

Chapter 7

The Discontents of Everyday Life: Civilization and the Pathology of Masculinity in *The Whirlpool*

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If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you
If you can trust yourself and all men doubt you
But can make allowance for their doubting too ...

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!
Rudyard Kipling, opening and closing lines of 'If'

“When one has children what one writes becomes a terrible responsibility.”
Miss Ambient, in Henry James, 'The Author of Beltraffio'

Gissing and Masculinity

In his fiction of the 1890s, Gissing's attention becomes increasingly engaged by issues of Empire and national identity, and, to a greater extent than previously, by late Victorian culture's construction of gender. Gissing had been preoccupied to some extent with the nature of masculinity since his first novel *Workers in the Dawn* (1880). The hero Arthur Golding tries and fails, like Henry James's effeminately-named Hyacinth Robinson (in *The Princess Casamassima*), to square external demands for masculine action with an internalized responsibility for the production of art. Gissing continued to chart the ways in which the male protagonist's identity might be threatened or oppressed, most often by the balance of power within marriage (Grylls 1986, pp. 162f.). In *New Grub Street* (1891), Edwin Reardon struggles to assert himself against his 'masculine' wife:

He had but to do one thing: to seize her by the arm, drag her up from the chair, dash her back again with all his force – there, the transformation would be complete, they would stand towards each other on the natural footing. With an added curse perhaps –

Instead of that, he choked, struggled for breath, and shed tears.

Amy turned scornfully away from him. Blows and a curse would have overawed her, at all events for the moment; she would have felt: 'Yes, he is a man,

and I have put my destiny into his hands.' His tears moved her to a feeling cruelly exultant; they were the sign of her superiority. It was she who should have wept, and never in her life had she been further from such display of weakness. (Gissing, 1985 [1891], pp. 261f.).

There is an analogous passage in *Isabel Clarendon* (Gissing, 1969 [1886], vol. 2, p.217.) In *The Whirlpool* (1897), and also the later anti-imperialist novel *The Crown of Life* (1899), Gissing concentrates on the location of a masculinity precariously defined between an internally-valorized conception of self and external pressures towards politics, violence, displayed Englishness and manly activity (see Mangan and Walvin, throughout). In *The Whirlpool* especially, masculinity is threatened by urban consumerist pressures that Gissing genders as female; the Empire provides a possible outlet for sublimated masculine urges, but not without cost to the development of the higher self. In 'Women and the Disease of Civilisation', William Greenslade has brilliantly identified *The Whirlpool's* project to establish a 'nervous pathology' of modern living (Greenslade, pp.134-50), a theme discussed in depth by David Glover in the present volume. The novel's heroine, Alma Frothingham (who becomes Alma Rolfe), is sucked into the 'whirlpool way of life' in and around London (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p.156.). She is morally compromised by her desire for both a commodified, public modernity in her career as a musician and a traditional family existence as a wife. 'The delight of an existence that loses itself in whirl and glare' has its cost, however, and Alma eventually dies from an overdose of a remedy for 'fashionable disorder of the nerves' (p.305). As H.G.Wells, among others, has noted, Gissing tends to group the characters of his novels around a particular 'structural theme': in this novel the theme is 'the fatal excitement and extravagance of the social life of London' ('The Novels of Mr George Gissing', in Gettmann, pp. 242-59; see p.245). The male characters who risk being propelled into the whirl of modern living by their hysteric womenfolk are thus also made subject to the same nervous disorders as the women – although the women's symptoms tend to be more conspicuous (see Showalter; and Federico, pp. 106f. My reading of Rolfe's development during the course of the novel, however, differs from Federico's.) After he has been dealing in the City, 'beneath [Hugh]'s eyes hung baggy flesh that gave him a bilious aspect, his cheeks were a little sunken, and the tone of his complexion had lost its healthy clearness' (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p.209); Abbott suffers from neuralgia (p.7); Morpew from 'indifferent health' (p.90); Rolfe from a sore throat (p.209); his father from fever (p.330).

