CHAPTE R - VII

FINA L A SSESSMENT

The idea of human perfectibility, suggestive of Christian salvation in humanistic form, pervades the works of Jeremy Bentham and the early nineteenth-century British Utilitarian. Contrasted with the end of the century, the early years, paradoxically so conflicted at home and abroad by the Napoleonic wars and the consequent repression, reflect vitality in most areas of the humanities. While the Romantic poets cover a wide spectrum of opinion concerning human growth and reform, Bentham attempts to develop a social, moral and political philosophy that would lead to human advancement. Social organization, rather than any form of conversion theory and practice, underlines Bentham’s ideas. Yet, from early in the nineteenth century, Thomas Malthus raises questions about the efficacy of technological expansion and improvement to solve the age-old problems of hunger and disease. By mid century, novelists, poets, essayists, and social reformers dramatize the negative effects of industrialization.

Raymond Williams states that George Gissing Demos (1886) and The Nether World (1889) . . . stand in the direct line of succession from the ‘industrial novels’ of the 1840s” (Culture and Society, 174). Gissing’s 1880 novel Workers in the Dawn, noted by Robert L. Selig as a work “grounded in a harsh material existence” (George Gissing, 21), also continues this tradition, leavened with a dislike for the London masses amounting at times to a profound antipathy. In The Nether World and even as late as In the Year of Jubilee, group images of the people tend to be negative, their manners and behavior often little short of brutish. Jacob
Korg describes the latter work as “sprawling story about marriage problems and the corruption of values in industrial society” (George Gissing, 195). Gissing’s urban portraits in his early novels makes it hard to believe that any positive social change occurred during the century, but statistically, living conditions, e.g., urban sanitation, medical health, and increased educational opportunities, were better. In Gissing’s fiction, the modern city represents a vast cacophony of people and science that erodes the quality of life and threatens to overwhelm whatever peace and beauty of nature remain.

While it may seem logical to end rather than begin by examining Gissing’s dire views on modern society, knowing the reality and extent of his pessimism about change, progress, and the value of human hope short of death determines the boundaries within which analysis of his fiction is profitable. The important question is, does Gissing think the best thing for humans to do is give up and wait for the end, whatever that may be? Faced with this question about his fiction, one may say no. Regardless of his criticism of modern culture, Gissing is no bleak fatalist. However, his fictive world produces serious, complex interruptions of any idea of a movement toward human happiness greater than transient relief. The paradoxical position implies a, recurring hope, however faint, that he continually challenges. If hope can survive, it will have to earn its place. In this way, Gissing does not have to believe that life can be improved for the lowest classes or those who cannot fit into their ‘rightful’ places in the middle class. He has only to accept the inevitable, the logic of circumstances that leaves some in possession of their lives. Will Warburton, in the novel of the same name (1905), finds himself defrauded and de-classed but nevertheless recovers his equanimity and a sense of balance toward the past and an acceptance of the present. Korg
states, “At the end of the novel Warburton is moving away from his upper-class friends, and there is the clear suggestion (somewhat surprising Gissing) that he is well rid of them” (George Gissing, 225). The future lies unknown. One wishes to label this as un-Gissing-like, but it merely transcends or shifts aside ideology. Similarly, in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Gissing gives Ryecroft a legacy and peace for several years and then lets him die. Ryecroft appears to find himself blessed in his escape from the drudgeries of the writing life for even that short time. Not only the content but also the title of Gissing’s essay “The Hope of Pessimism” begins to assume a sense of clarity. A real, if chastened, idea of hope results from an acknowledgement of Gissing’s bare vision of human life.

