

The Question of Motivation: George Gissing and Henry Maudsley

MICHAEL COLLIE

THE HUMAN consequences of violent social change are necessarily of interest both to novelists and doctors, as well as to a large number of other people. In periods of rapid change, the novelist cannot retain outmoded ideas about human beings unless he is prepared to spin fictions that have a deliberately romantic quality to them. To sell his books he must be concerned with believable contemporary characters and, to establish or sustain their credibility, must confront once again a number of basic questions of perennial importance to novelists — questions that touch on the very nature of the human being and on the way in which he behaves. It is in the nature of fiction that a rapport of some kind between author and reader must be created by the author by dint of whatever he can establish as being imaginatively credible. Meanwhile, who would ever want a doctor or psychiatrist whose ideas about people were antiquated?

At the heart of the matter is the problem of human motivation. *Why* do people behave as they do? What will move them to the most crucial actions of their lives? Only a dyed-in-the-wool conservative would suppose motivation to be eternal and unchanging: in a period of social upheaval, such as the last three decades of the nineteenth century, it was more interesting, useful and intellectually relevant to notice that patterns of behaviour changed as circumstances changed than to hanker after universal verities. Among English novelists, it was George Gissing who gave this his closest attention. He realized that well-established, but old-fashioned explanations of why people behaved as they did had been invalidated by the strains and stresses of industrial urban life — or, more generally, by capitalism. Among doctors

— the word must be stretched to include neurologists and psychologists — the same questions about human behaviour were of equal importance, because experience had demonstrated, firstly that moral and spiritual explanations for unusual behaviour were inadequate, secondly that Darwinian ideas about human beings had to be taken into account, and thirdly that behaviour could be studied clinically, at least with criminals and lunatics. Representative of his age, in this respect, was Henry Maudsley. Might useful things be learnt from a comparison of novelist and doctor within the same period? Did George Gissing, novelist, cosmopolitan, naturalist, have anything in common with Henry Maudsley, M.D., professor of medical jurisprudence, editor and propagandist? This paper is a first attempt at an answer.

The Gissing who concerns us here — there were other sides to his writing life — is the linguist, the European, the man who set out to write an essentially modern novel, the iconoclast, the experimenter, the naturalist. Naturalism as a European artistic movement obviously has deep roots, not least in the various types of social realism which preceded it. But Naturalism, as it will be discussed here, is in fact the social realism of the determinist and, as determinism strengthened as an intellectual force, so the novelist had to adapt to it. The force of secular determinist thinking was felt in England in the eighties, because of the active interest of Hardy, Gissing and Meredith,¹ because of Edmund Gosse's translations of Ibsen,² because of the availability for the first time of Turgenev³ and Zola⁴ and other continental novelists in inexpensive editions, because of a renewed interest in Schopenhauer and because the "new novel" provided a context within which or by means of which readers could think about urban social phenomena they could not yet understand. These intellectual and literary events were in fact a function of social change at least to the extent that environmental pressures were seen to be an unavoidable part of existence, which had therefore in some way to be taken into account.

During this same period (the final decades of the nineteenth century) Freud did his early clinical training in Vienna, studied under Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris for a number of years, and then returned to Vienna, still unknown. A coherent body of

psychological knowledge simply did not exist in the strictly accurate sense before 1895⁵ and, of course, he himself was the person destined to provide conceptual coherence to the confusing results of nineteenth-century clinical observation. But this essay is about the period immediately before Freud. While the late nineteenth-century intellectual knew about the unconscious mind, or at least had begun to realize that he needed the concept, he tended nonetheless to think about all mental operations in a literal and mechanical way: there were mental operations of which the mind was not conscious, but it ought to be possible to trace these, also, to a physical cause. For this purpose, one had to study how the nervous system worked. The study of the normal functioning of the nervous system including the brain (an inclusion that represented a difficult notion for many Victorians) would lead to advances in neurology. The study of abnormal functioning would tend to more advanced work in what for this brief period was called the pathology of mental disease. Neither was genuinely psychological in the modern sense: only at the very end of the Victorian era was the study of the unconscious freed from the idea of causality operative in the physical sciences. The short period of mechanistic psychology can be said to end, therefore, when Freud published *Studies in Hysteria* in 1895,⁶ which happens also to be the year in which Durkheim published *The Methodology of Social Science*.⁷ It was a period dominated by Darwinian ideas — but Darwinian ideas not yet tested by modern biology.⁸

The interests of psychologists and novelists overlap at many points, most obviously in the area of human motivation, which became increasingly a matter of perplexity in the latter part of the century, when for thinking people like Maudsley and Gissing the supposed moral verities of church and state became once again in history more and more suspect. What did late nineteenth-century Victorians — or Europeans — know about *why* people behaved as they did? Why *did* people behave as they did? In particular, why did people in the new industrial cities not behave in the same way as people were supposed always to have behaved in rural England? Or, from the point of view of the Victorian moralist, why was their *misbehaviour* so flagrant?

In Germany and France there had been a steady development in the clinical study of human behaviour, deriving largely from the work of Griesinger in Germany⁹ and Charcot in France¹⁰. Both urged that mental states had physical causes. In England, despite early general works like George Henry Lewes' *The Study of Psychology*, the process was more slow. "Mental pathology has run a course parallel to that of mental physiology," wrote Lewes in 1878.¹¹ For many Victorians it was difficult for mind and soul to be regarded in physiological terms at all. Could religion be what happened at the nerve end? In England, at least, the physical basis of mind had to be established before there could be psychology. Only reluctantly were people prepared to accept the idea that a human or "moral" action might have a physiological cause, a cause that could more easily be described in "pathological" or neurological than in moral or religious terms. Only with difficulty could they grasp the idea that population growth by itself¹² would create new social conditions which in turn would lead to new behaviour patterns, new pressures in the individual and new tensions in social relationships. Easier to suppose that the masses could be "reformed," politically, or "redeemed," morally, than accept in one's own time the idea that social values were shifting and that deviations from the old norms might not be "degenerate." The problem was in fact so great that the Victorians tended to call all inexplicable behaviour insanity and the extremes of behaviour at either end of a scale of social adjustment either "genius" or "madness." The mid-century Lunacy Acts reflected an increase in understanding and certainly a desire to treat lunatics more humanely,¹³ but to understand why there were lunatics was a different matter. For anyone who resisted change or was impelled to turn his back on the present, the structured, orderly world of George Eliot made sense; Birmingham did not. Because of this absolutely understandable conservatism, the impact of psychological ideas during the thirty years between 1870 and 1900 was only generally felt, and then only by people like judges and doctors — and novelists — who of necessity had an interest in the matter. It will be seen that Henry Maudsley played a major role in making the new psychology accessible to a fairly wide public.

