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# Classical References in Gissing's *Born in Exile* (1892)

Ayaka Okada

George Gissing (1857-1903) was a novelist with two divided interests. One was directed towards the modern world, and it gave him the impulse to write novels. The other was towards the ancient world, and this led him to pursue a classical education throughout his life. Gissing started on his career as a novelist and resumed his study of the classics at almost the same time, and both were carried on simultaneously until his death in 1903. But this combination of interests did not always work for the better for Gissing's creativity. It is only in his novels written in the early 1890s, that they were well balanced. As he proceeded in his career, his love for the ancient world became so strong that it made him shun from the realities of the present. That is fatal for a novelist, who must have a keen insight into real life. Yet, on the other hand, works of his such as *New Grub Street* (1891) and *Born in Exile* (1892) would never have been written without such divided passions. Classical references are abundant in these two masterpieces, and yet, they are natural and well integrated with the theme of the novels. In fact, they are crucial to enhance the quality of these novels. Thus, it can be said that Gissing's best works are those where he was able to make the most of his two passions. This certainly accords with the definition of art given by Gissing's alterego, Henry Ryecroft :

It has occurred to me [Ryecroft] that one might define Art as :

an expression, satisfying and abiding, of the zest of life.<sup>(1)</sup>

Nevertheless, during his lifetime, *The Odd Women* (1893) and *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) were better received by the reading public. Gissing was rather annoyed by their preferences, and he made clear to his friend his feeling towards his novels :

But what I desire to insist upon is this: that the most characteristic, the most important, part of my work is that which deals with a class of young men distinctive of our time—well educated, fairly bred, *but without money.*<sup>(2)</sup>

Doubtless he had in his mind *New Grub Street* (with Reardon, the pedantic novelist who was deserted by Minerva after worrying too much about the problem of money), and *Born in Exile*. The latter, especially, was a favorite of his. When, in 1901, he met Henry D. Davray, a French author, editor, journalist, and translator of many English books, Gissing chose *Born in Exile* as his favorite, saying that he was “less ashamed of it than some of [his] books,” and urged Davray to translate it.<sup>(3)</sup> Insofar as the fact that this novel shows the most deft use of the classical references, it is worthwhile to look closely at *Born in Exile*, for an examination of its classical references throws a very revealing light on Gissing, the classicist-novelist.

*Born in Exile* is a sort of *Bildungsroman*, which follows the life of the protagonist, Godwin Peak, from his teens until his premature death at thirty-two. The story opens in 1874 with the prize day at Whitelaw College. Godwin is of lowly origin, and was admitted to the school with a scholarship. He is obviously very smart, and wins a number of prizes. His education, however, is brought to an abrupt end,

for his cockney uncle reveals his plan to open a diner in front of the college, and Godwin cannot stand the humiliation. Ten years later, Godwin is in London working in a chemical factory, and is at the same time trying his hand at literature. When he goes to Exeter for his holidays, he comes across Buckland Warricombe's family. Buckland was one of Godwin's few friends at Whitelaw College. When Godwin meets Buckland's sister Sidwell, he sees an ideal type of womanhood in her. In order to be accepted by her, Godwin decides to become a clergyman. But Buckland, remembering Godwin's stern hatred towards Christianity, and believing that a man of intellect cannot be an honest Christian, is incredulous that Godwin has changed so much in ten years. He is determined to reveal Godwin's deception, and finally finds out that an article attacking the hypocrisy of the Church was written by Godwin. Buckland tells Godwin to stay away from his family. Godwin leaves England to wander alone in Europe, where he dies, in exile.

The period which Gissing chose for the setting of the story, 1874 to 1888, was a period of iconoclasm. Every authority—church, school, class division, gender role, etc. —was questioned by the new spirit of the age. As a corollary, in the late nineteenth century, continual attention to the topic made people more aware of the barriers of the establishment. In *Born in Exile*, Godwin had drifted away from his roots when he pursued his higher education at Whitelaw College. He no longer belonged to any class, or home, or religious community. It was imperative that he struggle to go beyond the boundaries. And to narrate his desperate odyssey, Gissing uses frequent classical references.

