those who happened to have intelligence and delicate feelings. Under less fortunate and more common circumstances, if the teacher had revealed his weakness and gone out with a pathetic look, it would probably have made pupils (who can be very callous) still more triumphant. To be convinced of that, we have only to read the seventh chapter of *David Copperfield*, where we find the gentle nature and pathetic weakness of Mr. Mell, the teacher, taken advantage of and made a laughing matter by a bullying boy, Steerforth.

Gissing seems to have been well aware that such a demonstration of weakness would not do for women; for he described the awful scene between Edwin Reardon, another alter ego, and his wife Amy, who refuses to live with him, in response to his humiliating suggestion that he earn a livelihood as a petty clerk because he cannot go on

writing the novel.

He lost control of himself; Amy's last reply went through him like an electric shock, and for the moment he was a mere husband defied by his wife, the male stung to exertion of his brute force against the physically weaker sex. . . .

He had but to do one thing: to seize her by the arm, drag her up from the chair, dash her back again with all his force----there, the transformation would be complete, they would stand towards each other on the natural footing. With an added curse perhaps----

Instead of that, he choked, struggled for breath, and shed tears.

Amy turned scornfully away from him. Blows and a curse would have overawed her, at all events for the moment; she would have felt: "Yes, he is a man, and I have put my destiny into his hands." His tears moved her to a feeling cruelly exultant; they were the sign of her superiority. It was she who should have wept, and never in her life had she been further from such display of weakness.²⁷

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Though he was fair enough to describe Amy, not as a vulgar and ignorant shrew, but as a well-educated and affectionate woman of intellect and refinement who loved her husband, Gissing knew very well that in his century the most effective way "to train a wife to his kind of life," as he put it, was to impress her with "the force of character," or, if necessary, to treat her as Mr. Murdstone, stepfather of David Copperfield and man of "firmness," did his wife;²⁸ and yet he knew as well that he was too weak and delicate-minded to hold absolute control over her.²⁹ So, little as we know about the particulars of his married life with Nelly and Edith, we are hardly confident that he was a very competent teacher for those women a great deal coarser and less educated and educable than Amy Reardon.

Compared with these obvious failures, he was more successful with his brothers and sisters. He felt himself responsible for their mental cultivation after his father's death, when he was still thirteen years old. He sent them many letters giving them encouragement and admonitions as to their study. In some of them, especially in those to his sisters, we can very often hear the somewhat priggish and patronizing tone of a preparatory school teacher. Here is one example among many.

There is nothing worse than desultory reading, without any definite object.

Always say to yourself, now I will confine my reading to certain subjects----pretty nearly----till I have a good idea of it. Then, in reading English Poetry----of which

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I devoutly hope and trust you read a good deal----don't skip from Chaucer to Tennyson, and from Shakespeare to Crabbe; but read all the principal authors of one period taking for your guide a book like the little Stopford Brooke primer.³⁰

In the following, however, we can hear the voice of his truer feelings.

If a girl is to be made a teacher it is certainly right that she should pass examinations; but, as a mere feature in education, I see little good to be effected by these tests. A girl's education should be of a very general and liberal character, adapted rather to expand the intelligence as a whole than to impart very thorough knowledge on any subject.³¹

Anyway, both of his sisters did become teachers and afterward began their school at Wakefield, thus fulfilling their brother's expectation that they should rise above other "quarter-educated" women of their own class. But were they really "emancipated" in the spiritual and intellectual senses of the word, as he would have liked some heroines of his novels to be? Did they enjoy the fruit of a liberal education and turn out to be women in whom he could take vicarious pleasure as the successful achievement of his educational system? Ironically enough, only its negative and less constructive side seems to have taken effect; for, having taken from their mother a provincially rigid moral sense, the Gissing sisters were hardly initiated into their brother's intellectual sphere----especially Margaret, the more obstinately pious, who never could or would understand the freethinking, provocative thoughts expressed in her brother's novels.³²

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And yet, on the other hand, they underwent his brainwashing thoroughly enough to believe themselves too highly educated to be satisfied with the social class to which they belonged and to be destined for anything but the bleak and solitary life of single-blessedness. It may be said, however, that his educational zeal had its reward; for they remained always loyal to him during and after his lifetime, and particularly Ellen,

the more “gentle and pliable,” felt very grateful for his guidance. Resenting the title of “a mere prig” wrongly given to him, she wrote in 1927:

His knowledge was no mere affectation, and his desire to instruct others was free from all thought of self: let it but be necessary to help some fumbler in learning, though it were but one step on the way, and all else was forgotten in the wish to be of use. No pains were spared, no patience was too great, so long as the glance of intelligence in the eye of the listener showed that his words had been understood.³³

She seems quite sure that she at least could understand his words; but was it really so? The implications of her misunderstanding of his idea of education and of his novel *Tue Emancipated* are our next concern.