It is in this context that the changed position of the novelist can also be examined. He, too, needed to know why people behaved as they did, if not for traditional social and religious reasons. He, too, became interested in urban behaviour patterns, particularly disruptions from a supposed norm. What then was the position of any novelist who perceived that there was something new to write about — urban life — but did not immediately know how to do it? Zola had advocated the obvious: write about what you see to be there. Easier said than done. To write a naturalist novel, one which derived from what could be seen, the novelist had many obstacles to overcome. He had to be consistently contemporary and manage without either the subtle ironies and ambiguities that go with historical perspective or the idealizing habit by means of which mid-Victorians had transformed actuality into something that was socially manageable.¹⁴ He had to acquire a technique by which the visible surface of life could be recorded without the intrusion of metaphors or the overlay of moral ideas.¹⁵ And he had to portray an environment so convincingly that a complete set of explanations were by implication provided for the way things were, simply by the depiction of surface detail. Determining social forces representing the relationship of individual to environment would be seen clearly enough through surface detail, if the novelist could find ways of convincing the reader he was being faithful to what he saw. What was visible was true.¹⁶

On this subject Zola urged, in *Le Roman expérimental*, that the novelist should apply to the writing of a novel the experimental method of the world of medicine. By "experimental method," Zola meant one which was derived from experience: the purpose of the novelist was to study phenomena in order to master them. "Our aim," he said, "is the same as that of the medical men. We also wish to master elemental phenomena of intellectual and personal life in order to control them. In a word we are experimental novelists showing from direct experience in what way an emotion works in a social situation."¹⁷ In the same passage Zola spoke of "the mechanism of passion" which is perhaps the nub of the question, in as far as the word "mechanism" indicates a transference from people seen as free agents who

might behave unpredictably or untypically to people seen as functions of their circumstances so that their behaviour should be typical and predictable. Most of us can ponder this difference at leisure, but not the novelist, since he should know what motivates his characters. The depiction of an urban environment, in which personal freedom is so curtailed by social or economic pressure that there is no social mobility and where the shape of existence at least seems to be determined by forces outside the individual's control, is incompatible with the type of novel whose plot and structure derive from a clash of motive or will between individuals. There is no point in having a conflict of motive if the environment always wins. Thus the question of motive — the mechanism of passion — is urgently important for a naturalist. He has abandoned or reduced his faith in the Romantic idea of freedom of action. He lacks an alternative to it. Why then does anyone do anything at all? In the period under discussion, he badly needed psychological explanations for human behaviour a couple of decades before credible psychological explanations were available.

No one represents this awkward predicament more completely than George Gissing who devoted the first part of his writing life to the question of how inherited techniques of social realism might be adapted for the new circumstances at the end of the century. He had read Ibsen, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Zola well before their works were translated into English.¹⁸ He wanted to adopt the new method, or a version of it, at least. And he knew there was artistic subject matter in the peripheral areas of the City of London and the City of Westminster.¹⁹ But how? Was there such a thing as a determinist novel that was psychologically credible? He attempted to find out in the way Zola advocated — experimentally.

It is Gissing's early novels, those written in the eighties, that can most reasonably be called naturalistic, because it is here at the beginning of his career that Gissing most directly confronts the problem of character motivation in a world which is seen by the novelist as affording scarcely any freedom at all from the pressures of environment. Of these early novels *Demos* (1886), *Thyrza* (1887) and *The Nether World* (1889)²⁰ form a group,

partly because Gissing, after writing them, turned his mind to a different kind of novel. If one calls these novels naturalistic, it is not with the intention of oversimplifying. The factors were complex that conspired to shape Gissing's imagination. He found congenial popularized Darwinian ideas on adaptation, for example: personal misery was a consequence of failing to adapt to circumstance, while happiness lay in rational resignation to circumstance, however unsatisfactory. He found Schopenhauer equally congenial, as his own essay called "The Hope of Pessimism" sufficiently indicates.²¹ It made more sense, he thought, to accept one's fate than to deceive oneself into thinking one could overcome it by dint of one's own efforts. This idea was probably reinforced by his appreciation of classical literature, as well as by his observation of the utter hopelessness of ordinary people's lives. So naturalism here is a term of convenience, used to signal an interest in the pressures of environment upon the behaviour of individuals. Gissing's novel *Thyrza* will provide a good example of what is meant.

Even more than *Demos*, the novel which preceded it, *Thyrza* comes close to satisfying Zola's prescription. Gissing deliberately took as the fictional location for the novel Lambeth, an area with which he had no previous familiarity. He consciously studied it during several months walking about its streets. He then wrote a novel where the greater part of the action is strictly contained within this one district of London, where the economic and social pressure of environment on characters is sustained and shown to be virtually inescapable, and where very ordinary hope and aspiration habitually give way to a very ordinary resignation and despair. The novelist characteristically addresses himself to the surface of life: writes down what he sees, what anyone supposedly might see or discover for himself. Lambeth in the novel is an urban village in which people live their whole lives without reference to anything outside, just as in a Hardy novel the characters act out the whole drama of their lives in a cluster of small villages, even a single hamlet. Their values are the values of the place. Other values are irrelevant to them. Class barriers are never crossed; characters in the novel who attempt to do so fail. Geographical barriers are rarely crossed: life is contained within

an area circumscribed by a few streets, so that moving house from one room in one street to two rooms in the next is an event of major importance. Lambeth is not the whole of the book, but Gissing nonetheless succeeds in describing in considerable detail an unfamiliar, indeed at that time generally unknown, urban environment, the social norms of which were completely foreign to most middle-class readers.