The first question that Godwin faces is the choice between education in arts or science : i.e. the traditional classical subjects, or the new subjects. As science was associated with industry and money, the child of a respectable family was wont to go for the arts course, whose

excellence was guaranteed by consensus of the generations. Godwin had a taste and talent for both arts and science. He “read poetry with precocious gusto but at the same time his aptitude for scientific pursuits was strongly marked.”<sup>(4)</sup> Because his father died at forty-three, Godwin was obliged to discontinue his schooling at the age of fifteen. He was at first flattered to be released from pupilage. However, a year as an assistant to Mr. Moxey, a manufacturing chemist, was enough to make his mind chafe against science in general. This led to his reading of poetry and history, and of the classics, and his fervour for higher education was enhanced :

His evenings were given to poetry and history ; he took up the classical schoolbooks again, and found a charm in Latin syntax hitherto unperceived. It was plain to him now how he had been wronged by the necessity of leaving school when his education had but just begun. (32)

He began studying hard in order to obtain a three-year scholarship at Whitelaw College, offered to those who achieved first place in the Kingsmill district in the Cambridge Local Examination. To his disappointment, Godwin came second, and missed the scholarship. Fortunately, however, Sir Job Whitelaw found him promising, and privately offered him a three years' studentship at the college. The college had splendid laboratories and was reputed for its science Professors. Moreover, science would have suited his humble station better, as it was more directly connected with future breadwinning. Nevertheless, on entering, Godwin decided without hesitation to pursue the arts curriculum, and later enlarged his course by adding other classes to it. But the extra subjects turned out to be too much for him.

Too late to realize this, Godwin had to face humiliating defeat on prize day. He had in mind to come first in all the subjects in his course. It turned out, however, that he received first prize in Logic and Moral Philosophy, and in Geology, but second in Senior Greek, Senior Latin, in Modern and Ancient History, in English Language and Literature, and in French. The first prize in these arts subjects, and also the prestigious special classical prize, went to the genteel Bruno Chilvers, whom Godwin strongly detested.

Following the defeat, everything becomes intolerable for Godwin, as he realizes the absurdity of his having pursued the arts course in the first place, ignoring his class. Whilst Chilvers had a graceful family and relatives to congratulate him on his success, Godwin's family was away at home, unable to come all the way to the school. What was worse, his lowly cockney uncle visited Godwin that same day to reveal his idea of opening an eating place, closeby Whitelaw College, called "Peak's Diner and Refreshment Rooms." When he went to the theatre to see *Romeo and Juliet* with the florin he had saved for this occasion, he sees a fellow schoolboy with his family, all dressed up and sitting in the stalls, whereas he was seated in the pit. Godwin decides to have a drink at the public-house after the play to improve his mood. Before long, he gets over his vexation with the help of some hot whiskey, and begins feasting recklessly, worrying in the corner of his mind that he would not be able to pay the landlady, nor pay for the train ticket home the next day. He throws away such thoughts and exclaims, quoting Virgil :

Books and that kind of thing are all very well in their way, but one must live; he had wasted too much of his youth in solitude.

*O mihi præteritos referat si Jupiter annos!* (45)<sup>(5)</sup>

This Latin quotation, which means “If only Jupiter would bring me back the lost years,” is the central theme pervading the novel. This is echoed by another Latin quotation, “*Pereunt et imputantur,*” which Godwin sees beneath the clock in Exeter Cathedral and repeats to himself later in the novel. (116) This is a partial quotation from a line in Martial, meaning, “(And he feels the good days are fleeing and passing away, our days that) perish and are scored to our account.”<sup>(6)</sup> Lamentations on the loss of youth and waste of time are repeated a number of times. After Godwin’s defeat in all the arts subjects, he felt that he “had wasted a couple of years which might have been most profitably applied.” (66) Godwin’s friend, Christian Moxey, regrets “the waste of years, the best part of a lifetime,” and wishes that he were able to go back about thirteen years,” that is, before he mistook the flirtation of a married woman as true love and waited for her to be widowed. (389) For Godwin, his life full of repentance began when he chose the arts course. The choice suggests his aristocratic temperament. And his defeat on prize day in the first chapter already foretells his future collapse.