Gissing is still wrongly portrayed as an unthinking supporter of patriarchy (for a recent account of this issue, see Kramer). Although certainly capable of misogynist sentiments, in novels such as the now better-known *The Odd Women* (1893) Gissing can demonstrate an awareness of how the oppression of women is less determined essentially by their sex than culturally by their gender, usually through unsatisfactory education. This is the argument of an often-quoted letter he wrote in 1893:

My demand for female "equality" simply means that I am convinced that there shall be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance & childishness of women. The

average woman pretty closely resembles, in all intellectual considerations, the average male *idiot* – I speak medically. That state of things is traceable to the lack of education, in all senses of the word. Among our English emancipated there is a majority of admirable persons.... I am driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman. That type must disappear, – or at all events become altogether subordinate. And I believe that the only way of effecting this is to go through a period of what many people will call sexual anarchy. (Mattheisen et al, vol. 5, p.113)

Gissing could perceive the constructed nature of masculinity as well as femininity. Often in fiction of the *fin-de-siècle* by male authors such as Stevenson, Wilde, Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle and du Maurier, literary presentation of masculinity tends to become a field of enquiry rather than a single node, offering versions within an identifiable typology, especially through contrasting pairings. *The Whirlpool* also offers this kind of sexual typology. Set in contrast to the central male protagonist Harvey Rolfe are his friends Cecil Morphew, Hugh Carnaby, and Basil Morton, who display different modern – or in the case of the last, archaic – ‘types’, and who before Rolfe’s marriage comprise a network of homosocial relationships, ‘quaffing and smoking and talking into the small hours’ (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p 128). Carnaby, for instance, is recognizably of the stock which peopled in life Victoria’s, and in literature, Kipling’s, Empire (Gatrell, pp. 79f):

Carnaby was a fair example of the well-bred, well-fed Englishman – tall, brawny, limber, not uncomely, with a red neck, a powerful jaw, and a keen eye. Something more of repose, of self-possession, and a slightly more intellectual brow, would have made him the best type of conquering, civilising Briton. He came of good family, but had small inheritance; his tongue told of age-long domination; his physique and carriage showed the horseman, the game-stalker, the nomad. Hugh had never bent over books since the day when he declined the university and got leave to join Colonel Bosworth’s exploring party in the Caucasus. After a boyhood of straitened circumstances, he profited by a skilful stewardship which allowed him to hope for some seven hundred a year; his elder brother, Miles, a fine fellow, who went into the army, pinching himself to benefit Hugh and their sister Ruth. Miles was now Major Carnaby, active on the North-West Frontier. Ruth was wife of a missionary in some land of swamps; doomed by climate, but of spirit indomitable. It seemed strange that Hugh, at five and thirty, had done nothing particular. Perhaps his income explained it – too small for traditional purposes, just large enough to foster indolence. For Hugh had not even followed up his promise of becoming an explorer; he had merely rambled, mostly in pursuit of fowl or quadruped. When he married, all hope for him was at an end. The beautiful and brilliant daughter of a fashionable widow, her income a trifle more than Carnaby’s own; devoted to the life of cities, wherein she shone; an enchantress whose spell would not easily be broken, before whom her husband bowed in delighted subservience – such a woman might flatter Hugh’s pride, but could scarce be expected to draw out his latent energies and capabilities. This year, for the first time, he had visited no wild country; his journeying led only to Paris, to Vienna. In due season he shot his fifty brace on somebody’s grouse-moor, but the sport did not exhilarate him.

An odd and improbable alliance, that between Hugh Carnaby and Harvey Rolfe. Yet in several ways they suited each other.... The one’s physical vigour and adroitness, the other’s active mind, liberal thoughts, studious habits, proved reciprocally attractive. Though in unlike ways, both were impressively modern. Of

late it had seemed as if the man of open air, checked in his natural courses, thrown back upon his meditations, turned to the student, with hope of guidance in new paths, of counsel amid unfamiliar obstacles. (Gissing, 1979 [1897], pp. 8ff.)

Gissing initially polarizes hero and hero's and hero's best friend between, in a phrase that Joseph Bristow has used writing on E.M. Forster, 'the opposed interests of the sociable sportsman and the smug intellectual' (Bristow, p.61). Carnaby is only partly ironized here (unlike the violent imperialists the Strattons in *Isabel Clarendon*). While recognizing Carnaby's character to be of a different kind from his own, Rolfe can potentially see a place in the world for the vigorous, unscholarly sportsman. Such a place might ideally, as for Carnaby's siblings, be the Empire: instead he is unnaturally confined to the enclosed spaces of London society by his marriage to a woman with a 'decided preference for civilisation' (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p 34; on the tension between marriage and manly imperial activity, see Tosh, p.176).