The surest way to enjoy the satisfactory results of one’s guidance, or to see that “glance of intelligence in the eye of the listener,” lies in the creation of imaginary people, and therefore it is quite natural that this recurrent and obsessive theme of education can be detected

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throughout Gissing’s novels. *Workers in the Dawn*, his first novel, already anticipated the *Leitmotif* of some of his later, more important works, in the sense that the process of mental formation and development of its hero and heroine takes a very prominent part in the novel, so that it may be called a novel of adolescence, or a *Bildungsroman*, rather than a novel of social comment. Though so many elements coexist in this work that it gave Mrs. Frederic Harrison the impression that there was “enough stuff in the book to make six novels,”³⁴ it may safely be said that its main theme is not so much any social problem, general or particular, as the record of its leading characters’ “Mind-growth” (which is the title of one of the most important chapters, vol. 1, ch. 14, where Helen Norman, the heroine, gives us through her diary an account of her mental development during her philosophical studies at the University of Tübingen). There is, for example, the hero’s dilemma in choosing between two causes, namely, allegiance to social reformation or to the pursuit of artistic beauty (vol. 1, ch. ii, “A Double Life”);³⁵ or the revelation made to Helen by Strauss’s *Leben Jesu*, and her doubt of, and “Emancipation” (the title of vol. 1, ch. 13) from, the conventional Christian dogmas

with which she had been brought up. Reflecting the author's idea of education, here it means, not instruction of the ignorant mass in the practical information useful for its present work or for promotion to a higher social class,³⁶ but the spiritual education of the chosen few, "an aristocracy of *brains*." It is also characteristic of his mind that the educations of the hero and the heroine both result in tragic frustration: in the case of the former because of his circumstances and what they lead him to, namely, his moral breakdown---the doom that kept its strong hold upon the author himself and a number of the male characters he created; and in the case of the latter because she could not go through the purgatory of love by which, the author be-

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lieved, the true spiritual emancipation of woman could be accomplished, though this consummation of female education was rarely attained even in his imaginary realm.

One of the rare cases where it was attained is that of Miriam Baske, the heroine of *The Emancipated*. The young widow of an industrial potentate, a woman reared under the strictest of puritanical codes, after her husband's death Miriam leaves her sordid Midland industrial town for a vacation in Italy, where, though feeling at first as if in exile,³⁷ she experiences a most remarkable revelation, just as the people from Sawston do there in some of E. M. Forster's novels. But, while in Forster's work the agent of such revelations is contemporary Italy, the Italians, their real life, or even some mystic power, a *genius loci*, as he prefers to call it, Gissing prefers that a spiritual education should be given to the uninitiated woman by an intelligent Englishman like the author himself. In the ninth chapter of Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, where Philip and Miss Abott (who have come from the civilized community of England) are involved in the shocking scene with Gino, an Italian very crude but full of vitality, the English undergo a wonderful metamorphosis of mind through personal contact with the Italian. And when Lucy, the heroine of *A Room with a View*, sees an unknown Italian stabbed to death in a scuffle on the street in Florence and faints, "something" does happen to her. A quite new phase of life opens, in which she can understand a world and people different from those she has been accustomed to: "It was not exactly that a man had died; something had happened to the living: they [Lucy and George, who held her in his arms] had come to a situation where character tells, and where Childhood enters upon the branching paths of Youth."³⁸ But in *The Emancipated* Ross Mallard, a middle-aged painter, teaches Miriam in "exile" to love and appreciate Italy and her people, not as it really is or as they really are, but for its classical associations and its cultural heritage.

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“Don’t you like to watch those animals?” [said Mallard, looking at a yoke of oxen drawing a cart along the street in Rome.] “I can never be near them without stopping. Look at their grand heads, their horns, their majestic movement! They always remind me of the antique----of splendid power fixed in marble. These are the kind of oxen that Homer saw, and Virgil.”

Miriam gazed, but said nothing.

“Does your silence mean that you can’t sympathize with me?”

