

George Gissing: A Story of English Realism

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Abstract George Gissing's novels sit on the permeable boundary between the diegetic tendencies of 19th-century realism and the mimesis-dominated narratives of modernism. In his early novels, characters deliver barely disguised narratorial comments directly to the reader. But this form of realism is already strained. The self-awareness of Gissing's art, manifesting in satire and irony, butts up against his research-led approach to writing. This article shows that what emerges in Gissing is a conflict between narrative intrusion, and the desire to displace authority and represent subjectivity at its broadest. This conflict is a synecdoche for proto-modernism.

Keywords Gissing. Mimesis. Artistic Gaze. Proto-modernism.

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1 The Introduction

George Gissing is hardly a modernist in the traditional sense. His fiction, in the main, is strictly contemporaneous. It is not just set in, but also engaged with, the particularities of time and space. Structurally too, his novels are in some ways markedly realist, following the characters' lives in an essentially chronological fashion. Yet while the narratives might "begin at the beginning [...] and go on till [they] come to the end: then stop", these endings are more disconcertingly proto-modernist in form (Carroll [1872] 2009, 106). Sometimes the novels' finales are open and ambiguous, at others too heavy-handedly conclusive to avoid appearing satirical and ironic. And again, in a manifest departure from the traditions of realism, Gissing's novels certainly do not seek to elevate or improve their audience. Gissing's narrative style mixes, and not always effortlessly, the diegetic form with a detached narrative mimesis that aims, like the modernist fictions that follow, to "show" rather than "tell".

This article begins with a survey of Gissing's reputation among contemporary or near-contemporary authors writing at the kernel of the realist/modernist debate, and asks how these early conclusions affect Gissing's place in literary history. A survey of the critical history registers a further misalignment with modernism; Gissing is censured by Joyce, Woolf and, though to a lesser extent, James, but admired by Wells, Bennett and Orwell. The second section analyses Gissing's writing on realism in its aims and execution in his letters, critical study of Dickens and journalism. Then, in the final section, such critical prescriptions are applied to his fiction to determine whether he does, in fact, practice what he preaches. Via references to Gissing's theses on writing, and his writing itself, this article contends that, in Gissing, art cannot imitate the world because there is not one world but many. What emerges in Gissing is a conflict between the comfort of a cumbersome but familiar realism and a cynicism about its formal means and modes. This is played out as the pull of the intrusive narrator is offset by a desire to displace such monologic authority and represent subjectivity at its broadest. This conflict is a synecdoche for proto-modernism.

2 Mr Bennett and Mrs Woolf: Gissing and his Critics

Early criticism was quick to identify Gissing as a realist, emphasising the rigorously contemporaneous aspect of his work. To H.G. Wells, Gissing's novels are "deliberate attempts to present in typical groupings distinct phases of our social order", and their interest "strictly contemporary" (Wells [1897] 1972, 298, 305). To George Orwell they are "tied more tightly than most [...] to a particular place and time" (Orwell 1943, 45), and for Arnold Bennett they are concerned

with “all the usual meanness of our daily existence” (Bennett [1899] 1972, 362). Typicality, distinctness, social order, particularity, the usual, the quotidian, all this suggests an identifiable, pragmatic and authentic quality in Gissing’s prose and what it describes. There is also, with strictness, order, and “tightly” “tied”, a sense of restriction, and an implicit lack of imaginative freedom innate in the form.

The recognition of the present-day also indicates universality and comparativeness - both Wells and Bennett use the collective pronoun (“our social order”, “our daily existence”). Gissing, they suggest, writes about the here and now, and that here and now is an experiential commonplace. This corresponds with what David Lodge describes as “the assumption that there is a common phenomenal world” that may be “reliably described by the methods of empirical history” in fiction expounded by late realists like Bennett and Wells (Lodge 1977, 47). In critiquing Gissing his realist reviewers are pursuing signs of a shared whole that aligns with their own artistic practice.

After all, according to Bennett, realism, as opposed to idealism and romanticism, means taking

the common grey things which people know and despise, and, without tampering, to disclose their epic significance, their essential grandeur. (Bennett [1899] 1972, 362)

Such profundity is realised in Gissing’s ability to perceive and present “a large coherent movement”, to evoke “from the most obscure phenomena a large ominous idea”, and to see “broadly, in vast wholes” (363). “[W]ithout tampering” is key here: Gissing’s art is successful because it renders snippets of commonplace material as a collective unit without the interfering influence of idealisation. But when Bennett complains that Gissing’s “pictures have no cynosure for the eye”, that his narratives are a “maze of episodes each interrupting the others” (363), what he is identifying is a rationed narrative unity and fragmentation akin to modernist structures.