A Man's Place

This novel's anxieties are confined mostly within the domestic sphere. While Gissing evidently feels that the home should largely be the concern of women, this household should still be ruled by masculine power, a view expressed in the idealized Mrs Morton's commonplace that ' "A married woman would, of course, be guided by her husband's wish" ' (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p 337; cf. Mattheisen et al, vol. 6, pp. 149f.). The question most urgently debated by the novel's married couples is where this home should be. The novel dramatizes a choice between a static, rural ideal supported by individual female service, or continuous and debilitating urban excitement driven by collective feminine desire (see James, 1997). The Empire supplies the possibility of a space further beyond Europe where the potentialities of the masculine self could be given fuller expression. Unlike many nineteenth-century representations of overseas territories, Gissing's portrayal of the Empire does not feminize it as fertile foreign territory awaiting colonization and domestication by a vigorous English male, but rather presents it as a liminal space where manly energies can be exerted with the least damage to metropolitan, feminine English society.

'Why didn't I follow Miles into the army? I think I was more cut out for that than for anything else. I often feel I should like to go to South Africa and get up a little war of my own.'

Rolfe shouted with laughter.

'Not half a bad idea, and the easiest thing in the world, no doubt.'

'Nigger-hunting; a superior big game.'

'There's more than that to do in South Africa,' said Harvey. 'I was looking at a map in Stanford's window the other day, and it amused me. Who believes for a moment that England will remain satisfied with bits here and there? We have to swallow the whole, of course. We shall go on fighting and annexing, until – until the decline and fall of the British Empire. That hasn't begun yet. Some of us are so over-civilised that it makes a reaction of wholesome barbarism in the rest. We shall fight like blazes in the twentieth century. It's the only thing that keeps Englishmen sound;

commercialism is their curse. Happily, no sooner do they get fat than they kick, and somebody's shin suffers; then they fight off the excessive flesh. War is England's Banting.'

'You'd better not talk like that to Sibyl.' (Gissing, 1979 [1897], pp. 16f.)

Before his marriage, Rolfe happily travels on his own in Europe, this foreign space one of contented masculine leisure; subsequently his freedom to travel is restricted by marriage and parenthood. Mrs Morton, apparently with the narrator's approval, is happy to remain confined to England unless safely escorted by male relatives: ' "I will go abroad," she said, "when my boys can take me" ' (p.325). Before the correction of his initial views by the actual fact of fatherhood, Rolfe mistakenly speculates:

'If I had a son,' pursued Harvey, smiling at the hypothesis, 'I think I'd make a fighting man of him, or try to. At all events, he should go out somewhere, and beat the big British drum, one way or another. I believe it's our only hope. We're rotting at home – some of us sunk in barbarism, some coddling themselves in over-refinement. What's the use of preaching peace and civilisation, when we know that England's just beginning her big fight – the fight that will put all history into the shade! We have to lead the world; it's our destiny; and we must do it by breaking heads. That's the nature of the human animal, and will be for ages to come.'

Carnaby nodded assent. (p.14)

As *The Crown of Life* later shows, Gissing can certainly be critical of the unappealing cultural consequences of imperialism, but for certain types of men, the Empire might yet be the most suitable place for them, where they may temporarily 'decivilise' themselves, work off their 'superabundant vitality as nature prompted' (p.45) and exert masculine urges that this novel's discourse constructs as 'natural instincts' (p.17). Nature and civilization are thus placed by this novel in opposition, in particular masculine 'nature' and feminine, urban 'civilization'.

Addressing these concerns in the aftermath of the First World War, Sigmund Freud wrote:

The inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and I return to my view that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilisation. (...) I may now add that civilisation is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that, families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity. (...) But man's natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this programme of civilisation. (Freud, p.122)

Freud blames the unsuccessful sublimation of this violent masculine urge for the wars which threaten the continued survival of nations and the species, and attributes to successful sublimation 'higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological' (p.97). Rolfe is too temperamentally studious – in the terms of this novel, psychically healthy – to need a violent outlet, but his unlettered friend Carnaby does. The narrator repeatedly indicates that the frustrated Empire-builder is unnaturally confined by his marriage, and by the urban living it demands; he

contracts 'an odd habit of swinging his right arm, with fist clenched, as though relieving his muscles after some unusual constraint' (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p.276).