“No. It means that you have given me a new way of looking at a thing; and I have to think.”³⁹

Thus, the revelation comes to the uninitiated woman, not through intuition or through some mysterious medium (the brightness of the Italian sky “mesmerized” Lucy),⁴⁰ but through an argument that made her feel she had “to think,” in other words, in the course of “Learning and Teaching” (the title of vol. 2, ch. 7) about the topics of classical literature and art. The novel closes when Miriam symbolically gives up her original plan to hallow the name and memory of her late husband by building a chapel and offering it to her community and when, fully emancipated, she marries her teacher, Mallard, thus realizing Gissing’s idea of the Bildungsroman, that a woman’s maturity should be attained by “an education into love, conceived and experienced as an identity or interfusion of the spiritual and the physical.”⁴¹

Gissing’s sister Ellen seems to have disapproved of this book, suspecting that her brother had made use of her as the model for Miriam,⁴² but since she could not (nor could Margaret, for that matter) experience the purgatory of love and enjoy that crowning moment of education as Miriam could, it is a tragic irony that she, quite ignorant of this crucial difference, and failing to understand the true meaning of *the* education as her brother used that term, com-

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mitted the stupid error of identifying herself with the heroine. It appears that “his words” could *not* be understood even by one most intimate with him. It would be very interesting to know how she reacted to the circumstances to which two other female characters are destined----one, Maud Enderby in *The Unclassed*, whose love is frustrated because of her religious fanaticism, or rather fatalism; the other, Jessica

Morgan, a poor victim of the sham intellectual emancipation of women, whom Gissing describes so ruthlessly:

She talked only of the “exam,” of her chances in this or that “paper,” of the likelihood that this or the other question would be “set.” Her brain was becoming a mere receptacle for dates and definitions, vocabularies and rules syntactic, for thrice-boiled essence of history, ragged scraps of science, quotations at fifth hand, and all the heterogeneous rubbish of a “crammer’s” shop. When away from her books, she carried scraps of paper, with jottings to be committed to memory. Beside her plate at meals lay formulae and tabulations. She went to bed with a manual and got up with a compendium.⁴³

Emily Hood’s case is a very ambiguous one; she is saved from barren intellectual asceticism by the love of Wilfred Athel, an intelligent young man brought up in a sphere of liberal culture, and by such means her spiritual education is brought to consummation. But, as we know, the present version is the result of reluctant revision forced on the author by James Payne, reader for Smith & Elder (one is reminded of the end of *Great Expectations*, changed by Dickens at Edward Bulwer Lytton’s suggestion), and Gissing’s original intention was, perhaps, to make the story a chronicle of the “mind-growth” and frustration of an intellectual young woman, who, like Godwin Peak and the author himself, must eventually find herself alien both to her lover’s world and to her own original environment---in a spiritual exile to which she has been driven by the education she got “by hook or by crook.”⁴⁴ As such, *A Life’s Morning*, together

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with *Born in Exile*, might have been one of Gissing’s finest Bildungsromane.

The Bildungsroman, when introduced from eighteenth-century Germany, had a very peculiar reception in England.⁴⁵ Some novelists (for example, Bulwer Lytton) made such a superficial use of this design of fiction that the original theme of the hero’s spiritual education was confused with, and finally replaced by, the more practical idea of training for success in life. This process was, perhaps, intentional on the part of the author, who wished to make the philosophical design borrowed from the Continent more congenial to his own taste and to that of the contemporary reading public of England as well. Gissing was, then, one of the few novelists with the insight to purge the practical English version of the Bildungsroman of its shallow utilitarian moral and

to reestablish its original and genuine function, namely, the pursuit of the “mind-growth” and spiritual education of its principal character. But the rather optimistic conception of the original Bildungsroman developed by the German men of letters in the Enlightenment had to disappear, and the artist was now confronted with the fact that the cultivation of mind leads an intellectual and conscientious man in modern society to the awareness of being lost in the abyss of doubt, tormented with everlasting dilemmas and frustrations, and finally condemned to an exile at once spiritual and physical. As William York Tindall begins his survey of modern British literature with the chapter titled “Exile,” referring to *New Grub Street* to illustrate the general literary situation discussed there,⁴⁶ such crucial issues as the modern novelists (e.g., Henry James, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann) were later to deal with were already recognized and used by Gissing as the most important theme of the Bildungsroman. His *Born in Exile* should be referred

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to again, therefore, as the zenith in a series of Bildungsromane begun with *Workers in the Dawn*.