It was consistent with Gissing's type of naturalism that emphasis should be placed, not upon one or two heroic or idealized characters, but "realistically" upon many unheroic, ordinary characters. In *Thyrza* he creates a whole gallery of factory workers, foremen, shopkeepers, shop-assistants and labourers, just as he had created largish social sub-sets of characters in *Workers in the Dawn* and *Demos*. Equally characteristic is his interest in parallel situations and pairs of characters who complement each other: here Gilbert Grail and Thyrza, Walter Egremont and Annabel. Within the larger imaginative structure of *Thyrza*, the universe which this time Gissing chooses to study, are the two sisters, Lydia and Thyrza Trent. Of these two sisters, it is Thyrza herself who attracts the most attention, though it must be stressed that the focus on the individual character is within a social environment shared by the other characters. Gissing makes Thyrza behave irrationally. Though sensibly engaged to Gilbert Grail, the man downstairs in the house where she lodges, she falls in love with Walter Egremont, the son of the local factory owner, and briefly challenges — in a less than satisfactory set of episodes — the moral and economic norms upon which social order is for most people based, only to fail and then willingly return to what she has to accept as her appointed place in the system. This is a typical Gissing device. Sanity consists of resigning oneself to one's fate, adapting to circumstance as best one can, suppressing those impulses that encourage one to feel that the self might be independent of circumstance. Since this is sanity, it is insane to desire what one has not got, and such insanity, though a fact of life in a world dominated by Schopenhauer and Darwin, needs explanation.

Both before and after *Thyrza*, Gissing often depicted behaviour that was represented as defying rational explanation. *The*

Whirlpool, for example, is about the marriage of Harvey and Alma Rolfe, but Harvey Rolfe got married in spite of himself and, as it were, against his best interests.²² This idea, crucial to Gissing, is in the very title of the as yet unpublished short story called "A Freak of Nature." Here the socially confined, married, habit-governed, middle-aged city clerk inexplicably goes beserk, first by playing practical jokes on his neighbours, and then, while away from home, by assuming the position and name of his employer, thereby involving himself in an absolutely "absurd" situation from which he only extricates himself by escaping in the middle of the night through a bedroom window.²³ This is a "freak of nature" in the context of a popular Darwinism. The character is not responsible for his actions, is therefore not punished for his "bad" behaviour. But his behaviour remains unexplained, just as does Rolfe's in *The Whirlpool*. Thyrza's falling in love with Walter Egremont when she is already engaged to Gilbert Grail is in the same sense a freak of nature, which so much defies rational explanation that the only course open to Gissing is to devise a plot in which Thyrza is eventually obliged by "circumstance" to resign herself to her fate by marrying Grail.

Here, then, one confronts a major difficulty in Gissing's early novels, a difficulty that would be shared by any determinist who wanted to write fiction. On the one hand, a contemporary belief in environmental pressure obviated the need for any justification of a basically pessimistic attitude to free-will and self-determination; on the other, it remained difficult to devise a credible and interesting plot without in some way penetrating, for the reader's benefit, the characters' underlying motives. (Put the other way round, this means that while bad plots sometimes just derive from bad novelists, at other times bad plots are the surface manifestations of intellectual difficulties experienced by good novelists.) In *Thyrza* Gissing's problems show up in an avoidance of the question of motive. In place of motive, we find neurology — i.e., mental illness associated with ordinary ill health. When a novelist is thinking about the pressure of environment on character, it is not unusual for him to examine the reactions of brothers or of sisters to identical events or circumstances. This is part of a popular heredity-environment experiment. Gissing

tries it here. In *Thyrza*, where Lydia and Thyrza share their environment — indeed share the same bed — but behave differently, Gissing distinguishes them the one from the other in physical terms and gives what looks like set-piece, conventional descriptions of the two girls at the beginning of the novel, descriptions which turn out to be essential to the naturalist's insistence upon the physical — upon the fixed relation between behaviour and physical appearance — and thus part of his stock in trade. Lydia was a person “of bright intelligence and warmth of heart” whose eyes were “large and shrewdly observant, with laughter and kindness blent in their dark depths” and whose face was “the kind of face which becomes the light and joy of home, the bliss of children, the unfailing support of man's courage.”²⁴ She has adapted to the circumstances of her existence and is happy.

By contrast, the equivalent set-piece for Thyrza reads as follows:

Like Lydia's, her eyes were large and full of light but their blue orbs regarded nothing near; imagination dwelt in them and seemed very busy with things remote from the workroom and the full street. Every line of the face was delicate, harmonious and sweet; each thought that passed through her mind reflected itself in a change of expression, produced one knew not how, one phase melting into another like flitting lights upon a stream in woodland. It was not a morbid physiognomy, yet it impressed one with a sense of vague trouble. There was none of the spontaneous pleasure in life that gave Lydia's face such wholesome brightness; no impetus to activity, no resolve; all tended to pre-occupation, to emotional reverie.²⁵

This is the passage as it appeared in the first edition, but when Gissing revised the novel for the second edition he made a number of changes. One of these concerned his lazy use of the word “morbid.” He deleted the words “was not a morbid physiognomy, yet it impressed one with a sense of vague trouble,” replacing them with “It was a subtly morbid physiognomy, and impressed one with a vague sense of trouble.” Why had Gissing at first saw that she did not have a “morbid physiognomy” and then say in the revision that it was “subtly morbid”? Was this a minor editorial change or was it more important? And what did

“morbid” mean, as used here? Was Gissing presenting the character Thyrza as a person whose impulse to escape from her environment was entirely consistent with a sensibility which in fact set her apart and distinguished her from her neighbours in Lambeth, or was he presenting her as someone whose impulse to escape the social environment to which she belonged was evidence of social or psychological maladjustment? If the first, the novel would be mid-Victorian Romantic, if the second late-Victorian naturalist. Obviously Gissing’s novel falls into this second category. Furthermore, it is an extreme case of determinist fiction, since the author denies the characters any opportunity to shape their own destiny. Thyrza and Walter Egremont are not allowed to talk to each other. Their love is an aberration. Their desire to break the barriers of class is a foolishness. Interestingly, Gissing does not justify this negative handling of character in terms of motive. On the contrary, he seems content to offer as a sufficient explanation of Thyrza’s behaviour her ill-health, her fainting fits, her collapse, indeed the long illness which leads to her early death. Her behaviour is a function of her physical make-up, and there must be a connection, so the novelist asserts, between her heart disease and her temporary lapse into fantasy. Thus in this novel a “morbid physiology” is associated with a failure to adapt, a failure which the novelist has completely removed from the context of morality. Was Gissing here failing imaginatively or was he attempting to treat a subject of great importance to his contemporaries?

