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Authentic *Ressentiment*: The “Experimental” Novels of Gissing

FREDRIC JAMESON

GISSING'S EARLY NOVELS raise two interesting issues for a post-formalist approach to literature. The first has to do with the relationship between literary quality and documentary value, a tension often and overhastily formulated as that between form and content. The fundamental problem here—known to technical aesthetics as the axiological one—is the alleged incapacity of a historicizing approach to do justice to the phenomenon of literary value. And it is certain that, in spite of Lucien Goldmann's very sensible suggestion that it is the greatest literary works which are the most representative—their greatness consisting precisely in their capacity to articulate the most significant contradictions of a given age—those of us still formed by the attitudes of a now distant Romantic tradition find it hard to overcome the instinctive feeling that it is only the average which can be more representative or typical, the greatest works being those which are the most personal and distinctive, and thus in one way or another profoundly uncharacteristic of the socially typical materials with which a sociological or a historical approach has to deal. That the early novels of Gissing with which this essay will deal—*Demos: A Story of English Socialism* (1886), *Thyrza* (1887), and *The Nether World* (1889)—are average at best, no one will wish to deny; at the same time all three of them have so often been pressed into service as historical or documentary testimony about the condition of the British working classes in the late nineteenth century that the question of their adequacy for such a task becomes an unavoidable one.

The second theoretical issue we will want to raise in connection with these novels—without, any more than the first, intending to offer a definitive statement of it here—is that of the relationship between narrative and ideology; and it is perhaps a question uniquely relevant to the novel as a form of discourse, and in particular to the realistic or “social” novel, in which, unavoidably, phenomena are presented about which people hold strong and differing opinions. Indeed, it might be interesting to reverse the question and to pose the problem in negative form: then we would want to explore the preconditions under which it would be possible for a reader to *avoid* raising such questions about the narrative text with which he is occupied. Our attention would be drawn thereby, on the one hand, to those narrative strategies whereby the novelists themselves sought to disguise their essentially social raw material under the appearance of metaphysical or ethical categories, or to lend it the form of a purely individual experience, whether in the love story or the psychological drama; but he would also certainly have to take into account the effect of time and of cultural difference in the weakening of the social signals emitted by a given work. So it is that the American reader is uniquely equipped to overlook the historical and sociological overtones of continental literature (or, when they are pointed out to him, to treat them as the mere historical accidents of some eternally human substance); even in the case of an English writer like Gissing, it is certain that the British reader will inevitably respond with more heat and passion than an American one to opinions not only offensive in their content, but instinctively understood as symbolic gestures of class affiliation and class provocation in their very form. One does not, of course, need to apologize for mentioning the unmentionable issue of class conflict in a discussion of a writer as obsessed with it as was Gissing himself. The theoretical problem is indeed more wide-ranging than that of the mere editorializing in which the novelist freely indulges and which, in a pinch, one might be willing to excise as so many blots or excrescences upon an otherwise innocent text. But opinion and fantasy-production both ultimately originate in the same place—even though, as we shall see later, they may under certain circumstances each function to compensate for the other. So it is not really a question so much of Gissing’s political attitudes as an individual, as it is of the rela-

tionship between ideology and the production of plot structures in general; and here also the early novels, so suggestively different from, yet embryonic of, those of Gissing's maturity, have interesting and unexpected things to tell us.

If, as has often been said, the effect of a literary realism draws its force from the cancellation of some previous narrative paradigm, now felt to be illusion or idealization, then there is something exemplary in the trajectory of Gissing from the Dickensian plots and stereotypes of these early works with all their sentiment and authorial intervention, to the electrical dryness of those of his narrative prime, in the nearest British equivalent to a genuine post-Flaubertian naturalism. The gradual abandonment of the older narrative paradigms, may at least in part, and in the case of Gissing, be explained by the emergent specialization of naturalist narrative, whose demands the former are unable to satisfy. Thus in the light of the later types of narrative, Dickensian form comes to seem a vast spatial totality, organized less by theme than by that bewildering interweaving of its characters' itineraries. In naturalism, this geographical organization by the event now gives way to an organization by the idea, to a process of abstraction whereby a narrative purports to be ordered by a given "theme" or problem: think, for example, of the specialized subjects—the peasantry, railroads, finance, illness, war, etc.—of the novels of Zola; think of the more subtle preselection and refraction of the novels of Gissing's own major period into thematic registers like those of feminism or journalism. *The Nether World* may serve as a useful illustration of this dilemma, of which both *Demos* and *Thyrza* then suggest the beginnings of a fresh solution, and the emergence of a new paradigm from the dead weight of the older storytelling conventions and stereotypes.¹

The Nether World cannot really be said to be a proletarian novel, in spite of the nominal occupations—die-sinking, the manufacture of jewelry or of artificial flowers—of some of its main characters; yet just as clearly it offers itself as a novel about that

¹ That it is here a question of the logical priority of Gissing's raw material, rather than of the chronological succession of the novels themselves, is plain from the latter's publication dates. Page references in the text refer to the following editions: *Demos* (New York: Dutton, n.d.); *Thyrza* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1974); and *The Nether World* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1974).

peculiarly nineteenth-century social compromise-formation, "the people,"² and this choice of narrative substance—for it cannot itself be said to be a theme but only the preliminary content in which some theme might be found—lends the work its interest at the same time that it accounts for its fundamental structural weaknesses as well. Starting from such an abstract and global subject matter, which in itself proposes no traces or hints of narrative articulation, the novelist inevitably finds himself forced back upon the older readily available stereotypical narrative matrices, which may loosely be ranged in two general groups or strategies: the sentimental or the melodramatic, the way of Dickens and the way of Eugène Sue (not that they are mutually exclusive, as we shall see in a moment).