Born in Exile is the record of a youth who was ambitious for a “room at the top,” like many of his brothers from Julien Sorel to Joe Lampton, and whose aspiration to educate himself was identified with the wish to get a woman of a class higher than his own.

“I have no other ambition in life---no other! Think the confession as ridiculous as you like; my supreme desire is to marry a perfect refined woman. Put it in the correct terms: I am a plebeian, and I aim at marrying a lady.”⁴⁷

But it is the record not of the practical stratagems and conquests he made but of the mental agonies he suffered; there are as little action and as much argument here as in *Crime and Punishment*, a psychological detective novel, as it is often called, and one that Gissing liked.⁴⁸ And, needless to say, all Godwin Peak’s ambitions came to nothing; he could find no community for him to belong to in his own country, and, when he left “a social sphere where he must ever be an alien,”⁴⁹ he could not find any spiritual shelter abroad. While Miriam Baske’s education could bear fruit in Italy, where, though feeling at first as if in “exile,” she was awakened to classical beauty by her spiritual teacher and emancipator, his could not, even in exile. Expatriation meant to him nothing

positive or regenerative but a mere continuation of and, perhaps, the last straw in, his endless frustration. “Dead, too, in exile! . . . Poor old fellow!”⁵⁰----these last words of the novel were, of course, addressed to the hero, Godwin Peak, but do they not seem to allude to the fate of many other heroes and heroines of the modern Bildungsromane written by Gissing and later by twentieth-century writers? And do they not also apply to

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the fate of the author himself, whose obsessive intellectual zeal was to end blighted, without any fruit, or root?

For Gissing’s real life very often imitated fictitious art, and some events and situations in his novels were followed by those in his later life as the last stage of his education. The most striking instance was that Godwin Peak’s dream to marry a woman of refinement came true, and Gissing did in fact experience the “frantic exultation” of Edwin Reardon, who “had always regarded the winning of a beautiful and intellectual wife as the crown of a successful literary career.”⁵¹ He at long last found the ideal woman, one intellectually equal to him, and won her love. His letters to Gabrielle Fleury are marked by a passionate tone that we had been led to expect from the mouths or pens of people in his novels, but hardly from himself. At all events, such a strong outburst of personal emotion and sanguine hope shows itself nowhere in his letters to his family or to his German friend Bertz. Gissing finally seemed almost sure that the crowning moment of his lifelong education was coming to him.

I believe that you will make of me a far better man, intellectually and morally, than I could ever otherwise be; and I believe that you, my sweet, will find a freer development of all your beautiful and noble qualities than would be possible if you did not marry me.⁵²

But what most surprises us is that he was so modest here that he dared neither try to train her to his kind of life, as he had done with his former wives, nor offer her that intellectual guidance in which he had so often indulged himself with his sisters.

Darling, I should think it impertinent to say that you must not read this or that. . . . You are my intellectual equal, Gabrielle, and I shall *never* presume to dictate to you in such matters.⁵³

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He refrained even from encouraging her to master the classical languages, an indispensable part, in his mind, of a liberal education, for want of which he had been almost ashamed of his own father.

Don't grieve, dear, that the old languages are unknown to you. As I said, life is so short, and the knowledge you already possess is far more than enough for our intellectual communion. It delights me that you know many things of which I am ignorant. You will often be my teacher. In one thing----all that concerns the higher life of the soul----I shall always be your pupil.⁵⁴

In Gissing's words, the comparison of teacher and pupil is more than mere lover's nonsense; but here we see that the table was turned and the "learning and teaching" relationship between Mallard and Miriam was just reversed----it was *he* who was to learn and *she* to teach in the actual realization of his ideal scheme of an education into love. That, however, does not necessarily mean that he was ever after to be subjected to Gabrielle; she was not so stupid as to gloat over his humiliation. She seems to have been very eager to learn what she didn't know, and she later asked him to teach her Italian and Greek.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, as Pierre Coustillas points out in his introduction to these letters, Gissing must have felt just as Edwin did when he took Amy as his wife----that it was almost too great a reward for his long suffering and "Perseverance."⁵⁶ And perhaps it was due in part to this sense of indebtedness on his part, and also to his homage to her culture and, through that, to French literature in general, that he represented himself as a pupil rather than a teacher.