Gissing’s contemporary most committed to the idea that all types of behaviour must be traceable to physical causes was Henry Maudsley.²⁶ This is Maudsley the cricket enthusiast who in 1903 travelled to Australia to watch the Test Series, not his doctor cousin, the big-game hunter. A Yorkshireman like Gissing, it is said Henry Maudsley failed to distinguish himself as a medical student because of his disrespect for authority. Nonetheless, he won ten gold medals while an undergraduate. Like Gissing, too, and indeed like many other Victorians, his thoughts about society, his sociology, were in part conditioned by his early reading of Aeschylus and other Greek dramatists. In 1857, the year Gissing was born, Maudsley became at the age of 23 Medi-

cal Superintendent of the newly opened Manchester Royal Lunatic Asylum at Cheadle Royal, after a brief period at the Wakefield Asylum. His reports written while at Cheadle Royal are now seen as enlightened statements on the humane treatment of the mentally ill, and as such were in advance of their time. After a few years, he moved to London and for sixteen years was editor of the *Journal of Mental Science*, a position which allowed him to keep in touch with work being done both in England and in Germany and France. Standard histories of medicine and psychiatry conventionally mention Maudsley as one of the two or three Englishmen most in touch with European advances in psychiatry.²⁷ Though he became in 1869 Professor of Medical Jurisprudence at University College, London, and in that capacity published a number of books on the extent to which the mentally ill were responsible for their actions, notably *Responsibility in Mental Disease* which was published in 1874, Maudsley's own work was as a theorist on neurology and his most important book *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, which became a standard text, and went into several editions during his lifetime. In the twenty-fifth Maudsley Lecture, Professor Sir Aubrey Lewis called this book "a turning point in English psychiatry" because it disengaged the study of the mind from metaphysics and Romantic philosophizing and because, in his words, "it embodied a critical synthesis of biological and other scientific advances so far as they had evident bearing on mental activity in health and disease."²⁸ Throughout a long lifetime, Maudsley worked to establish the notion that all mental conditions could be studied scientifically, vigorously campaigning at the same time to preserve his subject from speculation and superstition. The Maudsley Hospital, still the National research centre for British psychiatry, is sufficient testimony to the importance of his work.

Maudsley may fairly be taken as representative of English psychology during the last twenty-five years of the Victorian age. It is not necessary to show that George Gissing or any other novelist knew Maudsley's work.²⁹ For the moment, the purpose is rather to establish what was known about people, psychologically, during the period immediately preceding Freud's first accessible publications. (And here, as always in the history of ideas, one is

talking not about the truth, but about what people *thought* they knew because what they thought they knew *was* their truth.) The need for more up-to-date behavioural and social study had been growing in direct proportion to the growth of new urban centres where people were thrust into unfamiliar relationships with each other, where traditional rules rapidly disintegrated, where for the majority personal freedom was circumscribed in a new way, and where human motivation, especially criminal motivation, had suddenly become a perplexing subject. Nowhere more so than in London. The need for understanding can be seen, for example, in the editorials of *The Lancet*. At first there was the hope that social conditions in the cities would be remedied by practical action; for instance that Manchester would improve when the new reservoir was opened in Thirlmere. Later in the eighties it was realized that those same social conditions had important psychological implications, but ones which were not understood. In February 1888 the editor of *The Lancet* remarked gloomily: "We are still without much precise evidence regarding the nature and extent of the degeneracy of town-bred populations."³⁰ This remark was made at the time of the social upheaval and unrest that disturbed London throughout the eighties, disruptions which led to the unemployment riots of 1886 and 1887 and later to urgently needed reform in local government. In this social and political context, Henry Maudsley studied not so much the social as the psychological phenomenon of "degeneration," that is, the way in which people felt, thought and behaved when they failed to adapt, in the specifically Darwinian sense, to the social milieu of the new urban centres.

There is no doubt that Henry Maudsley was a representative Victorian medical man; what then were his ideas about human behaviour? What conclusions did he come to on the subject of human motivation?

He thought, first, that mental activities were "indissolubly" bound up with the physical and were functions of nerve centres that could best be understood in physiological terms; that derangement of mind had to do with "disease of the nervous system" and could not have a supernatural cause; and that all abnormal behaviour had to be evidence either of a kind of gen-

ius or a kind of insanity. Maudsley and his contemporaries were impressed by syphilis, for example, because it provided evidence of a direct relationship between body and mind. He thought that people with a hereditary predisposition to insanity might be made insane by the pressure of circumstances to which they failed to adapt. In the first edition of the *Pathology of Mind*, he listed factors that would make a person prone to mental illness, including over-population, petty trading and the Church of England. The conviction that mental derangement could be studied through the physical symptoms, and only in that way, led Maudsley, as it had led his Continental contemporaries, to classification and repeated reclassification of cases he himself knew or had heard about, simply because what could not be explained yet in biological or psychological terms could at least be described, and the descriptions, the records, the case histories were themselves a vast step forward. For instance, in the third of the Gulstonian Lectures for 1870,³¹ entitled "On the relation of morbid bodily states to disordered mental functions," Maudsley talked about the "influence of the generative organs in the production of insanity" and had classified the types as follows: nymphomania from irritation of the uterus; the insanity of male self-abuse; menstrual insanity, which he called "epilepsy of the mind"; the insanity of pregnancy. It was his general position that there simply had to be a relation, neurologically, between the actual physical make-up of the individual and that same individual's behaviour. Similarly, all physical abnormality would in some sense have to be meaningful. Even gout. "Writers on gout agree that a suppressed gout may entail mental derangement in some persons; and, on the other hand, that insanity has sometimes disappeared with the appearance of the usual paroxysm."³² Maudsley lacked the neurological expertise to push his work to a scientific conclusion, though he said, interestingly, that brain malfunction would later be traced to things too small for he himself to observe except by their effect.³³ He also lacked Freud's later insights and only dimly saw the psychological implications of his own clinical observation of the relationship of the sexual and the mental. Thus, he was left with the bare knowledge that there was a relationship, which he thought could

usefully be described in a mechanistic way, for the machine was the most natural Victorian metaphor for anything which functioned and effectively, and as a metaphor, precluded the mumbo-jumbo of metaphysics. All this was of considerable interest to the agnostic, anti-Romantic novelist prowling around Lambeth or Clerkenwell, attempting to understand why people behaved in the way he observed they did.

