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Morality and Economic Wealth in the History of the English Novel

Studies on Protestantism, Capitalism and Individualism. Insights on George Gissing and George Orwell.

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INTRODUCTION

The causal connection between material earnings and success is, I believe, one of the evils of the individual and of society: on the contrary, as Henry David Thoreau pointed out, in *Walden*, "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone".[1] I have no intention of claiming that this is a malaise of "modern society" – whatever that definition is supposed to mean – because I believe success to be an innate necessity and desire of human beings, as Abraham Maslow laid down in his 1943 hierarchy of needs, a *summa* of the universal needs of the individual. However, a problematization of the concept and its implications is necessary, and it is something that intellectuals, even coming from very different environments, have been doing perpetually in the history of thought. The Reverend Dean Inge, for instance, wrote that success is "written at the heart of every good American"[2] and that, despite the possibility for people to live their humble life as they please, dying as a millionaire, an archbishop, a judge, or a best-selling author is the only way to be recognized as successful.[3] Surely, the association between the American world and this kind of mentality has become so notorious as to become commonplace. The so-called "upward mobility", the possibility of reaching whatever economic and social status despite the initial condition, is sometimes used to oppose the American society to the European.[4] But I believe that the pursuit of wealth has spread like wildfire into society in general, as to affect the realms of ethics, personal fulfilment and self-achievement, and happiness. This has been the very general starting point which triggered this work.

My field of studies being English literature, I aimed at providing a web of causality which could, at least partially, give an explanation to the spread of this wide mentality. And, obviously, to trace some connections between a problematic aspect of the individual and some of the resulting works of literature which, in some way or another, grasped this concept and attacked it. What I identified as a good starting point for inquiring the causes – widespread as they may be – of the issue are Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and its application to English Realism written by Watt, namely the milestone text *The Rise of the Novel*. I found the idea of connecting a religious principle, predestination, and a shift in the paradigm of morality rather interesting but, above all, convincing. Thus, I decided to provide my first

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[1] Thoreau, *Walden*, 70.
[2] Inge, *But What Is Success?*, in *The North American Review*, 1.
[3] ibid.
[4] Heike, "Expressive Individualism and the Myth of the Self-Made Man", in *The Myths That Made America*, 367.

chapter with a historical and sociological perspective which is, I believe, unusual yet necessary to examine the subject from a distant and all-encompassing point of view. To do so, I put together a variety of different sources and readings, including texts borrowed from the fields of history, economic history, sociology, philosophy, and others. Those included, for instance, Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, and Hobsbawm's *Industry and Empire*, just to mention the most famous names. The historical component of the first chapter also includes a brief insight into the Industrial Revolution, and then a reconstruction of the traces of the issue as discovered in some of the early and modern English novels, above all *Robinson Crusoe*, the perfect embodiment of the subject of this dissertation. In addition to this, it is necessary to mention that, though I analysed the complexity of the implications deriving from the association of Protestantism and capitalism, I took for granted the validity of Weber's thesis, as an indispensable condition for the integrity of my observations. It thus seems self-evident that to deny this starting point means to break down the very foundation of my dissertation: and considering, also, the criticism of *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* – which is far from being scarce – would overcomplicate, I believe, the sociological component of a work which is not meant to be sociological, let alone political. I think this to be a necessary premise to my work.

The first association that had to be done, then, was that between the issue and some authors I will be dealing with. I decided to take into account two different writers belonging to two different centuries, in order to avoid having to contextualize a widespread problem in a single period and, instead, to render its transversal nature. I could not help but think of the social novel of the Victorian Age: its collocation – being immersed in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, of the 1848 Springtime of Nations (or Chartist movement, in the case of England), of Marx, Darwin, Zola, and any milestone of this period – made it perfect for the study of the issue. Among all the authors of the English Victorianism, I picked a rather secondary one: George Gissing. There are various reasons behind my choice: first of all, the availability of critical materials and the amount of research done until today – which settles in between over-abundance and scarcity. The most important aspect, though, resides in the originality of the author and, especially, in his tormented mind which often brought him to inevitable contradictions. His conservative political beliefs, for instance, and his despise of the poor which he never managed to hide make him an extremely unusual writer, far from the archetypal social novelist. I decided to follow the path of his life relying, primarily, on Korg's *Critical Biography* of his, a book which I found particularly illuminating for the connections between the events of

his life, his works and, especially, that particular historical context. Korg's book, in fact, turned out to be a corroboration of many points of this dissertation, as I will show in my second chapter. The primary sources that I chose, then, are two novels of Gissing which tackle the issue of poverty, money, and success from two very different points of view. The first, the famous *New Grub Street*, is the epitome of the novel about a novelist, following the life of Edwin Reardon, a middle-aged, failed writer. The second is *The Whirlpool*, a less known and studied but extremely fine work: it describes the marriage of two members of the middle class, Harvey and Alma Rolfe, and the latter's downfall into the whirlpool of the society of success. While doing research on Gissing, one of the first thing I came across was George Orwell's reviews of his works, which were, surprisingly, incredibly positive. I did not perceive them, in the first instance, as the enthusiastic and, undeniably, slightly biased judgment which critics have pointed out to be. But the connection between the two authors pushed me towards the choice of Orwell.

Once again, I decided to carry out my research on a secondary text of Orwell's: *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, one of his early, socialist-inspired works. The story of a man who willingly rejects the money-based system and chooses poverty seemed to perfectly fit the aim of my observations. Pinning the connection between Orwell and Gissing – and especially between this novel and *New Grub Street*, as critics have pointed out – as the starting point of my third and last chapter, I furtherly resorted to critical biographies of the author, especially the one written by Raymond Williams. For both authors, I adopted a critical approach to the reading of the novels, in order to identify some glimpses of my main theme in the plot of their works, in the behaviour of their characters, in the overall morality of the books.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1. The Reformation and its connections with capitalism: Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

There is only one single document which attests the nailing of the famous ninety-five theses by Martin Luther onto the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. That is a letter written in 1546 by Philip Melanchthon, one of the finest minds of the Protestant Reformation and a friend of Luther's.[5] But he was, in 1517, not only absent, but also just twenty. Truth or myth this famous event may be, 1517 is conventionally set as the year in which Martin Luther gave birth to the Protestant Reformation. A revolution which stemmed not only from spiritual beliefs, but especially from theological-juridical.[6] The attack to the sale of indulgences made by the German monk was to demolish a precise Catholic belief. Historically, Catholicism has always encouraged people to earn their grace, by performing good deeds and actions in life. That is the concept of *libero arbitrio* – that is to say – taking decisions independently and autonomously, according to one's own freedom of choice. If one acts benevolently during life, he will have possibly earnt his salvation by the time of his death. This had been the doctrine of Christianity since Thomas Aquinas codified it, as it appears in the Code of Canon Law of 1917. On the other hand, Luther introduced the concept of *beruf.* The doctrine of predestination, calling. The idea of the calling is described by Weber as something totally peculiar of the Reformation.[7] You may never earn your salvation in life, because God has ineluctably traced the path for you. Some of us are graced, some of us are damned, and that is established at the time we are brought to life. *Servo arbitrio,* in other words. Freedom of will – that Christianity always advocated for – is just a form of subjugation.[8] To others, because they might always try to convince you that you have to do more (i.e. to pay more) to earn your salvation. And to one's own self, because that urgency to do more can only lead to a perpetual sense of uneasiness. Therefore, man's only possibility – better said, duty – is to grab the signs God sends him during his life, that he is a chosen one, that he is safe. And it was precisely the doctrine of predestination, rightly or wrongly, that was considered the central dogma of the Reformation.[9] The word calling in itself suggests the idea

[5] Arcement, "Martin Luther Shook the World 500 Years Ago, but Did He Nail Anything to a Church Door?"
[6] Padoa-Schioppa, *A History of Law in Europe,* 227.
[7] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 79.
[8] McMahon, *The Pursuit of Happiness: A History from the Greeks to the Present,* 167.
[9] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 98.

of a task, a mission assigned from God onto the individual.[10] The main difference between Catholicism and Protestantism lies indeed in the different relationship between man and God. In Catholicism, the dialogue and the reading of the scripture is mediated by the figure of the ecclesiast, who interposes himself between humans and the Creator and serves as a filter. The Protestant believer, instead, relies on the words of the Bible only. Neither tradition nor reason can interpose between the Scriptures and the believer.[11] This idea finds its foundation in the change that the Reformation wanted to foster and in the claim it had, namely substituting a corrupt order with a true, primitive one.[12] The reading of the scripture is a subjective, immediated task which requires no third figure at all. The relationship between the individual and God is utterly personal, and that is what in the 16th century fostered the Protestant Reformation. As Ian Watt writes in *The Rise of the Novel*:

> "It is certainly true that if there is one element which all forms of Protestantism have in common it is the replacement of the rule of the Church as the mediator between man and God by another view of religion in which it is the individual who is entrusted with the primary responsibility for his own spiritual direction."[13]

Calvinism has been, without doubt, the most politically influential branch of Protestantism in the modern world, especially in the most developed countries in Europe (i.e. England, Netherlands and France).[14] Unlike Lutheranism, which overall was a conservative movement, Calvinism was an internationally active and radical force.[15] It influenced several domains, from the relationship between church and state to the already mentioned conception of the individual's subjectivity, notwithstanding civil law.[16] On top of that, many wars were fought between the 16th and the 17th century, wars in which Calvinists, or some declinations of it, were protagonists. Suffice to mention the French Wars of Religion, the English Civil War and the Eighty Years' War in the Netherlands. In all of these wars, Calvinists (Huguenots, like they were called in France, or Puritans, with the declination they took in England) played a crucial

[10] ivi, 79.
[11] Scott Pryor & Hoshauer, *Puritan Revolution and the Law of Contracts,* 313.
[12] Nelson, *Conscience and the Making of Early Modern Cultures: "The Protestant Ethic" beyond Max Weber*, 15.
[13] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 74.
[14] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 98.
[15] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism,* 111.
[16] Padoa-Schioppa, *A History of Law in Europe,* 227.

role. The political influence and outcomes resulting from these wars is beyond doubt. Let us consider the case of 17th century England.

The state James I inherited in 1603 was one of the best governed states in all Europe.[17] And yet, heterogeneous religious impulses present in England were certainly one of the major sources of conflict. Henry VIII had established the Church of England in the 1530s, but the Roman Catholics who still were faithful to the Pope were not few, especially in some parts of England – the north-west, the west midlands and Cornwall.[18] Prejudice against Catholics, who were believed to be traitors and concealed Spanish supporters, was nothing but reinforced by the Gunpowder Plot in 1605.

The debate around the Protestants' – and more precisely, the Puritans' – contribution to democracy and parliamentary rights in England is fierce. The main argument is that the already mentioned Protestant belief in a direct, immediated dialogue with God – and the consequent, autonomous interpretation of the Scripture – logically resulted in "an inherent secular and popular bias from the first".[19] The association between Protestantism and their advocation for parliamentary rights is, on the whole, factual. Especially when considering radical Puritans, which since the 16th century had been using the House of Commons as an alternative medium for furthering their religious cause, but ended up reinforcing the parliamentary house itself, whether they liked it or not. Consequently, the House of Commons had a very strong Puritan component, not certainly numerically, but at least ideologically.[20] On the other hand, both Luther and Calvin strongly reinforced the political idea of the subjects' obedience to the king with their theological theses. Only decades after them did some sections of dissidents express more democratic positions, advocating for the limitation of the king's powers.[21] The accuracy of such strong links between Calvinism and democracy is impossible to claim. In fact, there is no lack of counterexamples. The belief in the divine right of kings, which was so typical of absolutist, Catholic kings of the 16th and 17th century – Philip II in Spain and Louis XIV in France just to mention the most famous instances –, was also very strong in the mind of James, a fervent Anglican, who instead used Calvin's precepts to morally reinforce the centralisation

[17] Aylmer, *A Short History of Seventeenth-Century England: 1603-1689,* 27.
[18] ivi, 50.
[19] ivi, 55.
[20] ivi, 65.
[21] Padoa-Schioppa, *A History of Law in Europe,* 229.

of power. Scott Pryor and Hoshauer – moreover – claim that Puritan discipline indirectly reinforced the state power, by creating new means to enforce discipline.[22]

Religious and, therefore, political tension grew unbearable under James' son and heir, Charles I. The tolerance his father showed towards Catholicism turned into a concrete hope of reuniting with the Church of Rome.[23] This, together with his effort towards the centralisation of power and absolutism – proved by the frequent dissolutions of Parliaments and the fallacies in the revenue system –, lost him the support of the Parliament and made the Puritans hostile. The strongest feudal monarchy of the Middle-Ages, quite unbelievably, produced the weakest and shortest absolutist state.[24] An incredibly united opposition front deposed the king, sent him to trial for high treason and sentenced him to death. The monarchy was abolished. Whether this movement was revolutionary or reactionary is still debated.[25] Marxist interpretations tend towards a social divisions explanation, claiming that it happened to be a bourgeois revolution against the feudal monarchy. But this is only part of the story. Did the king and his allies stand for innovation and did the opposition want to react to it? Or was the Civil War fought for true, revolutionary aims? The fact that both answers are partially correct is well-shown by the divisions which rose in the reformers front after the Civil War[26]. That being said, it is undeniable that the Puritan movement was influent in the development of the English constitutional monarchy. If the parallelism between the confessional conflict and the form of state arisen from it is discontinuous, it is impossible to deny that Puritanism influenced the post-Civil War English state.[27] As Aylmer states:

> "Although the English Republic only lasted just over eleven years, the king's death and the abolition of the monarchy form the most important single political event of the century. It influenced the whole future development of the country. It symbolised the outcome, not only of the Civil War, but of the much longer and more far-reaching constitutional conflict."[28]

In 1905 Max Weber published his milestone *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, from which the idea behind this whole dissertation stemmed. In this gigantic

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[22] Scott Pryor & Hoshauer, *Puritan Revolution and the Law of Contracts,* 337.
[23] Aylmer, *A Short History of Seventeenth-Century England: 1603-1689,* 98.
[24] Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State,* 113.
[25] Aylmer, *A Short History of Seventeenth-Century England: 1603-1689,* 114.
[26] ibid.
[27] Scott Pryor & Hoshauer, *Puritan Revolution and the Law of Contracts,* 305.
[28] Aylmer, *A Short History of Seventeenth-Century England: 1603-1689,* 147.

work of sociology, Weber aims to trace a parallelism between work ethic, which is the foundation of capitalistic mentality, and the new Protestant concept of calling. As I was mentioning before, the main idea (or at least, the idea with which Protestantism was, rightly or wrongly, mainly identified) was that earthly pleasure and success ought to be interpreted as an outward sign of God's grace. Weber, understandably, assumes this to be enough to prove the influence of Luther's Reformation upon – at least generally – the everyday actions of men. It morally justifies every worldly pursuit, as long as it is circumscribed to the role that God has assigned to the individual. That is to say, his profession.[29] We cannot push it further than this, as claiming the truthfulness of Luther doctrine's direct connection with Capitalism would be – Weber well explains and justifies – a terrible blunder. Luther never would have subscribed a point of view like that of early capitalists, and neither would have Puritans such as Oliver Cromwell.[30] And never could we claim that Capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation. That was not Weber's idea, and that is not the point of my dissertation. As McMahon puts it, instead, we might as well highlight the push which the Reformation gave to the moral justification of earthly pursuit and to the secularization of happiness.[31]

> "Luther, like Calvin, significantly, was inclined to think of Hell as a psychological state. In earthly despair we experienced a foretaste of the anguish of those eternally rejected by God. Joy and good feeling, conversely, could be treated as an indication of divine favour. The experience of happiness on earth – unsullied merriment and Christian joy – was an outward sign of God's grace."[32]

In other words, Weber does not simply pose Protestant faith as the cause of economic wealth. Far from it. What the German philosopher argues is, instead, that Protestantism is exactly the effect of economic condition.[33] As a consequence, Protestants have developed a sensibility for all concerning economic rationalism, a sensibility which Catholics lacked.[34] This sensibility is to be understood under the light of stable, psychological and spiritual motifs present among Protestant sects. Everywhere it appeared – Weber argues – Calvinism has displayed a profound correlation between a keen sense of business and

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[29] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 85.
[30] ivi, 82.
[31] McMahon, *The Pursuit of Happiness: A History from the Greeks to the Present,* 175.
[32] ivi, 173.
[33] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 35.
[34] ivi, 40.

the moral justification of it. This Protestant ethic – which Weber associates with the spirit of Capitalism – has the features of a deep religious sense imbuing the individual's spirit and fuelling his commitment to improve his economic status.[35] Hence, the spirit of capitalism, that of money generating money increasing the capital, not only is harbinger of a natural inclination to business, but also of some kind of moral standing the neglecting of which is ethically despicable.[36] It is imbued with that Protestant *beruf*, which involves full commitment and devotion, and an incumbent obligation.[37] The task of business, of making money, is an ethical obligation for its own sake.[38] It is not subordinated to happiness, but the other way round. Weber speaks of capitalistic society as the reversal of the two poles of eudaimonia and ethics, as the former is subordinated to the latter.[39] The commitment to one's own profession shows no signs whatsoever of hedonism or eudaimonism, but simply is the subscription to one's duty. It is the ethic justification of the pursuit of the profit which gives capitalism its strength.[40] Weber states:

> "The earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long, as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling."[41]

At first glance, Weber's thesis may sound as his own subscription to Marxist historical materialism, according to which the history of humankind is to be analysed under the light of economic, material reasons. Ideology, philosophy, religion are to Marx merely sovrastructural factors which are all implied by the economic structure of society. However, Weber's compliance with historical materialism is often discussed, and more frequently denied than accepted. The causal link between religion and economics is more complex than that. It is true, as I was pointing at before, that economic wealth is the foundation of the rise of Protestantism, but it is the rise of Protestantism itself which fuelled the spirit of capitalism. As Tawney points out in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*:

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[35] ivi, 42-43.
[36] ivi, 51.
[37] Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action,* 506.
[38] ivi, 514.
[39] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 53.
[40] Macfarlane, *The Cradle of Capitalism: The Case of England,* in *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism,* 187.
[41] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 53-54.

> "The capitalist spirit is as old as history, and was not, as has sometimes been said, the offspring of Puritanism. But it found in certain aspects of later Puritanism a tonic which braced its energies and fortified its already vigorous temper."[42]

For Marx, instead, no religious or spiritual factor could ever be the cause of such a radical change in the history of sociology.[43] But again, it would be a mistake to plainly claim that, to Weber, the Protestant Reform is at the origin of Capitalism. That would give Weber's interpretation of history a spiritualist feature with which he would not have been in compliance.[44] By reading Weber, we never really get to know which element is the horse and which one is the cart. Is the spirit of capitalism the result of the Protestant Reformation, or is the Reformation the result of economic factors? The truth is that, to the German sociologist, both of these statements are not entirely right and not entirely wrong. Weber is sometimes a materialist, sometimes a spiritualist, and his thesis lies in between those two poles.[45] Interestingly, Weber borrows from his compatriot Goethe the expression "elective affinity" *(Wahlverwandtschaft)* to describe the relationship between Capitalism and Protestantism.[46] It is therefore a matter of mutual attraction and reinforcement.[47]

Turner, in his work *Religion and Social Theory,* writes that "the abstract Protestant believer was an extension of the isolated Robinson Crusoe of bourgeois political economy".[48] Indeed, the birth of the concept of individualism is linked with urban Puritanism as its catalyst.[49] The junction point connecting Protestantism and economic rationalism may in fact be individualism. Individualism is indeed the hallmark of any European, modern society. Any social theory concerning modernity has had to deal with the question of individualism, even when this meant disrupting its value. Yet, the link between these two concepts is merely a matter of empirical observation: it is in fact impossible to explain the causal relationship between individualistic ideology as brought forth by Calvinism and capitalistic individualism. However, that individualism which is congenial to business was appropriated by the Puritan in their secular

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[42] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism,* 225.
[43] Löwy, *Weber against Marx? The Polemic with Historical Materialism in the Protestant Ethic,* in *Science & Society,* 72.
[44] ibid.
[45] ivi, 76.
[46] McKinnon, *Elective Affinities of the Protestant Ethic: Weber and the Chemistry of Capitalism,* in *Sociological Theory,* 1.
[47] Löwy, *Weber against Marx? The Polemic with Historical Materialism in the Protestant Ethic,* in *Science & Society,* 75.
[48] Turner, *Religion and Social Theory,* 155.
[49] ivi, 157.

activity as a political movement.[50] The mode of production and the ideology related to it are not always in a relationship of necessity, but possessive individualism is regarded as the ideological form upon which the bourgeoisie based its strength and survival.[51] Capitalism has indeed been claimed to stand upon the firm beliefs of individual property and individual rights, and "it is generally thought by sociologists that individualism is a necessary feature of the growth of capitalism".[52]

1.2. The rise of capitalism in England and the Industrial Revolutions

Having introduced the concepts of Protestant calling, individualism, economic rationalism, and capitalism – and the relationship of mutual interaction and attraction between them – now my purpose is to delve into the link between England and capitalism, England and individualism and the early English novel and these concepts. The present chapter will deal with the rise of capitalism in England and the reasons for that.

Brenner argues that it was the emergence of a partnership between the landlords and the richer peasants in the sixteenth century which consolidated the renewed modes of agricultural production.[53] This delineated a three-tiered relation of landlord-capitalist tenant-free wage labourer around which Marx developed his theories in *Capital.*[54] In his 1976 work *Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, he states:

> "Thus, in my view, it was the emergence of the classical landlord-capitalist tenant-wage labour structure which made possible the transformation of agricultural production in England, and this, in turn, was the key to England's uniquely successful overall economic development. […] This was the indispensable precondition for significant agrarian advance, since agricultural development was predicated upon significant inputs of capital, involving the introduction of new technologies and a larger scale of operation."[55]

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[50] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism,* 233.
[51] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness,* 225.
[52] Turner, *Religion and Social Theory,* 158.
[53] Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,* in *New Left Review,* 43.
[54] ivi, 75.
[55] Brenner, *Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe,* in *Past & Present,* 63.

According to both Marx and Weber, England is the nursery of capitalism and the European country which was taken as a model by other European countries.[56] Macfarlane, paraphrasing Weber, summarizes some of the main reasons for the emergence of capitalism in England. First – the reason I am above all interested in and that I mentioned earlier – is the conspicuous presence of Protestantism and Protestant sects, and the moral reinforcement given to the capitalist cause. Secondly, the condition of the peasantry, which in England was particularly weak as peasants were not necessarily needed as fighting force for their king, who ruled an island.[57] The last is the quick development of industrialization which occurred in England – especially in the cloth industry – and which gave the new bourgeois class the possibility to rise. These, says Macfarlane, are necessary but not sufficient causes.[58] Brenner, for instance, challenges the claim of the weakness of the peasants, stressing instead the strength which allowed them to escape their condition as serfs, already from the fifteenth century onwards.[59] They were strong enough to win their freedom from serfdom and from feudal control, but as weak as to fail to appropriate the modes of production and to control the process of industrialization. This contradiction is in fact what brought to the collapse of the peasantry and to the triumph of capitalism in England. As Allen notes when discussing the Industrial Revolution in England:

> "The genius of capitalism consists as much in destroying the old production systems as it does in creating the new."[60]

Notwithstanding the misconception that we would encounter if we were to consider Industrial Revolutions as sufficiently satisfying explanations for the rise of capitalism, they are surely relevant enough to our discourse to deserve a separate insight.

As this dissertation does not claim to have history as its central subject or to be detailed on this, my interest is limited to the connections between historical events and changes in society. Industrial Revolution is a concept to be understood as a progressive, evolutionary process through several centuries implying changes in the diverse fields of economics, agriculture, trade, and demography, rather than a sudden transformation of the modes of production. This

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[56] Macfarlane, *The Cradle of Capitalism: The Case of England,* in *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism,* 185.
[57] ivi, 187.
[58] ivi, 192.
[59] Brenner, *Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe,* in *Past & Present,* 71.
[60] Allen, *The Industrial Revolution: A Very Short Introduction,* 3.

set of changes reinforced one another, and the economic change was first a cause, and then a consequence of the so-called Industrial Revolution.[61] Quoting form Hobsbawm:

> "In the late eighteenth century this economic and social transformation took place in and through a capitalist economy."[62]

For convenience's sake – as is customary – we can distinguish between a first Industrial Revolution, which can be placed between the years 1770-1870, and a second Industrial Revolution, from 1870 into the 20th century.[63] England's first Industrial Revolution material resources were provided, in large amounts, by Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, which released into the stream of commerce huge quantities of capital.[64] During the Elizabethan age, capitalism worked its way through the fields of textile and mining, through the increase of foreign trade and the growth of a very strong money-market, including deposit banking and speculation.[65] The trade of wool, which had already taken off in the previous century, shaped a new commercial class and vertiginously increased the demand for commodity, which gave a boost to intensive sheep farming. Early capitalism established itself through the extraction of absolute surplus value,[66] i.e. the intensification of the working day and the increasement of production while keeping salaries low. Agricultural development in fact devaluated wage labour, cheapening salaries. Engels marks the beginning of the Industrial Revolution with the introduction of steam-operating engines and the development of cotton industry,[67] the "pacemaker of industrial change".[68] Hobsbawm also claims arithmetic to be the immaterial tool of the Industrial Revolution: a new kind of rationality according to which everything could be expressed in terms of addition and subtraction, gain and loss. That is the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham – who applied arithmetic to the evaluation of human happiness too, with his *felicific calculus* – and his followers. Hobsbawm explains:

> "Happiness was the object of policy. Every man's pleasure could be expressed (at least in theory) as a quantity and so could his pain. Deduct the pain from the pleasure and the net result was his happiness. Add the happinesses of all men and deduct the unhappinesses, and that

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[61] ivi, 4.
[62] Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day,* 34.
[63] Battilossi, *Le rivoluzioni industriali,* 5.
[64] Scott Pryor & Hoshauer, *Puritan Revolution and the Law of Contracts,* 305.
[65] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism,* 180.
[66] Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism: A 21st Century Perspective,* 178.
[67] Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844,* 3.
[68] Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day,* 56.

> government which secured the greatest happiness of the greatest number was the best. The accountancy of humanity would produce its debit and credit balances, like that of business."[69]

With the advancement of technology, hours on the workplace became less physically exhausting, the muscular load was reduced, but the work turned out extremely repetitive and alienating.[70] The producer was separated and alienated from the means of production. The influential Marxist view claims the existence of a cause-effect relationship between the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, as the latter is the ultimate culmination of the former. To Marx, capitalism is the only economic system in which growth is brought by incentives and technological development, rather than distributing income.[71] Understanding the rise of capitalism is then the key to understand the shift in the productive process. The two channels through which the Industrial Revolution took place, in Marxist interpretation of history, are the reorganization of rural society and globalization.[72] As we were stating before, the transition from feudal society into capitalist society made the peasant weak and the feudal tenant redundant, in favour of the capitalist bourgeois. The new landlords would entrust their holdings to a capitalist tenant who – in turn – would exploit wage labour and new, improved methods to maximize the profit,[73] thus creating the already mentioned three-tiered relationship. Adam Smith's greatly influential theories were also a key element in shaping this new idea of society: England, much before other countries in Europe, got rid of the customs of the *ancient regime* and mercantilist principles of the nation's intervention in commercial affairs.[74] The other issue to which Marxists attribute technological development is globalization, and the growth of international market. Imperialism, not only in England but in other European countries, fostered the economic growth of the colonizers to the detriment of the colonized. In this regard, Heller claims that "the Industrial Revolution did underwrite a European illusion of cultural superiority over the rest of the world".[75] In addition to that, overseas demand grew far more rapidly than home demand, and this caused the modes of production to change, focusing on the production of those goods more requested by foreign market.[76]

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[69] ivi, 79.
[70] Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844,* 79.
[71] Allen, *The Industrial Revolution: A Very Short Introduction,* 11.
[72] ibid.
[73] Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,* in *New Left Review,* 41.
[74] Battilossi, *Le rivoluzioni industriali,* 66.
[75] Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism: A 21st Century Perspective,* 176.
[76] ivi, 180.

