

## Afterword

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*Born in Exile* begins with a showcasing event at a new British institution of higher education. With his usual attention to detail, Gissing specifies that Whitelaw College has been up and running for just nine years. And with the (equally characteristic) indication of the precise year 1874 as the setting for the celebration, British readers of the early twenty-first century can only be struck by a sense of unexpected familiarity across a long divide. So new universities, then as now, were par for the course. So 'commuting' students who go to a college near home to avoid paying extra costs of travel (or lodgings) had equivalents in the late nineteenth century. Just like now, those who were better off could move, or move on, to the more prestigious places.

We can recognise the opening scene not just as resembling a part of our own reality, but even as not unlike the literary reality of a twentieth-century campus novel: the prizegiving day is partly presented in the mode of light social comedy. But with Gissing's specification of features such as sponsorship and student funding, this novel is far more seriously informative than most of its twentieth-century successors. There is a breakdown, for instance, of the various types of student: their social backgrounds and likely outcomes, post-college. Also, the college is seen—unusually for the campus genre—from the students' point of view, not that of the teachers: Gissing begins with the several rivalries that exist in the trio of Bruno Chilvers, Buckland Warricombe, and Godwin Peak himself—our man in exile.

In *Born in Exile*, then, surprisingly, we find ourselves at home. It seems at the start that we know where we are and we sort of belong there too. The novel seems to be close enough to present-day cultural questions for it to serve as a useful means for thinking about similarities and differences between these historically separated cultures. For instance, we may be struck by the intellectual boldness of a college curriculum with not only a mixture of arts and sciences, but also both ultra-modern and traditionally academic subjects. An individual student can be studying both geology and ancient Greek and their specific conjunction, as utterly different modes of reflection about a distant past, is itself one source of Godwin Peak's almost existential sense of himself as without a solid sense of belonging here and now. The scope for comparisons between the time of the novel and ours appears to be as wide as it is with *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Odd Women* (1893) published on either side, chronologically, of *Born in Exile*. Dealing as they do with cultural questions about media and feminism that remain at the top of the social agenda today, these novels can even be used as teaching texts for contemporary students (and it helps that *New Grub Street* is also, in patches, laugh-aloud funny). So why not have a go with *Born in Exile* too?

Well yes. But unlike with these two, there are problems to face with this novel as well as the opportunities it clearly does offer. Very soon, before the story has gone much distance away from the academic festivities at Godwin's *alma mater*, new readers come up against a kind of cultural block where we no longer readily get what is going on for the characters at all. This is all the more disorientating because

initially, as before, we may think that we definitely do. The sequence of events goes like this. Accompanied by the amiable Earwaker. Godwin Peak is on his way to some sort of moderate prolonging of the public event, when out of nowhere appears an uncle. Nothing to do with the town, let alone the college, he is dressed in a ready-made suit and speaks in a version of Cockney dialect. So far, so recognisable: embarrassing relatives with the wrong outfits and the wrong accent have not disappeared from modern experience, even if the last fifty years have seen a progressive departure from the dominance of so-called standard English in mainstream auditory media.<sup>1</sup> Andrew's speech patterns, as represented by Gissing's pseudo-transcriptions, are ably analysed in Lynda Muggleston's piece.

But the man's distastefulness for Godwin extends much further than the sound of his voice or the factory-made cut of his ill-fitting sleeves. He is thinking of opening an off-campus café serving affordable, quality food to students—none of whom, as he ascertains from Godwin, have their meals provided in halls of residence:

'So naturally they want a plyce where they can 'ev a nibble, somewhere 'any?'

'Yes. We have to go further into the town for a decent dinner.'

'Just what I thought!' exclaimed Andrew, slapping his leg. 'With a establishment like that opposyte, there'd ought to be a medium-sized Spiers & Pond at this 'ere street corner for any man as knows 'is wye about. That's my idea, Godwin—see?'<sup>2</sup>

In naming Spiers and Pond as his model, Andrew is astutely likening the potential student appetite for quality combined with rapid service to that of the railway passenger; both classes, implicitly, are short of time, but want to be able to get a meal quickly before or between their lectures or their trains. By the early 1870s, this chain of refreshment rooms was familiar as a reliable brand in London railway terminals. In 1865 an announcement of their new establishment in Ludgate Station reads like a stylish twenty-first-century take on the perfect blend of fast food and style: 'Economy of charge is a characteristic feature, while the accessories of cleanliness, elegance, and tasteful display have been studiously regarded. In all of these points it will vie with any of the buffets of the continent. Two-minute luncheon, snacks, bonnes-bouches, pastry of their own cuisine, wines, liqueurs, ales, effervescing beverages, and Spiers and Pond's Ambrosial punch, served with promptitude in first-class style.'<sup>3</sup>

To modern readers, it looks as though Andrew Peak has spotted a gap in the market and had a bright idea. But it is here that *Born in Exile*, or its hubristic protagonist at least, goes off in a direction where the signs are practically unreadable now. For Godwin, in his time, the prospect of the off-campus café triggers a social shame so extreme that it puts the seal on his decision not to continue his education at the college:

Had the fellow really threatened to start an eating-house opposite the College, and flare his name upon a placard? 'Peak's Dining and Refreshment Rooms'—merciful heavens!