Secondly, Maudsley saw mental illness in terms of the individual's ability or inability to adapt to his environment. "Life is surrounded by forces that are always tending to destroy it," he wrote, "and with which it may be represented as in a continued warfare. So it is with the mind in the circumstances of its existence: the individual who cannot use circumstances, or accommodate himself successfully to them, and in one way or another make them to further his development, is controlled and used by them; being weak, he must be miserable, must be a victim; and one way in which his suffering and future will be manifested will be in insanity. Thus it is that mental trials which serve in the end to strengthen a strong nature break down a weak one which cannot fitly react, and that the efficiency of a moral cause of insanity betrays a conspiracy from within with the unfavourable outward circumstances."³⁴

For much of the population of England in the eighteen-eighties the outward circumstances were distinctly unfavourable. But what of the "conspiracy from within"?³⁵ Why did some people remain stable and survive, while others failed to cope with their environment and become insane? And why particularly did people with the same hereditary make-up react differently? Why did Lydia Trent succeed and Thyrsa Trent fail to adapt to the environment? Maudsley was preoccupied by this problem. He could not solve it, or even think about it in the right terms, because he was not a modern geneticist. But he knew that environment affected differently people with identical inheritance. "Nor have the halves of double monsters always similar dispositions," he wrote rather inconclusively in one of his *Fortnightly Review* articles.³⁶ "The so-called Siamese twins, again, who died a few years ago, did not live happily together to the end of their days; one gave way to drinking, thereby disturbing much the other's

comfort; and they quarrelled so much on that account, and because they took opposite views of the American civil war, that they were earnestly eager to have a separation of bodies and consulted eminent surgeons on that subject."³⁷

Maudsley understood heredity and wanted to relate his understanding to what he observed, but of course he did not understand it as a biological science. Nor did his contemporaries. But since he thought that the human brain had gradually evolved by one generation inheriting from those which preceded it physical features in the brain which permitted increased intellectual sophistication and therefore ability to cope, he was bound also to think that degenerative tendencies could also be inherited. The pathology of degeneration in a pseudo-scientific sense, became suddenly interesting to anyone who had observed "degenerate" behaviour in the slums. Morel had written on the subject earlier in France and had arrived at a formulation that was often quoted: "Degenerations are deviations from the normal human type which are transmissible by heredity and which deteriorate progressively toward extinction."³⁸ Close to Maudsley's and Gissing's time, Ray Lankester had put the same idea differently: "Degeneration may be defined as a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complete conditions of life."³⁹ Maudsley, explicitly following Morel, thought that progress towards mental breakdown could be traced through several generations in the same family, and conversely that human development through the ages, including moral development, was related to physical changes in the nature and size of brain tissue. Degeneration was thus associated with physical deterioration in the brain. Since this tendency to deteriorate was inherited, moral degeneracy was not culpable; a person who behaved "badly" was not completely responsible for his own actions since his behaviour was the result of pathological tendencies outside his control. Society, as it developed, could only be either healthy or diseased. If diseased, the disease would be social not personal. Yet within a person will be what Maudsley called the "insane temperament or neurosis" or the "germs of a morbid variety" representing the transmission of "degenerate elements" from generation to generation. "Nervous disease is a

veritable proteus," he said, "disappearing in one form to reappear in another, and, it may be, capriciously skipping one generation to fasten upon the next."⁴⁰

None of this would be of the least interest to a novelist in the Romantic tradition where in the compact between author and reader heroic or idealized characters were allowed freedom of action and self-determination. Nor, of course, would it be interesting to a psychological novelist in the twentieth-century, post-Freudian sense. But it was intensely interesting to a novelist who had set himself the task of studying social behaviour, because it partly compensated for the lack of socially credible types of motivation. This type of novelist could not devise plots which depended upon the clash of independent wills, where much of the interest lay in what had been called "character," since he did not believe that behaviour was independent of environment. This being the case, he needed a new theory, a new set of ideas on behaviour, self-interest and motivation, and the one available to him involved the concept of evolving social accommodations. As society changed, developed, progressed, evolved, like an organism, so, within it, families succeeded in adapting themselves to challenging circumstances or failed to adapt themselves to circumstances. Within a part of the total social order, adaptation meant accommodation to the circumstances in which you happened to find yourself and you might as well be resigned to this, because the time period needed for an evolutionary change was far in excess of the length of a lifetime. A convenient formulation, since while society was developing and changing in one sense it could still be seen to be necessary that an individual should accept conditions prevailing in the place he happened to be. If he did not accept them, he was, in the world of Maudsley and Gissing, either a genius or a madman (the terms Maudsley and his contemporaries consistently used for the two extremes of behaviour). If "mad" in this general sense, but not a lunatic, his essentially "morbid" behaviour could be studied within the general framework of Maudsley's *Pathology of Mind*. His inability to accept his social role would have not moral, but medical, pathological and eventually psychiatric implications. Thus when Gissing used the word "morbid" to describe Thyrza he was

adopting a pseudo-scientific view of the individual in society very far removed from the work of most of his compatriots. Meanwhile the novel itself, *Thyrza* that is, cannot be read as merely another novel in the larger school of English social realism but must be classified as an experimental attempt at a Continental type of Naturalist novel.