These strategies are, respectively, the carrot and the stick of nineteenth-century middle-class moralizing about the lower classes; and this is why a book like *The Nether World*, if it has documentary value at all, is best used as testimony, not on the state of Victorian slums, but rather on the narrative paradigms that organize middle-class fantasies about those slums, and about the unavoidable, yet only too disguisable, class structure of the world in which the Victorian reader reads: fantasy not in the sense of private figments or fancies—the paradigms we have in mind are in any case *collective* ones³—but rather in the spirit of the Althusserian definition of ideology as the "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,"⁴ the implication being that the individual subject, in whatever society, must always necessarily "map" his relationship to the collective structure by means of just such fantasies or storytelling techniques.

In a class society, however, such narrative paradigms inevitably serve the twin ends of mystification and legitimation, as *The Nether World* shows. The novel is indeed a particularly interesting example of "generic discontinuities,"⁵ its intertwining narrative

² The classic nineteenth-century expression for this loose "popular front" of artisans, peasants, and petty bourgeois is to be found in Michelet's *Le Peuple* (1846).

³ See for a different but related analysis of social significance of such nineteenth-century collective fantasies Lee Sterrenburg, "Psychoanalysis and the Iconography of Revolution," *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1975), 241–64.

⁴ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 162.

⁵ See my "Generic Discontinuities in SF: Brian Aldiss' *Starship*," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 1 (1973), 57–68; and for a more theoretical account, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History*, 7 (1975), esp. pp. 151–54.

strands or generic "keys" separable precisely according to the melodramatic/sentimental opposition evoked above. Thus when the beautiful but haughty Clara aspires to leave her station in life and to rise in society, not only is the attempt marked negatively by the questionable moral status of her activity as an actress; a narrative judgment is articulated in the form of the vitriol dashed by a jealous rival in her face; and her destiny is clearly used to evaluate the destiny of the heroine of the other generic strand, the modest and resigned, still relatively Dickensian Jane Snowdon. It is not, clearly, a question of the influence of a book like *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43) so much as of the tapping of a major vein of collective fantasy of which it was Sue's doubtful merit to have furnished the most glaring expression. Behind the fateful justice that flings the acid, indeed implicit in the gesture as something like its inner dramatic truth, is surely the vengeful and monitory figure of Sue's Harun-al-Rashid, Prince Rodolphe himself, whose mission in life is the scourging of evildoers—mostly drawn from the poorer classes, as Marx once observed in his lengthiest piece of literary criticism.⁶ A good deal of light is shed on the melodramatic impulse in nineteenth-century fiction by that archetypal scene in which the Schoolmaster (nickname of the most notorious villain in *Les Mystères*) has his eyes put out by the Prince's own hand in an early example of preventive justice. Such a gesture surely expresses the deepest middle-class anxieties about the "mob" and the urban lumpenproletariat, at the same time that it functions as a grim warning of the lengths to which a terrorized propertied class was willing to go (and went, in the massacres of June 1848 and of the bloody repression of the Commune). The argument is that this menacing ideological iconography, while not wholly present in the detail of the Clara subplot, is at one with and awakened by the generic register to which the latter is keyed and without which it could not be properly read.

Sue is of course also full of those sentimental ingredients which are the dialectical opposite of melodrama of this kind: but we would want to suggest, borrowing an Althusserian or even a Russian Formalist model,⁷ that in his work the sentimental is the sub-

⁶ *Die Heilige Familie*, ch. 8, in Marx-Engels, *Werke*, 40 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1962), II, 172–221.

⁷ See Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," esp. "Structure in Dominance," pp. 200–216, in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press,

ordinate feature, the melodramatic remaining the dominant element of the narrative structure. Dickens is obviously too complex to be fit into such a scheme; on the other hand, it is not exactly with the real Dickens that we have to do when we turn to the second of these two basic generic or narrative paradigms, but rather with something like the idea of Dickens, or that Dickensian paradigm which for so long furnished later or lesser novelists with a solution to a host of narrative and ideological problems. The Dickensian paradigm knows melodrama and sadism also, to be sure—think of the execution of Fagin, and, more subtly, the depression of the later works—but it has become, to use our formula, a subordinate element in a structure in which sentimentalism now forms the dominant, expressed in the emblem or icon (sometimes she is scarcely a character in her own right) of the childlike heroine.

We may momentarily anticipate our discussion of the other novels by suggesting that the heroine of *Thyrza* is in many ways the most striking of these Dickensian imitations. Yet even here a significant evolution has begun; and where the modest and undemanding temperament of the Dickensian heroine provided something like a natural relief, and the idyllic withdrawal to Bleak House, within the otherwise guilt- and anxiety-ridden space of the class world, in Gissing this indispensable modesty bears only too vivid traces and scars of repression and signifies *renunciation*—that omnipresent late-Victorian motif eternalized by everybody from Henry James to Theodor Fontane. Thus this most intolerably sweet and golden of Gissing's heroines is shown to owe her constitutive simplicity to the brutalizing limits of her situation and her poverty—from which, in order to preserve her value as an image, she must not be allowed to escape. Gissing's worst rhetoric—but he is speaking in a voice he believes to be that of Dickens—is summoned up to help the reader swallow Thyrza's gratuitous death, whose only too evident function lies in preventing her from marrying a man triply superior to her in station, education, and wealth (and thereby transforming this idyll into what was for Gissing a personal nightmare: the proletarian woman tormented