Modernist critics, however, hardly recognised their own means of aesthetic and formal innovation in Gissing’s works. Virginia Woolf asserts that he “reverenced facts and had no faculty it seems (his language is meagre and unmetaphorical) for impressions” (Woolf 1932, 223). Woolf’s response appears principally determined by a modernist rejection of outmoded ways of writing, and Realism’s seeming devotion to material culture, akin to the criticism levelled in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (Woolf [1924] 2008, 32-6). In an effort, perhaps, to emphasise the difference between Gissing’s art and her own, Woolf constructs a false binary between fact and impression. But, for all the geographical specificity and documentary exactitude of Gissing’s prose, it is all of course, only an impression of the real. The reader, such as Woolf, may be coaxed into accepting his writing as referential

but any such “facts” are selected, selective, subjective and personal. What’s more, the “real” is frequently disrupted by the self-reflexive tendencies of his fiction that register a limitation to omniscience. Gissing’s problematic reputation as a composer of documentary-style pseudo-fictions, then, is at least in part a result of a clash between realist and modernist advocate agendas. John Sloan explains that “his place continues to be that of a literary curiosity who stands between two major periods of literary art” (Sloan 1898, 1).

Henry James, after acknowledging the now well-trodden ground of Gissing criticism – that his acquaintance with the lower classes make him “*the authority* [...] on a region vast and unexplored” – moves on to examine that classic formal relationship between dialogue and narrative. His complaint is that Gissing “overdoes the ostensible report of spoken words” (James [1897] 1972, 291-2). To James, “colloquy”, or the mimetic reportage of speech, is a problem because it attempts to banish the author’s voice. A vote from James, then, for diegesis and authorial control. But Gissing’s use, or overuse, of direct speech certainly doesn’t mean that the narrative voice has been banished. In fact, the over-saturated quality, and the jarred impression of an author in exile that James identifies, register an uneasy tension between diegesis and mimesis that is a leitmotif of Gissing’s narrative style.

3 Gissing’s Realism: The Art of Suggestion

The tendency to rely on dialogue, whether internalised or not, was a problem that Gissing recognised. *New Grub Street* (1891) is famously disparaging of the overreliance on dialogue as filler. Experiencing writer’s block, the novelist protagonist Edwin Reardon resorts to:

[d]escription of locality, deliberate analysis of character or motive, demanded far too great an effort for his present condition. He kept as much as possible to dialogue; the space is filled so much more quickly, and at a pinch one can make people talk about the paltriest incidents of life. (Gissing [1891] 2016, 110-11)

In the same novel, Harold Biffen’s project to reproduce the diction of the working-class ‘verbatim’ receives ironic treatment (Gissing [1891] 2016, 128). This draws attention to the artistic vacuity of speech-for-speech’s sake and suggests, *contra* Woolf and James, that Gissing understood successful art, even in the realist tradition, as something quite different from simple and unimaginative reproduction. Gissing claimed elsewhere that realism is not just “the laborious picturing of the dullest phases of life” (Gissing [1895] 1929, 281). He recognised that the word itself was slippery term:

I observe that the word realistic has, in journalistic language, come to mean simply “revolting” or “painful”. In the *Star* of to-day, March 18, '89, is an account of a *Lancet* report on Crudley Heath, & the foll. examples of the word occur:

“The realistic description of this region is *accurate*.” This is not mere tautology, you see. And again: “Here is an account, equally *realistic*, of a house in this blighted region”. (Gissing 1962, 41)

Realism as a term is overused and misused, having become a synonym for either dreary mimesis or crudeness. The essay concludes that “it signifies nothing more than artistic sincerity in the portrayal of contemporary life” (Gissing [1895] 1929, 220). So, the imperative of Gissing’s fictional aesthetic, one that he repeats in his letters, journalism and writings on Dickens, is the vital importance of “sincerity”. Sincerity here doesn’t mean a universal accuracy, the presentation of objective truth. There is, after all, “no science of fiction” (220). Nor does it mean pandering to “the habit of mind which assumes that a novel is written ‘to please people’” (221). Like Bennett, Gissing views idealism as realism’s opposite. Artistic value depends on subjectivity as much as sincerity: “depicting some portion of human life as candidly and vividly as is in the author’s power” (219-20). This is a point that Gissing drums home again and again, both here and elsewhere: the artist sees “only a part of the actual”, “a world of his own”, “that world as it exists to him” (221). “Be he a true artist”, Gissing later contended, “he gives us pictures which represent his own favourite way of looking at life” (Gissing [1898] 2004, 231). This personal vision of the world counters the notion of a shared reality suggested by Bennett and Wells.