It must be remembered that this discussion has to do with motivation, not with madness. The naturalist needed to know why people did what they did: without a theory of motivation that would replace outmoded moral attitudes he could not sustain a long novel. The pre-Freudian psychologist also needed to know why people did what they did: he had a mechanistic view of a human being which was just as incompatible as the novelist's with traditional moral or metaphysical assumptions. In both cases there was a preference for seeing the individual in a larger social context, that is from a sociological point of view, where the emphasis was upon how people actually behaved, not how they were supposed to behave. But in neither case was the theory adequate. The mechanistic psychologist, like Maudsley, was so intent upon demonstrating the physical basis of mind, and in particular upon urging that socially atypical behaviour had a pathological character that could best be studied medically, that he in fact held back from genuinely psychological insight, being very simply not ready for the sustained diagnostic techniques adapted by Freud and Freud's contemporaries. The naturalist novelist, like Gissing, was similarly so intent on the problem of atypical behaviour in social settings where the individual was dominated by environment, and therefore so open to the type of explanations Maudsley proposed, that he tended to shy away from more complex or subtle views of behaviour which would have been inconsistent with his preoccupation with the environment and the problem of adapting to it. Both psychologist and novelist were influenced strongly by their first-hand observation of urban life, especially in London. Both tried to deduce their theory by observation. Neither in fact lived to see the formulation of adequate theoretical models for the understanding of human behaviour. Psychology after Freud, sociology after Durkheim, both bring an end, firmly indeed, to the Victorian age.

A final example may be useful. It can only be Gissing's *The Nether World*, probably the most fiercely sustained attempt, in this period, to depict an urban environment from which escape is virtually impossible: the area round and about a section of the City Road in London. The streets which constitute the entire universe of the characters are St. James' Walk, Islington High Street, Upper Street, St. John Street, Clerkenwell Close. Rarely do these characters go elsewhere. From upper windows within this universe can be seen distantly St. Paul's, the "surly bulk" of Newgate, Smithfield Market, Bartholemew's Hospital and what Gissing calls "the tract of modern deformity," the railway that has just broken through the area. Within the district itself are St. Luke's Hospital and the Middlesex House of Detention. It is a working-class novel and the author does not permit social mobility: one character comes from outside and goes away again; another tries to leave, fails, and comes back. The novel is remarkable for the violence of movement within this confined area, for the colour and noise of it, for the portrait of pent human energy that explodes in brawls and riots but has no real social outlet. There is also laughter and gaiety but Gissing, the observer, does not allow the characters to compensate for their environment. "Down in Farringdon Street the carts, waggons, cabs, omnibuses, crossed and inter-mingled in a steaming splash-bath of mud; human beings reduced to their due paltriness, seemed to toil in exasperation along the strips of pavement, bound on errands which were a mockery, driven automaton-like by forces they neither understood nor could resist."⁴¹ The novel concerns the lives of a number of working-class families in this *nether world* of Victorian society, people who live without hope, have little understanding even of their own lives and no control over them.

This is not, though, the place to consider the novel as a whole. In it, there is an extremely interesting character, Clara Hewett, a person who will not or cannot adjust to "society," is not resigned to her fate and has feelings within her which constitute an agony, since they are irrelevant to the life she must lead. What is important now is the way such a person is described.

Clara Hewett first appears in Chapter III, which is called "A Superfluous Family."

Her features were of a very uncommon type, at once sensually attractive and bearing a stamp of intellectual vigour. The profile was cold, subtle, original; in full face, her high cheekbones and the heavy, almost horizontal line of the eyebrows were the points that first drew attention, conveying an idea of force of character. The eyes themselves were hazel-coloured, and, whatever her mood, preserved a singular pathos of expression, a look as of self-pity, of unconscious appeal against some injustice. In contrast with this her lips were defiant, insolent, unscrupulous; a shadow of the naivete of childhood still lingered upon them, but, though you divined the earlier pout of the spoiled girl, you felt that it must have foretold this danger-signal in the mature woman. Such cast of countenance could belong only to one who intensified in her personality an inheritance of revolt; who, combining the temper of an ambitious woman with the forces of a man's brain, had early learnt that the world was not her friend nor the world's law.⁴²

Clara Hewett rebels against her father's authority, gets a job as barmaid in a local pub where she lives for a while, adds to her income by a period of calculated prostitution, and eventually escapes the environment completely by becoming an actress with a provincial company in the north. In the novel she does not reappear until Chapter IX, the title of which is "Pathological." The author says: "you must try to understand this girl of the people with her unfortunate endowment of brains and defect of tenderness." The smile on her face "had of course a significance discoverable by study of her life and character." From her father she had a nature that was "generously defect of social cruelties." Her mother was capable. "With such parents," said the author, "every probability told against her patient acceptance of a lot which allowed her faculties no scope." But when this girl left home to work two streets away, she separated herself from the social milieu that to that point had given her life its definition. In this alienated state, she became frustrated and ill and possessed (in the language of the novel) "by mocking phantoms of futile desire," until one day a chance encounter opens up to her the possibility of escape. She could escape her environment by

becoming an actress like the old school friend a man in the pub has told her about.

At this point, the language Gissing adopted seems at first sight just as extraordinary as Gissing's use of the word "morbid" in *Thyrza*. What follows is the paragraph in which this language, and the thinking it implies, appears in concentrated form.