Sir Henry S. Maine, nearly two centuries ago, summed up the transition from the feudal society to the progressive with the phrase "a movement from *status* to *contract*", with *status* being "the powers and privileges anciently residing in the family".[77] This transition was particularly strong in England, whereas in countries such as France and Germany, aristocratic values still exercised much influence.[78] Maine also stated that "the movement of the progressive societies has been uniform in one respect. Through all its course it has been distinguished by the gradual dissolution of family dependency, and the growth of individual obligation in its place".[79] This takes us back to the question of individualism, with which we will deal in the next subchapter.

1.3. The theory of individualism and individualism in England

I took into account a fair number of sources and works, by different scholars, in order to try and shed light on the nebulous notion of "individualism". What they all seem to agree on is that the word is quite recent in its semantic origin. Its first recorded use seems to appear in the English translation of de Tocqueville's work *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (1840), by Henry Reeve.[80] The word was indeed the hallmark of American celebration of democracy and liberalism, the defence of individual rights and freedom.[81] In economic terms, it was "an extension of the principle of non-governmental intervention in trade and commerce",[82] which resulted in the state policies of *laissez faire* which characterized the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It thus became the target for many anti-capitalist thinkers – who started to use the word with a derogatory connotation against the evils of market competition[83] – and for anti-communists or socialists, as it became antonym to those left-wing political currents. It seems to me, in other words, that in the late nineteenth century the tendency was to juxtapose individualism as an ideology and socialism (and therefore collectivism) as two opposite poles of a political discussion. This juxtaposition would eventually give grounds for an association between individualism and capitalism. However, as I already mentioned at the end of the first subchapter, this association is far from indisputable. I shall once again mention Turner and his work *Religion and Social Theory*, in which he states:

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[77] Maine, *Ancient Law,* 151.
[78] Battilossi, *Le rivoluzioni industriali,* 64.
[79] Maine, *Ancient Law,* 149.
[80] Lukes, *Individualism,* 32.
[81] ivi, 26.
[82] Coleman, *George Eliot and Money: Economics, Ethics and Literature*, 140.
[83] Lukes, *Individualism,* 32.

> If the specification of the connection between belief and class is problematic, then the relationship between belief and the mode of production is more so. It is not clear […] whether the capitalist mode of production is the cause of such beliefs, whether such beliefs are a necessary requirement of capitalist exchange or whether the two stand in a contingent relationship.[84]

The issue is quite the same as presented earlier. It is problematic to trace a precise line of causal connection between the ideology of individualism and capitalism, just like it is to connect ascetic Protestant ethic and the rise of the capital in Weber's thesis. I will now attempt to break down some of the principal approaches taken by scholars and connotations given to the word "individualism".

Weber's suggestion is that the breakdown of the extended family structure is central to the emergence of capitalism: this caused a rupture between the social and the economic spheres which freed the market and the individual.[85] This rupture traces back to at least the thirteenth century, just like the first hints of capitalism. Macfarlane delves into the familiar approach to the concept of individualism. He claims that most family groups, and that is still the case of China, India and most African peoples, revolve around the idea that the collective is more important than the individual.[86] This is what modern capitalist societies have renounced to. Weber claimed the breakdown of the economic interdependence among the members of the family to be a crucial reason for the rise and strengthening of the capital system. The individual, in other words, is worthier than the group in most European societies, and especially in the English one.[87] The separation between the unity of reproduction – the family – and the unity of production – economy – is in the Weberian theory at the core of capitalism.[88] Modern societies are characterized by an "ego-focused" family system.[89] Macfarlane explains:

> "Such a system already predisposes a society towards flexibility, networks and the concept of the individual as more important than the group. Indeed, there are no groups, just ego-centred

[84] Turner, *Religion and Social Theory,* 169.
[85] Macfarlane, *On Individualism,* in *Proceedings of the British Academy: 1992 Lectures and Memories,* 172.
[86] ivi, 174.
[87] ivi, 175.
[88] ivi, 176.
[89] ivi, 174.

> networks of people. […] This is a central underpinning of an individualistic way of looking at the world."[90]

This is only one of the possible ways to look at individualism, but different approaches have been taken as well. A key figure in the development of the concept is surely John Locke, the father of modern liberalism. Locke's expressed his concern in regard to individualism when talking about rights and – especially – property. Private property is indeed the key issue around which the seventeenth century philosopher developed his thought, so much so that some claim his whole political doctrine to be a defence of property.[91] In his *Second Treatise on Government* (1690) he marks the boundaries of the individual when, in sector 27 of Chapter V (*On Property*), he states that "every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his".[92] Therefore, every man is given a natural, individual right to property from the moment he is born. He does not possess any knowledge – it is famous the metaphor of the blank slate, *tabula rasa*, as the visual representation of Locke's empiricism – but he definitely holds a right to property. This belief goes hand in hand with the axiomatic assumption that all men are born equal, in the sense that they do not possess inherent authority or control over one another.[93] Hence, decisions must be taken autonomously by the individual, notwithstanding the dictates of the Church, nor the king, nor the family. This line of argument makes Locke one of the founding fathers of liberalism and – as a consequence – an important forerunner of capitalism. This may sound hazardous, and it is undeniable that socialist and capitalist ideas mingle in his writings, but Macpherson supports what I am stating.

> "What Locke has done, then, is to show that money has made it possible, and just, for a man to accumulate more land than he can use the product of before it spoils. […] Now that it is possible to exchange any amount of produce for an asset which never spoils, it is neither unjust nor foolish to accumulate any amount of land in order to make it produce a surplus which can be converted to money and used as capital. [...] Locke has justified the specifically capitalist appropriation of land and money. And it is to be noticed that he has justified this as a natural right, as a right in the state of nature."[94]

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[90] ivi, 175.
[91] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke,* 195.
[92] Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government,* 17.
[93] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke,* 199.
[94] ivi, 208.

While mentioning Locke, Turner claims that his bourgeoise doctrine of the right to property does not involve any kind of interest in the inner development or conscience of the individual.[95] Hence, he makes a clear distinction between individualism and individuality, which I found particularly appealing and of which I would like to speak a bit more in detail. Individualism concerns rights, individuality concerns interiority. They share their critical aspect and their aim to maximize the individual's well-being, but they pertain to different domains.[96] The doctrine of individuality was hinted at in utilitarianism, but blossomed especially in the post-Hegelian, German philosophical tradition. Remarkably it was thanks to philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – and their opposition to Hegel's rigorous, systematic way of thinking – that the focus was moved inward.[97] The logical implication is that individualism, being a doctrine of rights, addresses the class; individuality, instead, is a Romantic, elitist concept which secludes the individual and isolates him from society.[98] Then, Turner throws in a third concept, distinct from the previous two: individuation. Individuation, on the other hand, aims at separating different individuals by means of signs, codes, numbers and marks, and it aims at control. It is a concept not far from what philosophy describes as identification.[99] Individuation is needed by any modern state which intends to intervene in some way in its economic politics. Turner states:

> "What late capitalism does require, however, is an apparatus for individuating the mass of the population for purposes of control and surveillance."[100]

Individualism, individuality and individuation. Three different concepts with three different religious traditions. According to Turner, individualism stems from ascetic Protestantism, with its focus on the individual's responsibility and his rights. Individuality's elitism and escapism comes from the mystical Christian tradition and its focus on the subjective interior. Individuation, instead, with its focus on controlling great numbers of individuals, stems from the monastic Christian tradition.[101] What my attention is dragged to is obviously the first concept, individualism, and its link with ascetic Protestantism. This greater emphasis on the individual rather than the collective was particularly strong – and not by chance – in the English

[95] Turner, *Religion and Social Theory,* 162.
[96] ibid.
[97] ibid.
[98] ibid.
[99] ivi, 163.
[100] ivi, 164.
[101] ibid.

society and its colonies.[102] The line of thought that originated from Weber finds in this work by Turner its natural continuation, and it feeds the main argument of my dissertation.

Another critic analysed individualism in connection to the history of the English novel. Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* is surely a milestone of English literary criticism and one of the most reliable texts in terms of history of literature. In his work, Watt justifies the rise of the novel as a natural outcome in literature of the individualist shift initiated by Descartes in the seventeenth century.[103] Descartes greatness resides in the epistemological turn he generated by stating that the individual and the individual only was accountable for the truth. Every individual shall form and shape his reality through his senses. This idea, to Watt, is what the novel bases its premises on: truth is a wholly unique and individual experience, and this is what realist fiction relies upon. I cannot avoid directly quoting the critic:

> "The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth. […] Literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience—individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel."[104]

The author confirms that the word is very recent in its use,[105] as I was stating earlier. And he also states something of major significance for this work. Modern societies are individualist, in the sense that they are characterized by the independence of their members and the autonomy of their decisions. Decisions which are not taken according to tradition – rather the models of thought and action of the past – but autonomously by the individual.[106] This goes back to what Sir Henry Maine stated in the second half of the nineteenth century, as I already mentioned before. The movement of modern, progressive societies is a movement *from status to contract*, undermining the foundations of the authority of the past and – instead – shedding light on individual responsibilities. The shape of modern societies is to be attributed, according to Watt,

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[102] Macfarlane, *On Individualism,* in *Proceedings of the British Academy: 1992 Lectures and Memories,* 175.
[103] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 14.
[104] ivi, 14-15.
[105] ivi, 62.
[106] ibid.

to two factors: the rise of capitalism and the spread of Protestantism.[107] In other words, Watt corroborates Weber's thesis exposed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and applies it to the history of English literature. In the rest of the chapter, the author focuses on Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and its connection to economic rationalism and individualism. This is what I would like to focus on in the next subchapter: Robinson as the epitome of the modern economic man, infused with Protestant morality, and the way in which Defoe portrays his survival on the deserted island.

1.4. Robinson Crusoe: the epitome of the rational economic man and the Protestant work ethic

When I first started to gather ideas and cues for this dissertation, the novel by Defoe immediately came to my mind. I was already rather familiar with Watt's analysis in *The Rise of the Novel*, and the connections between individualism, economic rationalism and Puritanism seemed to be carried out in this novel more than in any other. The fame and reputation of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) need no introduction: the novel by Defoe is by many considered the first instance of realistic prose and the first English novel.[108] And neither does its plot, but for completeness' sake, and to make it easier to make references to it, I am going to quickly summarize it.

The novel is based on a real character – Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk, who spent more than four years (from 1704 to 1709) as a castaway on a deserted island which nowadays, unsurprisingly, goes under the name "Robinson Crusoe Island".[109] Nonetheless, the story is reportedly set in the Caribbean. Robinson, the main character, was born in 1632 to a middle-class merchant. His two elder brothers shared his own rebel temperament, as neither of them decided to walk in their father's footsteps. The first was killed in battle, the other one disappeared. Robinson, whose mind is "filled with rambling thoughts",[110] rejects the life of comfort that his belonging to the middle class would have guaranteed him, as he "was born to be his own destroyer".[111] He leaves England at the age of 19 and travels to Guinea where, after having come across some troubles during his journey, he enjoys some success as a merchant. During his second sea journey, however, his ship is attacked by some Turkish rovers. Three

[107] ibid.
[108] Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 268.
[109] Severin, *In Search of Robinson Crusoe,* 23-24.
[110] Defoe, *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, 9.
[111] ivi, 35.

shipmates are killed, eight are wounded, and they are forced to yield. He and his companions are brought into a port belonging to the Moors, in which they spend two years as slaves. After two years, Crusoe and one of his companions, Xury, spot an opportunity to escape. They travel all the way to Brazil, where Robinson becomes a pretty successful tobacco plantation owner. He spends there almost four years, when he decides to set out on his third sea voyage, planning to engage in the slave trade, travelling to the coast of Guinea. "Hurried on, obeying blindly the dictates of his fancy rather than his reason",[112] he sets sail for the third time and eventually comes across a terrible storm which causes his renowned shipwreck. He is the only survivor of the disaster, and he is stranded on a deserted island. He spends there almost three decades, most of the time hiding from savages and cannibals and with the sole company of animals.[113] After twenty-six years, he finally meets Friday, a native man who becomes his faithful and loyal companion. They spend three more years on the island, before being rescued by the crew of a boat they saw anchored near the island. When he goes back to Europe, he finds out that his plantations in Brazil have vertiginously increased their value and that, as well, he is the only heir of his father's estate. He marries and his wife gives birth to three children before passing away. Restless, he embarks on few other trading voyages before coming back to England after ten years, in 1705, when he retires.

Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* writes that "the connection between individualism in its many forms and the rise of the novel is shown particularly clearly and comprehensively in Defoe's first novel, *Robinson Crusoe*".[114] The way in which Robinson organizes his resources and his survival on the deserted island make him the ideal self-made man, so much so that he has been taken as an exemplar model of the *homo economicus* by many economists who have been making references to him in their narratives.[115] This is something oddly paradoxical, as the first thing we think about when talking about economy is obviously exchange. Nothing like an island, whose isolating quality makes it a recurring *topos* in literature[116] and the ideal cradle of individualism. In this context, the exchange value of a product becomes exclusively its usefulness. Crusoe finds himself stranded on a deserted island with nothing but a knife and a

[112] ivi, 36.
[113] Grapard, *Crusoe: the quintessential economic man?*, in *Robinson Crusoe's Economic Man*, 94.
[114] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 64.
[115] Grapard, *Crusoe: the quintessential economic man?*, in *Robinson Crusoe's Economic Man*, 95.
[116] Peraldo, *From Mercantilist to Utilitarian Crusoe: the Transformative Impact of the Desert Island*, in *Études anglaises*, 156.

tobacco-pipe,[117] and he hopes to "save some necessary things for his use".[118] Hence, he builds a raft as solid as he can, and goes inspecting the remains of the ship. He fills some chests with food and drinks, then carpentry tools, then arms and ammunition.[119] Instead, when he finds some money, this is his reaction:

> "I smiled to myself at the sight of this money: " O drug!" said I aloud, " what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me—no, not the taking off the ground: one of those knives is worth all this heap: I have no manner of use for thee; e'en remain where thou art, and go to the bottom, as a creature whose life is not worth saving.""[120]

What strikes the most here is the repetition of the word "worth".[121] Money, which Crusoe worshipped, and which was the reason why he embarked on the voyage which brought to his shipwreck, has totally lost its worth. Robinson before the shipwreck was the embodiment of mercantilist economy, which associates wealth to the accumulation of precious materials and money. Now that he is on the island, he seems to be turning to a more modern, utilitarian mentality which associates the value of a product to its usefulness. Nonetheless, he smiles when he sees money, and he keeps it anyway. In his character, we find the co-existence of these two mentalities: he never gives up his mercantilist, protectionist mentality even when he is on the island, even when he attempts to fool himself by neglecting the value of money. His obsession with lists, figures, exchange value is consistent, and his mental organization is consistently economically efficient.[122]

This brings me back to Ian Watt's interpretation of Weber: Watt says that, to Weber, profit and loss book-keeping is the key feature of capitalism.[123] This is a distinctive tract of Robinson, together with his constant obsession with money and well-being. He leaves the family because he is obsessed with making his economic condition better. That is to say, he is the embodiment of the *homo economicus.* Watt states that:

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[117] Defoe, *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* 41.
[118] ivi, 42.
[119] ivi, 44.
[120] ivi, 49-50.
[121] Peraldo, *From Mercantilist to Utilitarian Crusoe: the Transformative Impact of the Desert Island*, in *Études anglaises*, 158.
[122] ivi, 159.
[123] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 65.

> "Crusoe's 'original sin' is really the dynamic tendency of capitalism itself, whose aim is never merely to maintain the status quo, but to transform it incessantly. Leaving home, improving on the lot one was born to, is a vital feature of the individualist pattern of life."[124]

That tendency to individualism which we were discussing in the previous subchapter is found in the character of Crusoe in many forms and shades. I mentioned earlier that Weber stated that the dissolution of the economic boundaries between family members is the hypostasis of modern capitalistic society. Nothing more precise to describe Robinson's story, who leaves his family in hope for better conditions of life than what the "easiness" of the middle class would have secured him. He lives in a constant sense of uneasiness,[125] in the sense that Locke intended it: a permanent condition of "want" – in other words, a lack of something – which causes that uneasiness, a sense of dissatisfaction. This sense of dissatisfaction determines what the will chooses. This is a condition that never abandons Robinson, even when he comes back home. The word is indeed mentioned by him in this context:

> "But when I came home, I was still as uneasy as I was before; I had no relish for the place, no employment in it, nothing to do but to saunter about like an idle person. This also was the thing which, of all circumstances of life, was the most my aversion, who had been all my days used to an active life."[126]

Watt also mentions that the features of economic individualism displayed in Crusoe's character mirrored Defoe's belonging to a certain tradition. Wherever it appeared, industrial capitalism caused certain areas of thought and manner to be de-evaluated, and this was particularly the case of 18th-century England, as evidently as getting close to a commonplace.[127] These areas of thought included, as we were mentioning before, the economic and personal attachment to one's family group and every obstacle interposed between the individual and his self-accomplishment.[128] In the broad sense attachment to family group can also include the sense of belonging to one own's country: Robinson is not eager to fraternize with his compatriots more than he is to fraternize with strangers, as long as they are useful to him and they further his business.[129] Therefore, social and affective bonds are weakened as well, as there is no selfless

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[124] ivi, 67.
[125] ibid.
[126] Defoe, *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* 245.
[127] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 66.
[128] ivi, 65.
[129] ivi, 67.

commitment to other people, as one can easily note from Crusoe's relationship with both Xury and Friday.[130]

In the first paragraph, I mentioned Watt when talking about the features of Protestant religion. He claimed that the underlying tract that all the branches of Protestantism had in common was the shift they caused from a collective conception of devotion to an individual dialogue between men and God.

> "It is generally agreed that it was Calvin, in the sixteenth century, who re-established and systematised this earlier pattern of purposive spiritual introspection, and made it the supreme religious ritual for the layman as well as for the priest: every good Puritan conducted a continual scrutiny of his inner man for evidence of his own place in the divine plot of election and reprobation."[131]

This is something of crucial importance to the rise of the novel, and it is indeed one of the most powerful engines of realism. The individualist, introspective push given by the Reformation is to Watt the heart of the realist novel, the validation of individual experience, the experience of ordinary people. And this push is central to Robinson Crusoe as a character and as a novel as well. Robinson is the perfect incarnation of the Puritan individualist spirituality, in the sense that his devotion aims at discovering and following the path that God has traced for him, by catching every minute cue that is sent to him from above.[132] It is evident that the religious motif is directly linked to its secularized consequences, and that the author preached this Puritan doctrine intermittently.[133] But it is also evident that, by reading the novel, one can easily spot how Crusoe connects every prosaic event of his life on the island to a sign of God's Providence.[134] Watt states:

> "Defoe's hero is acting according to this tradition when he tries to interpret so many of the mundane events of the narrative as divine pointers which may help him to find his own place in the eternal scheme of redemption and reprobation."[135]

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[130] ivi, 70.
[131] ivi, 75.
[132] Watt, *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe,* 162.
[133] ivi, 163.
[134] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 76.
[135] ivi, 76-77.

I would like to pick some evidence of what has been said directly from the novel. When he is stranded on the deserted island, one of the first things Crusoe does, even before starting to write his journal, is to write down a balance of the good and evil of his predicament. He draws up a list of instances of his troublesome condition, and dialectically separates them from their respective upsides with the word "but". He "states very impartially, like debtor and creditor, the comforts he enjoys versus the miseries he suffers".[136] Notwithstanding the relevance of the economic metaphor, which is already clear enough, what the reader notices is that in his "impartial" list he immediately addresses his faith in God. These are two interesting elements of the list he draws:

> "I am singled out and separated, as it were, from all the world, to be miserable. But I am singled out, too, from all the ship's crew, to be spared from death; and He that miraculously saved me from death, can deliver me from this condition."[137]

> "I have no soul to speak to, or relieve me. But God wonderfully sent the ship in near enough to the shore, that I have got out as many necessary things as will either supply my wants or enable me to supply myself, even as long as I live."[138]

The reader can clearly notice the providential element shining through Crusoe's words, for every glimpse of hope that he is clinging to depends on God's will, and on the path he has traced for Robinson. The fact that he has "wonderfully sent the ship in near enough to the shore" is a positive sign that he grabs, and from which his hopes stem. Some pages later, undeceived, he attempts to grow some barley corn without much optimism, for the weather is not proper. When he sees the corn beginning to sprout, he begins "to suggest that God had miraculously caused His grain to grow without any help of seed sown, and that it was so directed purely for his sustenance on that wild, miserable place".[139] Let us not forget that at this point in the novel, Robinson has – as he himself admits – very little knowledge and interest in religion. He has done nothing to earn God's benevolence, it is not because he performed good deeds in life. He has left his family and committed an "original sin" for this reason on the contrary. This is what gives him such strength and hope, because he understands that he is safe, that Providence will do no harm to him because he is a chosen one. This is the difference between *libero arbitrio*

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[136] Defoe, *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* 55.
[137] ivi, 56.
[138] ibid.
[139] ivi, 67.

and *servo arbitrio* that I was describing in the first subchapter, and the watershed between Catholicism and Calvinism.

Only later in the novel does Crusoe find a copy of the Bible in one of the chests on the shipwreck, "directed by Heaven no doubt",[140] together with some tobacco. He picks it up and reads some pages, but his mind begins to wander elsewhere. Nevertheless, he says: "The words made a great impression upon me, and I mused upon them very often".[141] The passage he reads mentions deliverance, striking Crusoe who starts to pray, every night, before going to bed. His conversion, for this is the process that many Defoe's scholars describe, is performed by Crusoe by acknowledging the benevolence of God's Providence, by keeping a Sabbath and, ultimately, by making a sacramental observance of his deliverance.[142] His post-conversion attitude towards environment is different as well: before his conversion, he had never fully explored the island, paralyzed by fear.[143] After conversion, instead, he gains strength and confidence.[144] The island's natural environment is not a renewed Garden of Eden, but some land that the postlapsarian man must struggle to put to good use.[145] Postlapsarian is a word used to describe the condition of all human beings after the Fall from Paradise as explained in the Bible: they have lost their condition of immaculateness and are condemned to struggle for eternity in the toils of life. This is what Crusoe does on the island, and it is the germ of his incredibly tenacious work ethic, typical of the Protestant man as Weber – once again – describes in *The Protestant Ethic*. Another line of thought, however, criticizes the actuality of Robinson's conversion, arguing that at the end of the novel he is the same man that he was at the beginning.[146] In this regard, an important part is surely played by Defoe's own spirituality and to the role he attributed to religion in his work. As Watt argues in *The Rise of the Novel*, Robinson's uncertain attitude towards religion mirrors "an unresolved and probably unconscious conflict in Defoe himself".[147] This suggests not so much insincerity in Defoe's spirituality, but rather the literary

[140] ivi, 78.
[141] ivi, 79.
[142] Egan, *Crusoe's Monarchy and the Puritan Concept of the Self*, in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 452.
[143] Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe*, 171.
[144] ibid.
[145] ivi, 172.
[146] ivi, 164.
[147] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 80.

transposition of that movement of secularization which is a fundamental feature of 18th century literature.[148]

1.5. Mingling financial prosperity and good moral behaviour in the English novel: instances from Austen, Fielding, Eliot

To conclude this first chapter, it is now my interest to go back and return to one of the main points of my train of thought for this work, which I blandly mentioned in the first subchapter as one of the implications of Weber's discourse. The push given by the Reformation to the secularization of happiness and to the justification of the everyday earthly pursuit of men furthers the association of those elements with an outward sign of God's grace. Therefore, he who is safe and chosen by God will enjoy his success here, on Earth. The association between financial prosperity and the salvation of the soul is hence perfectly consonant with this Calvinist command. Going back to *Robinson Crusoe* just for a while, this is something that – as the reader can see with the support of numerous instances in the novel, which I showed in the previous subchapter – perfectly applies to Defoe's hero. Egan writes:

> "That God is pleased with the convert's behaviour is indicated by Crusoe's vindication as an Everyman figure at the end of the novel. As a sign of divine favour and a verification of his purity of soul, Crusoe is made financially secure. Although the dovetailing of economics and spirituality in Puritanism is an historical commonplace, it is nevertheless true that material success was considered a possible mark of providential favour by the most elevated divines. The Puritan's identity as a member of the chosen people allowed him to mingle sanctification and financial prosperity without reproach."[149]

Crusoe enjoys financial prosperity as a sign of the purity of his soul, as a reward for his strong work ethic as a Puritan man. He himself is conscious of the role of Providence in his economic success, as he states in Chapter 9 when he is back to England, pondering "what to do with the estate that Providence had thus put into his hands".[150] As Watt states, it was Protestantism that made its believers forget the postlapsarian element of work that I was mentioning earlier.[151] The traditional Biblical doctrine would associate work with God's punishment for men after

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[148] ivi, 81.
[149] Egan, *Crusoe's Monarchy and the Puritan Concept of the Self*, in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 458.
[150] Defoe, *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* 225.
[151] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 73.

the fall of Adam and Eve. This is a pre-modern view, which was already criticized by branches of Christianity even before Protestantism.[152] But it was Protestantism itself, in the modern period, which pinpointed the idea of the dignity of labour.[153] In the first subchapter I came to the conclusion that – even in the opinion of Weber himself – the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism is a mere contingent factor, or rather a question of affinity. A "historical commonplace", to borrow from Egan, but the mingling of a positive moral attitude with economic floridity is anything but despicable to the Protestant mind. English literature – especially from eighteenth and nineteenth century – is full of novels and characters which reflect this mentality.

An instance could be represented by Edward Said's postcolonial analysis of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), which seems to corroborate the leitmotiv of my dissertation. He borrows from Raymond Williams the idea that Austen's novels generally express an "attainable quality of life", displaying the acquisition of money and property through positive moral behaviour.[154] Fanny Price at the end of the novel becomes the mistress of Mansfield Park with "so much true merit and true love, [...] as secure as earthly happiness can be", and the acquisition of Mansfield occurs "to complete the picture of good".[155] This final reward is not based merely upon blood, but it follows the precise novel scheme of a "disaffiliation of some members of the family, and the affiliation between others and one or two chosen outsiders".[156] Through this process Fanny does not play an active role, but she is rather passive and very rarely takes initiatives.[157] Said explains the character of Fanny in this manner:

> "All in all, though, one has the impression that Austen has designs for her that Fanny herself can scarcely comprehend, just as throughout the novel Fanny is thought of by everyone as "comfort" and "acquisition" despite herself. Like Kipling's Kim O'Hara, Fanny is both device and instrument in a pattern, as well as a fully fledged novelistic character."[158]

[152] ibid.
[153] ibid.
[154] Said, *Jane Austen and Empire*, 84.
[155] Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 380.
[156] Said, *Jane Austen and Empire*, 84-85.
[157] ivi, 85.
[158] ibid.

Fanny is a pawn in the hands of the author, who creates connections and linkages which she is not fully aware of. Her goodness and steadfastness are highlighted,[159] even if she may not always be conscious of the impact she has on others.

Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) is one of the earliest instances of the sentimental novel. Partly realistic, partly allegorical, the novel is based upon the stories which are told to David, the protagonist, by the people he meets. Fielding's hero is born to a family belonging to the commercial class, but from an early age shows signs of intolerance towards this environment.[160] He does not belong to the realm of "interest", a word used by Fielding in both its figurative and literal – the percentage of profit obtained in business – sense to describe the modern, individualist attitude centred around enrichment and accumulation of capital. David and his brother Daniel are the allegorical representations of two concepts of morality.[161] David is a sentimental hero, and follows his inner virtue; Daniel is the negative representation of the modern economic man, ego-focused and acting only according to his own, once again, interest.[162] Early in the novel – more precisely in the second Chapter of the first book, whose title is "In which is seen the terrible Consequences that attend Envy and Selfishness" – Fielding juxtaposes the two brothers as almost two allegories, in a sort of Cain-Abel relationship:

> "Daniel, notwithstanding the Appearance of Friendship he had all along kept up to David, was in reality one of those Wretches, whose only Happiness centers in themselves; and that his Conversation with his Companions had never any other View, but in some shape or other to promote his own Interest."[163]

> "That David's amiable Behaviour, joined to a very good Understanding, with a great Knowledge, which he had attained by Books, made all their Acquaintance give him the preference: and as Envy was very predominant in Daniel's Mind, this made him take an utter Aversion to his Brother, which all his Goodness could not get the better of."[164]

Daniel tricks his brother and denies him his share of their father's inheritance. The dichotomic relationship between the two suggests that the author was well-aware of the overlap of morality and accumulation of capital which I described, and which resonates very much in the

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[159] ibid.
[160] Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 132.
[161] ibid.
[162] ibid.
[163] Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple*, 9.
[164] ivi, 13.

philosophy of Adam Smith, of whom I will speak later. The word "interest" and everything that has anything to do with money always have a negative connotation in the novel. Suffice to mention the episode in which David visits the Royal Exchange, one of the symbols of the eighteenth-century economic development in England. There, David is fooled by three people one after another, who try and trick him into carrying out financial transactions with which he is not familiar. His naivety, the sheer purity of his heart clashes with the modern world dominated by money, represented by the stock exchange.

George Eliot's debut novel *Adam Bede* (1859) is worth mentioning as well. Eliot belongs to that tradition of Realism whose interest was to inquire the moral sustainability of the developing money economy in the late nineteenth-century.[165] A tradition in which – and this will be one of the key points of the next chapter – an important part is played by George Gissing and the Condition of England novel. An author like Eliot, whose style and interest in social questions and beyond – colonialism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism – bring her closer to that literary tradition, especially with *Felix Holt* (1866),[166] cannot be left out from the set of British authors discussing money and morality. Her concern about economic responsibilities of the individual and the state is evident from both her non-fiction work and her novels.[167] Adam Bede, the protagonist of the eponymous novel, is a working-class hero who incarnates the Protestant spirit and ethic of work, diligently committing to his role in society[168] and, concurrently, in the world. Coleman argues that the scheme Eliot puts forward in *Adam Bede* is a sort of moral capitalism, in which the sincerity of his handiwork provides him with a small-scale business ownership, making him – counter-intuitively – evolve to a better economic condition.[169] Eliot, in other words, does not condemn the aspiration to a higher state *per se*, but the moral corruption brought forth by the bourgeois capitalism with the social exploitation of workers to accumulate capital. This is also evident, Coleman continues, in the celebration of labour which is found at the end of Chapter 19.[170] Here, the tones used by Eliot are even more evidently anti-bourgeois, in defence of the peasants and against the exploitation of workers:

> "He was not an average man. Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans [...]: they make their way upward, rarely as geniuses, most commonly as

[165] Coleman, *George Eliot and Money: Economics, Ethics and Literature*, 2.
[166] Henry, *George Eliot and Politics*, in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 156.
[167] Coleman, *George Eliot and Money: Economics, Ethics and Literature*, 140.
[168] ivi, 26.
[169] ivi, 27.
[170] ibid.

> painstaking honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them. [...] Their employers were the richer for them, the work of their hands has worn well, and the work of their brains has guided well the hands of other men."[171]

Eliot paints an idealization of the working class and of the value of labour and labourers, which goes together with her idea of Realism and her appreciation of the small and ordinary, as she well explains in the meta-literary passage at the beginning of Chapter 17. Entitled "In Which the Story Pauses a Little", the chapter contains Eliot's brilliant declaration of poetics, which is synthesized by the authors in artistic metaphors and images of ordinary life:

> "It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her."[172]

As I wrote in the previous subchapters, specialization and division of labour and technological development brought forth by the Industrial Revolution were both cause and consequence of Capitalistic mentality and society's structure. I mentioned utilitarianism and Bentham, whose ideas were only the most extreme representation of a rhetoric which was starting to spread in the eighteenth century. That the main function and duty of the individual should be the maximisation of material wealth, even in his private sphere, was becoming an increasingly common belief. [173] This new model of the individual and, consequently, of the state grew in strength as a symbol of modernity and was to oppose the civic humanist tradition of the centuries before.[174] The flattening of the distinction between the public and the private coincides with the breakdown of the family that Weber was talking about when connecting capitalism and individualism. This is what Macfarlane describes as an "ego-focused" modelled society, which has renounced to familiar bonds in favour of the rights of the individual, as I mentioned

[171] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 232.
[172] ivi, 195.
[173] Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 3.
[174] ibid.

in the previous subchapter. A new rhetoric approach was starting to become established, an approach according to which the economic discourse was not anymore circumscribed to economists. Bellamy writes:

> "The development of economic analysis in the eighteenth century was not just a matter of significance to financiers and economists. It had a much wider impact, for it represented the emergence of a new discourse of social analysis which provided a radical challenge to the terms of the existing forms, redefining the relationship between the individual and the state and influencing images of the polity and ideas of social morality. As such it presented a fundamental challenge to the terms in which society could be represented, and to traditional ethical systems."[175]

Apart from Bentham and utilitarianism, I also mentioned Adam Smith. Smith was a key figure in the development of the eighteenth-century English society, especially due to the cross-cutting nature of his work – which involved both moral philosophy and economics.[176] The difficulties which I – through the reading of Weber – encountered while trying to connect religion and the rise of Capitalism were the same difficulties that scholars belonging to both these areas of study encountered while reading Smith and while attempting to conciliate these two – apparently incompatible – disciplines.[177] In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) – Part I, Section III, Chapter III – Smith focuses on "the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition".[178] Most notably, he distinguishes between two different kinds of human dispositions, according to which humans address their own appreciation or contempt. The first disposition, morally immaculate, makes wisdom and virtue the object of respect, and vice and folly the object of contempt. The second, morally corrupt, directs its appreciation towards wealth and richness, and despises the poor. We read:

> "We frequently see the respectful attentions of the world more strongly directed towards the rich and the great, than towards the wise and the virtuous. We see frequently the vices and follies of the powerful much less despised than the poverty and weakness of the innocent. [...] They are the wise and the virtuous chiefly, a select, though, I am afraid, but a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue. The great mob of mankind are the admirers and

[175] Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 2.
[176] ivi, 30.
[177] ibid.
[178] Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 53.

> worshippers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness."[179]

What Smith was trying to expose is, in other words, the overlapping of morality and wealth which I was mentioning earlier. A mindset which is – as Weber and Watt have explained – typical of the Reformed countries like England, for all the reasons that we have listed. This admiration for wealth is a mental frame intrinsic to human mind, which is at the same time natural and corrupt.[180] Smith's theory takes into consideration the role of the individual as well – for the main criticality of capitalistic society, notoriously enough, is the de-personalization and alienation of the worker into a predictable multitude which becomes subjected to its own job. Smith did not subscribe to this lack of individuality, for he was very much adherent to that ideal of individual rights as a *sine qua non* which was the flag of American liberalism.[181]

[179] ivi, 53-54.
[180] Bellamy, *Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 31.
[181] ivi, 34.

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CHAPTER 2

2.1. The Victorian Age, Thomas Carlyle and the "Condition-of-England question"

> "The overmastering ambition of Victorian society was money-making. Calvinist religion preached the doctrines of election and economic success as almost equally important to salvation."[182]

I believe this statement by Korg – one of the main biographers of George Gissing, the undisputed protagonist of the present chapter of my dissertation – is the perfect way to start off this section, and to tie together all that we have introduced with the nineteenth century. The whole variety of subject matters that I inquired in the previous chapter pours its capillary consequences in a vast, complex, and ambivalent period which is the Victorian Age. Before delving into the main subject of this whole chapter – George Gissing and his novels – it is my purpose to introduce the notion of "Condition of England" novel. To do so, I want to provide the reader with a brief overview of the historical period, its main features and the social debate concerning it.

If one had to pinpoint the beginning and ending of the period in a scholastic, uncritical way, Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837 – the year of his uncle's death, King William IV – and passed away in 1901, becoming the longest-reigning British monarch in history, just to be overcome by Elizabeth II in the twenty-first century. However, the notions of "Victorian" and "Victorian culture" are all but unambiguous. Historians and critics have fiercely debated upon the reliability of such labels. Marking the Victorian Age as the period that goes from 1837 to 1901 would be far too simplistic and would overshadow the cultural implications and interconnections with past and future, which is what makes this era so complex and fascinating. O'Gorman, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, makes a very good point: how can we distinguish "Victorian culture" from a more general "Nineteenth-century culture" and – most importantly – what do we gain from making that distinction?[183] Hewitt gives a strong, positive answer to this question in an essay of his, explaining that "as a question of cultural […] it seems, on the face of it, counterintuitive *not* to think of the Victorian as a period, whether conceived of as lodged between the profound transformations of the Romantic era and the emergence of Modernism, or situated between long eighteenth century

[182] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 134.
[183] O'Gorman, *Introduction*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, 2.

and the twentieth-century".[184] Either ways, a periodization of the Victorian Age can and must be done and, in order to do so, we must highlight some of the interrelated characteristics of this very long period.

Traditionally we associate the Victorian Age with quick and abrupt economic and social changes, and much of them to the already mentioned spectre of the Industrial Revolution. It has been decades since historians have abandoned the idea of a hyperbolic narrative of the nineteenth century progress, and instead have begun to highlight the graduality and unevenness of the process.[185] It is nevertheless true that the British Industrial Revolution hit the top in the early decades of the century,[186] just a few years before Victoria took the throne. This brought to a profound and – indeed – quick restructuration of the English economic and cultural framework, especially in the Thirties. Class, Hewitt claims, was established as a "fundamental category of Victorian discourse, practice, and prejudice".[187] And then he goes on:

> "If there was no dramatic shift in the constitution of social power, a complex and unstable series of concessions and accommodations with elements of new wealth did nonetheless take place, reconfiguring social and political power. While the aristocracy and the metropolitan elites may have retained national power, emerging social elites in the localities still found new arenas of authority opening up for them."[188]

Prudishness and Puritanism became essential concept to gain respectability, which was the key to society. This flowed into what Wheeler describes as a "characteristic psychological malaise" of the period, that is to say a deficiency in the free expression and communication of emotions and feelings.[189] Korg explains this aspect of Victorian society by claiming that it was essentially a mean to maintain the *status quo*, and for the middle-class not to unsettle its way of life and to preserve a general sense of security.[190]

The Industrial Revolution did not just affect the fields of manufacture and transports, but it spread very widely into different realms of experience, such as class relations, the nature of work, the interaction between the public and the private sphere, and the popularization of various items and goods.[191] Consumerism began to develop as a result of the fall of prices of

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[184] Hewitt, *Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense*, in *Victorian Studies*, 396.
[185] ivi, 398.
[186] Alborn, *Economics and Business*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, 61.
[187] Hewitt, *Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense*, in *Victorian Studies*, 398-99.
[188] ivi, 399.
[189] Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian period, 1830-1890*, 90.
[190] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 133.
[191] Daly, *Technology*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, 43.

many goods and services, caused by the mechanization of the process of production.[192] Books began to circulate more easily, and became more accessible to different segments of the population. The transformation happening in the reading public shaped new forms for the novels to be published: not only did the development in the railway system facilitate the circulation of books, but it also made writers change the purpose of their writing process.[193] The "railway novel" transformed into a business and became an established genre, based on its cheapness and on the strong articulation of its plot.[194] The changes and improvements in the transportation network resulted in a radical morphological transformation, altering the perception of the concepts of city and country.[195]

Literature and society embraced in harmony in the Victorian Age like never before. Daiches writes that "the Victorian novelists deal boldly with society as they see it and are almost all propagandists of a kind".[196] Chapman reinforces this idea by claiming that publication changed from being an end in itself – the ultimate expression of the artist's creativity – to becoming a mean to shape society through the formation of public opinion.[197] Literature became increasingly polemical.[198] He also claims that any system – theological, political, social or economic – aims at controlling, by destroying it, the power of imagination, which has find its outlets in other ways.[199] In the Victorian Age, in particular, artists and writers found their expression and creativity in the most troublesome situations of real life, being completely immersed in the society that surrounded them.[200] Information spread way more easily, especially in the 1840s and in the 1850s, and novels make full use of the pieces of news regarding social problems.[201] This brings me to a key point of my observations. The mid-nineteenth century is a period marked, as we have already highlighted, by profound social transformations. In 1815, just before the Battle of Waterloo and the fall of Napoleon, England approved the first of a series of trade restrictions known as Corn Laws, which aimed at limiting the import of grains for cheap prices. The strong reaction that followed, with the constitution of an Anti-Corn Law League – formed mainly by Lancashire factory owners[202] – in the late

[192] ibid.
[193] ivi, 50.
[194] ibid.
[195] ibid.
[196] Daiches, *Literature and Society*, 208.
[197] Chapman, *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901*, 3.
[198] ibid.
[199] ibid.
[200] ibid.
[201] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 1.
[202] Alborn, *Economics and Business*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, 64.

Thirties of the century mirrored the growing sense of nationalism and of a general "Britishness"[203], and the ultimate repeal of such restrictions in 1846 marked the definitive shift to free trade policies.[204] Korg claims that after 1832 – the year of promulgation of the Reform Act, which I will mention later – the middle-class gained the whole of its political rights, and all of English society was pervaded by the ideal of a "Puritan class engaged in competitive business".[205] Along with this, the Victorian Age is surely characterized by urbanization. Between 1831 and 1851, the percentage of people residing in cities and towns doubled, from the 25% to more than the 50%.[206] The account of urban life became predominant in literature, as the representation of the working-class voice. On the one hand, industrial development and economic flourishing; on the other, the crushing of the lower classes achieved progress. Victorian compromise, in other words. The narration of the troublesome situation of the British working-class took the name "Condition-of-England question", as Thomas Carlyle explained in his essay *Chartism* (1839).

Thomas Carlyle's pivotal contribution to the nineteenth century English critical sphere is indisputable, just like the fact that he caused harsh controversy during his whole life and for many decades after his death in 1881.[207] He has long been accused of being reactionary and even a proto-fascist, especially due to controversial works like *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question* (1853) and *Shooting Niagara: and After?* (1867).[208] Lukács prefers to identify in his works a sudden change of perspective and alignment after the revolutions of 1848, after which he followed a reactionary wave that showered, to illustrate it in a general way, the whole European bourgeoisie,[209] partially rescuing him from such ungrateful accusations. Nonetheless, he has also been described as the first of the nineteenth-century prophets[210] and an all-round iconic intellectual of the Victorian Age. He perfectly embodied all the stereotypical features of the Victorian intellectual: honesty, anxiety to be heard, and criticism towards society.[211] He had a major impact on several writers and intellectuals to come,[212] even on some of those far from

[203] Hewitt, *Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense*, in *Victorian Studies*, 406.
[204] Hartley. *Trade: Discovery, Mercantilism and Technology*, in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, 176.
[205] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 133.
[206] Hewitt, *Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense*, in *Victorian Studies*, 408.
[207] Thesing, *Victorian Prose Writers Before 1867*, 48.
[208] ivi, 48-51.
[209] Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 98.
[210] Daiches, *Literature and Society,* 241.
[211] Chapman, *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901*, 79.
[212] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 171.

his way of thinking. Chapman mentions – for instance – his relationship with the Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, whose Tory political *milieu* he openly disliked: Disraeli, for his part, often displayed Carlylean ideas in his early works and, as Prime Minister, offered Carlyle a title, which the writer refused.[213]

Young Carlyle developed a singular interest in German Romanticism, especially in the works of Schiller and Goethe, whose translations he began his literary career with. His first translations and essays – such as the English translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1824) and a biography of Schiller (1825) – provided him with the first glimpses of literary success[214]. His 1829 essay *Signs of the Times* can arguably be pointed out as the symbolic *overture* of the Victorian Age.[215] Let me quote just a few, telling passages from his essay:

> "It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word. […] Our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. […] We remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with rude Nature; and, by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils. […] Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also."[216]

And:

> "These things, which we state lightly enough here, are yet of deep import, and indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind."[217]

Literary success ultimately reached a first peak in 1837 with the publication of the historical work *The French Revolution*.[218] What I want to turn my attention to is, however, his 1839 essay that I mentioned before, *Chartism*. Chartism was a social movement of the 1830s and 1840s, essentially led by the working-class, demanding changes in the political and economic sphere. With the French Revolution still in mind and the ghost of Napoleon still haunting the European monarchs, supporters of Chartism were labelled as dangerously "revolutionary" by their

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[213] Chapman, *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901*, 78-79.
[214] Thesing, *Victorian Prose Writers Before 1867*, 49.
[215] ivi, 51.
[216] Carlyle, *Signs of the Times*, 1-2.
[217] ivi, 3-4.
[218] Thesing, *Victorian Prose Writers Before 1867*, 50.

opposers.[219] The movement took its name from the *People's Charter*, a document written in 1838 by six members of the Parliament and six working people. Their requests were summed up in a series of six points:[220]

1	Extension of the right to vote to all adult males
2	Minimum salary for the members of the Parliament
3	Each Parliamentary constituency should have the same number of voters
4	Vote's secrecy
5	No longer need to hold property to sit in Parliament
6	General elections once a year

As we can see, there is no mention to the economic condition of the working-class at all, as the document is utterly political.[221] The movement was dismissed and it never came close to achieve those six points, and even the most direct attempts to succeed – in 1839, 1840, 1842 and, especially, 1848 – failed miserably.[222] However, Chartism was the sign of a profound discontent running across the mild Victorian Britain, one of the few countries in Europe to escape the revolutions of 1848. Lukács claims that the fall of Chartism was the cause of an important ideological depression and that it put a dramatic stop to the democratic evolution of England.[223] Carlyle, like many intellectuals of his time, was well-aware of the discontent running across his country, as the title of the entry chapter of his 1839 essay demonstrates. The "Condition-of-England question" which he describes is a "very general feeling" that:

> "The condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it."[224]

Something ought to be done indeed. Not only from an ethical point of view, but also from a very pragmatic one: the working-class was growing more and more violent, and the apparently political requests found in the *People's Charter* symbolized – in reality – a cry for help which the middle class had to pay attention to.[225] The "chimera" of Chartism, as the newspapers

[219] Evans, *Chartism*, 3.
[220] ivi, 9.
[221] ivi, 10.
[222] ivi, 111.
[223] Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 246.
[224] Carlyle, *Chartism*, 1.
[225] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 5.

described it, was already extinct in 1839.[226] But the reality of the problem, Carlyle claims, was not. This is proved also by the fact that the sense of responsibility that the leisure class felt for the condition of the poor is a *fil rouge* that binds together much of the Victorian literature.[227] Again, Carlyle states:

> "Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England. It is a new name for a thing which has had many names, which will yet have many. The matter of Chartism is weighty, deep-rooted, far-extending; did not begin yesterday; will by no means end this day or tomorrow."[228]

The Condition of England is the condition of the working man.[229] Carlyle points his finger at the Parliament's indifference, which instead "one would think, should inquire into popular discontents before it gets the length of pikes and torches".[230] A Parliament which – in other words – is detached from the reality of the social conditions and is not adequately representing the interests of the population. He also speaks of bitter inequality among social classes, stronger in England than anywhere else in Europe[231], and an unfair discrepancy between the upper and lower society. And he remarks the indispensable need to speak facts about the condition of the working-class as well, claiming the importance for intellectuals to carry out research on the matter: what had been done until then has "yielded us little, almost nothing".[232]

The research carried out by Carlyle is wide and goes far beyond the interest of my dissertation. I might just mention what he says about salaries which, Carlyle says, are just preliminary items to the well-being of a man.[233] The quantity is insufficient and, more importantly, the quality is worth worrying even more.[234] What is quality in wages? It is, he claims, the constancy of employment, the difficulty of finding employment, the fluctuation of salaries like that of gambling.[235] Statistics is unable to confine in some numbers the degree of satisfaction of labourers:

> "In a word, what degree of contentment can a human creature be supposed to enjoy in that position? With hunger preying on him, his contentment is likely to be small! But even with

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[226] Carlyle, *Chartism*, 2.
[227] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 38.
[228] ibid.
[229] ivi, 3.
[230] ivi, 4.
[231] ivi, 8.
[232] ibid.
[233] ivi, 12.
[234] ibid.
[235] ibid.

> abundance, his discontent, his real misery may be great. The labourer's feelings, his notion of being justly dealt with or unjustly; his wholesome composure, frugality, prosperity in the one case, his acrid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking, and gradual ruin in the other, how shall figures of arithmetic represent all this?"[236]

This is also an attack to Bentham's *felicific calculus* and materialism, of which we talked about in the first chapter.

To close this historical introduction, I would also like to mention what happened in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, England underwent a further economic crisis which intensified the harsh conditions of life brought by the Industrial Revolution.[237] If not comparable to the Thirties, which represented the worst period by far for the English working-class, the Seventies were characterized by further developments which brought to another period of depression.[238] Industrial poverty was to consolidate as one of the main social issues in England, an issue that the main protagonist of this chapter – George Gissing – successfully grasped and transposed in his novels.[239]

2.2. The Condition of England novel: Godwin the pioneer and Dickens

Carlyle dismissed most of the novels of the 1830s and 1840s as manneristic sparks of fad and fashion, and it is indeed true that – with few exceptions – most of the fiction from that decades did not help the genre of the novel to evolve.[240] However, the age of reforms – the most important being the first Reform Act (1832), the Factory Act (1833), and the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) – brought forth the first instances of social pieces of literature, which began to raise the issues mentioned in the previous subchapter.[241] At times, nonetheless, running the risk to over-exaggerate those problems by the exploitation of extreme, hyperbolic situations and with an excessive sentimentalization of the poor.[242] That is the case, for instance, of Disraeli, who was harshly criticized for this: it is important, however, to bear in mind that the selective approach to news has never been a Gothic sensationalistic expedient, but the ultimate aim was always to deliberately further the need for change.[243] It was only in the 1840s that the first gems of the English social novel began to appear: Carlyle's *Chartism* paved the way for a

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[236] ivi, 13.
[237] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 28.
[238] ivi, 29.
[239] ivi, 28-29.
[240] Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian period, 1830-1890*, 16.
[241] ivi, 20.
[242] ivi, 21.
[243] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 7.

whole new generation of English writers, who characterized the Victorian Age. The relevance of his work does not lie only in the prophetic element of his words, but also in the identification of the "Condition-of-England question" with a specific social circumstance, i.e. Chartism.[244] The issue reached its peak with the Chartist movement's uprisings of 1848 which followed the repeal of the Corn Laws two years before.[245] The Condition of England novel tradition includes, among many others, the works of Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley and, above all, Charles Dickens.

It is misleading to speak of the novelists of this literary genre as the trendsetting authors putting into narrative form the condition of the poor. Just to name a few, the literary tradition of Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding had already paid meticulous attention to the life of the London poor.[246] The mid-Victorian author, nonetheless, aims at giving an understanding of contemporary society, by depicting episodes of urban or rural poverty.[247] A true pioneer in this sense, that came long before Carlyle and Dickens, is William Godwin. Regarded as the founder of psychological anarchism,[248] and as an exemplar exponent of utilitarianism,[249] his *Caleb Williams* (1794) – whose full title is, not by chance, *Things as They are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* – is a social novel in every way, even though set – and most importantly written – before the Industrial Revolution.[250] The tradition of novelists that stems from him is, according to Kettle, "socially-conscious in the double sense of seeing personal and psychological problems as rooted in the organization of society and wanting to change things".[251] This tradition – including writers such as Bulwer Lytton and early Benjamin Disraeli[252], as Flint too confirms when mentioning his most famous novel *Sybil* (1845)[253] – lacks nonetheless in concreteness and the narration often drifts into generalization.[254] In addition, and referring to the role of information in literature, Flint says that the outlook of the

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[244] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 171.
[245] Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian period, 1830-1890*, 35.
[246] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 171.
[247] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 1.
[248] Philp, "William Godwin".
[249] ibid.
[250] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 172.
[251] ivi, 172.
[252] ibid.
[253] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 10.
[254] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 172.

author on society is that of a "distanced, aerial vantage point", as if he was "looking through the telescope rather than the microscope".[255] The concreteness that the novels before the 1840s lacked was then achieved after the dramatic social changes following the age of reforms: after the Reform Bill and Chartism, Kettle claims, the problem of poverty became so obvious that the theoretical standpoint from which it had been treated hitherto was bound to collapse.[256]

It may cause some perplexity to associate a "revolutionary" author like Godwin, and his whole literary school, with Benthamite utilitarianism. The reader might just think back to what I was claiming in the first chapter, that utilitarianism was nothing but a reinforcement to the rise of capitalism and economic rationalist ideas. And this was indeed true, but only after the French Revolution was dead and buried. I might borrow, once again, some observations from Kettle's book. He states that at the dawn of utilitarianism, at the turn of eighteenth and nineteenth-century, the principle of utility went hand in hand with the democratic revolutionary wave brought forth by the French Revolution.[257] It was after the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) – and the consequent demise of all revolutionary aspirations – that Bentham's *felicific calculus* began to blend well with economic rationalism, and started to be rejected by artists as a sort of banner of materialism. If the novelists of the beginning of the century saw themselves as part of a rational revolution, the later ones upheld the values of humanity and sensitivity and stood up against rationalism.[258] And as a matter of fact, the very notion of rationalism takes on a different meaning whether associated with Godwin or with the development of economics in the same period. Godwin's rationalism concretizes in the fact that, Philp states:

> "He shows that men are capable of recognising truth, and that, because mind acts as a real cause, they will act on it when they perceive it clearly. Nothing beyond the perception of truth is required to motivate our compliance with moral principles."[259]

As I said earlier, literature and society went hand in hand during the Victorian period more than ever. The Condition of England novelists gathered the flourishing amount of information supplied by newspapers, journals and magazines into their works; newspapers did not only pile up statistical data, but they also provided the reader with a polyphonic vision of society, based

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[255] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 2.
[256] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 173.
[257] ibid.
[258] ivi, 174.
[259] Philp, "William Godwin".

on many different points of view.[260] Not all novelists – and it is important to bear this in mind when we speak of Gissing – wrote from a high, stable position themselves. And their ideas were not always stable as well, as they encountered difficulties as they examined the Condition of England Question.[261] It is important to specify this, as one might be tempted to consider all the writers of the period as guides and prophets, observing from above some kind of herd. Sometimes, like in the case of Thackeray and Dickens, the novelist himself had been, at the beginning of his career, a journalist. The novelist's duty was, then, to shoot arrows at the heart of the reader's imagination by carefully manipulating information into a well-structured plot: not even the very first instances of the social novel are works of radical protest *per se*,[262] in the sense that they are never subject to information (like journalism), but they manipulate reality into fiction and make information the object of their manipulation. An interesting insight and deepening into the relationship between literary quality and documentary value – literature and information – is given by Jameson's Marxist analysis of the social works of Gissing, in an essay that I will quote later, in the main body of this chapter, when I will come to speak of the author. "The people", for they are the main subject of the Condition of England novelist, are not in themselves a theme, but they offer a basis upon which several themes can be developed. They are, as Jameson puts it, the abstract preliminary content upon which the novel ramifications are constructed. Therefore, we can assume that the social novel is indeed a useful testimony and holds some documentarist value, "not on the state of Victorian slums, but rather on the narrative paradigms that organize middle-class fantasies about those slums."[263]