1970); or Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies*, trans. Mary Klopfer (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), esp. pp. 45–54; and also Yurii Tynianov, "On Literary Evolution," and Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971).

by a middle-class marriage and drinking herself to death, like his first wife). I quote a little of this rhetoric, not merely as a historical curiosity, but as material for some observations we will want to make about Gissing's language at the end of the present essay: "Had she not herself desired it? [i.e., death] And what gift more blessed, of all that man may pray for? She was at rest, the pure, the gentle, at rest in her maidenhood. . . ." And later, when Thyrza's aristocratic patroness learns the news: "It is seldom that we experience a simple emotion. When the words, incredible at first, had established their meaning in her mind, Mrs. Ormonde knew that with her human grief there blended an awe-struck thankfulness" (473-75).

The use of the Dickensian paradigm in *The Nether World* is a good deal less drastic than this, but no less ideologically significant: in that "novel of the people," Jane Snowdon finds her qualifications as idyllic heroine tested by social and class discomfort, in the career of philanthropy forced upon her by her wealthy grandfather. So renunciation comes as a blessed relief, when the appropriation of the inheritance by a good-for-nothing father releases her from a mission for which she was so temperamentally unsuited.

A book like *The Nether World*, therefore, far from being a source of material on London working-class life during the period, is rather a transcript of something no less historical and objective, but a little less "measurable," namely a collection of narrative stereotypes. At the same time the novel shows signs of other developments which *Demos* and *Thyrza* will reveal more fully: faced, in other words, with that amorphous and unstructured raw material which is the theme of "the people," Gissing hesitates between the use of the already existing narrative paradigms discussed above and an impulse—barely perceptible here—to draw this raw material in the direction of his own future narrative inclinations, even if this involves doing the former some violence in the process. Thus the "hero" of *The Nether World*, a lugubrious proletarian by the name of Sidney Kirkland, is the occasion of a kind of narrative blur that cannot be wholly the result of accident or technical incompetence: in his case, unlike that of Gilbert Grail in *Thyrza*, we cannot attribute his atypicality as a worker to some uncharacteristic interest in reading and culture, nor is the explanation by temperament—some brooding cast that sets him apart from his fellows—altogether convincing either.

It is indeed difficult to escape the impression that from this ostensible workman a different kind of character altogether is attempting to emerge; and that we have to do here with the superposition upon an otherwise unrelated and accessory figure of what will develop into that alienated *intellectual* so characteristic of Gissing's later work. It would, however, be wrong to explain this emergence on the grounds of the novelist's personal thematics alone: such a superposition suggests rather some fundamental and objective deficiency in the narrative substance itself, and implies Gissing's sense of the lack of an Archimedean point within his lower-class narrative material, his discomfort at the absence of some ideologically privileged perspective or viewpoint around which to organize its actions and events. The emergence of the alienated intellectual must then be understood, not as some mere autobiographical indulgence, but rather as a compromise solution to the specifically narrative problem of the writing of novels, and the preservation of a novelistic totality, in the face of the raw materials of class society: we will return to this structural function of the Gissing hero shortly.

The other striking innovation of *The Nether World* may be observed in the philanthropic project around which the plot comes to be organized; here is old Snowdon's account of his great idea:

"Suppose when I die I could have the certainty that all this money was going to be used for the good of the poor by a woman who herself belonged to the poor? You understand me? It would have been easy enough to leave it among charities in the ordinary way; but my idea went beyond that. I might have had Jane schooled and fashioned into a lady, and still have hoped that she would use the money well; but my idea went beyond *that*. There's plenty of ladies nowadays taking an interest in the miserable, and spending their means unselfishly. What I hoped was to raise up for the poor and the untaught a friend out of their own midst, someone who had gone through all that *they* suffer, who was accustomed to earn her own living by the work of her hands as *they* do, who had never thought herself their better, who saw the world as they see it and knew all their wants." (178)

A full discussion of the philanthropic motif so omnipresent in the British fiction of the nineteenth century and so conspicuously absent elsewhere is clearly beyond the scope of the present essay: yet its presence and function in *The Nether World* suggest a few

observations which may serve to replace it in the context of narrative analysis. We must first observe that here—and in *Demos* and *Thyrza* also—the discovery of a philanthropic mission is at one with the very possibility of the plot itself: old Snowdon's sudden revelation of his purpose in life is in other words *the same* as Gissing's discovery of a center around which to organize his plot, so that the need to have recourse to such a mission has much to tell us about the social substance available to Gissing as a novelist when he comes to write.

Now such an observation would be banal or tautological were it not for the very special status of the philanthropic mission among the other kinds of events and desires and projects which the realistic novel has taken as its raw material. I have argued elsewhere⁸ that the great realistic novelists have an aesthetic stake, a kind of narrative vested interest, in the Being of the status quo, in the illusion of a kind of massive permanency of the world they unfold before us: tensions, conflict, tragedy, as much as you like! so long as the external framework of such events—the very world, or globe, or society, or nation-state whose background they presuppose for their intelligibility—be not called into question. The nineteenth-century novelist is indeed a "shepherd of being" (Heidegger) of a very special type, for whom even that slow organic social change of Burkean conservatism underscores the basic stability of his object and indeed of his own formal discourse; his ontological presuppositions may be measured most strikingly, perhaps, against the scandal of the proletarian novel as a form, whose fundamental events—the strike or the revolution—no longer innerworldly in the same way as the crises of the nineteenth-century novel, now threaten to destroy the very world-ness within which the more conventional "realistic" events had taken place and to which they were indebted for their "reality." So it is that the great realistic novelists had to invent a host of strategies designed to contain the not-being at the heart of narrative materials like wishes or desires, strategies aimed at reifying the latter and transforming them back into the mere accidents of a static substance, into psychological properties of the characters in question.