From that day the character of her suffering was altered; it became less womanly, it defied weakness and grew to a fever of fierce, unscrupulous rebellion. Whenever she thought of Sidney Kirkwood, the injury he was inflicting upon her pride rankled into bitter resentment, unsoftened by the despairing thought of self-subdual which had at times visited her sick weariness. She bore her degradations with the sullen indifference of one who is supported by the hope of a future revenge. The disease inherent in her being, that deadly outcome of social tyranny which perverts the generous elements of youth into mere seeds of destruction, developed day by day, blighting her heart, corrupting her moral sense, even setting marks of evil upon the beauty of her countenance. A passionate desire of self-assertion familiarized her with projects, with ideas, which formerly she had glanced at only to dismiss as ignoble. In proportion as her bodily health failed, the worst possibilities of her character came into prominence. Like a creature that is beset by unrelenting forces, she summoned and surveyed all the crafty faculties lurking in the dark places of her nature; theoretically she had now accepted every debasing compact by which a woman can spite herself on the world's injustice. Self-assertion; to be no longer an unregarded atom in the mass of those who are born only to labour for others; to find play for the strength and passion which, by no choice of her own, distinguished her from the tame slave. Sometimes in the silence of night she suffered from a dreadful need of crying aloud, of uttering her anguish in a scream like that of insanity. She stifled it only by crushing her face into the pillow until the hysterical fit had passed, and she lay like one dead.⁴³

Of many possible approaches to this paragraph and ones like it, three strike one immediately. Clara Hewett vividly represents Gissing's attempt to understand social organizations — an attempt which is completely consistent with Maudsley's theory of social adaptation and individual degeneracy.

Firstly, this is possibly one of the earliest depictions in English literature of personal anguish bordering on insanity. The character is socially alienated and a clinical explanation is given for

the alienation. Note is taken that a person has failed to adapt, the feelings she experiences within herself simply not being compatible with the circumstances of her life. But what a mess Gissing gets himself into. Like Maudsley, he is committed to the idea that failure to adapt is a "disease" — a disease "inherent in her being." As in Maudsley, "a passionate desire of self-assertion" leads to fantasy and physical deterioration. As in Maudsley, too, her "hysterical fit" had a sexual cause, though one which Clara Hewett herself did not understand. Gissing understood that "self-subdual" meant sexual repression, which in turn meant a "blighting" agony for the person at odds with herself and the world, but faced with the puzzle of why this type of psychological alienation should occur, and having only Maudsley-type not genuinely psychological concepts with which to cope with it, he concluded that personal happiness involved the sacrifice of self-assertion. Gissing allowed Clara Hewett to be cured. He knew from Maudsley and no doubt others that a type of "cure" was possible. Her cure involves the shock-treatment of disfigurement which jolts her back into place to marry the well-adjusted man from whom she had tried to escape. It was natural for Gissing, the fatalist, to contrive things in this way but in any case only contemporary solutions were open to him as he fashioned his plot. Repression of sexual feeling meant sanity. Self-control and the sacrifice of feeling allowed one to live with others. Had he been free of the mechanistic social views of Maudsley and his contemporaries he could have been a D. H. Lawrence. But he was not. He therefore kept the basic idea that if a person did not adapt to his own environment by accepting it, he would deteriorate physically and morally. Clara Hewett is a brilliant example of the most that could have been understood of the matter at that time.

Secondly, it can be observed that Gissing's temporary interest in naturalism predisposed him to this type of explanation of character. If you were not a post-Darwinian naturalist, you would not need a mechanistic view of character and if, like George Meredith and Henry James, you did not have a mechanistic view of psychology, you would not be a naturalist. Alexander and Selesnick in their *History of Psychiatry*, which is a

standard work, note the fact that it was the late nineteenth-century novelist who prepared the way for Freud and for twentieth-century psychiatry by perceiving subtle psychological dimensions to human situations that British nineteenth-century medicine of the school of Maudsley had oversimplified. By contrast, Gissing's encounter with British pre-Freudian psychiatry took him into a *cul-de-sac* from which, at least in part, he had to retreat in the nineties. Other novelists, James, Hardy, Meredith, tried different ways but were just as confused. The novel simply could not develop or be developed until the problem encountered by Gissing in *The Nether World* and in his treatment of Clara Hewett had been solved.

Finally, Gissing's interest in the morbid pathology of his characters, in social degeneration as an inevitable or unavoidable fact, and in *fin-de-siècle* attitudes of resignation that were compatible with it, presupposed a very simple model — a model that was too simple to last. His mechanistic view of society was in the last resort decadent, anti-democratic and fatalistic. His mechanistic view of a human being was simply wrong. The psychology of Gissing and Maudsley and their contemporaries involved imagining the nervous system as a railway network in which messages travelled along nerve railways from nerve end to head, London to Manchester. In health it all worked automatically. In ill-health there would be trouble along the route as at the terminal. But the trouble would be neurological. An argument with the Station-master at Rugby Junction, altercations on a branch line in North Yorkshire, unrest among the commuters from the home counties were irrelevant. In other words, he knew nothing of psychological events, only of psychological symptoms. The novel, as seen by the naturalist, more concerned symptoms than actual psychological events. And it required Freud to ask a different kind of question that was outside the range of Gissing and Maudsley: why is there trouble in North Yorkshire? What actually happened at Rugby?

NOTES

- ¹ The extent to which Hardy, Meredith and Gissing discussed the subject together during Gissing's visits to Max Gate and his more frequent visits to Box Hill has still to be explored. *One of Our Conquerors* and *The Amazing Marriage* represent Meredith's assessment of Naturalism.
- ² Edmund Gosse's awareness of Ibsen dates from as early as 1879, when he published his *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe*. His early essays on Ibsen were re-fashioned, later, in *Ibsen*, a book-length study published in 1907. In the eighteen-eighties Gosse was a prime mover in bringing Ibsen's work to the attention of the British public. A version of *A Doll's House* was performed at the Novelty Theatre on 7 June 1889. *The Pillars of Society* (abridged and called *Quicksands*) was first performed at the Gaiety Theatre on 15 December 1890. William Archer was the translator in both cases, v. Michael Meyer *Ibsen: a Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1971). Whether or not Gissing saw these early productions is uncertain. But he did see *Hedda Gabler*, which he referred to for the first time in January 1891 [*The Letters of George Gissing to Edward Bertz*, Ed. A. C. Young (London: Constable, 1961), p. 117] and then saw in May of the same year (v. Bertz, p. 125). These dates are important because after the publication of *New Grub Street*, Gissing's work took a new direction. Whereas the novels of the eighteen-eighties were concerned chiefly with social milieu, the novels of the nineties constitute a study of different types of social alienation, a study in which Gissing followed Ibsen in his depiction of the psychological and biological determinants of behaviour.
- ³ Gissing read Turgenev in German translation, then later in French. By March 1890 he had read *Fathers and Sons* "six or seven" times. A little later he endorsed Bertz's favourable response: "Yes, I quite concur with it. He is a great fellow, and most later work pales before his." Bertz, p. 199.
- ⁴ Vizetelly had published ten of Zola's novels in translation, beginning with *Nana* in 1884, but like George Moore, Gissing would have been able to read them in French as they appeared. From his diary we know that he read *Le Rêve* and the novels which followed it in the year of publication. In 1880, he told Frederic Harrison that he had not read any Zola, meaning that he had not read *L'Assommoir* (1876) or *Nana* (1880). It seems likely, however, that he would have read these two books by the time he wrote his own principal novels in the naturalist mode: *Demos* (1886), *Thyrza* (1887) and *The Nether World* (1889). Knowing, as he did, the work of both Zola and George Moore, he would obviously have considered the implications for himself of Moore's Zola-esque *The Mummer's Wife*, pondering the extent to which a desire for emancipation would be frustrated by biological considerations outside the conscious control of the individual. That Gissing later said that he detested naturalism did not make his interest in it less urgent.
- ⁵ See, for example, *The History of Psychology* by F. G. Alexander and S. T. Selesnick (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 150-78 on "The Modern Era."
- ⁶ *Studies Uber Hysterie* (1895) is taken to be Freud's first accessible, but of course not literally his first publication.
- ⁷ *Les Règles de la Méthode sociologique* (Paris: G. Baillière et Cie., 1895).