While speaking of Dickens, Wheeler states that the characteristic that many writers of the Condition of England novel share is that of being more inclined to individuate the symptoms of the social problem than to find a possible solution to it[264] (and nobody will be a better example of this than Gissing himself). This is evident even in the renowned *Hard Times* (1854), one of the most mature works by the author from Portsmouth. It is a prophetic work which "proves to be more than a social-problem novel or political tract for the times"[265], yet – whilst harshly criticizing the rampant spread of Utilitarianism in society – it fails to provide a plausible

[260] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 2.
[261] Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian period, 1830-1890*, 39.
[262] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 9.
[263] Jameson, *Authentic Ressentiment: The "Experimental" Novels of Gissing, in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 130.
[264] Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian period, 1830-1890*, 90.
[265] ibid.

solution to poverty beyond mere acts of individual benevolence or good-hearted charity.[266] While I do not claim to give a detailed insight on Dickens – another dissertation at least would be necessary for that – I believe that mentioning his importance and influence is at least necessary. Kettle explains very well the reasons that make Charles Dickens stand out from his contemporaries and social novel authors. He claims that what distinguishes him is the "total richness and complexity of his books", and the fact that there is "nothing thin, nothing theoretic of abstract about them".[267] And he also states that:

> "If they deal with the condition of England (and there is no better general description of what his books are about), they cannot, somehow, be bounded by the heading of the opening chapter of Carlyle's Chartism – "The Condition-of-England Question"; whereas Disraeli and Kingsley and Mrs Gaskell can. It is the note of abstraction involved in such words as Question and Problem that makes the difference."[268]

The manipulation of the plot of which we were talking about reaches its peak in Dickens. Flint claims that Dickens' rhetoric "both draws on, and helps to create, an awareness that processes of cause and effect permeated the entire social system".[269] As I mentioned before, notably enough, Dickens started off his literary career as a journalist, revitalizing a forgotten genre such as the part novel in the publication of his *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37).[270] He grew up reading eighteenth-century British novelists – in their turn influenced by the epistolary novels of Richardson.[271] Wheeler speaks of an "early Dickens" for the novelist who wrote before 1846 – that is to say – before the introduction of railways.[272] The Dickens of "coach journeys, country inns and coach office", characterized by a picaresque taste.[273] The works of the early phase include, among others, *Oliver Twist* (1839), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844), and *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845). Even between the first two works, one can easily spot a significant difference. In *Pickwick Papers,* the harsh conditions of life are narrated indirectly, by the account of past events.[274] *Oliver Twist*, on the other hand, points directly at the heart of the matter, with the protagonist-hero having to endure and confront

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[266] ibid.
[267] Kettle, *The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. From Dickens to Hardy*, 170.
[268] ibid.
[269] Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change,* 2.
[270] Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian period, 1830-1890*, 25.
[271] ivi, 26.
[272] ibid.
[273] ibid.
[274] ivi, 28.

tough circumstances from the day he is born.[275] Early Dickens creates a "teeming world of sharp contrasts and divisions"[276], and this is the reason why, according to Wheeler, it is only in his middle and later periods that "he was to bring his invention more fully under control in the service of an imagination engaged in social and psychological themes which also challenged the major thinkers of the Victorian Age".[277]

Dickens' later works suggest a shift from a collective to a particular approach, from an all-encompassing outlook on society to a deeper interest in the psychology of the single individual.[278] It is the beginning of a literary journey which accompanies the scholar of Victorian literature into the last decades of the nineteenth-century and the first decades of the twentieth. The pilgrim figure that dominated the novels of Dickens gives room to an "explorer figure", wandering in an uncertain and bleak world.[279] It is the case of authors like Thomas Hardy: deeply pessimistic writers who paint a world which is nothing but hostile and in which the possibilities for social or human salvation are close to zero.[280] Novels like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) are representatives of a grim feeling of pessimistic fatalism. A similar idea can be found in the novels of George Gissing. Gissing's role in the Condition of England novel and in the historical framework that I outlined in the first subchapter – with which I shall complete the transition to the next subchapter – is perfectly summarized by this quote from Korg's *Critical Biography* of the author, which also retraces the main steps of my discourse:

> "The tradition of social-protest literature which Gissing renewed in *Workers in the Dawn* had arisen in response to the worst period of poverty, the thirties. Firsthand information about conditions was made available in reports of Parliamentary commissions on factory reform and sanitation, in Carlyle's passionate condemnation of industrialism, *Past and Present* (1843), in Friedrich Engels' *Condition of the Working-Class in England* in 1844, and in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861). […] The depression of the seventies revived many of the old questions […]. During Gissing's early years in London a powerful, though not necessarily violent, spirit of revolution was in the air, and the reform literature of the eighties,

[275] ibid.
[276] ivi, 32.
[277] ibid.
[278] ivi, 102.
[279] ivi, 12.
[280] ibid.

> responding to recent scientific, philosophical, and political developments, had a sharp new edge."[281]

2.3. George Gissing: crossroads of life and literature

Few writers from the Victorian Age would have been more pleased to testify the factuality of Dickens' greatness than George Gissing himself. His admiration and fondness of the master of the English social novel is well-known, just like the massive influence which Dickens exercised on Gissing. In 1925, a posthumous collection of writings by Gissing was published under the name *The Immortal Dickens*: in the introduction, we read:

> "We believe that George Gissing will best be known to future generations by his *Private Papers of Henry Rycroft* and his *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*; and of the two, perhaps, the latter will be the book more frequently in demand."[282]

Indeed, Gissing became much appreciated not only for his novels, but also thanks to his critical works, the most famous of which being *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), which came out simultaneously in England and America.[283] In this work, he investigated on Dickens and was able to grasp all the complexities of his genius, avoiding excess both of praise or blame.[284] In his memories, he speaks of Dickens – and Tennyson as well – as a "household god" of his, to whom he "uttered with reverence".[285] He says:

> "The kindliness of the author's spirit, his overflowing sympathy with poor and humble folk, set one's mind to a sort of music which it is good to live with; and no writer of moralities ever showed triumphant virtue in so cheery a light as that which falls upon these honest people when rascality has got its deserts."[286]

I think that what Gissing writes is the perfect summary of what I was stating before, when talking about the Condition of England novelists, and their ability to put mundane events at the service of their writing. He says that Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) – the first of his books that he ever read – displays the writer's capacity to transform the sights of every day in the service of romance.[287] Nothing, in my opinion, compares to this statement when trying to sum up the attitude of the typical Condition of England writer. However, as I said before,

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[281] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 29-30.
[282] Gissing, *The Immortal Dickens,* vii (introduction).
[283] Rawlinson, *A Man of Many Parts: Gissing's Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, 194.
[284] ibid.
[285] Gissing, *The Immortal Dickens,* 2.
[286] ivi, 4-5.
[287] ivi, 4.

Gissing never gives in to temptation and uncritical praising of Dickens' work.[288] Far from that. He never fails to point out the criticalities and downsides of the author, highlighting how much his novels lack in open-mindedness and style variety, due to Dickens' "untrained intellect" and "insufficiently stored" mind[289], with a typical snobbish attitude that – the reader will have the chance to see – characterized much of Gissing's character. His critical side is always merciless. Nonetheless, Gissing's admiration – especially in the years of his youth – for Dickens is undeniable and brought him to a precocious debut in literature. In 1880, aged only twenty-two, he published *Workers in the Dawn*, which is described by Frank Swinnerton – in his essential critical study of Gissing – as a book with "no Balzacian omniscience and romantic quality, […] a curious mixture of conventionalism, raw philosophy, imperfect observation, imperfect but laborious humour, and imitation of Dickens."[290] It was enough, however, to win the attention of Frederic Harrison, jurist and historian with a keen interest in Victorian literature, who sent a praise letter to Gissing even before finishing reading the novel and invited him to dinner.[291] He told him that his novel went completely against his sympathies in literature, following the so-called realism of Zola which he loathed, but he could not help noticing his uncommon imaginative power.[292] The young author was to become a great friend of Harrison's and his children's tutor for some of the following years. However, it is necessary here to discuss, even though briefly, George Gissing's life. I will refer to, among other texts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912), the first extended Gissing biography, written by Morley Roberts, who had known him since they were young. The book is "a thinly veiled novel that details the unhappy life of George Gissing, the novelist" (as "The Literary Digest" summarized it in 1912): in other words, Gissing's name is never directly mentioned, and neither are all his acquaintances nor works. But *Henry Maitland* is an acceptably accurate account of the life of the author.

I believe that the biography of an artist is – to a greater or lesser extent – always interconnected to his artistic production. It is then the artist's duty, or choice, to disguise himself – again, to a greater or lesser extent – behind his creation. To a greater or lesser extent because, as it has always been, the many forms in which literature is realized allow different grades of the author's presence in the novel. For instance, the Japanese *Shishōsetsu* – a peculiar type of confessional literature – is deliberately a container for the events of the life of the author. This is not and

[288] Rawlinson, *A Man of Many Parts: Gissing's Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, 194.
[289] ibid.
[290] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 46.
[291] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 3.
[292] ibid.

cannot be the case of a Victorian novelist like Gissing, whose aim – from his earliest works – is openly social, being himself "full of earnest desire to catch that reforming temper which marked the less humorous works of Dickens."[293] Thus, he must obtain an important element of realism, for he must be persuasive. Nonetheless, it is impossible to deny the huge degree of self-referentiality which is present in his works, especially in the ones which I am going to discuss more in depth. Fernando claims that "it is never easy to separate the person from the author in Gissing's novels", and that "his works embody a broad scepticism towards society in general which George Orwell labelled as 'close to being reactionary'".[294] Perhaps, a critical reading of his works can provide a web of connections between his novels and his own life.

George Robert Gissing was the first of five sons – three brothers and two sisters – and was born on November 22nd, 1857, to Thomas Waller Gissing, a chemist working in a shop in Wakefield, Yorkshire.[295] The family was averagely literate, and there was no lack of reading in young George's house: those readings included some novels by Walter Scott, some poetry by Wordsworth, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and a bunch of books by the most popular writer during Gissing's youth, Charles Dickens.[296] Already from an early age he displayed a keen interest in teaching, and an innate disposition towards tutoring – his first pupils being his younger brothers and later – as I mentioned – Harrison's children.[297] He was a stubborn student and worker, and would spend hours and hours sitting at his desk, in a sort of compulsive fight against the distractions of his mind, which seemed to belong to him.[298] This determination was not just a natural inclination of his character, but it also stemmed from his awareness of his poor condition as a young man, coming from a family not so well-off, and the consequent awareness that he would have to make his own way through.[299] This awareness led him to a thriving academic career: he graduated in humanities at Owens College in Manchester, which carried free tuition for him due to his brilliant achievements in study.[300] In 1876, however, his education was abruptly interrupted. He fell in love with a prostitute, Marianne Helen "Nell" Harrison, and planned to marry her: he tried to rescue her, buying her a sewing machine and giving her everything he had, until he had exhausted his resources. He was caught stealing at college and

[293] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 46.
[294] Fernando, *"New Women" in the Late Victorian Novel*, 107-108.
[295] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 7.
[296] ivi, 8.
[297] ibid.
[298] ivi, 9-10.
[299] ivi, 10.
[300] ivi, 11.

was therefore expelled.[301] He was imprisoned for a month and then forcibly moved to the United States; he spent there a year teaching and writing short stories for a newspaper.[302] Of the stealing episode and of the arrest we find no traces in whatever book, diary or annotation by Gissing.[303] But his letters from Boston suggest that he was more than pleased with his life in the United States: he loved his work and lived comfortably enjoying the democratic air of the nation.[304]

When he came back to England, he faced a bitter period of poverty and was forced to live as economically as possible, changing his dwelling from month to month.[305] He sought for Nell, found her, and married her in October 1879. He was then writing his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), of which I spoke earlier. The novel was profoundly influenced by Comte's positivism[306] but, above all, by his relationship to Nell.[307] She was tormented by all kinds of illnesses, and never gave in the unhealthy habit of excessive drinking. Roberts never had the chance to meet her, as she was always drunk and absent when he visited Gissing's house. He recounts:

> "He told me that that very afternoon his wife had gone out, and obtaining drink in some way had brought it home with her, and that she was then almost insane with alcohol. This was the kind of life that Henry Maitland, perhaps a great man of letters, lived for years."[308]

Workers in the Dawn got Gissing no more than sixteen shillings in the first three months.[309] It was not until it was sent to Harrison that it received some praise. Harrison also gave him the opportunity to teach, and this ensured him a stable weekly income.[310] Meanwhile, his relationship with Nell became increasingly unbearable: she had become widely known as a drunkard and as a person with a very bad temperament[311] and, despite failing to obtain a legal divorce, by 1883 the two split up.[312] She would die in 1888, of drink and syphilis.[313] Gissing

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[301] ivi, 11-12.
[302] Morton, "George Gissing: A Biographical Sketch".
[303] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 15.
[304] ivi, 15-16.
[305] ivi, 20.
[306] ivi, 24.
[307] Morton, "George Gissing: A Biographical Sketch".
[308] Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 44-45.
[309] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 43.
[310] ivi, 47.
[311] ivi, 58.
[312] ivi, 59.
[313] Morton, "George Gissing: A Biographical Sketch".

describes the events immediately following her death in a very moving passage taken from one of his diaries:

> "At 8.30 Roberts and I started for Lambeth. I felt an uncertainty about the truth of the telegram, and Roberts offered to go alone to 16 Lucretia Street, Lower Marsh, to make inquiries. I waited for him, walking up and down by Waterloo Station. He came back and told me that she was indeed dead. Thereupon we both went to the house; a wretched, wretched place. The name of the landlady, Sherlock. She told us that Marianne Helen Gissing died at about 9.30 yesterday morning. The last struggle beginning at 6 o'clock. They found my Eastbourne address on an envelope in a drawer. I went upstairs to see the body; then Roberts accompanied me to the doctor who had been called in, name McCarthy, Westminster Bridge Road. He gave us a certificate. Immediate cause of death, acute laryngitis. Roberts took his leave, and I returned to the house."[314]

By the end of 1883 his second novel, *The Unclassed,* was completed. It is defined by some as a very characteristic novel of his, in which a peculiar class of characters is presented, who particularly aroused his interest: fine, well-educated, but without money.[315] The novel never gives up its social critique content, but it is primarily a novel of love.[316] Critics seem to agree on the fact that, at least formally, *The Unclassed* represents a significant step forward in the overall quality of Gissing's work.[317] To Swinnerton, in *The Unclassed* "Gissing the conscious sociologist and artist begins to express himself. We have several declarations upon Art, and […] we begin to feel the author's power of grasping character."[318]

The publication of *The Unclassed* was followed by an extremely productive period:[319] between July and September 1885 he wrote *Isabel Clarendon,* which was then published in 1886; between September and November came *A Life's Morning,* which however had to wait until 1888 for its publication. Before that, *Demos* was published in the same year of *Isabel Clarendon*, having been written from December 1885 to March 1886.[320] As *Demos* went into a second edition, the profits allowed him to put into practice what he had always longed for: a long trip to Italy.[321] He started to plan the trip, but he had to wait until 1889 to actually visit

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[314] Coustillas, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: the Diary of George Gissing, Novelist,* 22.
[315] Morton, "George Gissing: An Introduction".
[316] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 64.
[317] ivi, 66; Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 63.
[318] ibid.
[319] ivi, 37.
[320] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 75.
[321] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 37.

Italy. In the meantime, he took up the study of the language, and became fluent in a matter of months. As Roberts testifies, "his Italian was also very good", as he displayed no hesitation whatsoever in speaking it, and he could fluently and easily read Dante's *Divina Commedia* in the original language.[322] *Demos* reception was overall positive, and it was the first book marking the success of the author.[323] Richard Mutimer – for that is the name of the working-class protagonist – inherits a huge quantity of money and uses it to start a co-operative factory.[324] The project however collapses, and he is ultimately killed in a major protest mob held by his former followers.[325] After *Demos* hit its second publication, Gissing was able to travel to Paris, for a three weeks stay.[326]

The writing of *Thyrza* (1887) was a slow and strenuous process, which gifted Gissing with one of the novels that satisfied him the most, as he explained in a letter sent in December 1886 to his sister Ellen, when he was just finishing writing the book:

> "I am a quarter through the last volume of Thyrza. It is good, better in many respects than Demos. […] I value the book more than anything I have yet done. I hope to have finished it in little more than a fortnight, if I have perfect peace."[327]

The aim was to write a more accurate social novel than *Demos* was. However successful, Gissing valued his novel as superficial, and wanted to "contain the very spirit of the London working-class".[328] It is perhaps Gissing's most sympathetic book,[329] and the book in which the author's emotions are expressed most freely[330]. It is an overall warmly human novel.[331]

The years 1887 and 1888 were extremely dire for Gissing. He was still very poor – as he was still teaching to supplement his novels' profits. Roberts testifies:

> "No doubt the worst of his financial difficulties were before I returned from America, and even before his wife died, but never, till the end of his life, was he at ease with regard to money. He

[322] Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 295.
[323] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 99.
[324] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 83-84.
[325] ibid.
[326] ivi, 97.
[327] Gissing, *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family,* 188.
[328] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 100.
[329] ivi, 101; Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 61.
[330] ivi, 62.
[331] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 102.

> never attained the art of the pot-boiler by which most of us survive, even when he tried short stories, which he did finally after I had pressed him to attempt them for some years."[332]

Thyrza, in fact, was published under an agreement which Gissing had approved, but which soon repented. He renounced to a certain amount at the publication, just to earn half of it and then the ten percent of the publisher's sales.[333] I will expand on this theme later, when I come to talk about the difficulties of the century for authors to get their works published. Gissing had to ask his brother Algernon for a loan, and at the beginning of 1888 was in very poor health, and even contemplating suicide.[334] In February, as I mentioned before, his wife Hellen succumbed to her vices and passed away. It was not until March that he took up writing once again and began working on *The Nether World* (1889).

The Nether World is considered by many the finest of Gissing's social works.[335] Swinnerton defined it as an especially consistent work in its description of the lower class,[336] written with a "stern sense of responsibility".[337] Korg, instead, highlights the importance of the novel in summarizing the author's idea of the novel, that of a "broad and static canvas", in which one gets easily lost in the myriad of characters to which the huge Victorian world is the backdrop.[338] The result is a novel that depicts an semi-animalistic world with an utterly fatalistic perspective, which brings Gissing closer to Hardy.[339] In September he finished writing the novel, and in October he received news from the publisher and wrote to his sister:

> "Nelly sends letter from Smith & Elder. They begin by saying that my books as yet do not sell at all (*Thyrza* only 400 copies), and offer £150 for *The Nether World*. I accept. This will enable me to go to Italy."[340]

The idea of the journey was – initially – that of returning to France, Paris, and to spend there some days. The profits made thanks to the publication of *The Nether World*, instead, allowed Gissing to extend his trip to Italy.[341] He departed for Paris in September, accompanied by a German friend, Plitt. His first days in France were utterly miserable: he suffered from a very

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[332] Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 99.
[333] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 101.
[334] ivi, 109-110.
[335] Morton, "George Gissing: An Introduction".
[336] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 61.
[337] ivi, 66.
[338] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 112.
[339] ivi, 115
[340] Gissing, *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family,* 225.
[341] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 120.

bad sore throat and never got along with his companion.[342] Nevertheless, this trip to Paris is relevant because it fostered a dramatic change in the mind of the author. Having experienced the gleaming cultural flourishing that was present in the French metropolis, somehow his enthusiasm in recounting the condition of the poor was washed away, together with what he himself defined as a useless "idealism".[343] Korg states that, even though his interest in his "usual theme" was gone even before departing for Europe, his traveling experiences to France and Italy "reminded him that London was not the world".[344] He states:

> "In observing the poor of other countries he often remarked that they were clean, well-mannered, and considerate, in contrast to their English counterparts."[345]

As I said before, the long-awaited destination was Italy and, more precisely, Naples. Surprisingly enough – or perhaps not that surprisingly, given his naturalist disposition –, he was struck even more by the subtle details of everyday life than by the cultural side of Italy, food, wine and whatsoever.[346] The artistic beauty of the country made it possible for him to forget the troublesome conditions in which he was living in England, and the difficulties regarding his novels' sales.[347] He visited the graves of Keats and Shelley, climbed the Vesuvius and visited Pompeii.[348] Then went to Rome, Florence and Venice, in which he finished planning his next novel, *The Emancipated* (1890). Going to Florence, he spent some time in Bologna, and these are the words he dedicated to the city in his diaries:

> "Bologna is a wonderful old town. All the streets have broad arcades on both sides, so that people here never need carry umbrellas. There is a leaning tower, indeed it leans frightfully; I shouldn't care to live under it. Bologna has always been renowned for its good cheer, and such fat shops. I never saw, wonderful kinds of butter and cheese; cakes incredible! An uproarious place, too; I scarcely got any sleep for the row in the street all night. Excellent music in many of the cafés, and, indeed, a few organs in the streets."[349]

Unsurprisingly, *The Emancipated* is partially set in Naples and surroundings.[350] As I mentioned before, he decided to put aside the subject of the poor to focus on a more general insight of

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[342] ivi, 119-120.
[343] ivi, 121.
[344] ivi, 129.
[345] ibid.
[346] Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea,* 20.
[347] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 125.
[348] ivi, 126-127.
[349] Gissing, *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family,* 276.
[350] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 130.

industrial society.[351] But again, he was tormented by uncertainties and – also – interrupted by several obstacles during his writing process. His friend Roberts got involved in a brawl and was arrested.[352] Nonetheless, *The Emancipated* was published and it was the first of a series of novels centred on the middle class,[353] the high point of which he will touch in 1891 with the publication of *New Grub Street*, one of the objects of my study. For *The Emancipated,* Gissing earned another one hundred and fifty pounds which, again, were spent in a journey: towards the end of 1889, he visited Greece.[354] He then returned to Naples at the beginning of the following year, and in January fell ill, due to a respiratory disorder.[355] He went back to England just a month later, and in March *The Emancipated* was finally published. Meanwhile, he made the acquaintance of his future second wife: a woman from the working-class, named Edith Underwood, daughter of a shopkeeper.[356]

New Grub Street came out in 1891 and is universally considered Gissing's masterpiece.[357] For obvious reasons, I will for now skip this novel, and all the strain regarding its publication, which happens to be one of the next subchapters' main object.

Just after his second marriage, he started and finished writing a new novel in a range of six months, which was to be published only in 1892 with the name *Born in Exile.* It was the beginning of an incredibly intense productive period, going from 1891 to 1897, which drained Gissing's mental health.[358] *Denzil Quarrier* and *Born in Exile* were published in 1892; *The Odd Women* in 1893; *In the Year of Jubilee* in 1894; *Eve's Ransom*, *The Paying Guest*, and *Sleeping Fires* in 1895; and *The Whirlpool* in 1897.[359] Gissing, despite the success of *New Grub Street,* still laid in terrible economic conditions.[360] Nonetheless, he accepted another one hundred and fifty pounds – except commissions – for the publication of the novel, which again caused Gissing more than a little trouble. In his diaries, on March 29th, 1891, he wrote:

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[351] ibid.
[352] ivi, 131.
[353] ivi, 133.
[354] ivi, 146.
[355] ivi, 148.
[356] ivi, 151.
[357] ivi, 155; Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 92; Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 2.
[358] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 32.
[359] ibid.
[360] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 167.

> "On receiving final proofs of "Born in Exile", found that vol. III runs only to 249pp. This is too short. Resolved to insert a chapter before the last, and wrote to publishers saying this should be sent."[361]

Born in Exile, like *New Grub Street*, is representative of Gissing's bitter criticism towards society, with a strong autobiographical component in it: it tells the story of an intellectual incapable to escape his limitations due to class position and poverty.[362] This is the meaning of "born in exile": born to the wrong social class.[363] It is a key book in understanding what I was stating at the beginning of this biography, namely the importance of the connections between the author's life and his works.[364] In 1892 Gissing turned to another couple of publishers, whose names were Lawrence and Bullen. In Bullen especially he found a more reassuring and cooperative person, and it was him that published his next novel, *Denzil Quarrier* (1892).[365]

Along with *The Nether World*, *The Odd Women* (1893) is probably the most miserable and depressing of all of Gissing's novels.[366] It is the first time for the author to touch upon the theme of female emancipation. Alice and Virginia Madden are two victims of the Victorian concept of femininity: they are unmarried and unmarriageable, and therefore excluded from society.[367] Their younger sister Monica is the only one who manages to get married, but her marriage soon falls apart, and so does her own life, as she dies of childbirth.[368]

At the beginning of 1894, after a short yet unsuccessful effort to earn some money by the publication of short stories, Gissing joined the Society of Authors: it was a desperate attempt to disengage from the dependency that tied him to publishers, morally and economically.[369] The same year, *In the Year of the Jubilee* (1894) was published. Swinnerton highlights Gissing's decline, by defining the novel as "an elaborately but ill constructed book showing signs of exhaustion".[370] Then he once again chose the path of the short story: after an unsuccessful May, in June he completed *Eve's Ransom*, the first of the year's publications, which is another story

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[361] Coustillas, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: the Diary of George Gissing, Novelist,* 274.
[362] Gordan, *George Gissing, 1857-1903; an Exhibition from the Berg Collection*, 21.
[363] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 169.
[364] ibid.
[365] ivi, 179-180.
[366] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 107.
[367] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 188.
[368] ibid.
[369] ivi, 194.
[370] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 118.

of love.[371] It was published the following year in the *Illustrated London News*, and sold well as a six-shilling serialized volume.[372] In the meantime, his second marriage as well was on the way to be shattered, and living with his wife became almost unbearable for Gissing. This is a note of his from October 1894, found in one of his diaries (E. stands for Edith, his wife):

> "Today, the little boy has not been very well, owing to wet weather. At eight o'clock to-night, as E. did not come down to supper, I went quietly to the bedroom door, to listen, as I often do, whether the boy was asleep. To my amazement I heard E. call out "Stop your noise, you little beast!" This to the poor little chap, because he could not get to sleep. And why not? Because the flaring light of a lamp was in the room. I have begged – begged again and again that she will never take a lamp into the bedroom, but she is too lazy to light a candle, and then uses such language as I have written. But for my poor little boy, I would not, and could not, live with her for another day. I have no words for the misery I daily endure from her selfish and coarse nature."[373]

The Paying Guest (1895), which followed, is a well-executed satirical novella, and one of Gissing's "best attempts at comedy",[374] despite dealing with the already mentioned issue of social belonging and manners. In the same period, he also strengthened his allegiance with writers George Meredith, who praised him for his brilliant imagination, and Thomas Hardy, who was just writing *Jude the Obscure* (1895).[375] His friendship with Hardy did not prevent him, though, from defining the book some years later as "far from good, simply a bitter attack upon the cruelty of the Universe".[376] He eventually gave up short stories at the end of the year and started writing a new full-length novel.[377] It turned out to be one of his most toilsome and re-written works, it took him almost a year to finish it and at the end of 1896 he entitled it *The Whirlpool.* This novel, just like *New Grub Street*, will be the object of a separate, deeper analysis.

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[371] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 198.
[372] ivi, 199.
[373] Coustillas, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: the Diary of George Gissing, Novelist,* 350.
[374] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 204.
[375] ibid.
[376] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 333.
[377] ivi, 205.