The philanthropic mission stands at the very fault line of such

⁸ "On Politics and Literature," *Salmagundi*, 2 (Spring 1968), 17–26.

narrative strategies for it introduces into the world of the novel a powerful ontological doubt, the sudden appearance of the ethical imperative causing a ghostly double of this the real world to float across it and blur its solid contours. Yet precisely this new element threatens to destroy the fabric of realistic narrative. We may perhaps best convey the aesthetic dangers of this new type of theme or subject matter by recourse to the terminology of Todorov's "modal poetics." The premise of the latter is that the "facts" or events—the fable or raw material—of a given fictive discourse undergo as it were transpositions from one register of potentiality or realization to another, in much the same way as the verb or a sentence may be reformulated in, say, the subjunctive or the imperative or the optative moods.⁹ In such a perspective, the fundamental register of realistic narrative would constitute something like an indicative mood of full narrative realization, which could then be varied and remodalized in such a way as to generate alternate narratives from a single basic kernel or string of events. Thus the indicative of a *roman d'aventures*, in which all the content is realized in the form of narrative positivities or completed events, might well be wholly translatable into the optative of a psychological novel, in which the same event-content would come to expression in the form of wishes, desires, and mere feelings—a tense conversation for example (with its complete battery of Jamesian awarenesses) becoming the modal analogue of the physical *agon* and hand-to-hand combat of the thriller.

To look at plots in this way, however, is to become aware that the philanthropic motif has a specificity to which the traditional grammatical moods—or the narrative modes which in Todorov's model correspond to them—scarcely do justice, and which encourages us to describe the philanthropic narrative register rather in terms of a more complex modal auxiliary, of the type of the "ought to" or the verbal obligation. At this point the structural account intersects with one of the great themes of German idealistic philosophy, namely that of the relationship of the ethical—always unrealized, always an obligation or a *Sollen* rather than an already given state of being in the world—to being, history, and in the present instance the aesthetics of narrative. It is indeed

⁹ See Tzvetan Todorov, "Poétique," in *Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), esp. pp. 132–47.

precisely in these terms that the Lukács of *The Theory of the Novel* raises the problem posed for us here by *The Nether World* in particular and the whole philanthropic tradition of the nineteenth-century British novel in general. For Lukács, there have historically been two distinct moments in which ethical preoccupations—the *Sollen*, the sense of duty or of obligation, in Sartrean terminology the not-being of the unrealizable ethical value—have generated new forms through their willful contamination of the calm and massive being of epic narrative: these are, in classical times, tragedy,¹⁰ and, in the period which interests us here, the emergence of the so-called "novel of abstract idealism," whose prototype is of course Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.¹¹ Despite Lukács' sensitivity to the technical solutions into which Cervantes was forced by the structural peculiarities of his raw material (e.g., this new conjunction of epic narrative and ethical imperative or *Sollen*), we may feel that his use of a kind of rough chronological typology of such novelistic forms conceals as many problems as it solves. In particular, his neglect of the Anglo-Saxon tradition causes him to imply that the novel of abstract idealism is already outmoded with Cervantes, when it comes in fact to its fullest flowering only in the philanthropic novel of the British nineteenth century.

In another sense, Lukács himself weakens the structural and aesthetic dilemma posed by the philanthropic project by containing it in much the same strategic way as the novelists themselves, and their bourgeois critics, were to do: "The narrowing of the soul of which we speak [in the hero of the novel of abstract idealism] is brought about by its demonic obsession with an existing idea which it posits as the only and the most ordinary reality."¹² For Lukács also, then, the ameliorative mission of a character like old Snowdon is aesthetically redeemable only at the price of psychologization: transformation into a character trait or a demonic obsession; and something like this will become the royal road of later "novelists of ideas."

It has indeed often been claimed that ideas are unsuitable elements for the construction of the novel, because their mode of being is wholly different from that of narrative events, so that to

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), pp. 65–66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–111.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

take them seriously, on their own terms, would be to do irreparable damage to the narrative surface. So on the one hand, the great "novels of ideas" (Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann) end up reinvesting the various ideational parts of their narratives in the characters themselves, as so many traits or personal systems which stand in opposition to each other in a kind of perspectival way; while on the other, the option of preserving the content of the ideas intact at the expense of the narrative leads in the direction of such mixed or only partially narrative forms as the Utopia. In this sense we might suggest that the end term or the structural fulfillment of that philanthropic motif which riddles nineteenth-century British novels like *The Nether World* like so many pores in cheese is rather properly to be found in one of the great and neglected narrative curiosities of the period, Chernyshevsky's *What's to be Done?*, a text in which the entire narrative fabric is as it were de-realized by Utopian not-being in an utterly unclassifiable fashion.