Although it may not be progress, Gissing does not portray any Luddite leftovers acting on the edges of labour unrest. This is a significant change from the early part of the nineteenth century when breaking the looms offered a possible surcease from an advancing industrialization. Accommodation and incorporation are surely the watchwords in the 1880s and 1890s. In fact, Gissing dramatizes no serious threat to the industrial world. Its wealth permeates the society and preempts, if not silences, alternative discussions of social change. Tom Cobb in *The Paying Guest* moves into the realm of the needed expert who, if not the manager, is vital to his firm’s success. The lower class and the lower-middle class are not only the operators of the machinery, as happened during and after the Luddite outbreaks, but they also become its technicians and engineers. Gissing makes Cobb a generic electrical worker, though Mrs. Mumford thinks of him as “the electrical engineer, or whatever he was” (39) who functions more importantly as a symbol than a specific instance of expertise. Mr. Higgins, Louise
Derrick’s lower middle-class stepfather, is “rich” (14), with a business address in Fenchurch St., the city, and thus connected with the growing wealth of the country. Although he pays for Louise’s sojourn with the Mumfords, the action centers on Louise Derrick’s fruitless attempts to flee her class and/or Tom Cobb’s ardor. Gissing matter-of-factly gives Cobb “the girl,” success for the modern man without surprise at the outcome.

A fundamental consideration on the subject of progress is whether it is inevitable. Is the nineteenth century shift or change under the pressure of scientific innovation battering society? Ideas on free will and determinism come to mind, and if the latter rules, would man have any say in the event, whether the result is considered good or bad? Richard Mutimer’s inheritance in Demos transforms Wanley into New Wanley, and the discovery of an earlier will just as surely shifts it back. Is Hubert Eldon, the later beneficiary, any more in control of the destruction of the works at New Wanley than Mutimer is in their creation? Gissing’s use of the hackneyed device of a will to move the plot may have more significance than is usually the case since its importance lies not so much in its effects on Eldon’s financial prospects but rather on the effects on science’s inevitable march to social dominance. Gissing appears to reverse the century’s determining forces and suspend technology from its position of mastery. Dickens’ images of technological harm in Hard Times (1854) Coketown with its air and water pollution, and the general adaptation of that city, in its pervasive drabness, to the factory, train, and scientific educational methods lie upended in Wanley Valley’s newly recreated, pristine environment. Gissing makes Eldon most enthusiastic in his planned, complete eradication of the mines and the works. He tells Adela:
I shall sweep away every trace of the mines and the works and the houses, and do my utmost to restore the valley to its former state . . . . For my own part, in this little corner, at all events, the ruin shall be delayed. In this matter I will give my instincts free play. Of New Wanley not one brick shall remain on another. I will close the mines, and grass shall again grow over them; I will replant the orchards and mark out the fields as they were before. (338)

John Halperin comments on this process: “At the end of Demos, when Mutimer is disinherited and Eldon comes back to power, New Wanley is jolously destroyed.” (Gissing, 82) The narrator describes the aesthetic pleasure in the natural beauty as Eldon gazes at the prospect with the Rev. Wyvern. Society’s inevitable expansion on every scientific and technological front to the betterment of living standards, especially for the poor, is temporarily halted. The narrator observes:

Hubert Eldon has been as good as his word. In all the valley no trace is left of what was called New Wanley. Once more we can climb to the top of Stanbury Hill and enjoy the sense of remoteness and security when we see that dark patch on the horizon, the cloud that hangs over Belwick. (462)

This representative incident of the disruptive force of science, its dramatic power lying in the paradoxical calm of the prospect, rises in its increasing suggestiveness. To return to Hard Times, Sleary’s statement about the circus’s necessary role in society emphasizes another anti-progressive position that helps to illuminate the social alterations in Demos. First, the traditional, unchanging aspect of a circus is important to note. It is a world set apart that shows and reshow the same or similar acts and that one can see from childhood to adulthood and find in it little
difference. Second, Sleary stresses the circus’s purpose when he says that people must be amused. In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorain Gray* (1891), Oscar Wilde later writes, “All art is quite useless.” (17) The shock of the unusual makes Wilde’s statement memorable, but the subtlety of Sleary’s words are more profound. William Wordsworth’s assertion in “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” that pleasure is the chief end of poetry (311) is a possible source for the statements by Dicken’s Sleary and Wilde. For them, art speaks to human feelings and emotions; it does not create social processes, technological or otherwise, though it does have the moral power to shape the society in which they operate. Wordsworth, Dickens’ Sleary, and Wilde present essentially static images. These images are repeatable and full of meaning but do not move from one state of affairs to the next in a sense that the word progress would suggest. And, Demos’s Eldon functions in this tradition. To give pleasure in art, amusement at the circus, or the chance to appreciate an unchanged, however ironically presented, natural beauty is not to deny the possibility of progress or even that science could participate in it. However, by Gissing’s placing in Demos the static, recurrent experience on the site of the formerly dynamic, progressive one built by a working-class man become wealthy, and Eldon’s announced intention to keep it as it was, the author values the aesthetic over the socially progressive act. Sleary travels from one city to the other putting on the same show; Hugh and Adela will view the same prospect many times; pleasure, at the expense of Coketown and New Wanley, respectively, temporarily rules.