... What possibility of pursuing his studies when every class-companion, every Professor, —nay, the very Porters,—had become aware

that he was nephew to the man who supplied meals over the way? (56; ellipsis mine)

In milder form, this horror of having a family member with commercial connections is echoed elsewhere in the novel. There is a sister who marries a draper's assistant and a milliner aunt who, remarkably, is on friendly terms with ladies 'in spite of her shop' (32). In fact, these various characters are all more at home in their given places than Godwin Peak—who despairs at the existence of his sister and brother-in-law's two children, 'born into the world of draperdom' (127).

This evident difference in the social perceptions of the two historical times is exacerbated by the fact that today a scheme like Andrew's would not only not be awkward, but would be seen as positively enterprising and attractive for all parties: as surely a 'win win' proposition of the (recently) proverbial variety. In a sense, then, the extreme dissociation evoked for Godwin by this 'speculative uncle' (28)—his physical presence and his specific business plan—has its counterpart in the distance that marks a modern reader's likely incomprehension of the force of the young man's feeling. In a culture like ours that is entrepreneurial to a fault—as a default—it is impossible for us to recapture, on the pulse, any vestige of Godwin's recoil from the taint of *trade*.

Other elements of *Born in Exile* are equally alien for contemporary readers: equally 'dated'. They can be firmly located back then, as past and done with; and they are also no longer subjectively meaningful in the present day. In particular, it is almost impossible now to grasp the burning emotional intensity evoked by the ecclesiastical and theological controversies of the time; or the tortuous shame of Godwin's conflicted ambition at one stage to present himself as a potential clergyman, denying his past as a critical thinker. Jeremy Tambling exposes and explicates some of the many layers of these stresses and shakings in which personal integrity is painfully bound up with religious beliefs and choices, most often in relation to new scientific theories. The evident distance of these particular theological and even geological troubles draws attention to divergence (rather than continuity) between the two periods.

Also, it's only fair to point out that Gissing's Godwin is not what a modern student might call, or find, *relatable*. In his intellectual and emotional divisions he is no more at one with himself than he is with his different environments and their other occupants. As Richard Dennis documents with beautiful precision, Peak is unsettled in place as much as personally, a truly peripatetic individual who regards himself as being at odds with the various social spaces he enters and leaves. And yet there is still, and even for Godwin Peak, a horizon of something like home. Both Dennis and Constance Harsh write about the irresistibly unlikely description of the perfect lodgings Peak comes across in South London, at a place where he stays for several years. All is clean and tidy and immaculately maintained; the landlady, meanwhile, discreetly off-scene, is not just perfect of her kind, but even French as well. Happiness is coming back after a sociable evening to find supper laid out like this:

The cloth was spotless, the utensils tasteful and carefully disposed. In a bowl lay an appetising salad, ready for mingling; a fragment of Camembert cheese was relieved upon a setting of green herbiage; a bottle of ale, with adjacent

corkscrew, stood beside the plate; the very loaf seemed to come from no ordinary baker's, or was made to look better than its kin by the fringed white cloth in which it nestled. (126)

Like Harsh, who refers to the 'salad and Camembert', and Dennis, who quotes most of it too, I find this passage so wonderfully un-Gissingesque that I can't not bring it out once more for readerly consumption. With a few tweaks, it could be it a positive restaurant review on TripAdvisor—a bit overwritten perhaps, but clearly written by someone who's trying hard. Or, if you forget the touch of homely virtue (the 'spotless' cloth and the neat arrangement), then the luscious, aestheticising tone is not so far from the elegant domestic scenes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which came out while Gissing was writing this novel.

There came a knock at the door, and the butler entered with a laden tea-tray and set it down upon a small Japanese table. There was a rattle of cups and saucers and the hissing of a fluted Georgian urn. Two globe-shaped china dishes were brought in by a page. Dorian Gray went over and poured out the tea. The two men sauntered languidly to the table, and examined what was under the covers.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Peak's housekeeper, the (male) servants are visible here (though equally unobtrusive: they quietly get on with their elegant performance). And the décor and tableware are several cultural rungs above the Peckham Rye furnishings. But the two scenes share the feeling of peaceful aesthetic domesticity, with everything smoothly provided.

As Harsh makes clear, however, the soft power of the Gissing passage comes partly from the narrative's defaulting, straight after, to a Peakian tirade against the negative features of the city, from which this extraordinary space is then seen as a sanctuary. In Gissing, occasional—very occasional—moments of calm when a protagonist is at one with himself or the place where he finds himself are almost always surrounded, narratively and psychologically, by the countering sense of a hostile and comfortless world in which the subject can hope for neither rest nor fulfilment.