Thus the structural problems of *The Nether World* are to be understood, in the context of Gissing's work, not as some ultimate stumbling block, but rather as the starting point of a fresh and novel narrative solution of its own. It is a question of reconverting, into the possibility of new narrative production, that generalized not-being which the collective ethical project of old Snowdon introduced into the world or reality-framework of the realistic novel, and which risked draining the "essence" from its "life" in a kind of internal hemorrhage of being (to combine Lukács' terms with a Sartrean figure). Gissing's solution—and I now take *Demos* and *Thyrza* as representative early versions of it—will be to recombine the two new features mentioned—the privileged ideological viewpoint of the alienated intellectual and the ethical mission—in such a way that the fate of the first will be able to serve as a commentary on and a dramatization of the content of the second.

What distinguishes this new narrative structure from Lukács' demonic or possessed, Quixotic hero of abstract idealism is precisely the collective ambition of the ideal in question, which now takes the form, not of individual good works, but rather of the attempt to ameliorate a whole *social class*. At once, then, the figure of the alienated intellectual himself acquires a content which distinguishes these characters of Gissing's sharply from the conventional modern *poète maudit*, the Tonio Krögers or the Stephens:

for in Gissing the alienation of the intellectual from his class is secondary to the alienation of such a character from the class which he aspires to improve; and it is precisely in this fashion that the narrative articulation of such a hero's own personal story and destiny will provide its own commentary on his abstract aims or projects.

The fundamental situation of this new narrative solution—in contrast to the problems posed in *The Nether World* by the choice of a single, amorphous, class reality as a global subject—will be that of the crossing of class lines, or in other words, that of class relationship and the conflict between *two* classes. *Demos* and *Thyrza*, indeed, provide the basic structural variants of the new narrative solution, which would not be fully realizable were not that earlier modal distance from narrative reality itself recuperated here in a new way. To describe this new method of reality-modification, of opening up the breathing space of a plot within the stifling and massive being of late nineteenth-century capitalism, we will have recourse to a term which Zola applied with far less justification to his own narratives: namely the *experimental novel*, the novel organized as a scientific experiment with its variables and its hypotheses proved and disproved, the concept of narrative as a kind of controlled laboratory situation in which the interaction of carefully chosen characters and a carefully prepared environment may be observed with all desirable rigor. One should say, in defense of this now utterly antiquated conception of Zola, that some of the most important experiments in the history of science (those of Galileo and Newton just as much as those of Einstein) have been imaginary experiments of just this kind, written experiments, whose purely mental coordinates permitted a greater precision than any of the then available purely empirical physical instruments. Where the French novelist's "experiments" differ from those of Gissing is not only in the fascination of the former with heredity and extra-sociological factors and forces, but above all in Zola's inexplicable neglect of one of the most basic features of scientific experiment, namely that the latter must be repeatable, that the experiment in question must be replayable in as many different forms as there are variables to be tested.

Such experimental variation and repetition is what is afforded us by Gissing's entire narrative *combinatoire*, of which *Demos* and

Thyrza offer a useful sample, being virtual structural inversions of each other. Where *Thyrza*, indeed, traces the difficulties of an idealistic young gentleman intent on bringing culture to Lambeth, *Demos* follows a converse trajectory, in the destiny of a gifted young proletarian who, on the unexpected inheritance of a fortune, finds himself thrust into what is a de facto bourgeois social situation. The “experimental” nature of plots like these springs clearly enough from their arbitrariness, their atypicality, their value as exception rather than as rule. There was no need, in other words, for Egremont to conceive the senseless project of educating the working men of Lambeth; while the inheritance of Richard Mutimer is the merest sport or fluke (as will be only too painfully underscored later in the novel). In this sense, the “natural” state of the classes is disjunction from each other; yet as *The Nether World* shows, the trouble with either class, taken individually and resting, as Hegel might have said, calmly in its own substance, is that such substance—in nineteenth-century capitalism—is non-narrative, and provides the stuff of routine and habit, rather than of act and event: crisscrossed and intersected only by the feeble and intermittent wakes of older narrative paradigms. Gissing’s “experiments” thereby foretell the dissolution of plot altogether in modernism.

Yet the two variants with which we have to do at present are not precisely symmetrical with one another: both protagonists having a “mission” of the Snowdon type with this difference, that *both* take the working class as the object of their philanthropic intentions. Richard’s project is the establishment of a cooperative enclave in the classical Owenite or Utopian-socialist tradition, although it cannot be said that Gissing is really interested in providing a critique of the latter, not even of the psychologizing and ethical variety supplied by Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance*. To be sure, Richard never knew very much about running a factory in the first place: the latter, a complex of iron foundries and mines, was the property of an estranged uncle, an ex-proletarian Tory who had planned to leave it to a young aristocratic protégé. Only some ugly rumors about the young man’s dissolute love affairs suddenly cause a change in plan, and the elder Mutimer’s sudden death intestate thrusts Wanley lock stock and barrel into the hands of Richard, at the time a budding socialist orator who has just been fired from yet another job. Yet the failure of Wanley

is attributed to the conventional business villain of Victorian (and Balzacian) melodrama, Richard's legal advisor Rodman, an explanation that allows Gissing to displace the narrative interest onto what really interested him in the first place, namely Richard's class consciousness.