Now the story moves forward ten years, and we find Godwin still fighting for a higher existence. Godwin always believed that he “must be an aristocrat of nature’s own making” (30).<sup>(7)</sup> He had a brain that made him superior to the mob, but was constantly hampered by his origins. The first step upward was aimed at achieving fame as an author. Just as he was about to have his long coveted success in literature by writing an article attacking the hypocrisy of a Church that reconciles revelation and science, Godwin falls in love with Sidwell Warricombe. To become her social equal, Godwin abandons the idea of becoming an author, and deceives Sidwell and her family on the spur of

the moment by saying that he is studying to take Orders. He believed that a parson was the exceptional “case in which a woman will marry without much regard to her husband’s origin.” (112) Her family, except Godwin’s friend Buckland, are devout and pious orthodox Christians. So Godwin’s declaration relieves the Warricombes’ prejudice against Godwin, whom they at first saw as having no breeding whatsoever, and unusually unprepossessing. Moreover, Mr. Warricombe becomes more friendly after Godwin casually quoted Latin and revealed his interest in the classics :

Peak, in glancing over the pages, murmured with a smile :

*“Pereant qui ante nos nostra dixerunt!”*

“Even so!” exclaimed Mr. Warricombe, laughing with a subdued heartiness which was one of his pleasant characteristics. And after a pause, he inquired, “Do you find any time to keep up your classics?”

“By fits and starts. Sometimes I return to them for a month or two.” . . . They moved to the shelves where Greek and Latin books stood in serried order, and only the warning dinner-bell put an end to their sympathetic discussion on the place such authors should hold in modern educational systems. (136)<sup>(8)</sup>

Godwin has an extraordinarily strong pride and detests hypocrisy in every form. But as he could see no way to be acceptable to Sidwell except by becoming a clergyman, Godwin hides his disbelief, and prepares to enter the Church. There is a Latin motto for Godwin, who, though not ill-intentioned, has intentionally been fraudulent :

“Where does this phrase come from?” he [Christian Moxey]



continued, pointing to a scrap of paper, used as a book-mark, on which Godwin had pencilled a note. The words were : “*Foris ut moris, intus ut libet.*”

“It’s mentioned there,” Peak replied, “as the motto of those humanists who outwardly conformed to the common faith.”  
(158)

The Latin phrase quoted here means, “In public (behave) according to custom ; in private, as you please.”<sup>(9)</sup> Just as the humanists accorded to custom by hiding their faith, Godwin fakes his antagonism towards the Church by aiming to become a clergyman. But Gissing suggests that Godwin’s conduct is congruous with the etymology of the word “parson.” When Godwin, in the second chapter, refers to the clerical post, he explains thus :

“I don’t want to be a parson,” came at length, bluntly.

“Don’t use that word, Godwin.”

“Why not? It’s quite a proper word. It comes from the Latin *persona.*” (24)

Of course, nothing is more appropriate to hide his disbelief than actually becoming a parson. The word “*persona*” means an “actor’s mask.” Accordingly, Godwin masks his disbelief by claiming to plan on becoming a parson.

Thus, Godwin has in a way committed a crime. But is it really a crime? Is he alone to be blamed at? Gissing seems to answer this question with a negative. Godwin was just doing what others were doing as well, but, in Godwin’s case, fate is against him “just because he is of low birth, has no means, and wants to get into society.” (307) Here

the novel becomes a mordant satire on society in general. Gissing depicts Godwin's catastrophe ironically, by introducing a figure such as Bruno Chilvers, the son of a popular clergyman. As a contemporary at Whitelaw College, he presented the intelligence of mind and excellence of body that were admired in an ideal youth. As an adult, Chilvers represents everything that Godwin aspires to, though at the same time disdains, and is never able anyway to attain. Gissing makes this clear contrast between Chilvers and Godwin through associations to the classics.