As the contributors to this issue all point out in their different contexts, *Born in Exile's* Godwin Peak stands out as something like the exemplary Gissing hero, or anti-hero: in conflict with himself and the local and larger worlds he encounters; unsettled in both a geographical and a psychological sense; both wilfully self-isolating and also, to put it in socio-geological terms, feeling himself to be caught between a rock and a hard place. And there is a different kind of division, I have suggested, for present-day readers entering Peak's story. Some of the structuring forms that the character comes up against are familiar, sometimes strikingly so; while others have sunk into a state of ideological oblivion, out of sight and mind and without the power to move us in the ways that they clearly do move Peak and some of his peers.

One other strand of late nineteenth-century ways of seeing that surfaces in this novel may fall between these two categories in an intriguing way. Towards the end, Peak is talking with his sympathetic friend Earwaker, who remarks on Peak's inability to do without what he calls his 'sexual spectacles' (442). Extraordinary as it

is, this phrase might seem at first sight to be fairly simply a reference to something like rousing if not arousing public entertainments, such as the music hall. In fact, though, the sexual spectacles are Peak's own—as if on the end of his nose: Earwaker is talking about the (metaphorical) glasses that mediate and, implicitly, distort the way that he looks at everything. In this connection the thought would be proto-Freudian, and might be linked to a mention earlier on, in a formulation that is just as much ahead of its cultural time, of his 'labyrinths of erotic reverie' (315). But what Earwaker is talking about specifically in his complaint about Peak's 'sexual spectacles' is more to do with practical prospects than a fantasy underworld. It is Peak's over-preoccupation, as his friend sees it, with the lack of a viable woman to live with (and marry): one who, ideally, would be a resource for both sex and companionship.

We should remember that—as his diary painfully documents—this novel was written during the first few months of its author's half desperate marriage to the unmoneyed and uneducated Edith Underwood, whose social difference, he thought, would mean that he would never again be received in polite society.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there may be an element of old-fashioned novelistic wish-fulfilment in the way that Gissing's fiction creates not just one but two intelligent women, Marcella Moxey and Sidwell Warricombe, who are both ladies (that rare commodity) and both of them, in their different ways, smitten by Godwin—a more or less Gissing *alter ego*. Naturally, though, this being a Gissing novel, things can't be allowed to work out in the end: two of the trio dramatically die, leaving poor Sidwell, by now pushing thirty, to an uncertain and also Godwinless future.

Like the wincing awfulness of the entrepreneurial uncle, the particular forms of social shame and exclusions implied by having a lower-class wife are remote from the different prejudices of today. But the phrase 'sexual spectacles' is one that can still resonate strongly, now in relation to the complex confusions of gender bias and sexual inclination that are so prominent in our culture. And even without this urgency, the expression is brilliantly suggestive, not only because of the sex but because of the ambiguous function of the everyday prosthesis that is a pair of spectacles. On the one hand, wearing glasses restores a faulty vision; on the other, a given lens may be blurring or falsely heightening what is seen. And in addition to this, any pair of spectacles is positioned right in front of the eyes, before you start looking at all. You see through them—with their aid—but by the same token you don't see them at all. They are transparent and their presence is ignored, but they shape and modify the entire field of your vision.

Earwaker's sexual spectacles may be looked at from one more angle. Their ambiguous transparency surely offers the clearest possible image of what is going on when we try, from our far-off and diverse perspectives, to see and respond to the native worlds of *Born in Exile*. As the contributors to this special issue have all so distinctively done.

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<sup>1</sup> As I write, though, the BBC TV presenter Steph McGovern has been making a noise about negative discrimination against some northern English accents (she herself is from Middlesbrough, on Teesside).

<sup>2</sup> George Gissing, *Born in Exile* (1892), ed. Pierre Coustillas (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978), 26. Further page references will be given within the main text.

<sup>3</sup> Advertisement in the *Times*, Friday September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865, 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

<sup>5</sup> See the entries for 1891 and 1892 in Gissing, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian London: The Diary of George Gissing*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978), 235-93. In September, 1890, in the middle of writing *New Grub Street*, Gissing hits extremes of frustrated dejection: 'Feel like a madman at times. I know that I shall never do any more good work till I am married' (226). A week later he names Edith for the first time. On Tuesday April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1892, having received a letter from the lady, Gissing records: 'Wrote to Mrs Harrison, telling her of my marriage, and that henceforth I am shut off from educated people' (244). He may be exaggerating. On Wednesday June 24<sup>th</sup>: 'Recd from Mrs F. Harrison fine portraits [i.e. photographs] of herself and Frederic—former inscribed to Edith. Wrote to thank her' (249).