The Whirlpool came out in 1897 and, just two months later, Gissing left his house. Apparently, from what Roberts tells in his fictionalized Gissing's biography, his wife had abused him physically and verbally in an outburst of rage which he could not tolerate.[378] He recounts:

> "As he was drying himself he broke out suddenly: "I can't stand it any more. I have left her for ever." I said: "Thank heaven that you have. I am very glad of it — and for every one's sake don't go back on it.""[379]

He went to stay to a friend's house, a doctor whose name was Harry Hick, who examined him and told him that the respiratory disease that struck him almost ten years before was getting more serious.[380] In May, however, Gissing broke his promise and returned home where he was soon rejoined by his wife.[381] It was especially in this period that he was doing historical and literary research and, in fact, his critical study of Dickens came out a year later, in 1898.[382] In the same year, he published the humorous novel *The Town Traveller* (1898), which was expressly written, as he wrote to a friend, to make money.[383] Unexpectedly, it gained Gissing three hundred and fifty pounds, more than any other book he had ever written.[384] Peace at home was not destined to last, however: Gissing and his wife broke up another time in September 1897, and this time for good.[385]

Towards the end of the month, he travelled back to Italy, specifically to Siena, where he was hosted by the Gabrielli family for a month.[386] He then travelled to the south, to begin his journey along the coasts of Calabria, which he described in his popular *By The Ionian Sea* (1897).[387] Gissing re-established in London in May, 1898. Edith was seeking incessantly for him and, when she finally found him, she brought with her their youngest son, Alfred: this was the last time he ever saw them.[388] In the meantime, he met another woman: a French translator, named Gabrielle Fleury, who earned the permission to translate *New Grub Street.* They started an epistolary relationship which soon turned into love, and it was Gissing's last glimpse of

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[378] Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 200.
[379] ibid.
[380] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 210.
[381] ivi, 211
[382] ibid.
[383] ivi, 212.
[384] Coustillas, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: the Diary of George Gissing, Novelist,* 482-483.
[385] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 212.
[386] ivi, 214.
[387] ivi, 219.
[388] ivi, 226.

happiness: Gabrielle represented the aristocratic, educated woman he had always longed for, and Gissing was struck by her knowledge and her conversational abilities.[389] By the middle of January 1899, he finished writing *The Crown of Life* (1899). Gissing and Fleury were never able to marry officially, as he never officially divorced form Edith, but they were able to hold a private ceremony in May.[390]

The author's health was withering away more and more, but he still managed to publish *Our Friend the Charlatan* in 1901, which earned him another three hundred and fifty pounds.[391] Between September and October of the previous year, he had already written most of the pages of what was going to be published under the name *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903). Korg claims it to be the most successful and stylistically refined book by Gissing, and to have earned the status of a minor classic.[392] Always characterized by some kind of autobiographical connotation – which, actually, the author hoped for the readers not to pay too much attention to[393] – the last of Gissing's novels is a confession of a middle-aged writer, who retires and meditates upon his own life.[394]

Against the wishes of Gabrielle, in 1901 he left France and went to a sanatorium in Suffolk, England, where his health conditions mildly improved.[395] In December, however, he wrote this letter to his sister Ellen:

> "After a good deal of miserable experiment and consultation, I seem to have got at the truth about my lungs. I am threatened with gradual hardening of all the surface, which, if it went on, would of course stop all breathing, and so extinguish me."[396]

In February 1902, Gissing got the news that Edith had been arrested and interned in an asylum.[397] After some wondering – for the author's state of health required him to breath fresh air and to avoid dwelling in large cities – he and Fleury decided to move to the French Pyrenees.[398] He would never make return to England. With great difficulty,[399] he finished writing *Will Warburton* (1905), which he would never see published. Gissing's last destination

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[389] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 274.
[390] Hall, "George Gissing", in *British Short-Fiction Writers, 1880-1914: the Realist Tradition,* 128.
[391] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 236.
[392] ivi, 239-240.
[393] ivi, 244.
[394] ivi, 240.
[395] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 326.
[396] Gissing, *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family,* 378.
[397] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 331.
[398] ivi, 333.
[399] ivi, 341.

was a small French town, Ispoure. In December 1903, during an ill-conceived walk in the cold, he caught a fever, which soon progressed to pneumonia and made the author's lungs definitively succumb.[400] After a week of terrible sufferings, on December 28th, 1903, George Robert Gissing passed away.

2.4. Gissing and writing: his temperament, poetics, and contradictions

Before diving into the analysis of the two novels of my choice, and hence conclude this second chapter, I would like to anticipate the interweaving patterns between the present and the next chapter or – better to say – the next author, George Orwell. The link between the two authors is more than just mere affinity, or likelihood. Orwell was a real worshipper of Gissing, and in an essay-review that he wrote in 1947 (which was then published in 1960 on the *London Magazine*), he summarized Gissing's intellectual temperament in a sentence which, in my opinion, fits perfectly in this chapter and in this whole dissertation:

> "Gissing was a bookish, perhaps over-civilized man, in love with classical antiquity, who found himself trapped in a cold, smoky, Protestant country where it is impossible to be comfortable without a thick padding of money between yourself and the outer world."[401]

Of this essay I will presently speak no more, as it will be the subject of the beginning of the last chapter of my work. However, let me resume from this starting point to touch upon some important aspects of Gissing's personality and poetics, which I willingly left out when I was presenting his life.

"A bookish, perhaps over-civilized man" seems even reductive: in reality, the scope of Gissing's cultural knowledge, and his dedication to literature, was beyond imagination. He could read with ease in Greek, Latin, Italian, French and German, besides English.[402] He took responsibility for the education of his siblings, and their literacy when they were fully grown up as well: from a letter he sent to his sister, containing reading advises, we can induce much of his range. He had a real obsession with Greek and Latin classics, and regarded Walter Scott as their peer, as one of the "indispensable writers".[403] His obsession with classicism was also at the root of his idealisation of Italy, as a perfect match of the two ancient cultures he loved the most: the Roman and the Greek. Apart from what I said, he mentions Dante, Boccaccio, Goethe,

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[400] ivi, 347.
[401] Orwell, "George Gissing", in *London Magazine*.
[402] Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 295.
[403] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 76.

Molière, Balzac, Milton, and Keats as other indispensable writers, just to name a few.[404] He does not mention – but we do not need to read it from this letter to certify the influence they had on him – what he considers "less indispensable" authors: German philosophers (Kant and Schopenhauer above all), Dickens, and George Eliot.[405] This brings me to his style and his poetics.

Gissing was no experimental writer: his novels pretty much follow the conventions of the time, and he was not interested in testing the boundaries of the genre.[406] He was much more influenced by authors like Dickens and George Eliot than others like Hardy or Henry James.[407] He was, in every way, a naturalist writer. His mentor Frederic Harrison, as I mentioned before, was the first to note his naturalist manner and accuracy, bringing him close to the naturalist attitude of Zola, whom he did not appreciate at all. And Korg as well states that:

> "Like Zola, he regarded faithful perception of actuality as a necessary preliminary for writing. Zola was, of course, the standard contemporary example of reportorial accuracy in fiction."[408]

It is also worth noting, however, that Gissing's level of esteem for Zola was the same of the typical English literate man at the time: extremely low.[409] The only novels that display some similarities with the French master of naturalism are, indeed, the first ones dealing with the lower classes which are, by the way, Gissing's less memorable works.[410] Even Frederick W. Farrar, an important critic of the late nineteenth-century, wrote in a long essay on Gissing's *The Nether World*, on the *Contemporary Review* section on *The Guardian,* that the author's realism had "nothing to do with the leprous naturalism of Zola and his school."[411] Anyway, the label of "English Zola" was attached to Gissing more than frequently at the time he was writing.[412] Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, in an article from 1976, preferred to speak of Gissing's poetics as "the nearest British equivalent to a genuine post-Flaubertian naturalism".[413]

Naturalism, obviously, goes along with positivism: one of Gissing's strongest influences, especially in his first works, was Comte and the whole movement of the *Philosophie Positive*

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[404] ibid.
[405] ibid.
[406] Morton, "George Gissing: An Introduction".
[407] ibid.
[408] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 100.
[409] ivi, 128.
[410] ibid.
[411] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 121.
[412] ivi, 212.
[413] Jameson, *Authentic Ressentiment: The "Experimental" Novels of Gissing, in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 129.

that emerged in the second half of the century.[414] In an unusual fit of enthusiasm, he wrote – in a letter to his friend Bertz – that *Entwicklungsfreiheit* (freedom of evolution) was the only principle of life in this world, whether we liked it or not.[415] Comte was even one of the reading advises given by the author to Algernon, his brother. The appreciation of Comte's ideals reflected Gissing's delusional early approach to society, when the idea was there that society could indeed be changed by means of rationality. And such an interest was logically going to wither away together with Gissing's hopes: he had already rejected positivism before the publication of *The Unclassed*, in 1884, and the faith in humanism as the only guiding principle for human beings.[416] "The Hope of Pessimism", an essay which the author never published and which came to us posthumously, shattered all positivistic beliefs and reduced them to a sterile optimistic hope which undermined any moral responsibility of men,[417] which Gissing had no intention whatsoever to renounce to. His pessimistic drift is coupled with his position in concerning religious beliefs: Gissing is part of that agnostic movement of Victorian intellectuals who were troubled by the impossibility for both science and religion to answer the questions about the metaphysical sphere and, therefore, turned to agnosticism.[418] However, agnosticism was never a satisfying answer for the author: instead, it was the perfect representation of the miserable ignorance that all humans share, and that condemns them to a perpetual clouding of the spirit.[419] The initial quote by Orwell highlights also Gissing's awareness with the rampant materialism which had invaded Victorian society. Korg subscribes to this point of view, and states that:

> "The events of the time reported in the newspapers convinced Gissing that he was living in a materialist society which had no nobility of spirit. […] When many thousands of pounds were spent to erect an ornamental statue of a griffin in Fleet Street, and it was then found that the griffin interfered with traffic, Gissing saw in the ugliness of the statue and the wasteful muddle of the whole affair typical reflections of the period's state of mind."[420]

This will be a key point in the analysis of *New Grub Street* as well.

Gissing's attitude towards writing and working in general is described by Korg as some kind of obsessive self-imposition: he was exceedingly self-critical, always unsure, never calm, or

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[414] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 171.
[415] ibid.
[416] Harsh, *Gissing's the Unclassed and the Perils of Naturalism*, 918.
[417] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 47.
[418] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 176.
[419] ivi, 177.
[420] ivi, 55.

methodical.[421] His temperament was extremely moody, and writing became very soon an "agonizing struggle for him".[422] In his life, he has often lived under a monastic regime of seclusion and solitude that mined both his temper and his well-being,[423] especially at the beginning of his career. By 1885, he had already been writing for years, but was barely able to earn a dignified living, and could not abandon tutoring for many years.[424] Roberts asserts that his seclusion should not be attributed purely to his literary pursuits: he was really afraid of society, tremendously careful about what other people thought about him, and with a "very natural fear that some brute […] might suddenly and unexpectedly expose his ancient history"[425] – his juvenile felony robbery conviction.

It seems to me that Gissing's reception at the time he was writing is almost similar to the critical reception he has gained throughout decades after his death. Hall states that despite being an exceptionally prolific writer – bear in mind that he published twenty-two novels in twenty-three years, from 1880 to 1903, plus two posthumous novels and additional critical works and countless short stories – his following has remained relatively small.[426] Korg says the same about the author's own feeling when he was alive: he thought he had gained his respectability among just a small circle of readers.[427] In addition to this, we must mention that he was perpetually unhappy with the critical reception that his novels received, and he often felt misunderstood – as if the readers ignored the artistic aspects of his work just to criticize characters' opinions.[428] That was the case of both *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Unclassed*, the latter especially, which brought Gissing to quarrel even with Harrison and to defend himself from the easy accusation of being one with the opinions of his characters.[429] Actually, Gissing never let his characters explain everything: Swinnerton points out the element of muddiness which is always present in his novels, and that is to be attributed both to his own consciousness of his defects as an author and by the lack of trust in the sympathy and comprehension of the average reader.[430] But that conflict between the aesthetic and the moral experience of his novels is the same conflict that he was fighting himself, book after book, to achieve that objectivity

[421] ivi, 61.
[422] ibid.
[423] ivi, 76.
[424] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 59.
[425] Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 152.
[426] Hall, "George Gissing", in *British Short-Fiction Writers, 1880-1914: the Realist Tradition,* 117.
[427] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 202.
[428] ivi, 67.
[429] ibid.
[430] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 51.

that he never managed.[431] As a social novelist, he probably lacked something in coherence when tackling the issue of poverty. Critics agree that he was bound to a double-sided, contradictory attitude and rhetoric. On the one hand his aim has always been openly social, as I widely demonstrated when talking about his life. On the other hand, his writing and his whole personality were characterized by some kind of snobbish attitude which he never truly abandoned. See this quote by Halperin, for instance, when he praises the artistic value of his novel *The Nether World*:

> "In *The Nether World* Gissing looks at poverty longer and harder than anywhere else, regarding the poor with his characteristic contempt, but also with the new passionate conviction that something has gone wrong in the social organism the new understanding that settled upon him in the aftermath of Nell's death."[432]

In fact, in *The Nether World* the outlook provided on the lower classes, as I already mentioned before, is that of a world of animality, ruled by disorder and animosity.[433] Korg claims that this snobbery came from Gissing's profound conviction that the miserable life led by the working-class was simply the result of the materialism and competitiveness produced by industrialisation, which "favored the survival of the harshest, the cruelest, the most unscrupulous, and these, in accordance with evolutionary doctrine, came to dominate it".[434] This conviction did not prevent him, though, from being disgusted by the barbarism and the lack of culture which the people of the lower classes shared.[435] "Vulgar" was a favourite word of his, which was in his eyes the perfect summary of the poor's attitude: they lacked taste in all fields, for their intellect was insufficiently trained, but they also displayed a childish, naïve disposition.[436] His opinion on the lower classes could be viewed, also, under the light of his staunch support of Percy Shelley's romantic ideal of imagination as the site of human moral faculties and, therefore, of the cultivation of imagination as a preliminary requisite for the good functioning of society.[437] This passage is taken from an unsigned review of *Workers in the Dawn* written in 1880 on the *Athenaeum*, and is so symbolic – even if applied just to the early stages of the author – that it is quoted in almost every critical work on Gissing I have come across:

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[431] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 69.
[432] Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, 109.
[433] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 114.
[434] ivi, 90.
[435] ivi, 261.
[436] ivi, 104.
[437] ivi, 90.

> "Whether the light which illumines Mr Gissing's hero and heroine be that of dawn or twilight may be a matter of opinion, but some people think the social difficulties of over-population and pauperism may be redressed by rousing the passions of the poor, and others that religion may be usefully replaced by an amalgam of Schopenhauer, Comte, and Shelley. To both these opinions our author is an enthusiastic subscriber."[438]

Gissing also forms part, indirectly for the most, of the debate around nature and nurture, heredity and *milieu*, conservatism and radicalism, which was a topical theme in the Victorian Age. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was one of the most important driving forces for environment, or nurture: yet, Gissing was not particularly impressed by the work.[439] On the contrary, he was never able to get rid of a certain conservatism which made him give great value to heredity in shaping the character of the person, even though in his novels both factors share the same importance. In fact, his conviction that poverty was, after all, an inherited trait which people could not escape nor hide – both morally and physically – was too deep-rooted.[440] This also led him to a profound distrust in mass education, which may seem in contradiction to his love for Shelley and the importance he attributed to culture.[441] Gissing failed to see mass education as a possible solution, and this is explained well in his novel *Thyrza*, by the character of Egremont:

> "With the mud at the bottom of society we can practically do nothing; only the vast changes to be wrought by time will cleanse that foulness, by destroying the monstrous wrong which produces it. What I should like to attempt would be the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanic class. At present they are all but wholly in the hands of men who can do them nothing but harm – journalists, socialists, vulgar propagators of what is called freethought. These all work against culture."[442]

2.5. *New Grub Street*

2.5.1. The toils of publishing in the Victorian Age and the novel's relevance

> "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

[438] Coustillas, *Gissing: the Critical* Heritage, 51.
[439] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 145.
[440] ivi, 88-89.
[441] ivi, 105.
[442] Gissing, *Thyrza*, 39.

> problem of the writing of novels, and the preservation of a novelistic totality, in the face of the raw materials of class society."[443]

In the biographical introduction to the Oxford edition of *New Grub Street*, written by Katherine Mullin, we read that "the publication of *New Grub Street* in 1891 marked a shift in Gissing's fortunes".[444] As I mentioned in the previous subchapters, the novel can be defined as his most mature work. Orwell himself claims it to be "the most impressive of Gissing's books".[445] Swinnerton, instead, calls it "an extraordinarily fine, and, within Gissing's limitations, a richly characterised, study of professional literary life".[446] It is mesmerizing to think that the author, in desperate need for money, wrote the whole book between October and December 1890, at a speed of four thousand words per day.[447] Fuelled by the beginning of his relationship with Edith[448] – he needed an income to marry her indeed – he gathered his imaginative power like never before and, in just two months, wrote probably his most memorable work. Before going any further, it is crucial to contextualize this novel in the editorial and literary environment of the late nineteenth century, and to explain why the writing of a book like this was necessary.

Critics agree on the fact that *New Grub Street* is the first English novel to delve into the private sphere of writers in a so pure, precise, and meticulous way.[449] There is a precise reason for that: the wave of consumerism that I mentioned in the first sections of the chapter did not spare the field of literature, and the process of publication became more and more disadvantageous for writers. Moreover, the fear of a sort of tyranny of readership was instilling in the mind of literary England, and less commercial authors were the most to be struck by this tyranny.[450] In an 1892 book, almost contemporary to the publication of *New Grub Street*, Sir Samuel Squire Sprigge – who was to become president of the Society of Authors in 1911 – exposed the rights of the authors and the dishonesty of publishers, as a warning for writers. He illustrated the many ways in which books could be sold by their authors. The simplest one was what he calls the "Sale Out-right" – that is to say – the writer sells his book to a publishing house for a pre-established sum, leaving all the risk to the publisher. Needless to say that this method forced the author to

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[443] Jameson, *Authentic Ressentiment: The "Experimental" Novels of Gissing, in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 134.
[444] Mullin, "Biographical Preface", in *New Grub Street*, vii.
[445] Orwell, "George Gissing", in *London Magazine*.
[446] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 92.
[447] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 151.
[448] ibid.
[449] ivi, 154; Collie, *Gissing's Revision of "New Grub Street"*, in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 212.
[450] Díaz Lage, *Naturalism and Modes of Literary Production in George Gissing's "New Grub Street"*, in *Atlantis*, 75.

accept ridiculously low amounts of money, just to avoid starvation.[451] Or, alternatively, it was a choice made by naïve, young writers who did not have a clue about editorial business and did not see beyond the little sum that was offered to them.[452] Direct purchase was avoided even, and especially, by publishers themselves, who did not have enough capital to buy all books.[453] A more common method was half-profit system: risks, and incomes, were shared fifty-fifty by publisher and writer.[454] Even more common, and modern, was the royalty system: the publisher produced the book at his own cost, and the writer would gain a royalty on every copy sold – either from the beginning, or from a certain number of copies sold above, or until the costs of production have been covered.[455] In any case profits were low, and this is to be attributed also to the spreading of lending system. Charles Edward Mudie, founder of the "Mudie's Select Library", monopolized the literary market and became the standard upon which the choices of editors were made: if a novel did not fit the taste of Mudie's readers, it would have been rejected by publishers.[456] The custom of books lending replaced that of buying, for it was way less expensive for the average reader; this dramatically impoverished all writers.[457] Gissing had somehow accepted this idea, and resigned himself to write for subsistence and nothing more than that – as even Thomas Hardy was not able to earn much from the sales of his books.[458] It is important to bear in mind this context as we now come to introduce Reardon, the protagonist of the novel.

Edwin Reardon is a thirty-two years old writer, who looks much older in his appearance, as on his face one can detect "the pallor of mental suffering".[459] He is a writer, and his creativity currently lays in a terrible state: he fails to put one word after the other and to build even the simplest sentences. He is married to a tomboyish, bad-tempered girl of twenty-two, named Amy. Mr Reardon, his father, was a man who "followed many different pursuits, and in none had done much more than earn a livelihood".[460] His mother, on the other hand, died when Edwin was just fifteen. As a young man, he received a very solid education, and by the age of eighteen he was already familiar with most of the ancient classics and was able to read and speak French.

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[451] Sprigge, *The Methods of Publishing*, 26-27.
[452] ivi, 33.
[453] ivi, 30.
[454] ivi, 37.
[455] ivi, 56.
[456] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 154-155.
[457] ivi, 155.
[458] ivi, 157.
[459] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 42.
[460] ivi, 51.

When his father died too – when Edwin was nineteen – he inherited the sum of two hundred pounds, his father's life insurance. He started writing critical works, but then was advised to turn to fiction, even if he was not naturally attracted to it. He worked for three years in a hospital's secretary office, and in the meantime got acquainted with a writer named John Yule. He first met Amy, John's niece, while visiting the Yules house; ten weeks after, they got married. Marrying a girl like Amy Yule was the dream of a lifetime for Reardon, he was "rapt to the seventh heaven":[461] beautiful, intellectual, he always felt deep reverence towards her and since the beginning of their marriage they established a deep intellectual correspondence.

The Yule family is presented by Gissing in the second chapter of the novel. The family consisted of three brothers: John, Alfred, and Edmund. The three of them grew up very well-educated, from a comfortable social position. However, growing older, they failed to get along well with each other: John and Edmund quarrelled, and unfortunately Edmund died at the age of forty. He was married and had one only child, Amy herself. John's life has been grim too: his wife died just three years after their marriage and left him childless. He retired from literary business, developed an interest in sports but then became an invalid, due to a rheumatic fever. Alfred is still a man of letters and has a daughter too, whose name is Marian, Miss Yule. The other key family is presented in the first chapter, and that is the family of Jasper Milvain. Milvain is a young writer of twenty-five, thin, pale, but well built. His father died years before, he was a veterinary surgeon. Now Mrs Milvain lives as a widow with her daughters: Maud, a music teacher, and Dora, a governess. Jasper visits the house twice a year. The relationship between him and his sisters is not brilliant, as he still does not earn enough money to be economically independent from the family.

2.5.2. Reardon and Milvain: two opposite poles

The novel is based on the juxtaposition of two kinds of literary man and on their divergent views of the concept of literature, as Swinnerton writes as well in his critical study of the author.[462] Similarly, Collie states that *New Grub Street* "is made to depend upon a straightforward contrast between a type of literary failure and a type of literary success".[463] The first kind of literary man is Milvain, who is presented in the very first pages of the novel and depicted as a young, canny, and extremely opportunistic writer. The second page of the book already puts success in front of failure, in the words of the young man, and tells the reader much

[461] ivi, 58.
[462] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 93.
[463] Collie, *Gissing's Revision of "New Grub Street"*, in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 214.

about his character and mentality. When talking about a man who was just sentenced to death, this is what he says:

> "A man who comes to be hanged has the satisfaction of knowing that he has brought society to his last resource. He is a man of such fatal importance that nothing will serve against him but the supreme effort of law. In a way, you know, that is *success*."[464]

And then, when he receives a letter from his friend Reardon, who tells him of his bad moment:

> "He isn't the kind of man to keep up literary production as a paying business. In favourable circumstances he might write a fairly good book once every two or three years. The *failure* of his last depressed him, and now he's struggling hopelessly to get another done before the winter season. Those people will come to grief."[465]

He also claims himself to be "a stronger man than Reardon", and that he can "keep his eyes open, and wait".[466] Even more importantly, he states that Reardon is the "old type of unpractical artist", and he, instead, is the "literary man of 1882".[467] Again, he says:

> "I am learning my business. Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is a successful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets."[468]

> "We talk of literature as a trade, not of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. If I could only get that into poor Reardon's head. […] We are not geniuses, and if we sit down in a spirit of long-eared gravity we shall produce only commonplace stuff. Let us use our wits to earn money, and make the best we can of our lives."[469]

The statement "literature nowadays is a trade" perfectly sums up the materialistic shift of the Victorian Age, its consumerism, and the chaotic and difficult environment of publishing. Díaz Lage identifies two different impulses in the end-of-the-century literary crisis. On the one hand, a subjective factor, which concretized in the movement of Aestheticism and the "art for art's sake" ideal, with novels such as Huysmans' *Au Rebours* (1884), D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* (1889), and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). This subjective impulse co-existed with an objective one, namely the birth in Britain of the modern publishing house and the

[464] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 6.
[465] ibid.
[466] ivi, 7.
[467] ivi, 8.
[468] ibid.
[469] ivi, 12-13.

demise of the patronage system in favour of a larger public of readers; this, obviously, implying that writers must now comply and attain to the requests of the mainstream.[470] Milvain is the literary man of 1882 because he understands that the key to success does not lie in the hands of the author's creativity and originality, but in his ability to adapt to the market and to the publishers' requests. And success is, obviously, to be measured in materialistic terms: a successful novel is a novel that sells a lot, and well, regardless of its content. That is the reason why the successful man of letters is a successful businessman. Milvain stresses the importance of money-making in literary business and in life in general, because without it, he says, "one spends the best part of one's life in toiling for that first foothold which money could at once purchase".[471] Orwell himself, in the same article on Gissing, says that in the late Victorian era:

> "Money was a nuisance not merely because without it you starved; what was more important was that unless you had quite a lot of it — £300 a year, say — society would not allow you to live gracefully or even peacefully."[472]

To have money was to have friends, acquaintances, and the writer with no money would struggle to succeed because his work would be overwhelmed by other writers richer than him.[473] And this is what happens in the novel. To Milvain, "poverty" is the worst word that may come out of the English vocabulary, and it is "the root of all social ills; its existence accounts even for the ills that arise from wealth".[474] This mirrors Reardon's statement when he finally gets paid the pages he wrote:

> "Blessed money! Root of all good, until the world invent some saner economy."[475]

At the other end of the spectrum of writers, Edwin Reardon is suffering because of his sterility in writing; he is so idealist, however, that he shudders when he hears his wife pronounce the word "market", and cannot come to accept the fact that, as Amy tells him, he must now write for the market and cannot afford to hate the word.[476] The description Reardon makes about his own writer's block is beautiful:

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[470] Díaz Lage, *Naturalism and Modes of Literary Production in George Gissing's "New Grub Street"*, in *Atlantis*, 75.
[471] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 26.
[472] Orwell, "George Gissing", in *London Magazine*.
[473] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 26.
[474] ivi, 29.
[475] ivi, 137.
[476] ivi, 44.