In fact, Gissing’s writing on writing suggests a commitment to something more layered than material realism’s preoccupation with “the common things”. A serious novelist’s aim should be “to expose the secrets of the mind, to show humanity in its external combat with fate” (Gissing [1895] 1929, 218). The external world alone is not a sufficient subject for art; sincere realism concerns how individual perception conceives of it. This aim to “show” and “expose” the mental landscape, with the surface constituting only part of the real, corresponds with Henry James’s belief that fiction must have an “air of reality” connected to “the atmosphere of the mind”. Both novelists contend that “the only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (James [1888] 1970, 390, 378).

Despite all his arguments for personality in realism as a mode, though, Gissing advocates elements of the impersonal in its execution: “the artist”, he writes “must not come forward among his characters” (Gissing 1892). And Gissing frequently expressed frustration that critics read his novels as political polemics, complaining that in reviews “the novelist is often represented as holding an opinion which

he simply attributes to one of his characters" (Coustillas, Mattheisen, Young 1990-97, 5: 176). Gissing's views on detachment in writing are very much in the modernist spirit. He advises his brother, Algernon, that in writing one should:

omit the *instructive* part of the description. Hints of association are of course needful, but let them only fill up the background [...] the secret art of fiction is the *indirect*. Nothing must be told too plumply [...] don't give hints of what's to come [...] never treat your story as a story, but as a simple narration of facts. (Coustillas, Mattheisen, Young 1990-97, 2: 178-9)

If mimesis and diegesis sit at opposite ends of a scale, where mimesis is direct speech, moving through reported speech, and description to comment as diegesis, Gissing's "secret art of fiction" warns against the most diegetic form of writing. He also cautions against the overbearing narratorial technique of self-reflection. This is an instance of Gissing separating himself from the older school of realism. The newer method of realism, Gissing writes elsewhere, is "[f]ar more artistic [...] merely suggesting",

dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life, - hinting, surmising, telling in detail what *can* so be told, & no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentation. (Coustillas, Mattheisen, Young 1990-97, 2: 320)

Like Henry James, Gissing may have admired the art of suggestion but showing alone is not enough. In 1892, when approaching "the complex life of to-day", Gissing asserts that mimesis, in its classical definition, must be eschewed: "I am not content to offer only dialogue". This is because the novelistic world, in its amalgam of verbal and non-verbal acts, denies its possibility: "[t]o talk about being "objective" is all very well for those who swear by words. No novelist was ever objective or will ever be. His work is a bit of life as seen by *him*. It is his business to make us feel a distinct pleasure in seeing the world with *his eyes*" (Gissing 1892, 1423). Unlike the dramatic scene, then, the novelistic world is transmuted by the artistic gaze. That "bit of life" consists of a multitude of fragments, consciences, and styles drawn together in one of many possible views in a way that could suggest modernism, were it not for that repeated and emphasised pronoun. The author is the first among equals, claiming neither truth, objectivity, nor fact, but a certain take on the world.

4 To Show or to Tell?

The case for Gissing's later works as proto-modernist or, at the very least, problematizing realism, has been convincingly argued elsewhere.¹ But the 'air of reality' is troubled by form, structure, genre and narrative even in those works commonly considered as exemplars of English naturalism. The perversity of diegesis in *Demos: A Story of English Socialism* (1886) also prefigures modernism's disdain for the omniscient narrator. The book's unsettled realism is clear even when taken as a "broad" "vast whole" (Bennett 1972, 363). For one, the structure is delimited by the overbearing cogs of high Victorian plot mechanics such as lost and discovered wills, returned fortunes and hidden identities. This is the stuff of melodrama, reliant on coincidence, fate and patterning, and as such introduces elements of a starkly non-mimetic mode to the narrative.