Thus he bade farewell to his own country and began the last period of his education as an exile in the physical as well as the spiritual sense of the word. But was he able to reach the crowning stage of his life and art after achieving "intellectual communion" with one he loved? Alas, here again the answer is no. He seems to have grown spiritually very little under the new *ménage*, and physically much

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weaker under the new system of diet. There was also little growth in his art----unlike Joseph Conrad and Henry James, two novelists he admired, who achieved their artistic

maturity through expatriation, who learned so much from life in exile. Perhaps Gissing had experienced spiritual exile too early and too thoroughly in his own country. Although in earlier years he had always been learning more from books than from life and had been more interested in “the minuter difference between Dochmiacs and Antispasts”⁵⁷ than in actual events in real life, yet he could create out of this intellectual passion fine works of fiction. Some of his Bildungsromane, which will have their place in the history of the English novel, were at once an autobiographical and impersonal representation in art of his obsessive idea of spiritual education, whether its outcome be success or failure. There *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung* were indivisibly combined.

But in his later and apparently calm days his passion could assume only the very personal form of a delightful account of travel or quasi-autobiographical wish-fulfillment. It could not elevate itself into the impersonal world where a group of imaginary people can live freely.

Foolishly arrogant as I was, I used to judge the worth of a person by his intellectual power and attainment. I could see no good where there was no logic, no charm where there was no learning. Now I think that one has to distinguish between two forms of intelligence, that of the brain, and that of the heart, and I have come to regard the second as by far the more important.⁵⁸

To learn to recognize these two kinds of intelligence, and to subdue his own intellectual arrogance, was, to be sure, an advance in his education to a philosophic wisdom, to maturity. But why should he express it in such a personal form---why not in the impersonal form of fiction? It seems as if he had learned to distinguish between two forms of his art, the impersonal and the personal, and to produce better personal writings than novels. Was this complete discord

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between *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung* one step nearer to artistic maturity?

His exodus---the last stage of his education---did not turn out to be the beginning of a great epoch in his life, a time when something new and positive would be born; rather, it was a mere continuation of the same endless education to which he had been, and would be, submitted all his life, and which was again to end in frustration. His personal study, of course, was still carried on patiently. He wrote in his commonplace book that his “modest” intellectual ambitions were “a thorough knowledge of Greek &

Roman Literature, of the period covered by Gibbon, of English history, of the history of Christian church, of the topographical history of London, of French fiction & memoirs, of Goethe, Heine & a few of the Germans, of all English literature, of the English flora, of the Bible, of classical Geography, of the history of Magna Graecia & Sicily, of the Renaissance, of Dante, [and] of the history of Painting & Sculpture.”⁵⁹ And he was very pleased to have learned enough Spanish to read *Don Quixote* in the original---the achievement he had so long looked forward to. But what did these vast intellectual exertions of his come to?

Nothing. After toilsome documentation prolonged over many years, he at last set to work on *Veranilda*, his first attempt at a historical romance---a work which he had dearly wished to write for more than twenty years, one that was dearer to him than, and so different from, any of those he had written for money during that period, and one that was based on the materials on which he had worked so long and diligently. It was doomed to be left unfinished. But the most painful thing about it is not that it was left unfinished but that nobody, however sympathetic, dares to assert that with *Veranilda* Gissing’s art would have attained its consummation, if he had lived to finish it. This is only to repeat the familiar truism that the hardest work will not necessarily produce a good piece of art. To the very last, his study with “Perseverance” was for its own sake indeed and availed him nothing---not even for artistic creation. The only consolation is that he seemed quite unaware that this effort

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would prove to be his last and that it would also prove to be futile. For he murmured “Patience, patience,” now with a French accent, his language in exile, still convinced, perhaps, that his education, “the work of his life,” was continuing, continuing forever.

Notes

¹ *Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family*, ed. Algernon and Ellen Gissing (London, 1927), p. 269, December 31, 1888, to Ellen. Hereafter referred to as *Letters to Family*.

² Ellen Gissing, “Some Personal Recollections of George Gissing,” *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 225 (May 1929): 658.

³ *Letters to Family*, p. 398, Appendix A.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵ *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz*, ed. Arthur C. Young (London, 1961), p. 153, May 20, 1892. Hereafter referred to as *Letters to Bertz*.