Gissing infuses his novels with objects, processes, and the products of modern science. Unlike Upton Sinclair’s open investigation of the excesses of industrialization in *The Jungle* (1906) and *Oil* (1927), Theodore Dreiser’s picture of Chicago in *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Frank
Norris’s novel about the expansion of the railboard in *Octopus* (1901), none of Gissing’s novels so openly engage the subject of industrialization but rather provide the physical results of science as background and connection. In *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (1971), Malcolm Bradbury provides a sense of this atmosphere:

> With the application of science to communications, the nation as a whole was shrinking, while the individual environment was becoming wider: the railways, from 1860 the tramways, the postal and telegraphic services, the spread of gas and electric light, the wide-circulation and national newspaper broke into separated communities, enfranchising them but producing greater social and political complexity. The need for abstract, impersonal social arrangements increased, and local and national government alike had to commit themselves to civic arrangements, services, sanitation, health matters. (45-46)

The emphasis in *New Grub Street* on the train that thunders under the bridge on which Jasper Milvain and Marian Yule stand is not so much as an industrial product with all the suggested effects of the factory system but rather as a contemporary symbol of force and energy.

The moon rising from the fog and mist in the last book of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and the frozen northern wastes that Dr. Frankenstein gazes on in Mary Shelley’s work (1818) function similarly as symbols. To the young Jasper and Marian, looking to the future and interested in one another, the train symbolizes their different expectations from life. Wordsworth and Shelley, as seems appropriate for the Romantic period, incorporate natural images into their characters’ hopes
and frustrations, images that provide them with understanding and from which they can obtain emotional and intellectual substance.

In *New Grub Street* and *In the Year of Jubilee*, Gissing also employs the London Underground, the telegraph, and electric lighting. In *The Odd Women*, the recently invented typewriter figures in the plot as a means to achieve female emancipation in a male-domiated world. Rhoda Nunn says:

My first engagement here was as shorthand writer to the secretary of a company. But he soon wanted some one who could use a typewriter. That was a suggestion. I went to learn typewriting, and the lady who taught me asked me in the end to stay with her as an assistant. This is her house, and here I live with her. (23-24)

Gissing uses some of these scientific products in a positive way and some in a negative one but does not generally invest the product with the negative or positive qualities. The smoke and dirt from the Underground, not electrified until the early 1900s (Saint and Darley, *The Chronicles of London*, 223), counterbalance the ease and speed with which one moves around the city. In a striking scene between Jessica Morgan and Samuel Bramby in *In the Year of Jubilee*, Gissing describes the Underground with ethoes of Homer’s, Virgil’s and Dante’s images of the underworld (259). The news that Reardon receives in London of his son Willy’s illness in Brighton is not made worse by the telegraph’s quick transmission of it (*New Grub Street* 439) nor does the train that rushes him to Brighton, as sick as he is, convey negative overtones. Marian Yule, in the same novel, complains of the harsh effect on her eyes of the British Museum Library’s electric lighting, but the problem may lie as
much in Marian’s physical and emotional condition as in this new means of illumination:

But then flashed forth the sputtering whiteness of the electric light, and its ceaseless hum was henceforth a new source of headache. It reminded her how little work she had done today: she must, she must force herself to think of the task in hand. A machine has no business to refuse its duty. But the pages were blue and green and yellow before eyes; the uncertainty of the light was intolerable. Right or wrong she would go home, and hide herself, and let her heart unburden itself of tears. (108)

Other than Rhoda Nunn’s estimation that, “It takes a good six months’ work to learn for any profitable use” (The Odd Women 39), acquiring efficiency on the typewriter is an opportunity that women can take to achieve independence.