Measured on plot motifs alone, *Demos* might appear as a progeny of Victorian industrial novels. The rags-to-riches narrative, the easy resolution of social differences via cross-class marriage alliances are akin to the motifs of, for instance, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil*, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. In *Demos*, however, rags are returned to rags, marriages collapse, the classes remained unbridged. In fact, the concluding match between Adela Waltham and Hubert Eldon returns the action to the comfortable and comforting *bourgeois* beginning. So, while the novel is "a satire on working-class aims and capacities", it is also a satire of its presentation in fiction (Coustillas, Mattheisen, Young 1990-97, 2: 360). It is a story of return and restoration rather than the development innate in the typical *Bildungsroman*. The plot goes nowhere, and it circles around an absent moral centre. Hence Bennett's complaint: no centre, no unity, a "maze of episodes". The novel is, after all, *a* and not *the* story of English socialism. It begins and ends, not with socialism, but with feudalism; not in "real" London, but fictional Wanley.

The third chapter of *Demos* marks a shift from the genericisms of provincial and fictional Wanley to the referential topography of Hoxton, London:

On the dun borderland of Islington and Hoxton, in a corner made by the intersection of the New North Road and the Regent's Canal, is discoverable an irregular triangle of small dwelling-houses, bearing the name of Wilton Square. In the midst stands an amorphous structure, which on examination proves to be a very ugly house and a still uglier Baptist chapel built back to back. The pair are enclosed within iron railings, and, more strangely, a circle of trees. (Gissing [1886] 1972, 25)

¹ See, for instance, Harsh 1994; McCracken 2001; James 2003.

The geographical precision, use of toponyms and shift to the present tense establish that 'air of reality', and give the prose a documentary quality. The narrative takes on the role of investigation, uncovering things for the reader: Wilton Square "is discoverable", "examination" of an "amorphous structure [...] proves". Yet there are already signs of an impulse beyond mere reportage – adjectives offer value judgments "dun", "very ugly". And why should it be strange, in objective observation, for there to be trees? Because this is not pure and unadulterated referential mimesis but rather a subjective report of place, replete with value judgements, from a disembodied perspective. The use of the passive voice without a specified subject draws attention away from the actor and onto the effect. This becomes clearer as the narrative focus retreats back from the Mutimers' house and to the more general setting. The passage is worth quoting in full:

The canal – *maladetta e sventurata fossa* – stagnating in utter foulness between coal-wharfs and builders' yards, at this point divides two neighbourhoods of different aspects. On the south is Hoxton, a region of malodorous market streets, of factories, timber yards, grimy warehouses, of alleys swarming with small trades and crafts, of filthy courts and passages leading into pestilential gloom; everywhere toil in its most degrading forms; the thoroughfares thundering with high-laden waggons, the pavements trodden by working folk of the coarsest type, the corners and lurking-holes showing destitution at its ugliest. Walking northwards, the explorer finds himself in freer air, amid broader ways, in a district of dwelling-houses only; the roads seem abandoned to milkmen, cat's-meat vendors, and costermongers. Here will be found streets in which every window has its card advertising lodgings: others claim a higher respectability, the houses retreating behind patches of garden-ground, and occasionally showing plastered pillars and a balcony. The change is from undisguised struggle for subsistence to mean and spirit-broken leisure; hither retreat the better-paid of the great slave-army when they are free to eat and sleep. To walk about a neighbourhood such as this is the dreariest exercise to which man can betake himself; the heart is crushed by uniformity of decent squalor; one remembers that each of these dead-faced houses, often each separate blind window, represents a 'home,' and the associations of the word whisper blank despair. (Gissing [1886] 1972, 25-6)

The continued topographical precision might convince the reader that the paragraph offers a verbal picture of the setting, faithfully reproduced. But the opposition and balance are all a bit too good to be true. The canal, the narrative suggests, bifurcates two neighbourhoods, one of commerce and industry, and one of accommodation. The public