> "Perhaps I am only out of sorts. But I begin to be horribly afraid. My will seems to be fatally weakened. I can't see my way to the end of anything; if I get hold of an idea which seems good, all the sap has gone out of it before I have got it into working shape. In these last few months, I must have begun a dozen different books; I have been ashamed to tell you of each new beginning. I write twenty pages, perhaps, and then my courage fails. I am disgusted with the thing, and *can't* go on with it—*can't*! My fingers refuse to hold the pen. In mere writing, I have done enough to make much more than three volumes; but it's all destroyed."[477]

His wife fails to sympathize with him and instead scornfully reproaches him for not making enough money – of which he is already conscious, as he states that his "due course of things is troubled by his poverty".[478] She accuses him of weakness and tries to persuade him in accepting that literature, like all arts, has become business. It is Amy herself who puts her husband in comparison with Milvain, as to treat literature as trade business is "what Mr Milvain is always saying";[479] Reardon replies that his temperament is very different from Milvain's. "He is naturally light-hearted and hopeful; I am naturally the opposite",[480] he states. There is also a passage in which they discuss money and morality, the two main issues of my discourse. Amy claims the former to be more powerful than the latter, as she states:

> "But I know the value of money better now. I know it is the most powerful thing in the world. If I had to choose between a glorious reputation with poverty and a contemptible popularity with wealth, I should choose the latter."[481]

And the same would be done, probably, by Milvain. But not by the idealist Reardon, who blames himself both for his lack of money and for his want of it – explicitly saying: "All that's wrong is my accursed want of money".[482] This, however, does not mean that Reardon is the only positive character, nor that Amy or Milvain are immoral characters; they are just conscious of the world they are living in and try to make the best out of what nature has given them, especially Jasper.[483] This is indicative of the fact that Gissing does not make distinctions and does not compel his characters to choose between a bright side and a dark side: in his novel – and this will have even more relevance in *The Whirlpool* – people are pawns in a larger scheme. It is the whole world whose morality has become corrupted, not the single individuals'. Reardon

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[477] ibid.
[478] ivi, 69.
[479] ivi, 46.
[480] ibid.
[481] ivi, 47.
[482] ivi, 70.
[483] Collie, *Gissing's Revision of "New Grub Street"*, in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 215.

and Milvain, despite their differences, do not avoid nor hate each other.[484] When, for instance, Milvain visits Amy, as he often does, and Reardon finds him home when he comes back, he does not get angry at him, but he invites him to stay for dinner. The absence in his novels of somebody who can be pointed to as the villain is something that Orwell highlights as well.[485]

Having said that the novel's central theme is the contrast between Reardon and Milvain, there are also other characters who embody different types of literary men, and who are worth mentioning. The first I would like to talk about is Mr John Yule, the old, widowed, and childless former writer who has retired from literary life. Milvain has a discussion with him when he goes visiting his house, in the second chapter of the novel. The two discuss literature, and they strongly disagree on one point. John would like to see the business of literature abolished and swept away, and he boycotts the idea of literature as a mean of civilisation. This – it seems to me – follows much of Gissing's distrust towards mass education, of which he spoke about also in *Thyrza*, as I mentioned earlier. When Milvain claims that the good side of literary business is that it spreads civilisation, Mr Yule's reaction is strong and scornful:

> "'Civilisation!' exclaimed John, scornfully. 'What do you mean by civilisation? Do you call it civilising men to make them weak, flabby creatures, with ruined eyes and dyspeptic stomachs? […] You talk of civilising; there's no such way of civilising the masses of the people as by fixed military service. Before mental training must come training of the body. […] Do you suppose, Mr Milvain, that society is going to be reformed by you people who write for money? Why, you are the very first class that will be swept from the face of the earth as soon as the reformation really begins!'"[486]

The narrator echoes these words some pages later, when he states that "to the relatively poor, education is in most cases a mocking cruelty".[487] Mrs Yule, Marian's mother, reiterates Gissing's concern with poverty, saying that it "will make the best people bad, if it gets hard enough".[488]

Harold Biffen is another key character, and even Rowlinson mentions him as "the most obsessive character in the whole of Gissing's work".[489] He is another writer, whose body is terribly and dramatically worn-out by his poverty, which leads him onto the verge of starvation.

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[484] ibid.
[485] Orwell, "George Gissing", in *London Magazine*.
[486] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 22.
[487] ivi, 36.
[488] ivi, 78.
[489] Rawlinson, *A Man of Many Parts: Gissing's Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, 116.

Gissing describes him as an almost non-human being, so thin that he resembles a "human skeleton".[490] Reardon and him get along very well, as they share similar taste in literature, but Biffen's condition is even direr than the former's: he does not earn enough from his novels – not even close – and he is a teacher of whichever pupil he manages to find. He is, in Gissing's mind, the incarnation of "the realist", because he spends most of the time of the novel to try and finish writing, and publish, his novel "Mr Bailey Grocer":[491] he perfectly represents the author's conflicted ideas but real and concrete suffering.[492] Harold Biffen's parabola is probably the most miserable and tragic of the whole novel. He struggles to finish his book and, the evening in which he finally completes the last chapter of it, he takes a walk at night, as he is unable to sleep for the excitement. Yet, his walk is interrupted by the chaos of people shouting in the street, and he soon understands that a fire is raging nearby. His blood runs cold when he realizes that his own house is on fire:

> "He could now smell the smoke, and all at once a black volume of it, bursting from upper windows, alarmed his sight. At once he was aware that, if not his own dwelling, it must be one of those on either side that was in flames. […] By dint of violent effort Biffen moved forward yard by yard. A tongue of flame which suddenly illumined the fronts of the houses put an end to his doubt."[493]

Miraculously, he manages to rescue the only manuscript of his novel, and both him and his work survive. However, as he tries to get his novel published, two publishers turn him down. When he finally manages to get it published, the reviews are horrible, and he commits suicide. His death is the perfect embodiment of the uncertainty towards the fate of realist fiction[494] which, as I said before when I talked about Gissing's affiliation to Zola, was not viewed highly by the English literary environment. A very solid interpretation, in my opinion, is given by Matz's analysis of the novel: he states that Biffen's death mirrors the defeat of Realism at the hands of the Real[495] and – this I add myself – the victory of materialism over idealism. This idea is reinforced by a passage in which Gissing exposes his own disillusion in the reader's ability to sympathize for losers like Reardon and Biffen himself:

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[490] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 172.
[491] Matz, *George Gissing's Ambivalent Realism*, in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 215.
[492] ivi, 219.
[493] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 420.
[494] Matz, *George Gissing's Ambivalent Realism*, in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 246.
[495] ibid.

> "The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you. They seem to you inert, flabby, weakly envious, foolishly obstinate, impiously mutinous, and many other things. You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on; why don't they bestir themselves, push and bustle, welcome kicks so long as half-pence follow, make place in the world's eye—in short, take a leaf from the book of Mr Jasper Milvain? But try to imagine a personality wholly unfitted for the rough and tumble of the world's labour-market. From the familiar point of view these men were worthless."[496]

It is the "rough and tumble of the world's labour-market" which won, and those who do not comply are worthless losers.

2.5.3. A coherent ending: punishment and rewards

Poverty jeopardizes Amy and Reardon's relationship: unable to abide their condition of poverty, the woman takes their little son with her and leaves the house to go to her mother. Edwin's lack of self-assertion, which causes him "tremor of the nerves" which always interferes with "the line of conduct he has conceived in advance"[497], is responsible for Amy's stubbornness – obviously in the eye of a nineteenth-century man. What was to be a temporary solution becomes definitive, and the two depart despite Reardon's desperate efforts to cling to any shred of sympathy which could be left in Amy. Meanwhile, Marian and Milvain are growing more and more intimate, and Alfred's daughter is falling in love with the young man. Jasper, on his side, is reluctant to marry below his status, and therefore rejects Marian until she inherits a large sum of money from her uncle John. But when he is finally convinced and writes to his future father-in-law Alfred Yule, the dislike of the latter for the former's affiliation to Fadge, the editor of *The Current* magazine, who hates Yule – and Gissing already tells us at the beginning of the novel that Milvain's "intimate relations with him could not have survived his alliance with Fadge"[498] – causes the imminent marriage to collapse. Things change as Alfred discovers that he is going blind due to cataract, and much of Marian's inheritance is squandered for his care. The interest of Milvain, who is the kind of man whose "every step would be regulated by consideration of advantage"[499], obviously withers away.

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[496] Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 377.
[497] ivi, 202.
[498] ivi, 99.
[499] ivi, 100.

Part of John's inheritance also is assigned to Amy, his other niece. It is only when she gets her share of the inheritance that she writes a letter to her husband, calling him back. As she writes him, they "should never have spoken the words and thought the thoughts" which led them to split up, if they got that money before.[500] It is perhaps too easy to point out that the brutally materialistic portrait of society that Gissing does also invests marriage which is – just like in the minds of other Realists or Naturalists – a mere social contract based upon advantage, not love. Their reconciliation is however shattered by tragedy: Willie, their son, gets ill with diphtheria and dies. A beautiful passage describes the moment in which Reardon, and Biffen, receive the telegram from Amy which reports Willie's illness, and asks Reardon to join them as quickly as possible. Biffen is struck by the man's total lack of emotion and reaction – he even says that "the poor little fellow has no great place in his heart"[501] – and questions the "obstinate idealism" they share:

> "What are we—you and I? We have no belief in immortality; we are convinced that this life is all; we know that human happiness is the origin and end of all moral considerations. What right have we to make ourselves and others miserable for the sake of an obstinate idealism? It is our duty to make the best of circumstances. Why will you go cutting your loaf with a razor when you have a serviceable bread-knife?"[502]

This passage will, in a sense, mirror Gordon Comstock's words, when the protagonist of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* states that the only possible alternative to money-based society is religion, or death. I will mention this passage in my last chapter. Here, I believe, we find a similar idea: being human happiness the "origin and end of all moral consideration" – and it is easy to spot, once again, the Protestant influence on these words, even though religion is completely put aside, because "this life is all" – failure means misery, and misery implies the abnegation of life. This obstinate idealism will cost both Biffen and Reardon their lives. In fact, very sadly, Reardon soon follows Willie's destiny: the journey he underwent to see his dying son caused his feeble health to fall apart, and he dies from his fever just ten pages after, in a chapter which is curiously entitled "Reardon becomes practical". Once again, the juxtaposition between what is ideal and what is practical is crystal clear: Reardon becomes practical only when he lets his body succumb. He is visited on his deathbed by his good friend Biffen, to whom he leaves all

[500] ivi, 337.
[501] ivi, 390.
[502] ivi, 391.

the objects left in his room, and who will commit suicide just some months thereafter, as I already anticipated.

The final chapter – once again, symbolically – is entitled "Rewards". This word, in my view, summarizes the Protestant ideal of predestination: those who are chosen will be rewarded, not because they performed good deeds in life, but simply for the fact that they are chosen. Indeed, the final chapter closes the novel in, possibly, the most coherent and consistent way: Milvain, having abandoned the perspective of marrying Marian Yule, whose family's position was desperate, turns his attention to her cousin, the recently widowed Amy, against the will of his sisters – who hate her and blame her for Reardon's death. The two marry and Gissing ends his story by showing Mr and Mrs Milvain's house.

> "'Happiness is the nurse of virtue.'
> 'And independence the root of happiness.'
> 'True. "The glorious privilege of being independent"—yes, Burns understood the matter. Go to the piano, dear, and play me something. If I don't mind, I shall fall into Whelpdale's vein, and talk about my "blessedness." Ha! isn't the world a glorious place?'
> 'For rich people.'
> 'Yes, for rich people. How I pity the poor devils! —Play anything. Better still if you will sing, my nightingale!'
> So Amy first played and then sang, and Jasper lay back in dreamy bliss."[503]

Jasper, the practical and opportunistic writer, who is aligned with the spirit of the times, gets rewarded with Amy's company and affection. The world, Gissing says – through the voices of the characters – is a glorious place only for those who have money. And those who have money are successful – or vice versa –, like Milvain, for instance, is: therefore, they are rewarded with happiness, tranquillity of mind, and a long and fruitful life. In this view, money and success are the only keys to achieve morality: happiness, they say, is the root of virtue. But the root of happiness is independence, which can only mean economic independence. Rich people are happy, and therefore virtuous and, overall, good. Those who are poor and miserable, like Reardon and Biffen, make other people miserable as well, and are therefore immoral. Thus, they can only get punished. We will see how important and central this concept is in Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in a less tragic but equally nihilistic way.

[503] ivi, 456-457.

2.6. *The Whirlpool*

2.6.1. The destructive invisible hand, or the devilish whirlpool

> "Gissing thought of moral character as a complex whole whose smallest weakness leads to a general downfall. In his novels little dishonesties are the beginning of a crescendo of immorality that eventually leads to complete ruin, and the more trifling the first misstep, the more impressive is the ultimate disaster likely to be."[504]

If *New Grub Street* is often regarded as one of the best of Gissing's novels – and without doubt the most popular – the same cannot be said, unfortunately, for *The Whirlpool*, one of his last works, which came out in 1897. And the same facility with which *New Grub Street* was written does not belong to the present novel: *The Whirlpool* was one of the books which gave Gissing most trouble, as it involved a lot of revision and rewriting.[505] A critic defined it as "Gissing's most skilful novel in every respect", even though it has long been ignored.[506] The quote I started this subchapter with suggests, once again, a connection with Thomas Hardy, Gissing's contemporary and friend. Korg labels the novel as the closest to Hardy, in which the world is dominated by a "malevolent determinism", an invisible force which hovers over the world of the characters and influences their actions, often causing disastrous consequences.[507]

The protagonist of the novel, Harvey Rolfe – another man of letters, not by chance – is a totally average man: he is not old, nor young (we discover that he is thirty-seven); not poor, nor rich. Gissing tells the reader that he reads a lot, though he does not write. From a political point of view, he is a conservative. He is all but a sympathetic man, "which he recognised as the defect of his character".[508] He lives in a large house and owns lots of books. When he was younger, he lived in harsh poverty for some years, and even dwelled for some time in lodgings:

> "He had constantly before him the spectacle of human misery and defeat, now and then in such dread forms that his heart sank and his tongue refused to lie."[509]

We cannot avoid noticing at least a partial similitude between Harvey and his writer. However, if Reardon's character was shaped so accurately on Gissing as to make the reader almost mistake *New Grub Street* for the author's autobiography, the same cannot be said about Rolfe,

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[504] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 82.
[505] ivi, 207.
[506] Fernando, *"New Women" in the Late Victorian Novel*, 123.
[507] Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, 208.
[508] Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, 45.
[509] ivi, 23.

who shares nonetheless many aspects of his character with Gissing himself. The experience of poverty, for instance, above all, as we know how much the author struggled with his economic situation during his whole life. Rolfe's best friend is Hugh Carnaby, an image of the "perfect Englishman": strong, good-looking, "a slightly more intellectual brow would have made him the best type of conquering, civilising Briton".[510] He is married to Sybil, a cold and selfish woman whose face is so pure as to suggest no sensuality at all, as an ideal Victorian lady. She never loses her temper, even when she is upset. Everyone at the beginning of the novel talks about a certain Mr Frothingham: the reader comes to know that he is a popular, respected man in the world of finance. He is the leader of the "Britannia", an investment banking company. His only daughter is a beautiful young musician, named Alma. She plays the piano and the violin, and she hopes to make a career out of music. She is not particularly cultivated, but she is ambitious and extremely pretty, so that Rolfe falls in love with her as soon as he meets her.

Mr Frothingham commits suicide at the beginning of the fifth chapter, as the Britannia went bankrupt. Gissing bitterly comments against the "laws of life", namely the laws of economics which rule the modern world:

> "The Britannia Loan, &c., &c., &c., had run its pestilent course; exciting avarice, perturbing quiet industry with the passion of the gamester, inflating vulgar ambition, now at length scattering wreck and ruin. This is how mankind progresses. Harvey Rolfe felt glad that no theological or scientific dogma constrained him to a justification of the laws of life."[511]

This ironic "&c., &c., &c." is a sign of the negative connotation given by Gissing to the world of finance and money. The image of the money-world as something huge and dangerous recurs periodically in the novel, and it is associated to another image: that of the whirlpool. Later, Rolfe writes a letter to Carnaby, in which he states:

> "I feel as if we were all being swept into a ghastly whirlpool which roars over the bottomless pit."[512]

It is the first of a series of recurring images about the whirlpool. Something you cannot escape, a mysterious force, stronger than you, that acts against your own will and drags you down in a hole. The second victim of the whirlpool, after Bennet Frothingham, is Mr Abbott, a friend of Rolfe's, who had put all he had in the Britannia and has died of an "accidental" overdose – most

[510] ivi, 9.
[511] ivi, 45.
[512] ivi, 48.

likely, suicide. Swinnerton claims that in *The Whirlpool* "Gissing […] finally claims that life as it is lived in the world is nothing but a vast, agitated, and soul-destroying turmoil of ambitions and occupations".[513] The whirlpool is the result of the clash between the two incompatible objects of personal ambitions and social obligations, and it is representative of the impossibility to break free from social constrictions, first of all that of marriage.[514] We will see how this majestic, uncontrollable force will pitilessly swipe away Alma, who is to become the other protagonist of the novel.

Sybil and Alma, who are close friends, meet, and Sybil shows signs of hypochondria: the idea of Alma suffering from mental instability, after her father's death, drives her paranoic. I will explain more in detail the reasons behind this behaviour later, when I report an interpretation of Alma's character which is relevant in the aim of my observations. The young girl's reputation is ruined by the name she bears, so she goes to Germany, putting temporarily aside her music career, and she grows indolent and slightly depressed. There she meets two men: the first, Felix Dymes, is a young, witty, and arrogant music composer who courts her and even proposes, but she rebuffs him. The other man is an old acquaintance of hers, an English gentleman named Cyrus Redgrave. From the first moment she meets him in the novel, she is intimidated by his social superiority:

> "Alma did her best to behave with dignity. In any case it would have been trying to encounter such a man as Redgrave —wealthy, elegant, a figure in society, who must necessarily regard her as banished from polite circles; and in her careless costume she felt more than abashed. For the first time a sense of degradation, of social inferiority, threatened to overwhelm her self-respect."[515]

It is one of the first passages in which we understand how much important public opinion is to Alma. During the course of the novel, she will grow more and more obsessed with her appearance to the eyes of those who are respectable, who occupy a higher place in the social scheme. Redgrave is indeed a very powerful character: a charming man, extremely charismatic, gifted with a persuasive and enchanting rhetoric. Alma is immediately fashioned by him, but strongly denies emotional or romantic involvement. Seeing him not eager to propose to her deeply insults her though, as she would have been pleased to marry this "polished capitalist".[516]

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[513] Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study*, 92.
[514] Parrinder, "Introduction", in *The Whirlpool*, xiv.
[515] Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, 75.
[516] ivi, 88.

Another relevant character is Mary Abbott, widower of the deceased Mr Abbott. She is a foil to Alma: full of self-denial, humble, shy. The admiration she displays towards her, though, makes her "glow with satisfaction":[517] As I said, Alma is in an incredible need for appreciation, and even though she would not want to, she sticks to other's opinion about her. Mrs Abbott, like Rolfe, is aware of what she calls "the whirlpool way of life":[518] a downward spiral which does not concern, she claims, only idle people. Instead, there is the much more worrying "whirlpool of the furiously busy",[519] those who feel an obligation towards the children they have given life to, and who do not have the time for leisure, nor meditation, nor thinking or even talking to other people, because they are totally absorbed by their life. Those people, she says, almost return to the state of savages.

Eventually, Alma receives a letter from Rolfe himself, and she goes back to England. The two soon fall in love, and in a matter of few pages they start planning their marriage:

> "'No, no, no! You misunderstand me. I am not thinking about money. I hate the word, and wish I might never hear it again!' She spoke with impetuosity. 'I meant—how and where do you wish to live? What thoughts had you about the future?'"[520]

Alma's naïve idealism clashes with the outside world ruled by the money-god, and marrying a richer man would mean, in her mind, the end of her dream of pursuing music as a professional career. This because she has seen too many people foolishly living up to high standards of life which they could not afford, just to deny themselves a simple life which belongs only to the lower classes. "But there may be", she says, "a simple life without poverty".[521] That is what she longs for:

> "You know that most people would take a house in a good part of London, and live up to the last penny—making everyone think that their income must be two or three thousand pounds. I know all about that kind of thing, and it sickens me. There's the choice between vulgar display with worry, and a simple, refined life with perfect comfort".[522]

This, again, due to a fundamental contradiction: money is dangerous, but it is the only way to achieve happiness and live life, like Milvain stated at the end of *New Grub Street.* So that Alma's heart induces her to neglect money, but her conscience makes her incapable of getting rid of

[517] ivi, 149.
[518] ivi, 156.
[519] ivi, 157.
[520] ivi, 117.
[521] ivi, 108.
[522] ivi, 118-119.

her desire for success. For, again, success is being moral. The outcome is similar, though less drastic, to that of the protagonist of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*: she alienates from her social position, and longs for a project of a "simple, refined life".

Two years after their marriage, Alma's state of health is shown not as stable as one could infer from her age, but in the meantime she and Rolfe had their first son, Hugh Basil. Harvey is "inspired with a new tenderness"[523] by the birth of his son: in fact, Gissing himself explained to H. G. Wells that Rolfe was rescued from egoism by his experience as a father.[524] On the other hand, Alma does not show any kind of domestic predisposition and – not always her fault – spends very little time with the child. Her feebleness of spirit turns into a gloomy, overwhelming *ennui*:

> "She stood before the mirror, and looked at herself, blankly, gloomily. Her eyes fell a little, and took a new expression, that of anxious scrutiny. Gazing still, she raised her arms, much as though she were standing to be measured by a dressmaker; then she turned, so as to obtain a view of her figure sideways. Her arms fell again, apathetically, and she moved away."[525]

She and her husband quarrel all the time, and Harvey's main shortcoming, his lack of sympathy and his inability to listen to his wife, causes their relationship to waver. The first divergences between the two start to emerge. When they meet with the Carnabys, who have taken a flat in Oxford, Alma shows signs of envy towards them, as they display no hints of that simple life she had dreamt – but which she now started to regret – and live in opulence. It is the same contradiction I was talking about before: she cannot, at the same time, desire a simple life and then be envious of others whom she apparently despised. Sybil and Hugh are visited by Mrs Strangeways, a woman of thirty-five: over-dressed, over-cordial, whose habit is "to speak in superlatives".[526] She is immediately looked upon with suspicion by Alma, especially when she comes to know that she is a friend of Cyrus Redgrave's. Ultimately, Alma and Harvey return to London is made permanent: their simple life is over, they are dragged into the whirlpool.

Meanwhile, Rolfe's financial situation, which was not in very good condition anymore, is relieved by the inheritance of debenture stocks. He begins to put interest in the reading of the economic sections of newspapers, but this gives him a contrasting feeling of uneasiness and

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[523] ivi, 135.
[524] Greenslade, *Women and the Disease of Civilization: George Gissing's "The Whirlpool"*, in *Victorian Studies*, 512.
[525] Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, 143.
[526] ivi, 178.

guilt, like "meddling with something forbidden", and studying the money-market makes him so uncomfortable that he "had to go for a country walk, to bathe and change his clothes, before he was at ease again".[527] The image is literally that of wiping off stains of dirt from himself; the money-market is compared to a sin, the touching of which makes one in need of purification. The lack of money is "the most hateful of all worries"[528] – echoing Milvain's words in *New Grub Street* – but now he, too, is being drawn into the whirlpool:

> "His days of quietude were over. He, too, was being drawn into the whirlpool. No more dreaming among his books; no more waking to the ordinary duties and cares of a reasonable life."[529]

This idea is echoed by his friend Hugh Carnaby as well, who is starting to get in touch with Redgrave to become his partner in affairs. He says that the man manages all of his properties "devilish well".[530] Again, money and property are associated to unholy images: sin and the devil. Instead, nature and leisure are associated to cleanliness, and peace of mind. See, for instance, this passage which reports a stream of consciousness of Rolfe:

> "He had always thought with uttermost contempt of the man who allows himself to be gripped, worried, dragged down, by artificial necessities. Was he himself to become a victim of this social disease? Was he, resistless, to be drawn into the muddy whirlpool, to spin round and round among gibbering phantoms, abandoning himself with a grin of inane conceit, or clutching in desperation at futile hopes?"[531]

Artificial necessities are something that drags you down, and the whirlpool is once again described as muddy: it gives birth to "gibbering phantoms", "inane conceit", and "futile hopes".

2.6.2. The whirlpool strikes with catastrophic consequences

Alma grows jealous of Sybil, as Redgrave's affiliation with the Carnabys brings him closer to Hugh's wife. And she grows dissatisfied with her social position too: she feels restricted by her husband and would like to make her own way through success, through her own acquaintances, like Sybil apparently manages so well to do. She becomes more and more obsessed with success, and money, which she seemed to hate, as I reported earlier. Now she is fighting a battle

[527] ivi, 208.
[528] ivi, 394.
[529] ivi, 249-250.
[530] ivi, 212.
[531] ivi, 216.

to succeed by all her means, even if this involves perilous flirtation with Dymes and Redgrave. She struggles a lot to get her profession as a musician taken seriously by Harvey:

> "Alma smiled and shook her head. 'You think I go only for amusement. It's so difficult to make you understand that these things are serious.'"[532]

Here I believe that it is worth denoting another kind of juxtaposition, after that of business and leisure. It is that of business and arts, who are paradoxically described as incompatible. Paradoxically, because I extendedly explained and talked about the growing commodification of art – especially, in this context, literature – through which it was caught in the realm of business. I think that the struggle for a musician like Alma to make her job be taken seriously by others, especially by her husband, is used by the author to display a sense of a general crisis of the arts. It is a crisis which stems from mingling two insoluble objects, like water and oil, and expecting both of them to survive. Ultimately, I think it can be stated that Reardon's and Biffen's struggles to get published mirror Alma's struggles to get listened and respected as a musician. The woman comes to realize that her husband does not appreciate her, neither as a musician nor as a woman, and instead sees her "with eyes of tolerance, rather than whole-hearted admiration",[533] as opposed to Mary Abbott, whose intellect he pays profound respect to. Alma and Harvey construct a shield around their own individualism; yet this shield is so thin and fragile that the reader can never truly believe what they tell each other. They always seem partially insincere, disguising part of the truth for the fear of causing trouble to each other.

Mrs Strangeways then persuades Alma into making a choice between Dymes and Redgrave, as they both are trying to plead her case, and make her career as a musician take off. Alma's "jealousy without love"[534] towards Sybil grows more and more, as she starts suspecting that she and Redgrave are having an affair. Mrs Strangeways machinations manage to definitively put her against her former friend, which now she saw as "the corrupt, unscrupulous woman, who shrank from nothing to gratify a base selfishness".[535] Carnaby notices Alma's distress, but decides not to get in the way, because of the tense relationship she has with his wife. He is then told by a certain Mrs Maskell that his wife Sybil is in fact Redgrave's mistress. Hugh is in shock: at first, he does not believe the woman, and threatens her. But he then realizes that "her lie has a terrible support in circumstances":[536] all its details are plausible. He rushes back home

[532] ivi, 244.
[533] ivi, 253.
[534] ivi, 270.
[535] ivi, 274.
[536] ivi, 286.

to talk to Sybil, but he does not find her there, even though it is night. On the verge of insanity, he takes a train to Waterloo and heads straight towards Redgrave's bungalow. He hears a man and a woman talking, without recognizing the woman's voice: Redgrave sees him, tells the woman to hide and opens the window-door to confront Carnaby, who punches him in the face and, accidentally, kills him, breaking his neck with his fist. Entering the bungalow, with much surprise, he finds Alma.

As the quote from Korg reminds us, at the beginning of this subchapter, the smallest weakness – jealousy – led Carnaby to disaster, to a descent into hell which he was not expecting at all. He will say to Rolfe:

> "'The whirlpool!' muttered Carnaby, with a broken laugh. 'It's got hold of me, and I'm going down, old man—and it looks black as hell.'"[537]

Hugh reports himself, as he does not want to get Alma, nor his wife, involved. Rolfe learns about the news the following day, when Alma's first public appearance is set: he does not want to have anything to do with it, and instead goes to the Carnabys, hoping to find Hugh there. He has instead put himself in the hands of the police; the trial is set, and Hugh is sentenced to two years' imprisonment: he is the umpteenth victim of the whirlpool. After her husband's friend's sentencing, Alma's mental and physical health definitively collapses: she starts taking sleeping pills, which reveal to be ineffective. In profound distress, she has a nervous breakdown. Moreover, reading the newspapers, she finds the article about her performance, which is short and uninspired.

The tragedy is a slap in the face of Harvey Rolfe's idealism, his love for books and history. As Gissing says:

> "For the first time, tragedy had been brought near to him, and he marvelled at the indifference with which men habitually live in a world where tragedy is every hour's occurrence. He told himself that this was merely a morbid condition of the brain, but could not bring himself to believe it. On the contrary, what he now saw and felt was the simple truth of things, obscured by every-day conditions of active life."[538]

It is a sort of loss of innocence, or better, a loss of naivety. By visiting the family of an old acquaintance of his, Basil Morton, he understands that the old-fashioned stability – which the Morton family represents – is the only possible alternative to the whirlpool. As Gissing says,

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[537] ivi, 320.
[538] ivi, 326.