Love and Marriage

Male identity, for Gissing, is not given expression by the sexual act whether in or outside of marriage: masculinity is conquered and restrained by sex. When Rolfe first falls for Alma, 'all his manhood [is] subdued by her scornful witchery' (this phrase occurs in a passage of very poor writing, as if Gissing's own capabilities are subdued by the difficulties of representing a powerful female sexuality); Carnaby is baffled as well, and by other women besides his wife (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p102). Carnaby is robbed by his housekeeper, Mrs Lant, of his symbolically masculine possessions of silver-mounted pistols, cheque-book and ibex-hoof paperweight. After losing money in the Britannia crash, he goes abroad, temporarily to the open space of Queensland but then to an émigré version of the civilized London society he would prefer to escape, in Honolulu.

The tropics were not his favourite region, and those islands of the Pacific offered no scope for profitable energy; he did not want to climb volcanoes, still less to lounge beneath bananas and breadfruit-trees, however pleasant such an escape from civilisation might seem at the first glance. A year of marriage, of idleness amid amusements, luxuries, extravagances, for which he had no taste, was bearing its natural result in masculine restiveness. His robust physique and temper, essentially combative, demanded liberty under conditions of rude or violent life. (p.58)

On their return, Sibyl's continued consumption having prevented any money being saved, Carnaby is obliged to enter a bicycle-manufacturing business. This allows some scope for his natural instincts: 'He preferred to stay down at Coventry with his partner Mackintosh, living roughly, smoking his pipe and drinking his whisky in the company of men who had at least a savour of sturdy manhood' (p.184). However, the novel seems to suggest that since the activity of trying to make money is one enforced by female consumption, it is inherently feminizing, or at least threatening to masculinity's (sexual) capital: 'his days of sport were gone by; he was risking the remnant of his capital' (p.184). Carnaby is thus obliged to seek additional 'capital' from the financier Redgrave. When by chance Carnaby re-encounters his former housekeeper, she hints that Sibyl has secured the loan by sleeping with Redgrave (the narrative withholds confirmation of whether this is true). Carnaby goes to Redgrave's suburban villa and, mistaking Alma's presence there for Sibyl's, strikes the millionaire, killing him.

Carnaby has stated earlier that 'men must not quarrel; women did more than enough of that' (p.279); but the physical alternative to verbal quarrelling proves more harmful still. In this novel at least, action is natural for men, but women are more at home in language, especially untruthful language. ' "I hate a dirty, lying, incapable creature, that's all, whether man or woman. No doubt they're more common in petticoats," ' claims Rolfe (p.15). Carnaby's forceful masculinity is ill-equipped to deal with the unreliable female discourses of gossip and slander:

The Discontents of Everyday Life

Hugh Carnaby – the man who had lived as high-blooded men do live, who had laughed by the camp-fire or in the club smoking-room at many a Rabelaisian story and capped it with another, who hated mock modesty, was all for honest openness between man and woman – stood in guilty embarrassment before his own wife's face of innocence. (p. 300)

The trip abroad and the time he spends in prison both make Carnaby less of a man – literally, as his physique wastes away, and socially when he becomes infantilized by his wife, who addresses him as her 'boy'. The novel seems to blame this episode on the nature of modern living: if society allowed men such as Carnaby the scope to exert 'natural' urges towards violence, such incidents would not occur; instead, Carnaby and Redgrave are victims of civilization's failure to accommodate their instincts of sexual competition.

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Freud, p.211)

'Civilization', in *The Whirlpool's* fashionable London society, is less the culture which Rolfe is seen enjoying in pleasurable masculine seclusion at the novel's opening than an unnatural, feminizing, societal restraint. Although proximity to London allows Harvey temporary liminal escape to the world of the club – where he can turn, as Alma puts it, ' "into a sort of bachelor again... quite in a boyish way" ' (p.172) – the range of its amusements is insufficient to satisfy the outdoor-minded Carnaby, making him 'get quarrelsome and wish he was on the other side of the world' (p.213). He complains, in a flat over-crowded by feminine possessions:

"What *should* I do? I'm not the man for books; I can't get much sport nowadays: I don't even care for billiards. I want to have an axe in my hand!"
Gesticulating carelessly, he swept a wine-glass off the table. (p.215)