and the private, then, are helpfully kept apart by topography. The rhetorical tools and structure of the passage reinforce and accentuate this observed divide. The first section, describing industrial Hoxton, is loaded with superlatives - “everywhere”, “most degrading”, “coarsest type”, “ugliest” - that suggest archetypal status. Hoxton is an exemplar of working-class labour. The long single sentence that lists the features is as crowded and unrelenting as the setting it purports to describe. The second section, depicting residential streets, employs comparative adjectives - “freer” “broader”, “higher” - that imply rather than state the north’s superiority over the south. And again, physical place is mimicked by the spatial form of the prose: the streets are quieter and emptier, the sentences are shorter and simpler. Observations are now embodied in “the explorer” and carry implications, perhaps, of journalism, or of fact-gathering sociological report. This is a sign of the already jarred relationship with omniscience in the narrative style. Gissing could just as easily state this, why the need for the imagined explorer? By superimposing the explorer figure onto the scene, the narrative mimics the movement of walking, of discovering in the present - “here”, “here” - and coming across things one by one rather than giving the panoramic overview of the omniscient narrator. So, while the passage is far from being the limited point of view of modernist prose, the omniscient narrator of traditional realism is distanced, embodied in the detached position. However, lest the reader should be in any doubt about the crushing dreariness of residential Hoxton, at the end of the passage, marked by the shift in tense and subject (“man” becomes “one”), the “impertinent Ego” enters, and delivers judgment.² The shift into the narrative voice answers to Gissing’s rule that realism must present “the world as it appears to [the artist]” (Gissing [1895] 1929, 220).

Until this point, the narrator and the reader have remained relatively implicit. With the introduction of the Mutimer family, however, the narrative voice shifts:

[O]n the edge of the quieter district, and in one of its houses dwelt at the time of which I write the family on whose behalf. Fate was at work in a valley of mid-England. [...] With [Joseph Mutimer’s] children we shall have to make closer acquaintance; but before doing so, in order to understand their position and follow with intelligence their several stories, it will be necessary to enter a little upon the subject of ancestry. (Gissing [1886] 1972, 26)

Suddenly Gissing commits what he is later to identify as

² The “impertinent Ego” is Gissing’s phrase in his “Preface to the second edition of *The Unclassed*” (1895).

that capital crime against art so light-heartedly committed by Anthony Trollope, who will begin a paragraph in his novels with some such words as these: "Now, if this were fact, and not a story". (Gissing [1898] 2004, 67)

The referential spell is broken by the interjection of an intrusive narrator akin to that characteristic of high Victorianism. This interjection shifts the narrative mode from description to comment, and into complete diegesis. It is also a voice of ironic self-consciousness – the narrator is a writer, recording the "Fate" of the Mutimer family, telling "their several stories", but notably relinquishing responsibility for the action. It is as though Fate (i.e. the plot) is working autonomously. As with the ironic comment in the following chapter – "Start not, dear reader; the Princess is only a subordinate heroine, and happens, moreover, to be a living creature" – the peculiarly contradictory mixture of self-reflexive fiction and fact, of control and detachment, suggest a deep-seated anxiety with omniscience (Gissing [1886] 1972, 38).

The subordinate heroine Alice Mutimer is frequently the subject of scornful sarcasm. Even her name, "the Princess", is caustically ironic. She is, therefore, trapped in the realm of parody. Her story is as conventional and one-dimensional as her characterisation – silly, vulgar and unduly proud, she is destined to fall. The actual heroine, Adela Waltham, is a more complex creation. This, of course, stands in line with the book's stated stance as a story told from "a very Conservative point of view" (Coustillas, Mattheisen, Young 1990-97, 2: 363). Simon J. James has suggested that Gissing's narrators "are rarely reliable judges of character and can even give the impression of actively disliking certain characters" and this is certainly true in *Demos* (James 2003, 43). Adela is the only main character that receives consistent narrative sympathy. After a passage of free indirect discourse where Adela explores her own hypocrisy and mock heroism in the face of Mutimer's duplicity the narrator jumps in:

A pity, is it not? It were so good to have seen her purely noble, indignant with unmixed righteousness. But, knowing our Adela's heart, is it not even sweeter to bear with her? [...] For my part, Adela is more to me for the imperfection, infinitely more to me for the confession of it in her own mind. How can a woman be lovelier than when most womanly, or more precious than when she reflects her own weakness in clarity of soul? (Gissing [1886] 1972, 333)

The reader is poked and prodded, instructed to "bear with her". Adela is complex and human, the narrator clamours, all the better for her weakness. She is the heroine and she must be liked. The rhetorical questions aimed, presumably, to pre-empt or reflect the assumed reader's uncertainty, give the interjection an almost hysterical tone

that undermines narrative authority. Despite claiming to know the “confessions” of Adela’s mind, such omniscience is not sustained.