"he saw it from another point of view now, and if the choice were between rut and whirlpool".[539] This aspect, as Parrinder highlights in the introduction of his edition of the novel, is symptomatic of a typical Victorian attitude: the restlessness of the new, wealthy middle class, torn between the choice of an idle, old-fashioned way of life and diving into the material wealth which the new, prosperous Victorian society had gifted them with.[540] The first chapter of the last part – for the novel is divided into three parts – marks a further inward turn of the novel.

Rolfe wants to move to Gunnersbury, but Alma prefers to stay where they are: the contrast between them is another reason for quarrelling and Alma – mad at her husband – accuses him of having concealed that Mrs Abbott children are his, suspecting the closeness between the two to derive from an old affair. She is growing increasingly ill, both mentally and physically. She has completely abandoned her youthful dream of living a simple life in harmony with nature:

> "Sitting upon the sand, between cliff and breakers, she lost herself in a dream of thronged streets and brilliant rooms; the voice of the waves became the roar of traffic, a far sweeter music. With every year this tendency had grown stronger; she could only marvel, now, at the illusion which enabled her to live so long, all but contentedly, in that wilderness where Hughie was born. Rather than return to it, she would die—rather, a thousand times."[541]

Once again, the contrast between leisure and business is striking. Alma is sitting on the shore, listening to the sound of the waves, completely immersed in nature. But the whirlpool has got totally hold of her: the roar of the sea becomes, in her head, the noise of the city, of cars, of people. She looks back at her youthful dream with spite and marvel, for her own naivety, swearing never to make return to the idea of living in the wilderness. Renouncing to her dream, in a sense, she is already dead.

She grows more and more hateful towards Sybil, but it is a hatred that stems from fear, the fear for the truth about Redgrave's death to be disclosed. She suffers from severe insomnia, dreams of Cyrus and feels guilty for his death.

> "Upon her lay the guilt of Redgrave's death. This had entered slowly into her consciousness."[542]

Harvey, like he always did, fails to understand her needs, but he is aware that he did more harm to her than other, and that what he did to her was "very much like the clipping of wings".[543] The

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[539] ivi, 328.
[540] Parrinder, "Introduction", in *The Whirlpool*, xii.
[541] Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, 361.
[542] ivi, 370.
[543] ivi, 383.

downward spiral intensifies its suction: Alma is visited by a doctor, who informs her husband that she is been taking narcotics and that she is an addict. She also gives birth to another child, a little girl, who is very ill and dies just some days after her birth. The woman's state of health is becoming really worrying.

Some time later, she finds out that Felix Dymes is going to marry. She meets him, and he tells her that she owes him one hundred and thirty pounds, an enormous sum. But, worse than this, he tells her that the treacherous Mrs Strangeways has been spreading the voice that Redgrave died due to a plot between Alma and Cyrus' housekeeper. Alma is outraged: she goes to London and heads straight towards Sybil home. Every glimpse of the old friendship between them is washed away: they speak to each other in an incredibly cold way and threaten one another. This is quite the last turning point of the novel, the moment in which Alma seems to dim from life into death. She wonders, through the voice of the author:

> "Had she known the world a little better, it might have been. Then, how different her life! Pleasure, luxury, triumph: for she had proved herself capable of triumphing. He, the man of money and influence, would have made it his pride to smooth the way for her. And perhaps never a word against her reputation."[544]

She manages to meet Mrs Strangeways, and confronts her. She obviously denies any accusation, and eventually threatens Alma of destroying her reputation, which she has already done. Her reputation is in fact already shattered, drawn into the whirlpool and destroyed. In a later scene, Mrs Strangeways is shown while talking to Sybil, and Sybil asking her to put Alma in the hands of the police. They both have deceived her. Sybil then tricks his husband into revealing that Alma was there the night of Redgrave's death, by making him believe that Alma threatened her. Hugh's is powerless before his wife's treacherous wit:

> "'Have you lost all your senses?' she exclaimed passionately. 'Must I keep reminding you what she has done to me? Is a woman that will behave in that way likely to be innocent? Is her husband to be kept in the dark about her, deceived, cheated? I can't understand you. If you are too cowardly to do your plain duty—Hugh, how am I talking? You make me forget myself. But you know that it's impossible to spare your friend. It wouldn't be just to him. Here's a form; write the telegram at once.'"[545]

[544] ivi, 419.
[545] ivi, 437.

In a final scene, the Rolfes and the Carnabys meet. It is a sort of unofficial, unauthorized trial against Alma, who is not even able to defend herself. Hugh and Sybil tell Harvey what they know – or, in the case of Sybil, pretend to know –, and Alma is too weak and, in a way, already dead to say anything believable against it. "There are three of you, and it's hard for me alone",[546] she says. Alma tries to, at least, save her reputation in her husband's eyes:

> "'Are you yourself. Alma? Do you know what you are saying?'
> 'Yes—indeed I do. I know I lost myself; my head went round; but I am well again now.'
> 'Then tell me in a word—is there any reason why you should not go home with me?'
> 'What's the use? You won't believe me. You can't believe me!'
> He grasped her hand, and spoke imperatively, but not unkindly. 'Stop that! Answer me, and I will believe what you say.'
> 'There is no reason. I have done no wrong.'
> 'Then come, if you feel able to.'"[547]

She manages to make herself heard, and believed, by her husband, as was her last wish. The same night, she dies of a – probably – self-induced overdose, following the footsteps of her deceased father.

2.6.3. Alma's heroism and some final considerations

Alma is a modern heroine, whose death does not only achieve a powerful pathetic force which is transferred to the reader, but which also stands up to symbolize the cultural failure of a whole era.[548] Her parabola follows her inability to cope with the avalanche which follows her father's suicide, which smears her surname and condemns her to cling to her heredity forever. Sloan states:

> "Alma's acceptance of 'circumstance' and 'hereditary shame' is represented not as an ascent to wisdom, but as a repressive purgatorial resolve which is attended by a symptomatic recurrence of insomnia and drug dependence."[549]

Earlier in my discussion, I left aside an interpretation of the mental weakness which affects many of the characters, Sybil and Alma above all. Halperin says that Gissing's characters display a "savage moodiness, what today we'd call unfortunate nerves", which is the root of

[546] ivi, 441.
[547] ivi, 443.
[548] Sloan, *George Gissing: The Cultural Challenge*, 144.
[549] ibid.

their misery.[550] This echoes Fletcher's words, when he states that, besides providing "a luminous case-study of the destruction of a pretentious and ambitious heroine by the city", Gissing in *The Whirlpool* depicts "a new type of woman, the *névrose*, the modern hysteric".[551] This aspect of the feminine character comes from the influence of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), a work of social criticism which identified the disease of civilisation in the frantic life of the city, which is responsible for hysteria and neurasthenia.[552] "Neurasthenia" was first used as a term by the American George M. Beard, to refer to a weakness of the nerves which he attributed to "the frenetic pursuit of wealth through business and commerce".[553] This is an interesting interpretation of Alma's mental weakness, which links the novel and her character to the main theme of my discussion.

Thus, my interpretation of the title-word is that of a three-layers structure: an inner and personal layer, an outward and personal layer, and an outward and general layer. The first one is the disease of the mind deriving from the troubles of modern, business life, which affects the brain and results in the dissolution of the individual's integrity. It happens to Alma, to her father, to Mr Abbott, but also to other characters who did not share the same, tragic fate. It happens to Sybil, as her moral integrity is shattered by her will to maintain her social status unaltered. It happens to Rolfe, when he begins to take interest in the world of finance and feels like an unforgivable sinner. And obviously to Hugh, whose jealousy turns him, the perfect, noble Englishman, into a murderer. The outward and personal layer is the more literal meaning of the word: the downward spiral which destroys the individual's reputation and, therefore, life. The descent into hell, as Gissing himself described it with all the analogies we have looked at. The third layer, outward and general, is the external force which directs the course of all characters' moral behaviour and influences their decisions. Unescapable and almighty, it is the same force which Orwell will materialize in the image of the aspidistra, as we will discuss in the following chapter.

The issue of the novel similarity to other authors is worth spending a few more words upon. I mentioned Hardy, whose influence Gissing would probably have denied, but which is difficult not to be noticed. He would have been more pleased to admit George Eliot's influence, which

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[550] Halperin, *How to Read Gissing*, in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920,* 190.
[551] Fletcher, "Introduction", in *British Poetry and Prose, 1870-1905*, xvii.
[552] Greenslade, *Women and the Disease of Civilization: George Gissing's "The Whirlpool"*, in *Victorian Studies*, 511.
[553] ivi, 508.

is not, nonetheless, less evident.[554] In the previous pages, I mentioned Gissing naturalistic influence: Parrinder claims that the impact given by Flaubert and Zola is quite evident in *The Whirlpool*'s capacity to make use of the tragic narrative dimension to depict a wider, general disease of society, like the French authors did in works like *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *L'Assommoir* (1877).[555] However, nineteenth-century reviewers claimed that *The Whirlpool* lacked the consistence which was present in such works and that, even though Gissing did start writing with Zolaesque intentions, he did not manage to achieve a look of the overall picture like the mentioned authors did.[556] A re-evaluation of the work, like Fernando did in 1977, allows me to state that *The Whirlpool* is an incredibly well-executed novel, as critical evidence supports my statement. His point of view is very present in the novel without ever being intrusive or introducing elements of disturbance, and he manages to effectively mingle into his work "narrative, feminist opinions, and character".[557] Of the same opinion was Gissing contemporary, H. G. Wells, great friend of his, who highlighted the book's topicality.[558]

It is more complex to claim a resemblance to Henry James' novels. The structure of the novel mirrors, somehow, that of James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). First of all, both Alma and Isabel Archer make the acquaintance of three men during their youth and get married to the third they meet. Alma turns down Dymes' proposal, expects Redgrave to make one – which he does not – and eventually ends up marrying Rolfe. In the same way, Isabel is made a proposal by Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, before marrying Gilbert Osmond. And, like Alma, Isabel is the victim of a Machiavellian machination orchestrated by Madame Merle, who closely resembles Mrs Strangeways. However, a profound difference distinguishes the two characters, and the two novels. At the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer is perfectly aware of Madame Merle's intentions and she – in a way – triumphs over her treacherous intents. In *The Whirlpool*, instead, Alma loses all she has: her career, her reputation, and eventually even her life. And in the same way loses the reader, as we never get to know whether Mrs Strangeways actually furthered Redgrave's cause, or whether Sybil Carnaby had actually been Redgrave's mistress.[559] In the author's incapacity to reassure the reader lies the greatness of *The Whirlpool.*[560]

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[554] Fernando, *"New Women" in the Late Victorian Novel*, 127.
[555] Parrinder, "Introduction", in *The Whirlpool*, xv.
[556] ivi, xiii.
[557] Fernando, *"New Women" in the Late Victorian Novel*, 124.
[558] ivi, 127.
[559] Sloan, *George Gissing: The Cultural Challenge*, 142.
[560] ivi, 144.

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CHAPTER 3

3.1. George Orwell: his intellectual legacy…

> "When I suggest that Gissing is the best novelist we have produced I am not speaking frivolously. It is obvious that Dickens, Fielding and a dozen others are superior to him in natural talent, but Gissing is a 'pure' novelist, a thing that few gifted English writers have been."[561]

I believe the best way to start off this final chapter of my dissertation is to give it the continuity which I tried to give to the whole work. To do so, I must once again allude to the affiliation between two distant writers, one of whom was profoundly influenced by the other. I already mentioned, in the previous chapter, that reverence with which George Orwell always referred to Gissing. Perhaps, that was because of his own Victorian sensibility – stemming, plausibly, from a Victorian familiar background – to which Anthony Powell draws attention in his memoirs.[562] He looked at the past with nostalgia and respect, being defined by many as a Victorian writer in a post-Victorian era, as he never managed to abandon his peculiar taste for everything that was old-fashioned, from clothes to writers.[563]

George Orwell, born Eric Arthur Blair, was indeed a liminal intellectual, whose rational independence and refusal to follow a pre-established line of thought often put him in front of contradictions,[564] which he was the first to find amusement in pointing out.[565] He was, and still is, the perfect embodiment of the figure of the independent intellectual, who looked at organized politics and ideological conformity with fear and contempt.[566] This is why he is still so actual that subscribers to different – or even opposite – streams of thought claim him as a member of their own intelligentsia; from Catholics to Socialists, from neo-Conservatives to environmentalist activists, his quotes are so transversal that they are borrowed by all kinds of intellectuals.[567] As Beadle explains:

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[561] Orwell, *Not Enough Money: A Sketch of George Gissing*, in *The Gissing Newsletter*, 2.
[562] Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling: the Memoirs of Anthony Powell*, 70.
[563] Beadle, *George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 288.
[564] Connelly, *Orwell and Gissing*, 4.
[565] Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling: the Memoirs of Anthony Powell*, 70.
[566] Beadle, *George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 288.
[567] Connelly, *Orwell and Gissing*, 3.

> "Orwell was one of the most politically 'engaged' writers of the twentieth century, but the precise nature of his political posture simply cannot be defined and analysed within the context of any identifiably modern political ideology, party, or movement."[568]

Blair was born in 1903 in the British-colonized India, precisely at Motihari, to an agent of the Indian Civil Service. He lived in India until he was four, when all his family but his father made return to England, to settle in Henley, Oxfordshire.[569] After studying at a preparatory private school, and then at a secondary school in Eton, he joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, in 1922.[570] He serviced there for five years, before making return to England in 1927. At this time, the education and growing up of Blair did not differ much from that of many of his peers to be allowed to be labelled unorthodox.[571] However, his intellectual sensibility was so remarkable that he was sure, from the period in which he was in Burma, he wanted to become a writer. It is in the period after his return to England that, as Raymond Williams states, he begins the formation of a strong critical thought. This period marked the "critical evolution from Blair into Orwell".[572] His first object of criticism was English imperialism, which he had the opportunity to see first-hand when he was in Burma: he was torn between an inevitable feeling of sympathy for the Burmese and his duty as an imperial officer.[573] But his relationship to his home nation was complicated even more by his return to England when, as the perfect Realist writer of the nineteenth century would have done, he went to the East End of London to mingle with the poor, and to experience their way of life.[574] Orwell – who was not known by this name yet – paved his way into writing and journalism, initially, as a writer of poverty and depression.[575] He was, in a sense, a writer of the Condition of England, just in a different social context. He then moved to Paris, which at the time was swarming with artists of all kinds, and spent there less than two years, before making return to England at the end of 1929. He started off his career as a writer, and managed to publish his first book in 1933, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, a title which was given to the novel by the editor and against his will, under the pseudonym George Orwell.[576] It was followed by *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman's*

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[568] Beadle, *George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 287.
[569] Williams, *Orwell*, 7.
[570] ibid.
[571] ivi, 8.
[572] ibid.
[573] ibid.
[574] ivi, 9.
[575] ivi, 11.
[576] ivi, 10-11.

Daughter (1935), and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, the novel which I will deal with in this chapter, published in 1936. In that same year, he married Eileen O'Shaughnessy, graduate in English and psychology.[577]

The publication of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) marked a shift in his production which, Williams states, was to become definitive.[578] The shift was towards political writing and, especially, a socialist commitment which he will not abandon until his death. Though he was even more critical towards socialist public figures and most socialist organized parties, as appears in the acclaimed *Animal Farm* (1945), he was heaped with a socialist dream of equality and freedom.[579] He then, at the dawn of the Spanish Civil War, joined the POUM – the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification – in Barcelona. Heavily wounded in May 1937, he made return to France the following month. He gathered his experience in Spain in his *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), and then joined the Independent Labour Party.[580] In 1939 *Coming up for Air*, his fourth novel, was published, and then World War I break out. Rejected by the army, he lived in poverty until 1943, when he joined the *Tribune* as literary editor.[581] He lost his wife at the end of 1945, as she died in a surgery operation, and Orwell's own health conditions were becoming to get worse (he was haunted by tuberculosis). He settled on the Scottish coast in 1946, and between 1947 and 1948 wrote his masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). He died the following year from an artery burst in his lungs.

Going back to what I was saying at the beginning of the chapter, much of Orwell's uniqueness, as an intellectual, lies in his adherence to a moral – and personal – approach to social problems rather than an ideological one; a line of conduct that, Beadle states, stems from his Victorian background and from the heavy influence, once again, of Charles Dickens.[582] Like Dickens and the whole Condition of England tradition – fuelling one of the main counter-arguments to their way of writing, which I mentioned in the second chapter – his works lack constructive criticism and the suggestion for a new, alternative social system, rather than the one ruled by the laws of economics.[583]

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[577] ivi, 11.
[578] ivi, 12.
[579] ibid.
[580] ivi, 13.
[581] ivi, 14.
[582] Beadle, *George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 288.
[583] ivi, 289.

> "Like Dickens, his target is 'human nature'."[584]

This reflects, in addition, his bitter distrust in the collectivist ideology outcomes in politics, which would be the most natural counterpart to capitalism-founded society. In a 1944 review of two novels – *The Road to Serfdom* by Friedrich von Hayek and *The Mirror of the Past* by Konni Zilliacus – which appeared on the *Observer*, he stated:

> "Between them these two books sum up our present predicament. Capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war. Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war. There is no way out of this unless a planned economy can somehow be combined with the freedom of the intellect, which can only happen if the concept of right and wrong is restored to politics."[585]

His complicated relationship to Socialism is aligned with the general perception of the left-wing English intellectual since the times of Dickens; a Socialist tradition which, Beadle states, plunges its roots in Christianity more than Marxism[586] – which, in Orwell's mind, never was a practicable counterpart to capitalism.[587] If, on the one hand, the course of British radicalism followed a pattern of growing secularization, on the other hand it always remained firmly grounded to a religious principle of brotherhood and equality.[588] Orwell firm premise to Socialism was, in Williams' words, a strong belief in equality,[589] and the demolition of both Fascism and imperialism. The movement of utilitarianism itself had a fair component of Christianity at its roots, as one can read in John Stuart Mill's words.[590] And the English modern history quite plainly demonstrates this fact by the almost utter lack of violent revolutions to subvert the social order: the Glorious Revolution of 1688, for instance, is "bloodless", and the radical subversive movements of 1848, which flailed Europe, spared England, which instead underwent the Chartist petitions. This is reflected in Orwell's hope for a non-violent reform of society through the recovery of past values, rather than a violent, revolutionary subversion of the current system.[591]

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[584] ibid.
[585] Orwell, *Grounds for Dismay*, in *Observer.*
[586] Beadle, *George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 292-293.
[587] ivi, 294.
[588] ivi, 293.
[589] Williams, *Orwell*, 55.
[590] Beadle, *George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 293.
[591] ivi, 299.

The aversion with which he looked at totalitarianism goes hand in hand with his complex spirituality, due to which he never detached from atheism but retained an odd affection for the Church of England.[592] The link between totalitarian systems and religion is provided by the Catholic Church, towards which Orwell felt a deep hatred which stemmed from his youth education by Catholic nuns.[593] He will come, later, to associate both Fascism and radical Communism with the Catholic Inquisition, both in *Coming Up for Air* and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – precisely in the character of O'Brien.[594] And it was definitely present in his mind the danger of turning faith in God in an unconditional worshipping of dictators like Hitler, Mussolini, or Stalin.[595]

3.2. … and his essays

In a 1946 essay entitled *The Prevention of Literature*, Orwell states that Catholics and Communists share the inability to perceive their opponents as both, and at the same time, intelligent and honest.[596] Communist rhetoric – just like the Catholic one – hides itself behind the idea that the "truth" is there, already revealed, and that anybody refusing to subscribe to it is either a fool or dishonest, and is to be labelled as a "petty-bourgeois individualist".[597] He adds that, if at the dawn of the 1930s intellectual freedom was to be defended against Fascism or – more in general – Conservatism, after 1945 the threat came from Communism.[598] In any case, the absence of intellectual freedom is to be viewed as a primary cause for the demise of literature. This lack of liberty, Orwell claims, is typical of totalitarian systems, a category with which Catholicism is very much related. As this statement is – to put it mildly – controversial, I might just quote directly from his essay, for it is my aim not to be misunderstood:

> "Orthodox Catholicism, again, seems to have a crushing effect upon certain literary forms, especially the novel. During a period of three hundred years, how many people have been at once good novelists and good Catholics? The fact is that certain themes cannot be celebrated in words, and tyranny is one of them. No one ever wrote a good book in praise of the Inquisition."[599]

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[592] Bowker, "George Orwell and the Church of England".
[593] ibid.
[594] ibid.
[595] ibid.
[596] Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature", in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, 330.
[597] ivi, 331.
[598] ibid.
[599] ivi, 337.

The novel as a literary genre, he claims, stems from rationalism and Protestant individualism.[600] That is to say, from the freedom of the intellect, as Protestantism eliminates the role of the Church as mediator between men and God, and makes the individual the only one accountable for his own moral behaviour. This seems to anticipate Ian Watt's fundamental work *The Rise of the Novel*, which will not come out until 1957, but which will link the rise of realism to the ascetic Protestant spirituality – as I extendedly explained in the first chapter. Or, more broadly speaking, to the individualistic turn which began with the Scientific Revolution, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This "liberal culture", as Orwell calls it, which stems from the Renaissance and has always allowed the artist with some degree of intellectual freedom, is grimly bound to come to an end, and to drag literary art down.[601] Literature is bound to perish not only in any totalitarian system, but in the pen of any writer who, Orwell says, adopts a totalitarian way of thinking and "finds excuses for persecution and the falsification of reality".[602] "Literary creation in impossible, and language itself becomes ossified".[603] This dystopic outlook on reality will give him grounds for, evidently, the composition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In *Why I Write*, he stated:

> "So it is clear what kind of books I wanted to write, in so far as I could be said to want to write books at that time. I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound."[604]

Why I Write is probably one of Orwell's most famous and quoted essays. It is definitely worth mentioning before delving into the analysis of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, as the author himself explains how impossible it is to "access a writer's motives without knowing something of his early development".[605] Eric Blair was, above all, a man in love with language. He loved the sound of it, he loved the connections between words and meanings, and his aesthetic enthusiasm is defined by him as one of his major motives for writing. He describes it as the "perception of beauty in the external word, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement".[606] This comes out evidently in his prose: Orwell style is always aesthetic, his choice of words is always aimed at beauty rather than effectiveness. Woodcock describes the author as "an

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[600] ivi, 338.
[601] ibid.
[602] ivi, 340.
[603] ibid.
[604] Orwell, "Why I Write", in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, 2.
[605] ivi, 3.
[606] ibid.

individual sensibility at work, a mind that operates by other rules than those of mere utility".[607] What are then the other impulses which compelled him to write? First of all, a "sheer egoism" – as he describes it – a desire to be considered clever and to be discussed, even after death. A desire which, he states, is shared by all the "top crust of humanity" – scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, successful businessmen, and so on and so forth.[608] Those, in other words, who are clever enough to be acutely selfish. Then he describes a historical drive – towards the discovery of the truth and the reconstruction of events – and a political one. Political, once again, in the broadest sense possible; in the sense of, in Jakobson terms, the conative function of language. That function that aims at producing an effect in the receiver, or, as Orwell describes it:

> "Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after."[609]

These impulses, which seem to be at war with one another – as the author himself confirms – turn out producing a peculiar type of literature which Woodcock describes as an "autobiographical-polemical reportage", in which words play a double role as evocative sounds and as means for exact description.[610]

His unusual preference for the Victorians is to be found somehow in his accounts on poverty and in his description of the effects of having no money in contemporary society. This, in particular, will be the main point in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*: how the lack of money affects human relationships and influences behaviour and moral conduct. For this reason, his fondness for Victorianism has caused some critics to view his judgment on Victorian authors as, at least, eccentric.[611] His evaluation of Gissing, for instance, is considered by Powell as biased.[612] Not by chance, all his major influences share the theme of poverty as their focal point, whether it is Butler, Dickens, Gissing, Rutherford, or London.[613] And we will see how close novels like *New Grub Street* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* really are.

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[607] Woodcock, "Prose Like a Window-Pane", in *George Orwell; a Collection of Critical Essays*, 162.
[608] Orwell, "Why I Write", in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, 3.
[609] ivi, 4.
[610] Woodcock, "Prose Like a Window-Pane", in *George Orwell; a Collection of Critical Essays*, 164.
[611] Beadle, *George Orwell's Literary Studies of Poverty in England*, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 189.
[612] ibid.
[613] ivi, 190.

3.3. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

3.3.1. A quixotic quest against the money-god

> "What he realised, and more clearly as time went on, was that money-worship has been elevated into a religion. Perhaps it is the only real religion – the only really *felt* religion – that is left to us. Money is what God used to be. Good and evil have no meaning any longer except failure and success. Hence the profoundly significant phrase, to *make good*."[614]

The choice of a minor novel like this may sound odd to the reader, given the fact that Orwell himself claimed *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* to be one of his worst works. And especially given the fact that he admitted that it was written sheerly out of the need for money, as he was half-starved, and that he had not allowed any reprint or translation of it.[615] Woodcock describes it as a burlesque more than a novel[616] and, admittedly, as "the worst example of Orwell's failure to involve his characters in credible relationships".[617] It is hardly possible to consider it a study on poverty, like *Down and Out in London and Paris*, just to mention one: the focus – not differently from Gissing's *New Grub Street* – is not on the lower depths of poverty, yet on the "lower-middle-class", like Eagleton describes it.[618] However, Lionel Trilling defined it as a "remarkable novel", and "a *summa* of all the criticisms of a commercial civilization that have ever been made".[619]

Like Edwin Reardon in *New Grub Street*, Gordon Comstock – the protagonist of the present novel – is a writer, precisely twenty-nine years old. The adjective that best fits him – and by which Orwell calls him at least a dozen times throughout the novel – is "moth-eaten".

> "Gordon shortened the focus of his eyes. From the dust-dulled pane the reflection of his own face looked back at him. Not a good face. Not thirty yet, but moth-eaten already. Very pale, with bitter, ineradicable lines. What people call a 'good' forehead – high, that is – but a small pointed chin, so that the face as a whole was pear-shaped rather than oval. Hair mouse-coloured and unkempt, mouth unamiable, eyes hazel inclining to green."[620]

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[614] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying,* 46.
[615] Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell – 4, In Front of Your Nose: 1945-1950*, 205.
[616] Woodcock, "Prose Like a Window-Pane", in *George Orwell; a Collection of Critical Essays*, 170.
[617] ivi, 168.
[618] Eagleton, "Orwell and the Lower-Middle-Class Novel", in *George Orwell; a Collection of Critical Essays*, 10.
[619] Trilling, "George Orwell and the Politics of Truth: Portrait of the Intellectual as a Man of Virtue".
[620] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying,* 4.

Gordon has purposedly waged a war against capitalism and the money-god, which, he asserts, dominates every corner of the world and interferes with every human relationship. He abandons a comfortable position as secretary in an advertising company named New Albion, because he felt being drawn into the whirlpool. Almost by chance, "you swear never to Make Good, and then something happens, and you find yourself Making Good almost automatically".[621] To escape this pattern, he quits his job and, instead, accepts a humble employment in a small bookshop, as a librarian. From there, he observes the multitude which populates London. He sees ad-posters on the streets, "like succubi with pimply backsides", the products of the "money-stink".[622] He meets an old couple of beggars, who try and sell him some books: they are, he says, the "throw-outs of the money-god"[623], rejected by a society which eats people up into the maelstrom of money-making and spits out the waste.