A different kind of 'accident' resulting from a 'natural' masculine urge blights the life of another of Rolfe's friends, Cecil Morphew. Morphew's marriage to Henrietta Winter has been delayed for ten years because of the objections of his fiancée's parents to his straitened means. The death of her father makes the marriage possible, but Henrietta calls it off after learning of Morphew's liaison with a working-class girl, resulting in a child, now dead. Had it not been for lack of money (the constant thematic preoccupation of Gissing's fiction) and the Winters' concern with social appearances, Morphew's masculine sexual desires would have been directed sooner and correctly towards the woman he really loves (pp. 348f.). Like Carnaby's urge towards robust violence, when checked, these energies find an outlet elsewhere. The shock of rejection nearly drives Morphew,

the most nervous and hyper-sensitive of the male characters, towards the eternal sleep hinted at by his name. ‘ “There is a point in the life of every man with brains,” ’ (he declares earlier) ‘ “when it becomes a possibility that he may kill himself” ’ (p.326). It is the sickly Henrietta, however, who dies prematurely instead, and rather than directing these urges harmfully inwards, Morphew is free to emigrate to the more hopefully manly territory of New Zealand.

Rolfe is contrasted with these and the novel’s other men: Frothingham, the Merdle/Melмотte-like speculator who, true to literary type, commits suicide shortly before his exposure; Wager, who deserts his children when he loses his money in the Britannia crash; Leach, who risks death by labouring to fund his wife’s and daughters’ spending; Abbott, who *is* worked to death by his family; the sexually speculative Cyrus Redgrave; the successful vulgar composer Felix Dymes, who eventually marries an eighteen-year-old heiress. Rolfe attempts a marriage of more equal minds with Alma; however, not only the narrator but Alma herself hint that Rolfe may do well to exert his (literally) patriarchal authority upon her more than he does: ‘Once or twice she had thought (perhaps had hoped) that he would lay down the law in masculine fashion; but no’ (p.254; and see also pp. 163, 166, 305). The novel never indicates that Rolfe’s unspoken words should be followed by the proverbial blow. However, Sibyl does suggest that to be entrapped like him is ‘ “the fate of men – except those who have the courage to beat their wives” ’. ‘ “Rolfe isn’t half the man he was,” ’ agrees her husband (p.277). John Tosh has argued on the place of patriarchy in the nineteenth century:

“Patriarchy” has become an unfashionable term in recent years, as indicating a crudely reductionist view of sexual stratification. But, in its precise meaning of ‘father rule’, patriarchy remains an indispensable concept, not only because men have usually wielded authority within the home, but also because it has been necessary to their masculine self-respect that they do so (Tosh , p.3).

Parenthood: Becoming a Man

Rolfe ponders what it means to be a man not only because of his own uneasiness with ‘masculine decision, ... the old-fashioned authority of husbands’ (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p. 382), but also because of his new role as a father, responsible for the type of a man into which little Hugh Rolfe will grow. Wells, in his review of *The Whirlpool*, noted the emergence of child-rearing as a new theme in Gissing’s fiction (Gettmann, p.244). Gissing himself had become a father in 1891. He wrote in his diary for December 10th:

4.15 a.m. Have been up all night. A furious gale blowing. E[dith, his wife] in long miserable pain; the doctor has just given her chloroform, and says that the blackguard business draws to an end.

5.15. Went to the study door, and heard the cry of the child. Nurse, speedily coming down, tells me it is a boy. Wind howling savagely. So, the poor girl’s misery is over, and she has what she earnestly desired. (Gissing, ed. Coustillas, 1978, p.265)

Although initially Gissing's reactions to his offspring shifted between indifference and pity, the welfare of his children soon became a constant presence in his diary and letters. (See, for instance, Gissing, ed. Coustillas, 1978, pp. 296, 317, 326, 345, 396, 407, 441; and Mattheisen et al, vol. 4, throughout). Gissing fretted constantly about his and Edith's capacities as parents, especially as their unsuitability as husband and wife became more apparent. In 1896, the year in which Alfred, his second son, was born and in which *The Whirlpool* was written, Gissing confided in his diary:

[Walter] knows there is no harmony between his mother and me, and he begins to play upon the situation – carrying tales from one to the other, etc. The poor child is ill-tempered, untruthful, precociously insolent, surprisingly selfish. I can see that Wakefield [where Gissing's mother and sisters lived] *may* have a good influence, but only the merest beginnings show as yet. - I should like to know how the really wise and strong father would act in this position. But no wise and strong man could have got into it. Talk of morals! What a terrible lesson is the existence of this child, born of a loveless and utterly unsuitable marriage. (Gissing, ed. Coustillas, 1978, p.418.)