Shelley’s *Frankenstein* taps into the fear of disruption that science create. It is not so much fear of any specific disruption but of the state or condition of disruption. True, Shelley explores the application of electricity to the generation of life, a fundamental displacement of the God-like role to the insistence by one human that he must know if he can create life: Do his scientific ideas have merit? However, any dramatic example would suffice since an underlying theme of Shelley’s work is that a new world is coming, one that human beings will fashion and in which they will turn intractable natural processes advances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fall far short of this goal, but they do produce inroads into nature’s ineluctable laws. A sense of an oncoming force pervades Gissing’s fiction. The city of London seeps into the suburbs; the masses of people swarm throughout the city; the buildings
stretch endlessly and dismally on some streets; the noise of the city penetrates every recess. Earlier literature, to go no further back than Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798) and Books First and Seventh of the *Prelude*, has produced images of a London that parallel these, but science sustain the greater momentum of later nineteenth-century occurrences. Processes and products, ideas and things proliferate under a more dynamic system in the last several decades. The word “dynamic” might have positive overtones, but it could merely mean activity, kinetic energy. In fact, one could well speak of an irreversible, dynamic decline that afflicts the lower classes in all their swarming numbers. However, Gissing does not depict a compression that is prelude to a revolutionary explosion. In *In the Year of Jubilee*, Nancy Lord and Luckworth Crewe witness the police and the masses “in brief conflict” (64) on Jubilee Day, but the people are more stirred by drink than ideas. One might well ask what good is science and technological change if not to improve humanity’s lot? Disruptive change that narrows options is not sufficient.

Gissing’s emphasis on the social effects of science distances the reader from the factory and the laboratory. While he employs no affective images of machinery as Dickens does in *Hard Times* such as the machine as lumbering elephant or in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) as Little Nell and her grandfather escape from Quilp through an industrial landscape of glowing fires, the ominous spread of London portends a new world spawned by technology that increase wealth as it sometimes debass society. Admittedly nostalgic, Gissing’s fiction displays a desire for something more than the world not only fast approaching but already mutating under the new orders of hegemony.
George Gissing approximates Hardy in his outlook towards God and universe and the place of man in a vast world, being controlled by a blind and powerful force: he dittoes, “Thomas Love Peacock in his outlook towards science.” As to the first approach, he regards universe an inhabitation where ultimate causes are inscrutable where man’s destiny is predetermined by an indifferent and nonchalant Providence: where man suffers miserably at the cruel and merciless destiny. “Rather must I apprehend,” he writes, “that man, in some inconceivable way, may at his best moments represent a principle darkly at strife with that which prevails throughout the world as known to us.”(Letters, 200) The Manichaeism system of universe seems to have confirmed his view that man should constantly endeavor to glorify good without the least expectation of its being rewarded; and, in this advocacy for the good for its own sake, he conveniently tallies the Puritan conception of virtue. “Of all theological systems,” he writes, “the most convincing is the Manichaeism, which, of course under another name, was held by the Puritans themselves.”(Letters, 280)

Science, he regards, as “the remorseless enemy of mankind.”(Letters, 268) In science, he sees, the end of “all the beauty of the world;” an approach typically Peacockian in substance, who, too, regards science as the most powerful virus which gradually eats into the vitality of human life; and who in his famous novels -Headlong Hall, Melincourt, Crotchet Castle, Gryll Grange, Maid Marian, The Misfortanes of Elphin, and Nightmare Abbey enunciates the philosophy of scientific agnosticism through such immortal characters of his as Mr. Forster, ‘the perfectibilian,’ Mr. Escot, ‘the deteriorationist,’ Mr. Jenkinson, ‘the status-quo-ite,’ and the Reverend Doctor Gaster. Gissing finds in new civilization, based on science the roots of barbarism, the callousness of
heart, and the seeds of all beastly conflicts. Science, for him, is not an
ennobling force or a soothing balm or blessing fairy, it is rather a demon
bent on creating ‘a blood-drenched chaos’ in mankind.