There are some unavoidable period echoes of the reigning racial and biological theories of positivism and social Darwinism in Gissing's portrait of Richard. The causal link between Richard's relatively unproletarian physique and the working-class diet of the day strikes a curious compromise between patronizing loftiness and scientific common sense: "He was the English artisan as we find him on rare occasions, the issue of a good strain which has managed to procure a sufficiency of food for two or three generations" (and note the intended juxtaposition with the description of the classical proletarian physique of Richard's friend Daniel which immediately follows: "thick-set, square-shouldered, rolling in gait . . . [walking] with head bent forward and eyes glancing uneasily, as if from lack of self-confidence," etc.) (33-34).

That this inevitable slippage of the argument from inborn physical to inborn moral characteristics must be attributed to Gissing himself rather than to the prejudices of his aristocratic characters is argued by the utter lack of irony in this narrative register: "Could he [Hubert] trust Mutimer to appreciate his motive? Such a man was capable of acting honourably, but the power of understanding delicacies of behaviour was not so likely to be his. Hubert's prejudices were insuperable; to his mind class differences necessarily argued a difference in the grain" (334). Such a passage is probably more complicated than it seems, as we shall try to show at the end of the present essay: but the shift in judgment is not retroactive, and fails to put the initial condemnation of Richard in any more relativized and doubtful light. And consider the following, in which Richard's wife for the first time "understands" his truest nature:

What was the meaning now first revealed to her in that countenance? The features had a massive regularity; there was nothing grotesque, nothing on the surface repulsive; yet, beholding the face as if it were that of a man unknown to her, she felt that a whole world of natural antipathies was between it and her.

It was the face of a man by birth and breeding altogether beneath her. (350)

The utter absence of irony in such a passage verges on deformity; yet it is worth noting the persistence of the physical reference, the unproblematical yet tenacious fashion in which not the mere expression, but rather the very bone structure of Richard's face continues to reveal the secret of his mentality and his ethical lack of worth.

Such details are anything but incidental, and serve to reinforce Gissing's principal theme and his diagnosis of Richard's motives, in which he rejoins the mainstream of late nineteenth-century conservative thinking. Richard's ambition, his rebelliousness, his doubly perverse unwillingness, either to become a Tory like his uncle or to remain comfortably in his own station like a "good" Cockney workman, are all implicitly accounted for by the concept of *ressentiment*, of which Nietzsche was the primary theorist, if not indeed, the metaphysician: "The slave uprising in ethics begins when *ressentiment* becomes creative and brings forth its own values: the *ressentiment* of those to whom the only authentic way of reaction—that of deeds—is unavailable, and who preserve themselves from harm through the exercise of imaginary vengeance."¹³ Nietzsche's whole vision of history is organized around this theme, in which ethics in general, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition in particular, are seen as a slave mentality slyly imposed on the masters in order to rob them of their own authentic insolence and power. Meanwhile the more secular practitioners of the theory of *ressentiment*, such as Taine, in his *Origines de la France contemporaine*, use it to explain the phenomenon of revolution itself, and that, indeed, in a twofold way: first, in the vulgar and, as it were, exoteric sense of the envy the poor inevitably have for the rich; and then in a more esoteric use, in which, like the priests for Nietzsche, it is the intellectuals—unsuccessful writers and poets, bad philosophers, bilious journalists and failures of all kinds—who attempt to overthrow the social order for their own personal satisfactions. This diagnostic double standard, which has furnished the inner dynamics for a whole counterrevolutionary tradition from Dostoyevsky to Orwell, is then immediately applicable to the twofold vocation of Richard Mutimer as a proletarian and an in-

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Pt. I, Sect. 10, in *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta, 3 vols. (Munich: Hanser, 1955), II, 782.

tellectual, and thus provides Gissing with a foolproof motivation for his character's discontent.

What is most striking about the theory of *ressentiment*, however, is that it is itself the sign and the product of *ressentiment*, and proves on closer inspection to be nothing more than a projection whereby the conservative theorists attribute their resentment of lower-class agitation to the very objects of their distaste. In *Demos*, certainly, the conclusion is inescapable: Gissing resents Richard, and what he resents the most is the latter's *ressentiment*. Whence the painful gratuitousness of the "experiment" to which Richard is subjected in this novel, whose fundamental characteristic is here not only that it be repeatable, but reversible as well. So, seated in the pew in which the elder Mutimer has been stricken, suddenly Richard's aristocratic bride—whose reflexions about him have already been noted—searching for a ring that has fallen to the ground, finds instead a sheet of paper which is, of course, none other than the missing testament. The original heir inherits after all (in fact he was not as unworthy as rumor had it), and Richard must abandon, along with his new way of life, his whole Utopian project, which the new owner razes to the ground in order to restore the natural beauty of the spot (thereby suggesting the conflict, still acute in Victorian times, between industry and the older aristocratic ideology of the land).

Nor is Richard spared in the sequel, when, bilked by the villainous Rodman of the workingmen's savings that have been entrusted to him, his death at the hands of a raging "mob" of proletarians dispatches him at the very moment at which we risk having some sympathy for him, while confirming in the meantime our worst fears about the nature of the lower classes themselves. Such is then this legendary "Story of English Socialism," long Gissing's most celebrated work, and surely one of the most unambiguously reactionary novels in the canon. Yet, as we have suggested above, the ideological mechanism of the novel cannot be fully grasped in isolation, but must be juxtaposed with its structural inversion in a novel like *Thyrza*, where Gissing's social and narrative experiment seems on the point of taking on a genuinely tragic resonance.