- ⁸ Which, despite books like Weissmann's *Theory of the Germ Plasma*, did not happen until the twentieth century. See A. M. Sturtevant, *A History of Genetics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
- ⁹ Wilhelm Griesinger (1817-1868), professor of psychology and neurology in the University of Berlin, founder of the *Archiv für Physiologische Heilkunde*.
- ¹⁰ Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) became physician in charge of the Salpêtrière in 1862.
- ¹¹ *The Study of Psychology* (Edinburgh: Wm. Blackwood, 1879), p. 35.
- ¹² Thus there are very few crowd scenes in British nineteenth-century fiction, the "Io Saturnalia" chapter in Gissing's *The Nether World* being the exception rather than the rule.
- ¹³ For an authoritative treatment of this see William Parry-Jones *The Trade in Lunacy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).
- ¹⁴ By "socially manageable" is meant, for example, works like Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* where ideal behaviour associated with the search for an absolute but unattainable truth is preferred to the more limited but real human encounters many of Arthur's knights have in the process of failing to find the Holy Grail.
- ¹⁵ Most noticeable is this overlay in the work of George Eliot, who was fully prepared, as in the case of *Silas Marner*, to fashion and turn a plot so that the action in which the characters were involved could be resolved in terms of a set of values represented as one in which all sensible writers, readers and characters would believe.
- ¹⁶ There is an obvious parallel between the descriptive methods of the naturalist and the technique of the impressionist painter, who also believed that what the eye saw was the most that could be known.
- ¹⁷ *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1880), p. 76.
- ¹⁸ Though Gissing read tirelessly throughout his life, it is interesting to note that his most intense encounter with European writing occurred between 1883-1887 when he lived by himself at 7K Cornwall Mansions just off Baker Street. See my *The Alien Art* (Folkestone, Kent: Wm. Dawson & Sons, 1979), pp. 136-37.
- ¹⁹ For the most part Gissing did not write about parts of London in which he had lived; he went to live in parts he wanted to write about. He never went very far. For example, he did not write about the docks or the East End. His chosen subject, in short, was a very specific one: urban life that lay just beyond the pale.
- ²⁰ These are the dates of the first editions. Gissing wrote *Demos* in 1885-86, *Thyrza* in 1886-87, and *The Nether World* in the first half of 1888.
- ²¹ *George Gissing: Essays and Fiction*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), pp. 75-97.
- ²² "The inconceivable had come to pass," says the narrator; "By a word and a look Harvey had made real what he was always telling himself could never be more than a dream, and a dream of unutterable folly." *The Whirlpool* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1897), p. 113.
- ²³ *The Freak of Nature* is a short story published by Gissing in *The Minister* and *The London Magazine*. Despite vigorous searches, the particular

issues in which the story was published have not been traced. It is therefore only known by the manuscript in the Kansas City Library.

- 24 *Thyrza* (London: Smith, Elder, 1887), I, 53.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 26 I am indebted to Professor Aubrey Lewis who sent me an off-print of his "Henry Maudsley; his Work and Influence," *Journal of Mental Science*, April 1951, pp. 1-20, as well as his article on Maudsley in *Kolle, Grosse Nervenarzte*, Bd. 3, pp. 101-08.
- 27 See, for example, L. S. Hearnshaw's *A Short History of British Psychology: 1840-1940* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), especially chapter 2.
- 28 Published separately as "Henry Maudsley: His Work and Influence," reprinted from the *Journal of Mental Science*, April 1951, p. 12.
- 29 Gissing referred to Maudsley, however, both in his correspondence and diary.
- 30 *The Lancet*, 25 February 1888, p. 376.
- 31 *Body and Mind*, Gulstonian Lectures (London: Macmillan, 1870).
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 33 "It is plain, then, that there may be, unknown to us save as guessed from their effects, the most important modifications in the molecular activities of nerve element, changes in its chemical composition, and actual defects in the physical constitution of the nerve-centres. . . . Close to us, yet inaccessible to our senses, there lies a domain of nature — that of the infinitely little — the operations of which are as much beyond our present ken as those that take place in the remotest regions of space, to which the eye, with all its aids, cannot yet reach and of which the mind cannot conceive." *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 35 It is interesting to note in passing that Gissing used the expression when describing Gilbert Grail in *Thyrza*. Grail's "haunter within" was his idealism.
- 36 "Hereditry in Health and Disease," *The Fortnightly Review*, 45 (1886), 650.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 650.
- 38 *Traité de dégénéreuses*, Paris, 1857.
- 39 *Degeneration*, 1880, p. 32.
- 40 *Body and Mind*, p. 68.
- 41 *The Nether World* (London: Smith, Elder, 1889), p. 280. (This is the second edition of *The Nether World* which is in fact the definitive text.)
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 86.