⁶ George Gissing, *Born in Exile*, 3 vols. (London, 1892), 1: 51. Another character in whom “one phase” of the author manifests itself as strongly is Emily Hood; she also devours any book out of love of reading: “She had a passionate love of learning; all books were food for her. . . . The strange things she read, books which came down for her from the shelves [of the library] with a thickness of dust upon them; histories of Greece and Rome (‘Not much asked for, these,’ said the librarian), translations of old classics, the Koran, Mosheim’s *Ecclesiastical History*, works of Swedenborg, all the poetry she could lay hands on, novels not a few. One day she asked for a book on *Gymnoblatic Hydroids*; the amazing title in the catalogue had filled her with curiosity; she must know the meaning of everything. She was not idle, Emily” (George Gissing, *A Life’s Morning* [London, 1947], p. 78).

⁷ Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle, 1963), p. 7. This account is based on the unpublished MS “Reminiscence [*sic*] of My Father” in the Yale University Library.

⁸ Gissing, *Born in Exile*, 1: 79.

⁹ *Letters to Family*, p. 327, March 14, 1892, to Ellen. Note such similar expressions as “an Aristocracy of mind” (*Letters to Bertz*, p. 151, May 1, 1892), or “*intellectual aristocracy*” (*Letters to Bertz*, p. 172, June 2, 1893).

¹⁰ *Born in Exile*, 1: 64.

¹¹ Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (London, 1958), p. 28. This book is a biography of Gissing in the guise of fiction, every person and place given fictitious, but easily identifiable, name: e.g., George Gissing as Henry Maitland, Owens College as Morhampton College.

¹² Gissing, *Born in Exile*, 1: 80-81.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ By this term Gissing meant “not the *déclassés* but rather those persons who live in a limbo external to society, and refuse the statistic badge” (George Gissing, *The Unclassed*, new rev. ed. [London, 1895], author’s preface).

¹⁵ *Howards End* (New York, 1944), p. 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ But I have seen only a few casual allusions to the resemblance, the earliest of which was made by William Plomer in his introduction to Gissing’s *A Life’s Morning* (London, 1947): “*The Whirlpool*, which a little foreshadows *Howards End*” (p. 16).

¹⁹ George Gissing, *The House of Cobwebs* (New York, 1906), p. 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

²² Of course there is no such term in textbooks of psychoanalysis, and I have only once come across it, in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*: "I don't know whether psychologists have yet named the Cophetua complex, but I have always found it hard to feel sexual desire without some sense of superiority, mental or physical" (New York, 1957, p. 27). George Meredith wrote fine comedies introducing a number of such male characters, for example, Sir Willoughby.

²³ *Letters to Bertz*, pp. 115-16, January 23, 1891; italics added. We can see how he found her, in his own words, as later addressed to Gabrielle Fleury, his third wife: "In recklessness (of course criminal recklessness) I offered marriage to the first girl I happened to meet---and the result was what might have been expected." (*The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury*, ed. Pierre Coustillas [New York, 1964], p. 29, August 1898. Hereafter referred to as *Letters to Fleury*.)

²⁴ Gissing, *A Life's Morning*, p. 52.

²⁵ Austin Harrison, "George Gissing," *Nineteenth Century and After*, 69 (September 1906): 460.

²⁶ Austin Harrison, *Frederic Harrison: Thoughts and Memories* (London, 1927), p. 82; italics added.

²⁷ George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (London, 1927), p. 206.

²⁸ "David," he said, making his lips thin, by pressing them together, "if I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do?"

"I don't know."

"I beat him . . . I make him wince, and smart. I say to myself, 'I'll conquer that fellow'; and if it were to cost him all the blood he had, I should do it." (The Oxford Illustrated Dickens [Oxford, 1947], p. 46.)

²⁹ Cf. "Could he [Bernard Kingcote] from the first have borne himself like a man . . . then he might have held her [Isabel Clarendon] his own. But that was requiring of him to be another than he was. . . . His passion was that of a woman" (George Gissing, *Isabel*

Clarendon, 2 vols. [London, 1886], 2: 229). As for Gissing's attitudes to women, see John

Middleton Murry's excellent essay "George Gissing" (in *Katherine Mansfield and Other*

Literary Studies [London, 1959]), where Murry compares Gissing's with D. H.

Lawrence's. The comparison is altogether convincing. See also Pierre Coustillas, "Gissing's Feminine Portraiture," *English Literature in Transition*, 6 (October 1963): 130-41.