Such tragic overtones, however, are more closely linked to the fate of Egremont's project than to that Dickensian pathos asso-

ciated with the heroine of the title and of which we have already spoken above. Unlike Richard's mission, Egremont's is a resolutely cultural and aesthetic one, as befits a reformer who comes to the working classes from above: this notion of the social function of culture and education is of course as old as the middle-class revolution itself, and finds its most dramatic expression in Schiller's view of the "aesthetic education of humankind" as a means for transforming society peacefully and avoiding the bloody upheaval of social revolution. Its specifically Victorian manifestation—Matthew Arnold or Ruskin come at once to mind—surely has something to do with the premature timing of the bourgeois revolution in England, whose stakes were formulated in religious and therefore essentially cultural, rather than socioeconomic terms. But it has even more to do with the hasty revival of religion during the Romantic period, as the most effective inoculation against the Jacobin virus: the striking differentiation of the British from the continental cultural traditions may indeed be dated from the success of this strategy, in which the political and the historical is systematically rewritten in terms of the ethical, and Darwin's threat to theology becomes a more momentous event than the Commune. Egremont's lecture series and the lending library with which he proposed to launch a regeneration of the working population of Lambeth are at any rate characteristic to the point of caricature of a host of Victorian attempts to reconcile a genuine concern for the social damage of industrial capitalism with an equally genuine terror of revolution itself. Unsurprisingly, Egremont is disappointed by the uncompromising reaction of his initial listeners, but heartened to discover among them a kindred soul, Gilbert Grail, who, passionately devoted to reading and culture, finds a place in the reformer's master scheme as librarian and chief mediator between the working-class readers and Egremont himself.

Pathos and tragedy may here be disentangled by the hypothesis that the latter is an effect of Grail's story, while the former is generated by Thyrza herself (she becomes Grail's betrothed) and serves in some measure to mask or weaken the class implication of the tragic motif. Egremont's plan, indeed, enters the older man's life like a thunderclap, transforming it from top to bottom, and arousing expectations of a sort that would be unthinkable in the "realistic" closed nonmobile virtual caste system in which Grail's

life has hitherto been lived: the idea of marrying Thyrza is the most dramatic expression of this change, which thus functions as a virtual analogue of the kind of deliberate social and personal "experiment" we have witnessed in *Demos*.

Thereby the stage is predictably set for the involuntary (and mutually unwelcome) passion of Egremont and Thyrza, who meet by chance while the former is uncrating the new library. Their love, and Thyrza's flight from Grail and from the projected marriage, blast Egremont's project and discredit him more effectively than any working-class recalcitrance could: and the sense of desolation, of blighted hopes and illusions, that hangs over the subsequent destinies of Grail and Egremont himself, is surely to be counted among the most authentic features of this novel, while the death of Thyrza—as we have seen, among the most inauthentic—is nonetheless so stylized and perfumed as to suggest all the ornamental unreality of a Pre-Raphaelite angel.

Adultery is of course one of the principal vehicles through which the nineteenth-century novel articulates its refusal of institutional society and expresses what the Frankfurt School would call its negation of the latter's instinctual renunciation; while it is only with the age of a radical feminism that we have been in a position to estimate the critical value of those great tragedies of feminine destiny in their fullest concrete sense. Nor is it surprising that the author of *The Odd Women* should in both *Demos* and *Thyrza* appropriate the conventional love story as a means of articulating a social meaning: indeed, the later books suggest that Gissing's sensitivity to the class overtones of relationships between men and women is the source of much that is original in his mature storytelling.

But *Thyrza* is as it were a story of an adultery without a marriage: in it the force of the critique is deflected away from the alienating rigidity of the institutions themselves onto the ethical evaluation of Egremont's conduct. Nowhere in these works is the absence of irony more striking than in the strange, charged neutrality with which Egremont is presented to us: this scarcely more attractive English variant of Gregers Werle is the object of a kind of pre-ironic point of view, what I would want to call a kind of *blank irony*, a state in which judgment is called for but indefinitely withheld.

Two reasons may be given for this structural peculiarity: the first has to do with the evolution of the novel itself, in which irony (and the monadic relativism of which it is a mark) is a relatively late stage, a work like this standing as a kind of transitional moment between the earlier sociological judgments on characters and their actions, and the later full-blown ironic and ethico-psychological ones of, say, a Henry James. But in this particular context, the check on ironic judgment reflects the endangerment of the plot structure itself by a perspective which would end up discrediting the very nature of the ethical and philanthropic project and too rapidly satirizing it.

The tension in *Thyrza* comes therefore less from any coherent evaluation of Egremont's character than from the spectacle of the victimization of Grail himself, a spectacle whose terrible objectivity is only reinforced by the absence of anything particularly likeable about its victim (the prototype of the brooding and gloomy alienated Gissing intellectual). The power of the situation itself might perhaps best be suggested by its activation of what Northrop Frye would probably call the Bathsheba archetype, the traditional figural fulfillment of the saying, "From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (Matthew 25.29). Even in its Old Testament embodiment, the story of the theft of Bathsheba from the unhappy Uriah, and the latter's virtual murder by the king, is itself parabolized, and transformed into a moral fable by Nathan's warning to David: "The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: but the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his own children; it did eat of his own meat," etc., and on to the predictable conclusion (2 Samuel 12.2-3). It is indeed hard to escape the feeling that Egremont also, who already has everything that Grail lacks—birth, money, status, education, leisure, youth, ideas—is nonetheless intent on robbing the latter of even that one "ewe lamb," which is his modest treasure; hard to escape the feeling that what is at work here is some primal *envy* at the heart of Egremont's interest in the poor, a longing to appropriate that class solidarity they have for each other (the only real link between Grail and Thyrza being that of their common social situation) and from which he himself is eternally excluded. The passion for Grail's "intended" thus becomes a kind of

grim commentary on the true unconscious meaning of Egremont's conscious altruism and philanthropy, a virtually Nietzschean unmasking of the ambivalence, indeed the aggressivity, concealed within the ostensibly charitable gesture, of the hostile intent that takes philanthropy itself as the vehicle for its most satisfying realization (and on such a phenomenon a Nietzschean analysis or hermeneutic evidently has a more reliable diagnostic function than does that more properly Nietzschean ideology touched on earlier).