‘I see,’ he passionately argues against science, ‘it is
destroying all simplicity and gentleness of life, all the beauty
of the world; I see it restoring barbarism under a mask of
civilization; I see it darkening men’s minds and hardening
their hearts; I see it bringing a time of vast conflicts, which
will pale into insignificance ‘the thousand wars of old’ and,
as likely as not, will whelm all the laborious advances of
mankind in blood-drenched chaos. (Letters, 168-69)

This evident distrust for science is copiously traceable in George
Gissing's novels: in Demos (1886), Kingcote, “the refined, sensitive and
pessimistic” (17) prototype of the novelist himself, “tortured with
jealousy is Isabel’s apparent lightness,” (19) and “a demagogue of the
working-classes,” (19) typifies Gissing’s scientific objectivity -with a
hostile reaction to it.

In Thyrza (1887), Thyrza, a factory-girl imbued with the Ruskinian
teaching, vehemently reacts to the scientific impact on modern life, and
regards industrialization as a bane on human happiness, because her love,
meandering through serpentine ways of modern civilization, ends in
renunciation and death.

In A Life's Morning (1888), James Payn transmogrifies her simple
pleasures of life into a tragic one, because it is science, which is wholly
responsible for it. In another famous novel, The Nether World (1889),
Gissing presents a sharp reaction to scientific march, because it has
caused a gloomy panorama of misery, of squalor, and of savagery in the
modem life. In New Grub Streets (1891), Gissing curses science and its
world, in which even authors are forced to struggle in an environment of garrets and basements, often too poor to afford a fire, and slaving daily at the British Museum for an uncertain pittance. In *Born in Exile* (1893), Gissing presents the inner history of a man whose integrity, rather than his happiness, has been affected by science. In *The Year of Jubilee* (1894), *Eve's Ransom* (1895), and *The Whirlpool* (1897), both present Gissing's scientific approach to study the effects of the socialistic programme on different characters and their capacities: Rolfe's uncertainty, in *The Whirlpool*, for example, show the gist of all these works, namely, the revolt against “the softness and sweetness of civilization,” (13) and he is, ultimately, forced to recognize “the brute savagery of it,” (19) “the very lingo,”(19) “the tongue of white chapel blaring lust of life in the track of English guns;” (19) and prognosticates further that the complex social life will prove a curse to the posterity.

Gissing marshaled for scientific inspection in *The Emancipated* a miscellaneous crowd of free-livers, self-questioners and others of both sexes who had repudiated the ordinary restraints of morals and religion: in *Denzil Quarrier*, he has selected a special case for scientific study- the woman who leaves a husband convicted of felony and enters into an irregular union with the man she loves: in *The Odd Women*, the real causes of an unfortunate matrimonial alliance have scientifically been studied.

But despite an apparent hostile attitude towards science, Gissing prefers to be known as a scientific artist; and, in fact, it is almost a truism to pronounce that it has been his avowed aim like George Moore’s to write fiction on scientific lines. There is, of course, a scientific impartiality, as, for instance, when he explains Mutimer, he draws up what he calls a tabular exposition of the man’s consciousness, and sets
forth the motives impelling or restraining his ambitious democrat, who is on the point of breaking with Emma Vine, the girl of his own class, and marrying the genteel Adela. Such type of scientific objectivity and analysis entitles him to the rank of a scientific novelist, despite his distrust in and hatred against scientific principles; and, in any serious attempt at tracing this positive influence of science on him, even an iota of doubt cannot be raised against his being not a true scientific novelist.
Works Cited