Comstock's purpose is, like Reardon's in *New Grub Street*, to get his work published. He has written a long, complex poem called *London Pleasures*, a "labyrinthine mess of words" which has costed him two years' work.[624] Since he left his comfortable position at New Albion, he has been living in terrible conditions, utterly penniless. He now dwells in a bedsit in London, "not definitely slummy, only dingy and depressing",[625] whose landlady is an obnoxious, shrewish woman named Mrs. Wisbeach, which gives Gordon the feeling that "she was always watching you".[626] This is the description of the room given by the author:

> "The room was medium-sized, not big enough to be curtained into two, but too big to be sufficiently warmed by one defective oil-lamp. It had the sort of furniture you expect in a top floor back. White-quilted single bed; brown lino floor-covering; wash-hand-stand with jug and basin of that cheap white ware which you can never see without thinking of chamberpots. On the window-sill there was a sickly aspidistra in a green-glazed pot."[627]

I believe this description to be the perfect representation of what I was saying before. Orwell's prose is almost always self-sustaining, in the sense that its poetic force is so strong to give it an aesthetic dimension which nearly overshadows the very meaning of the sentence. The love for language and for the sound of words shines through and is highlighted by the alliterative word choice ("… that cheap white ware which …", "green-glazed pot") and sort-of rhyming

[621] ivi, 58-59.
[622] ivi, 13.
[623] ivi, 16.
[624] ivi, 37.
[625] ivi, 23.
[626] ivi, 31.
[627] ivi, 28.

expressions ("wash-hand-stand"). The overuse of hyphens to tie words together, even when they would not be required, mingles with the sophistication of the chosen adjectives, especially those related to colours. The bed is not white, it is "white-quilted". The pot is not green, it is "green-glazed". Besides this, Orwell, throughout the whole novel, plays with the familiarity of the reader with certain situations or scenarios, drawing his attention to those in order to address his sympathy: this, in my view, gives the novel an ever-present ironic dimension, which I find peculiar of the author's style. See, for instance, what the author says when presenting Gordon's ancestors, in chapter three:

> "No need to repeat the blasphemous comments which everyone who had known Gran'pa Comstock made on that last sentence. But it is worth pointing out that the chunk of granite on which it was inscribed weighed close on five tons and was quite certainly put there with the intention, though not the conscious intention, of making sure that Gran'pa Comstock shouldn't get up from underneath it. If you want to know what a dead man's relatives really think of him, a good rough test is the weight of his tombstone."[628]

Indeed, what the Comstock's family has always been characterized is that "nothing ever happened":[629] no births, only deaths. "Every one of them seemed doomed", Orwell says, "to a dismal, shabby, hole-and-corner existence".[630]

Woodcock points out that there are only three personal relationships of Gordon's which are worth mentioning.[631] The first one is with his sister Julia: a tall, thin woman, five years older than him, who idolises him. During his youth, Comstock had been living by cadging on her, until he squandered all her money away. Julia's lack of personality and, in a certain sense, characterization[632] makes her totally subjected to her brother's rampant egotism, who "never went near her except to 'borrow' money".[633] It is frustrating to see the total lack of reaction which brings Julia to bow to Gordon's every request but, at the same time, she is so proud that she would rather die of starvation than to "put up with such squalor as Gordon lived in".[634] A great deal of the man's financial necessities go to support his relationship with Rosemary, his mistress. Comstock's love affair is, to put it mildly, vacillating: on the one hand, he is fond of the girl and in constant need to hear from her, and to receive her attentions. On the other hand,

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[628] ivi, 40.
[629] ivi, 41.
[630] ibid.
[631] Woodcock, "Prose Like a Window-Pane", in *George Orwell; a Collection of Critical Essays*, 168.
[632] ibid.
[633] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying,* 136.
[634] ibid.

he is imbued with a profound, deep-rooted misogynous feeling stemming, once again, from his lack of money. His delusional mind brings him to think that women would be more interested in him if he were wealthier, as if charm and money were inseparable. He also thinks that Rosemary reluctancy to sleep with him is to be attributed to her fear of having to marry a man with no money. This because, he says, "it's the women who really believe in the money-code",[635] and who "have got this money-business at the bottom of their heart".[636] This is what he thinks:

> "Gordon thought […] of Rosemary, his girl, who loved him – adored him, so she said – and who, all the same, had never slept with, him. Money, once again; all is money. All human relationships must be purchased with money. If you have no money, men won't care for you, women won't love you; won't, that is, care for you or love you the last little bit that matters. And how right they are, after all! For, moneyless, you are unlovable."[637]

And why should Gordon be deprived of what he depicts as a fundamental need a human being, part of the "inalienable rights"?[638] Without money, he says, you cannot pick or choose, you must settle for whoever you can get. His misogynistic mentality mirrors, once again, his egotism, as it is shown in the first scene in which Gordon and Rosemary meet, more than a week after their last meeting. Seeing her casually on the street, the man's joviality does not reside in spending some time with her, but rather in the fact that "people were looking at her, and therefore at him as well", and in the fact that "he was no longer invisible to women".[639] Once again, though, Rosemary lacks so much in characterization that she fails to display any kind of active reaction to Gordon's quixotic folly. Orwell says that "it was not much use arguing"[640] – even though the reader struggles to truly believe this – and that:

> "From Gordon, whom she adored, she put up with almost anything. It was the measure of her magnanimity that never once, in the two years that she had known him, had she blamed him for not attempting to earn a proper living."[641]

The third and last decent glimpse of relationship which Comstock manages to cultivate is with a man named Ravelston, who is the editor of a Marxist magazine, the *Antichrist.* Ravelston holds a naïve sympathy for Socialism, and an optimistic hope that Socialism is "going to put

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[635] ivi, 126.
[636] ivi, 125.
[637] ivi, 14.
[638] ivi, 114.
[639] ivi, 119.
[640] ivi, 123.
[641] ivi, 124.

things right".[642] But for Gordon this is not possible: the price for optimism is, once again, money, which Ravelston, on the other hand, does not lack at all. "Give me five quid a week and I'll be a Socialist",[643] Comstock states. Ravelston mildly attacks his contradiction: he despises the money-ruled world – "the world in which money is virtue and poverty is crime"[644] – but he will not accept the only possible alternative. He cannot answer the question of what he wants, he can just spot what he hates. He hates capitalism, but the prospect of Socialism is equally dreadful to him:

> "'But what would Socialism mean, according to your idea of it?'
>
> 'Oh! Some kind of Aldous Huxley *Brave New World*; only not so amusing. Four hours a day in a model factory, tightening up bolt number 6003. Rations served out in greaseproof paper at the communal kitchen. Community-hikes from Marx Hostel to Lenin Hostel and back. Free abortion-clinics on all the corners. All very well in its way, of course. Only we don't want it.'"[645]

In reality, the only thing that Gordon achieves is a self-imposed social downfall, renouncing to his status as petit-bourgeois and adapting to live like a member of the poorest working class. "Serve the money-god or go under; there is no other rule",[646] he says. And he chooses indeed to go down, or to sink, as he prefers to say. But to renounce living up to the standards of money-ruled society means to encounter inevitable contradictions, for the world always tries to carry upwards him who tries to sink – at least, this is Comstock's sensation.[647] The powerful gravitational pull exercised by the money-world is always at work: for instance, when you feel guilty for not being able to bring your fiancée to the sea, or for having to let her pay for her share of the meal, which is exactly what happens in the novel. Gordon is so proud as not to accept any kind of financial help from Rosemary, except then to drag on his poor sister's coffers until she is left with nothing. He does this even though he had previously stated that, after having declared war on money, his first rule was "never to take charity".[648] And his stubbornness to follow a pre-conceived moral conduct hits rock bottom when he finally gets some money, at the beginning of the eighth chapter, for the publication of his poem *London Pleasures* (he is given fifty dollars, the equivalent of ten pounds). How can you despise money and the money-world, and then run off to the bank in ecstasy when you receive a cheque? The

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[642] ivi, 92.
[643] ivi, 94.
[644] ivi, 47.
[645] ivi, 97.
[646] ivi, 166.
[647] ivi, 233.
[648] ivi, 133.

answer is easy, and it is Comstock himself who gives it: because "that other world, the world of money and success, is always so strangely near".[649] However, money's fate in the Comstock family is already decided:

> "One and all they turned out listless, gutless, unsuccessful sort of people. […] All of them, of course, were hopeless fools about money."[650]

For his inability to manage money, he will once again blame his economic condition as moneyless. Because, he says, it is impossible to know how to spend money when you are poor and you finally get some, you just go on and squander everything away, "like a sailor in a bawdyhouse his first night ashore".[651] Blinded by his foolish pride, and full of desire to take revenge on those hateful, snobbish, petty bourgeois with which he had looked pathetic just some days before – he and Rosemary stopped to eat in an elegant hotel, only for lack of alternatives, and were insidiously scorned by the waiter for their evident poverty – he squanders all his earnings by inviting Rosemary and Ravelston to dinner in an expensive Italian restaurant. He gets drunk and splurges on fine wine, taxis, and dinner, and insists on not sharing the expenses. On the contrary, he completely clams up when his girlfriend and his friend try to talk sense into him, and to convince him not to spend so much:

> "Inwardly, Gordon damned their eyes. There you are, you see! They were in league against him already. They were trying to prevent him from spending his money. There was going to be that deadly, hateful atmosphere of 'You can't afford it' hanging over everything. It made him all the more anxious to be extravagant."[652]

Eventually, he gets drunk and forces Rosemary into having a physical intercourse, to which she reacts, and goes home. In his few glimpses of soberness, Gordon understands what he has done, but then plunges back into self-induced unconsciousness. This is, metaphorically – even when he is not drunk – the line of conduct he adopts throughout the whole novel. He knows what he is going to face – days of hardship with no money in his pocket – but he prefers to dispel such thoughts, deludedly resolving that he will get by, some way or another. Orwell says that his tendency is to "transfer the whole thing to the realm of abstraction".[653] Ravelston,

[649] ivi, 245.
[650] ivi, 40-41.
[651] ivi, 208.
[652] ivi, 177.
[653] ivi, 129.

despite all efforts, and "incapable of being properly angry",[654] fails to bring him home, and the two end up with two prostitutes.

Gordon wakes up the morning after in a police station, where he is expecting trial for having hit an officer. The judge, seeing that he is a poet, reproaches him for not being able to let poetry teach him how to behave, and sentences him to fourteen days in prison. However, Ravelston pays his five pounds fine and takes him out of prison, feeling guilty for not being able to stop him the previous night. After a brief period of recovery, Gordon finally wakes up and realizes:

> "Gordon Comstock, last of the Comstocks, thirty years old, with twenty-six teeth left; with no money and no job; in borrowed pyjamas in a borrowed bed; with nothing before him except cadging and destitution, and nothing behind him except squalid fooleries. His total wealth a puny body and two cardboard suitcases full of worn-out clothes."[655]

He is fired by his employer at the library, and struggles terribly to find another job, until Rosemary comes back to him and pleads him to go back to New Albion. Obviously, driven by his pride and stubbornness, he refuses. He wants a job, "but not a good job"[656] – "good" meaning, once again, well-paid – because that would mean bowing to the rules of the money-world. So, he accepts a terrible job in an "cheap and evil little library"[657] – a twopenny library intended for lower-class customers. But, as I said earlier, it is difficult to sink alone without anybody trying to pull you up. Eventually, the world of money and success reclaims possession of Gordon, in possibly the most forcing way. The long-awaited sexual intercourse between the protagonist and his fiancée leaves her pregnant, leaving the two no alternative but to marry. To achieve this, Comstock must go back to being a respectable person – that is to say, once again, earning a respectable income. His hopeless war is over, ending in "ignominious defeat":[658] wearing a hat and a nice suit – as it looks "more business-like"[659] – he goes back to the New Albion and gets back his old job.

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[654] ivi, 193.
[655] ivi, 209.
[656] ivi, 218.
[657] ivi, 225.
[658] ivi, 265.
[659] ivi, 264.

3.3.2. The Aspidistra triumphs: the success of success

The novel ending is perhaps just too obvious. Guild, for instance, claims that "Gordon's reintroduction into middle-class life is inevitable".[660] Gordon already knew that he was fighting a hopeless war, against an invisible enemy which gave him no possibility of triumphing whatsoever. Ravelston, in the most rational terms, had alerted him that he had made a blunder: Comstock had supposed to be able to change his own morality, according to his own terms, while remaining in that same society, in that same system, that he believed to be corrupt. But, Ravelston tells him, "one's got to change the system, or one changes nothing".[661] Disliking any other alternative, Gordon is left alone with his anger and resentment, without knowing what he is fighting for, only what he is fighting against. And to do so, he tries to materialize his enemy before his eyes, in objects and people. Therefore, the ad-posters, for instance, become the physical representation of the money-god, of its power and influence.

Most importantly, however, the chief metaphor in the book is that of the aspidistra, and the love-hate relationship that Gordon weaves with it. The aspidistra is a strong plant, extremely resistant to cold and neglect. Its etymology is very telling, as *aspis* is the Greek word for "shield". Trilling defined it as "the ugly, stubborn, organic emblem of survival".[662] Hence, it becomes the perfect symbol of the money-god: indestructible, sneaky, and respectable. And, especially, impossible to dodge, as it "gets at you through your sense of decency".[663] It is not present, solely, in those scenes of luxury at the Italian restaurant which Comstock despises so much. It is not present only in the stupidly expensive bottles of wine, or in the fine clothes worn by the leisure class members. It pervades every aspect of life or, at least, of respectable life. To gain money is to gain respectability, and the more money you make, the more respectable you become. Because economic wealth is at the root of social relations, as Gordon laments throughout the whole novel: money regulates friendship, love, the labour market, it sneaks in the public any more than in the private sphere. It is, to trace a parallelism with the previous chapter and the previous author, an inescapable whirlpool. And it is particularly strong because it is so easy to be disguised behind the curtain of decency and respectability – which once again proves Orwell's

[660] Guild, *In Dubious Battle: George Orwell and the Victory of the Money-God*, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 56.
[661] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 236.
[662] Trilling, "George Orwell and the Politics of Truth: Portrait of the Intellectual as a Man of Virtue".
[663] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 258.

Victorian influence to be undeniable. This is the reason why Comstock hates the aspidistra so much, as the author describes:

> "Gordon had a sort of secret feud with the aspidistra. Many a time he had furtively attempted to kill it – starving it of water, grinding hot cigarette-ends against its stem, even mixing salt with its earth. But the beastly things are practically immortal. In almost any circumstances they can preserve a wilting, diseased existence."[664]

The key word here is "furtively": all that the protagonist does, he does it furtively. In a "hole-and-corner" way, as his friend Ravelston reproaches him of doing.[665] He evidently tries, in a way, to pay back the money-god: the idea behind Comstock's quest is obviously radical, but the approach with which he tries to carry it out is a silent, sneaky one. Even if his mind is revolutionary, his actions are not. So that he has no option but to be completely crushed and swept away by his enemy if he keeps his war waging. He is bound to capitulate, in a way or the other: accept the system and become part of it, or die – at least spiritually. White states that Comstock, at the end of the novel, "becomes destitute and actually falls into the social abyss he has always dreaded".[666] This seems to me to perfectly mirror what happens in Gissing's *The Whirlpool*, with the downfall of Hugh Carnaby and, especially, of Alma Rolfe.

Therefore, the aspidistra triumphs. No man can possibly get rid of it without subverting the system. It triumphs over Gordon's hopeless dream, but also over his blind rage. And, especially, over his literary aspiration. One of the most touching scenes is when, towards the end of the novel, Comstock stands miserably on top of a manhole cover, with the manuscript of his poem *London Pleasures* in his hand. He has already accepted his fate as a member of the respectable middle class: married, employed, and with children. He looks at his poem for the last time, thinking that, perhaps, it is not that bad, that he can finish it in his free time. But then resigns, shoves it down the drain, and the piece of paper sinks in sewage water. Because, once again, he wants to keep the oath he has made: he has surrendered. "Either surrender or don't surrender",[667] he says. Saying goodbye to his beloved poem, he exclaims:

> "*Vicisti*, O aspidistra!"[668]

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[664] ivi, 29.
[665] ivi, 236.
[666] White, *George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia*, in *Utopian Studies*, 88.
[667] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 268.
[668] ivi, 269.

The triumph of the aspidistra is the triumph of the logic of success, of decency, and, in this sense, of life. "The aspidistra is the tree of life",[669] he thinks. It is the tree of life because those people of the tranquil middle-class, those who have accepted the money code, live in peace and in harmony with society. Or, simply, they live. Because to reject the money code is to die. In this sense, they "keep the aspidistra flying". Lionel Trilling prefers to shed light on the positive implications of the aspidistra as the tree of life: Comstock's embracement of it represents his acknowledgment of his state as a living human being, and of the happiness and tranquillity of marriage and fatherhood.[670]

The inconsistency of the novel's point of view, which follows the protagonist inconsistency, is something that divides the critics. Undeniably, John Wain states, Orwell started off the novel as a "sardonic, bitter little parable" about the evils of a society whose morality is based on money-making.[671] What remains to be seen is the degree to which the author subscribes to the protagonist point of view at the beginning of the novel. I will speak of this more in detail in the next subchapter, but I anticipate that the issue is, at least, debatable. Kubal, for example, defends Orwell's position by claiming that it is evident how immature Comstock's ideas are in the novel, intendedly portrayed as such by the author.[672] In addition to that, Kubal suggests that it is incorrect to state that, at the end of the novel, Comstock goes back to his class origin.[673] Because, in reality, he never abandoned his middle-class mentality, and his problem did not lie in the self-imposed lack of money, but in believing that money was the regulator of all relationships.[674] In such perspective, it becomes much easier to corroborate Trilling positive view of the novel ending, as the redemption of the main character. His adherence to the aspidistra – to the decent and respectable way of life – is total, and it is so strong and loyal that it causes him to quarrel with Rosemary when they first move into their new house as husband and wife. Gordon wants to buy an aspidistra at any cost, even if Rosemary would rather a geranium, scorning him for just thinking of putting "one of those awful depressing things"[675] in their bedroom. But Comstock is inflexible, and they buy an aspidistra.

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[669] ivi, 268.
[670] Trilling, "George Orwell and the Politics of Truth: Portrait of the Intellectual as a Man of Virtue".
[671] Wain, "George Orwell", in *Essays on Literature and Ideas*, 203.
[672] Kubal, *Outside the Whale: George Orwell's Art and Politics*, 93.
[673] ivi, 97-98.
[674] ivi, 97.
[675] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 275.

3.3.3. Eric Blair in Gordon Comstock, and vice versa

The society which Orwell, through Comstock's character, describes is falling to pieces. It is the narration of a pre-war apocalyptic scenario in which society is dominated by fierce competition. Gordon's words, when he speaks to Ravelston, echo in, once again, a whirling force which reduces the world to a flat, apathic, shapeless cemetery of dead people:

> "My poems are dead because I'm dead. You're dead. We're all dead. Dead people in a dead world. […] The life we live nowadays! It's not life, it's stagnation, death-in-life. Look at all these bloody houses, and the meaningless people inside them! Sometimes I think we're all corpses. Just rotting upright."[676]

Literature is gone with the vitality of the authors: no poet can possibly write, and when he finally manages to, "it is something as arid as the rattling of a pea inside a big drum".[677] It is, once again, one of the victims of the aspidistra: crushed by respectability, the creative force and aspiration succumbs. Ultimately, the protagonist seems to find some kind of masochistic pleasure in reducing all his conversations to his "favourite subject; the futility, the bloodiness, the deathliness of modern life".[678] Competition makes money-making the ultimate object of desire, overshadowing every other potential value, as "good and evil have no meaning any longer except failure and success".[679] Gordon laments his condition to Ravelston:

> "This writing business! What bullshit it all is! Sitting in a corner torturing a nerve which won't even respond any longer. And who wants poetry nowadays? Training performing fleas would be useful by comparison."[680]

His words are unmistakably borrowed from Gissing's rhetoric in *New Grub Street*, especially in the spiteful words of Reardon for the literary elite.[681] Yet, I extendedly underlined how Gissing's novels mirrored a late Victorian, widespread scepticism towards the book industry and the reading public as well, and a sense of general crisis – or, perhaps, simple change – in literature. And I underlined that there is a fair share of Gissing in Reardon, and a quite strong imprint of the author's personal experience in the novel. Can the same be said about the present novel, and how close is the relationship between Gordon Comstock and George Orwell?

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[676] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 93-94.
[677] ivi, 91.
[678] ivi, 92.
[679] ivi, 46.
[680] ibid.
[681] Connelly, *Orwell and Gissing*, 41.

Guild claims that Comstock's distrust – or hatred, to tell the truth – towards the literary elite reflects Orwell's real point of view. That is to say, the literary establishment as a petty, restrictedly accessible, small circle of hateful former Cambridge students who rejected anything and anyone coming from outside their sphere.[682] This is a supplementary to Orwell and Comstock's conviction that literature cannot possibly co-exist with poverty and unemployment, as Blair reiterates in *The Road to Wigan Pier* a year later.[683] And also, Guild borrows passages from *Down and Out in Paris and London* which seem to corroborate – within the personal experience of the author – Gordon's misogynistic assumption that women regulate and direct their feelings according to the economic situation of the person they have to face: this is what Orwell himself had testified coming back from Paris.[684] Terry Eagleton, very interestingly, points out that what Orwell criticizes in Comstock's character is, essentially, what he criticizes in his own person.[685] I find this to be a fascinating interpretation of the novel: Eagleton claims that the critical detachment created by Orwell from the protagonist allows him to "indulge in his own less intelligent feelings"[686] – namely, the quixotic and dogmatic rejection of capitalism. With the support of these critics, I think I can safely claim that, like in Gissing's novels, the imprint of the author's experience on *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is rather strong. It is hard not to perceive the wall of fiction of the novel as something frail and transparent. The author's experience perforce reflects Gordon Comstock's, and, as a result, the novel inevitably lacks in objectivity.

Kubal highlights also that another aspect that the author and the protagonist of his novel share is that they both tried to "de-class" themselves (he quotes from Hollis), in the sense that there was a point in Orwell's life in which he, like Comstock, tried to renounce to his privileges as a member of the bourgeoisie and tried to live among the poor. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, with Gordon's failure, is the final demonstration of Orwell's renouncement to this kind of idealistic rejection of his class, and, on the other hand, his acceptance of it.[687] However, Kubal underlines that their aims were radically different: Orwell always had in mind a positive, constructive and,

[682] Guild, *In Dubious Battle: George Orwell and the Victory of the Money-God*, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53.
[683] ibid.
[684] ivi, 52.
[685] Eagleton, "Orwell and the Lower-Middle-Class Novel", in *George Orwell; a Collection of Critical Essays*, 24.
[686] ibid.
[687] Kubal, *Outside the Whale: George Orwell's Art and Politics*, 16.

in a sense, selfless approach – as to "expiate guilt, to make contact with the workingman, and to discover himself".[688]

The author's intrusion in the novel is also evident in the rather frequent comments he makes in those essayistic passages like, for instance, the beginning of the third chapter, in which he comments on the origin of the name Gordon Comstock. He states that his first name, of Scotch origin, is only one example of an increasingly common "Scotchification of England that has been going on these last fifty years".[689] There are several sources which testify Orwell's antipathy towards Scotland: first of all, the choice of his stage name was, among other things, due to the Scottish origin that the name Blair would have suggested (this is something that his friend Anthony Powell states).[690] A former girlfriend of his also told the BBC that he held a profound, blind prejudice against those who he called "whisky-swilling planters", whom he had met in Burma.[691] When presenting Comstock, in fact, he ironically states that, apart from names such as "Gordon", "Colin", "Malcolm", and "Donald", golf, whisky, porridge, and the works of Stevenson and Barrie are "the gifts of Scotland to the world".[692] However, Orwell had been expressing thoughts on the relationship between Scotland and England in some articles he wrote for the socialist magazine *Tribune*, in a column called "As I Please". In these extracts, he critically strikes the cultural hegemony, and domination, exercised by England upon Scotland, advocating for the reasons of those people who felt "pushed into an inferior position".[693] He claims that the cultural occupation of Scotland created a dreadful social fracture: on the one hand, the Anglicised upper class. On the other hand, the Scottish working class, whose distinct accent and vocabulary – for he states that they often talked in an almost different language altogether – marked a "more dangerous kind of class division than any now existing in England".[694]

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[688] ivi, 17.
[689] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 39.
[690] Martyris, "George Orwell Weighs In on Scottish Independence".
[691] ibid.
[692] Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 39.
[693] Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell – 4, In Front of Your Nose: 1945-1950*, 285.
[694] ibid.

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CONCLUSIONS

Connecting spiritual principles to socio-economic outcomes is a daring and risky operation which only partially, I believe, pertains to a literary scholar. Therefore, from the beginning of this work, I have been aware that I was going to encounter the risk of making hazardous associations. But, as I perhaps did not clarify enough in the initial pages of my thesis, the driving force behind my research was just the observation of a social phenomenon which has become increasingly strong. More and more, I think, we are bound to associate the idea of success and fulfilment to economic wealth, the ability to manage money, the capacity to climb up the social ladder. Even from the earliest stages of life: our progress at school is always measured in terms of competition with others. Because I think, unconsciously or consciously, we are brought to think of the future as a guerrilla warfare where the rule of the survival of the fittest is stronger than ever.

So, I would like to emphasise, once again, that one of my main principles during the writing of this dissertation was to avoid turning this work into a blind attack to capitalism, or a money-based system, and to avoid giving any kind of connotative, derogatory, or moralizing impulse to it. I believe, in fact, that the novelists I analysed well understood and explained the impossibility of escaping from such system. In *New Grub Street*, Reardon dies, and so does poor Biffen. And instead, the cunning and opportunist Milvain triumphs and marries Reardon's wife. In *The Whirlpool*, the naïve Alma Frothingham is completely crushed by society's prejudice and – false – prudishness, and by a monster so much larger than her, as Habermas pointed out: people's opinion. Comstock instead, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, has no hope of winning his war and does not stand a chance against the money-god, and he knows this better than anyone else. But the problem is: nobody ever proposed an alternative. Even Orwell, a committed socialist, mocks – through Gordon's words – the alternative of socialism. With this I have no intention whatsoever, obviously, of claiming that there is no alternative to capital-based system: it would mean to climb over the problem and to fall down on the other side of it. But the ambivalence and transversality which characterizes both Gissing and Orwell, as I showed, is a clear sign of the fact that both of them were perfectly aware of the impasse I am describing here.

What I tried to claim, ultimately, is the presence of an acquired mentality which characterized chiefly most part of the reformed countries, and which resulted in evident signs of distress, which reached a peak during the Victorian Age. And, especially, the fact that many intellectuals

were aware of the presence of this mentality, that was almost innately instilled in their minds, and that they actively tried to fight it. I am not sure whether it is safe to claim that the Protestant's doctrine of predestination is the strongest factor in the formation of this mentality, but I think that the historical reconstruction built by Weber is at least fascinating, and that the relationship of affinity between the pursuit of wealth and the Protestant mentality is convincing.

The relationship between the aversion to this concept and the authors I considered and analysed is probably the most problematic and, as a consequence, debatable aspects of this work. The choice of Gissing and Orwell being – and I am not afraid to state this – arbitrary, subjective, and pre-conceived lead me to inquire into the presence of a Protestant-capitalist mentality (for the sake of simpleness) in the backdrop of their novels, which appeared nonetheless to be present, as I expected. The whirlpool and the aspidistra are, in my view, two metaphors which stand for the same thing. They are two sides of the same coin. The overlapping of morality and material success is the monster that pervades all the three novels that I analysed, and that influences the behaviour of the characters, leading to their downfall. Even when this implies actively rejecting an adherence to the system, which is the case of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. And especially when it results in the neurosis and mental instability of characters like Alma and Reardon, who completely lose their orientation in a desperate quest for success. Their instability is an evident sign of distress which is still now, I believe, haunting the individual and his moral compass.

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