After the lost will is discovered, restoring the Manor to the disinherited Eldon, “Mutimer”, Adela realises, “must abandon Wanley, and whither he went, thither must she go also. [...] Doubtless he would return to London; their home would be a poor one, like that of ordinary working folk” (Gissing [1886] 1972, 310-11). “Whither” and “thither” resonate strangely here, clashing with Adela’s pragmatic resolution, as though a borrowed authority is allegorising her fate. The necessary move from Wanley to London marks a move from the site of idealism and tradition to that of reality and modernity. At the close of chapter 27, Adela waits for her husband at the station – a space on the boundary between the two places:

Adela made an effort to speak in words of comfort, but her own voice sounded hopeless in her ears. In the station was a constant roaring and hissing, bell-ringing and the shriek of whistles, the heavy trundling of barrows, the slamming of carriage-doors; everywhere a smell of smoke. It impressed her as though all the world had become homeless, and had nothing to do but journey hither and thither in vain search of a resting-place. (Gissing [1886] 1972, 349)

The above passage challenges Woolf’s opinion that Gissing’s texts are “meagre and unmetaphorical” (Woolf 1932, 223), revering fact and lacking impressions. In fact, the passage is psychologically symbolic. The station is a site of modernity, the constant noise and fumes prefiguring, in impressions, the urban environment. But more than this, the station mirrors Adela’s state of mind, not just in the sense of classic pathetic fallacy, but in the way it is described. The unconnected clauses enact both the experiential bombardment to the senses and her mental turmoil. The formal and archaic diction, directly recalling the “whither” and “thither” of the earlier passage, connotes a distancing from language, a feeling of being at once out of oneself, yet at odds with the modern surroundings. Here is Gissing’s negative identification at its finest: loneliness, homelessness and isolation become universal qualities, a shared absence.³

The complexity of this, however, is undermined as the scene unfolds:

The morning had threatened rain; when at length the journey to London began, the black skies yielded a steady downpour [...] Adela glanced up and down the barren fields of type, but there was

3 “Negative identification” is Raymond Williams’s term from *The Country and the City* (1985), 175.

nothing that could hold her attention, and, by chance looking at her husband's face, she continued to examine it. Perhaps he was asleep, perhaps only absorbed in thought. [...] She could not avert her gaze; it seemed to her that she was really scrutinising his face for the first time, and it was as that of a stranger. Not one detail had the stamp of familiarity: the whole repelled her. 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. (Gissing [1886] 1972, 349-50)

Here the symbolism continues, though with less subtlety. The tears that Adela held back in the station are superimposed onto the elements in a heavy-handed metaphor. This is the first clue of narrative determination. Initially, it appears that the narrative remains in her consciousness - without omniscience it is unclear whether Mutimer is awake. As the train moves from provincial Wanley towards London, the reality of the situation and of her husband seems to dawn on Adela: "he was not of her class, not of her world". But whose reality is it? We are supposed to take from this scene Adela's realisation of class difference via her examination of Mutimer's face. But the unmasking of Mutimer's hypocrisy has already occurred: Adela knows that he snubbed his working-class fiancée, that he wanted to hide the rediscovered will, that his commitment to socialism is limited and self-seeking. The complexity of emotion, still present in the bleakness of Adela's loneliness and the repulsion of marital unhappiness, is diminished by that impertinent Ego, committed to the tone of the book: satire and reactionary politics. Free Indirect Discourse, lying between direct and reported speech, occupies the middle ground between mimesis and diegesis. In high realism, like that practised by George Eliot, Free Indirect Discourse is supposed to create an imperceptible blurring of character and narrator, thus reinforcing narrative control. In Woolf's writing, it has a different effect: diminishing the role and authority of the narrator via increased focalisation. But in the passage above, signalled by the shift into the gnomic present ("It was the face [...]"), Adela becomes a silent mouthpiece for the Conservative point of view, a substitute for a narrator that renounces responsibility for such generalisations. Identity, then, is fragmented and incomplete, and class is an easy way out, something fixed and stratified to set against the chaotic worlds of emotion.

5 Conclusion

The failure of physiognomy in Adela's reading of Mutimer, her sudden consciousness of foreignness beneath what is supposedly known and the subsequent awareness of abject disparity and disintegration enacts in microcosm the experiential pattern of Gissing's novels. It correlates with a persistent incongruity between naturalistic surface realism (Woolf's "facts") and the troubling unknown beneath ("impressions"). Thus it is that the world according to Gissing appears incomplete, centreless, a "maze of episodes". Inner monologue, Free Indirect Discourse, direct speech, reported speech, narrative interjection, reflection, and comment all sit unhappily alongside each other, disrupting a narrative unity and control that Gissing can't quite seem to relinquish.

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