Gissing wrote to Wells: 'In Rolfe I wished to present a man whose character developed with unusual slowness, & who would probably never have developed at all, after a certain stage, but for the change wrought in his views & sentiments by the fact of his becoming a father' (Mattheisen et al, vol. 6, p.320). Rolfe reflects self-consciously on this 'revolution in his thoughts' at the beginning of the novel's second part (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p.135). The reader is informed of all the circumstances which stunted Rolfe's development and from which he wants to save his own son, especially given his concerns about 'nervous tendencies inherited from his mother' and her mother before her (pp. 330ff., 383; see also p.228). Much of Rolfe's identity becomes invested in his role as a father: 'fruitless his life could not be, if his child grew up' (p.139). In a letter to Thomas Hardy in 1895, Gissing wrote:

One theme I have in mind – if I can ever get again to a solid book – which I want to treat very seriously. It is the question of a parent's responsibility. This has been forced upon me by the fact that I myself have a little boy, growing out of his infancy; the thought of his education – in the widest sense of the word – troubles me day & night. (Mattheisen et al., vol. 6, p.20)

Gissing later wrote to Eduard Bertz that the theme of his new novel, initially called *Benedict's Household*, was 'the decay of domestic life among certain classes of people, & much stress is laid upon the question of *children*' (Mattheisen et al., vol. 6, p.123; see also the letter to H.H. Sturmer, pp. 178f.). The 'matter of education' (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p.391) preoccupies the hero, as it did the author during Gissing's several changes of mode of living in the early years of his sons' lives. Even by the end of the novel, Rolfe has not entirely dismissed the suggestion that he should try to raise the bookish and weakly Hugh, possessed of 'nervous tendencies which were to be expected in a child of such parentage' (p.383), to be more like his namesake Hugh Carnaby, thus standing a better chance of survival in a world increasingly violent and jingoistic (there are analogous moments in *Isabel Clarendon* and *Born in Exile*: see Gissing, 1969 [1886], pp. 237ff., and Gissing,

1978 [1892], p.458.) Rolfe has no such doubts about the other boy for whose education he is responsible: Albert Wager, who 'loathes everything but games and fighting' (p.390), is sent into the navy.

Finally a lone male parent to his son, in this novel full of unsatisfactory mothers, Rolfe ultimately moves to Greystone, near Morton's idyllic household. (Significantly, the female children born to Alma and Mrs Abbott both die). In the book's closing scene, Rolfe and Morton discuss Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads*. Many reviewers, including H.G. Wells, misunderstood Rolfe's apparent enjoyment of the 'strong man made articulate' (p.449). Gissing corrected Wells's review in a letter: 'I never meant to suggest that Rolfe tended to the "Barrack-Room" view of life. In all he says, he is simply expressing his hopeless recognition of facts which fill him with disgust' (Mattheisen et al., vol. 6, p.320; for Gissing's own disapproval of the influence of Kipling, see vol. 7, p.236). Such resigned 'recognition' is one of the strengths of Gissing's fiction, a successful deployment of the realist mode which allows the confrontation of material phenomena that the writer finds inimical, while (with the exception of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*) avoiding a utopian position as a response. Freud ends *Civilisation and its Discontents* with the words: 'And we may well heave a sigh of relief at the thought that is nevertheless vouchsafed to a few to salvage without effort from the whirlpool of their own feelings the deepest truths' (Freud, p.133). Gissing foresees both jadedly and accurately the coming hegemony of emergent mass culture, represented by the success of Kipling's poems and Carnaby's thriving bicycle-factory, producing hundreds of bicycles a week for an increasingly leisured working-class. (H.G.Wells, far less hostile to these social developments than Gissing, had chosen a working-class hero with an appetite for bicycling and literature alike as the hero of his novel *The Wheels of Chance*, published the year before.) Rolfe, like Freud, sees a connection between civilization's turning to outdoor activity (such as bicycling) and the prevalence of aggressive drives:

"Mankind won't stand it much longer, this encroachment of the humane spirit. See the spread of athletics. We must look to our physique, and make ourselves ready. Those Lancashire operatives, laming and killing each other at football, turning a game into a battle. For the milder of us there's golf – an epidemic. Women turn to cricket – tennis is too soft – and tomorrow they'll be bicycling by the thousand; – they must breed a stouter race. We may reasonably hope, old man, to see our boys blown into small bits by the explosive that hasn't got its name yet." (Gissing, 1979 [1897], pp. 449f.)