³⁰ *Letters to Family*, p. 54, January 13, 1880, to Margaret. Compare also: "I hope she [Margaret] will choose one or two good books (such as Macaulay) and read them slowly and carefully. I should also advise her to do a little every day at French; that is very important" (*Letters to Family*, pp. 75-76, June 20, 1880, to sisters), and "Don't read too many novels, but try to know all the best; you should get hold of Jane Austen's novels, they are very healthy" (*Letters to Family*, p. 76, June 25, 1880, to Margaret).

³¹ *Letters to Family*, pp. 72-73, May 30, 1880, to Algernon.

³² "Apropos of 'Born in Exile,' Madge writes to me: 'It is a pity you should write on a subject you so little understand as Christianity.----It would be as reasonable for me to deny the existence of all the beautiful things you have seen & told me of in foreign countries, simply because I have not seen them, as it is for you to deny spiritual things you have never seen or felt, when there are thousands of people who have seen them, & are therefore as certain of them as of their own existence. How anyone can disbelieve the Bible merely because it is not written in the latest scientific language seems remarkable.' How impossible to reply to such stuff as this!" (*George Gissing's Commonplace Book*, ed. Jacob Korg [New York, 1962], p. 48). It seems that she read "some dirty little pietistic work" during her holidays with George in the Channel Islands (*Diary*, August 25, 1889, quoted in *Letters to Bertz*, p. 71, footnote). See also the very interesting passages where Gissing describes his mother and sisters (*Letters to Fleury*, p. 54, August 30, 1898).

³³ Ellen Gissing, "George Gissing: A Character Sketch," *Nineteenth Century and After*, 102 (September 1927): 418-19.

³⁴ *Letters to Family*, p. 79, July 23, 1880, to Algernon. The letter contains a copy of Frederic Harrison's letter.

³⁵ About this dilemma, see Jacob Korg's "Division of Purpose in George Gissing,"

Publications of the Modern Language Association, 70 (June 1955): 323-36.

³⁶ Such attempts, if ever made, always end in failure; the evening class organized by Egremont in *Thyrza* is one of the most typical illustrations.

³⁷ After calling her past life in the Midland community a "real life," Miriam says in her letter, "I feel it [her stay in Naples] as exile" (George Gissing, *The Emancipated* [London, 1895] p. 5).

³⁸ E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (Harmondsworth, Mddx., 1947), p. 59.

³⁹ Gissing, *The Emancipated*, p. 322.

⁴⁰ Forster, *A Room with a View*, p. 54.

⁴¹ Murry, "George Gissing," p. 68.

⁴² Korg, *Gissing: A Critical Biography*, p. 149.

⁴³ George Gissing, *In the Year of Jubilee* (New York, 1895), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Gissing, *A Life's Morning*, p. 77. But her asceticism has none of Maud Enderby's religious aspect. "The vulgarities of hysterical pietism Emily had never known; she did not fear the invasion of such blight as that" (p. 80). She also experiences much the same dilemma as Arthur Golding between the aspiration toward the Palace of Art and the renunciation of it.

⁴⁵ But in my opinion what may be called the germ of the Bildungsroman was already detected in the picaresque novels that flourished in eighteenth-century England and France (such as the works by Lesage and Smollett). This point is discussed in my book *Shiawasena Tabibitotachi* [The Fortunate Travelers] (Tokyo, 1962).

⁴⁶ *Forces in Modern British Literature: 1885-1956* (New York, 1947), p. 4.

⁴⁷ Gissing, *Born in Exile*, 1: 223.

⁴⁸ As for the influence of *Crime and Punishment* and other novels by the writers of the Continent on Gissing, see Jacob Korg's "The Spiritual Theme of George Gissing's *Born in Exile*," in *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad*, ed. Robert Rathburn and Martin Steinman, Jr. (Minneapolis, 1958), and Korg's *Gissing: A Critical Biography*, pp. 171-72.

⁴⁹ Gissing, *Born in Exile*, 1: 84.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3: 270.

⁵¹ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, p. 56.

⁵² *Letters to Fleury*, p. 69, October 1, 1898.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 91, December 24, 1898.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53, August 30, 1898.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104, February 4, 1899; and p. 106, February 12, 1899.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Roberts, *Henry Maitland*, p. 68.

⁵⁸ George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (London, 1903), p. 43.

⁵⁹ *Gissing's Commonplace Book*, p. 26. The date of entry is unknown but is assumed to be toward the end of his life.

Earle Miner, ed. *English Criticism in Japan: Essays by Younger Japanese Scholars on English and American Literature*. U of Tokyo P, 1972. 233-58.