Now we must come to terms with the questions raised at the beginning of the present essay, and in particular with the problem of ideology as it shapes the very fantasy structures which allow the novel itself to be produced. If I have made little secret of my own revulsion for Gissing's opinions, it is in order to underscore the incentive I may feel more strongly than an indifferent reader in explaining to myself why, under the circumstances, I continue to find the author of *The Odd Women* and *New Grub Street* a more attractive novelist than many of the more ideologically acceptable (i.e., purely liberal) storytellers of the nineteenth-century British pantheon. To be sure, the third logical alternative, that of a genuinely revolutionary literature, is scarcely afforded by the production of the great nineteenth-century novelists, few of whom (Stendhal? Keller? Galdos?) were even Jacobins or Republicans, let alone radicals (of the latter, only Vallès comes to mind). All monuments of culture, said Walter Benjamin, are at one and the same time documents of barbarism; and certainly the great productions of triumphant Victorian culture all in one way or another entertain a profound organic complicity with the system itself.

In Gissing's case we shall suggest that it is the very structure of his ideology which unexpectedly proves to be a vital instrument of narrative cognition. Gissing's "wound"—his particular way of living the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness—condemned him to wander forever between two classes in neither of which he was able to feel at home, or to know the stability of some definitive class identification. Thus the liberal and reforming view of the social order was unavailable to him, for he was not able to repress all traces of class conflict as liberalism must in order to project its vision of social harmony (and the pointed failure of Egremont's "aesthetic education" of the lower classes is sufficient testimony of the novelist's impatience with such liberal motifs).

He does not seem to have been able to identify wholeheartedly with an urban proletariat; nor, paradoxically, does an untroubled espousal of Tory values—we call this kind of class consciousness *snobbery*—appear to have been available to him either. It is, indeed, in this context that we would want to propose a more complex mode of stylistic analysis for such texts than that old-fashioned univocal kind, based on psychology and on the “philosophy of the subject,” which would read some of the authorial interventions already quoted as samples either of Gissing’s own opinions, or—what amounts to the same thing—of those of some “implied narrator” devised by him. Such passages rather suggest the practice of an already alienated language, and the exercise of what Bakhtin has analyzed as “dialogical speech,”¹⁴ in which the center of gravity of the words being spoken lies in the listener rather than the speaker; in which the verbal gesture must be analyzed by way of the listening stance of a particular interlocutor which has been somehow structurally incorporated into it, rather than in terms of the univocal intention of the original speaker. Yet here also the mimicry of Tory attitudes and upper-class snobbery is somehow blank of all identification: these complacent and intolerable values somehow express themselves impersonally without the intervention of authorial subjectivity, or of any real individual commitment. So it is not difficult to detect a deeper level of intention in such passages in which it is precisely a hostility for the dominant classes themselves which finds issue through their imitation; a hostility rewarded by the inevitable embarrassment of genuinely snobbish readers at finding their values thus enthusiastically endorsed by someone who has no right to them, as with that faithful yet ambiguous portrait of the ruling classes given, according to Sartre, by the “establishment” literature of the seventeenth century, which, quite the opposite of critical or satirical, nonetheless, “by virtue of the very fact that it reflects the reader’s image back in silence, renders the latter intolerable to him.”¹⁵ *Ressentiment* thus remains a two-edged sword, tending to compromise even those on whose behalf it seemed to have been enlisted.

So Gissing’s divided self remains a scandal for both classes; and

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), pp. 150–69.

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* Collection Idées (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 123.

the narratives generated by the structural instability of his class position—returning again and again to the ancient trauma of class transgression and *déclassement* without being able to work it through or liquidate it—provide a more vivid, a more permanently uncomfortable sense of class conflict than any positivistic or even *progressive* realism was to do. Is it so paradoxical to suggest that Gissing's stubbornness in attempting to imagine an impossible fraternization between the classes—of which he was ultimately able to imagine only the failure—has a more radicalizing effect, in spite of the reactionary reflexions with which it is accompanied, than the sentimental and condescending working-class novels of the period or the mere satirico-ethical denunciation of the corruption and immorality of bourgeois or aristocratic high life? Gissing's *ressentiment* is alone genuinely divisive, the profound "mixed feelings" of his narratives ultimately unassimilable to any complacent sense of clear conscience. That unhappy consciousness that made Gissing into a snob was also his registering apparatus, as an artist, of a historical and social reality only fitfully glimpsed by the bourgeois reader, a reality in which it is indeed quite intolerable for members of what Christopher Caudwell called a "dying class" to dwell for any length of time. This is the sense in which, perhaps, the oxymoron of our title may be justified, and in which alone the phenomenon of *ressentiment*—surely, among all human passions, the most deeply driven by bad faith of the Sartrean type—may be said to have a certain authenticity.

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