Gissing's Masculinities

Gissing's different fictional masculinities constitute an acknowledgement of the hostile and unstable nature of the world his characters inhabit. Rolfe desires to 'toughen up' his son in the advent of the war which threatens his development:

"The best kind of education would be that which hardened his skin and blunted his sympathies. What right have I to make him sensitive? The thing is, to get through life with as little suffering as possible. What monstrous folly to teach him to wince and

cry out at the sufferings of other people! Won't he have enough of his own before he has done? Yet that's what we shall aim at – to cultivate his sympathetic emotions, so that the death of a bird shall make him sad, and the sight of human distress wring his heart. Real kindness would try to make of him a healthy ruffian, with just enough conscience to keep him from crime.... It's natural for a boy to be a good deal of a savage, but our civilisation is doing its best to change that.' (p.342)

Gissing wrote to Morley Roberts in 1900 that he would 'rather never see [Walter] again than foresee his marching in ranks, butchering or to be butchered' (Mattheisen et al., vol. 8, p.11; see also p.50, and vol. 7, p.419). Gissing never did see Walter again after 1900. On arriving at manhood, Walter Gissing beat the British drum and was killed in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. (Both Hughie Rolfe and Albert Wager would also have been old enough to fight in the First World War). Alan Sinfield quotes from a letter by another writer's son with even more to prove in the way of his 'manliness' – Cyril, the son of Oscar Wilde:

The more I thought of [the stain on his name], the more convinced I became that, first and foremost, I must be a *man*. There was to be no cry of decadent artist, of effeminate aesthete, of weak-kneed degenerate. (Sinfield, p.126)

If forced to choose, Gissing would have sided with the 'aesthetes' against the 'sportsmen'. However, in daily life he seems himself to have displayed the performance of a more pronounced masculinity. Perhaps surprisingly, Gissing himself may have embodied the successful union of masculine types which the ending of *The Whirlpool* seems to desire. His pupil Austin Harrison paid tribute both to Gissing's physical strength and athleticism and to his artistic gentleness; Israel Zangwill remembered him in 1896 as a man 'in the flower of his age: a tall strapping Anglo-Saxon, scarcely suggesting the literary recluse' (quoted respectively in Michaux, pp. 22ff., and in Halperin, p.236). H.G.Wells, who taught Gissing to ride a bicycle, remembered a Gissing who 'craved to laugh, jest, enjoy, stride along against the wind, shout, "quaff mighty flagons"' (Wells, vol. 2, pp. 571f.). The wishful thought that 'something more of repose, of self-possession, and a slightly more intellectual brow, would have made [Carnaby] the best type of conquering, civilising Briton' offers the possibility of a more harmonious masculinity, characterized by extremes neither of nervous bookishness nor of unthinking violence. It is surely one of the characteristics of the unhappy man to wish himself other than he is; still more, perhaps, of the father to wish one's child better or happier than oneself. The presence of a child in the ending of the novel at least allows the hope that nature and civilization might in a future generation be brought into a more comfortable accommodation. Rolfe recognizes that Hughie must, whatever his own nature, adapt to the nature of the world, to a limited extent, thus perhaps avoiding the threats the world has in store for those with an aesthetic temperament:

"I must send him to the Grammar-School next year," said Rolfe. "It won't do; he must be among boys, and learn to be noisy. Perhaps I have been altogether wrong in teaching him myself. What right has a man to teach, who can't make up his mind on any subject of thought?" (Gissing, 1979 [1897], p.452)

Perhaps, in spite of the final estrangement of his father and his namesake, educated in the right way Hugh Rolfe may have the potential to embody the union of the contrasting masculinities hinted at in the novel's frustrated beginning.

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