Firstly, Chilvers was the student who collected all the first prizes in the arts course—Greek and Latin. And whereas Godwin had to quit Whitelaw College by an unfortunate incident concerning his uncle's scheme about the diner in front of the college, there was nothing that hindered Chilvers from his course of study. Chilvers naturally goes to London for his BA Exam without thinking of what it costs, whereas for Godwin, the five pounds for transportation to London to take the exam was a grave matter. Chilvers then went on to Oxford, where he learned to pronounce Latin differently. Godwin notices this with disgust :

“In moments of repose, when I [Chilvers] look back on work joyously achieved, I often murmur to myself, with a sudden sigh, *Excepto quod non simul esses, cætera lætus!*”

He pronounced his Latin in the new-old way, with Continental vowels. The effect of this on an Englishman's lips is always more or less pedantic, and in his case it was intolerable. (288)

The new-old way of pronunciation of classical Latin was formulated around 1870 by Oxford and Cambridge scholars. Therefore, Chilvers' pronunciation in this way was a mark of his Oxford years. Chilvers'

superiority is here depicted with association with the classics.

Chilvers becomes a clergyman and comes to Exeter to succeed at St. Margaret's. His attitude towards the Church is totally the opposite of Godwin's. Though Godwin is in truth a non-believer, he is determined to "preach Church dogma, pure and simple," and "have nothing to do with these reconciliations" once he decides to become a clergyman. (109) Chilvers was an extremely broad clergyman. Though Chilvers was always ready to make his familiarity with Latin conspicuous by correcting the common errors of quantity in Latin words which had become English—"minnus the spiritual fervour," "acting as his *loccum tennens*"—outwardly, he pretends to care little about such knowledge. He declares openly that the Church needs to be infused with scientific spirit :

Only thus can we resist the morbid influences which inevitably beset an Established Church in times such as these. I say it boldly. Let us throw aside our Hebrew and our Greek, our commentators ancient and modern!" (286)

To try to reconcile science and religion was nothing other than "pious jugglery" to Godwin, but that was the vogue of the day. From the 1860s onwards—that is, after Darwin and Wallace—many respectable scientists questioned Christianity. They named themselves "agnostics"—a word coined in 1869. The Church could not dismiss them as easily as they had done previous anti-church movements. In the 1870s, more and more books challenging Christian world-views were published by respectable men. "[T]heism was on the defensive and agnostic rebellion in the air."<sup>(10)</sup> Downright assaults on science were no longer popular. Those who pretended to reconcile science and religion were hailed with

enthusiasm. Thus, no matter how strongly Godwin despised this, the reality was as described by the quotation, "*Nos numerus sumus.*" (106)<sup>(11)</sup> Chilvers is successful and becomes a prominent clergyman.

In addition, Chilvers is always supplied with female society. He was once married. Though his wife had passed away already, she was modern, and in full sympathy with her husband. So when Chilvers, talking about his dead wife, quotes "*Excepto quod non simul esses, cætera lætus!*," Godwin suffers two-fold frustration : Chilvers is always able to boast about his Oxford education and his wife. Moreover, in the last chapters, we find that he has married a second time, his new wife being the daughter of Baron. Godwin on the other hand was deprived of his only love. Unlike Godwin, Chilvers is to survive and prosper.

The role of the classical references in *Born in Exile* is two-fold. For one thing, it is used as a device for characterization. It shows the aristocratic temperament of Godwin's, that leads him to want to attain the unattainable, and consequently brings about his downfall and his death in exile. Earwaker, Godwin's best friend from Whitelaw, who becomes a successful magazine editor, is also characterized with by references to the classics :

Birth allied him with the proletarian class, and his sentiment in favour of democracy was unendangered by the disillusionments which must come upon every intellectual man brought into close contact with public affairs. The course of an education essentially aristocratic (Greek and Latin can have no other tendency so long as they are the privilege of the few) had not affected his natural bent, nor was he the man to be driven into reaction because of obstacles to his faith inseparable from human weakness. (227)

But "Earwaker was naturally marked for survival among the fittest." (86) The difference between Earwaker and Godwin can be found in the susceptibility to the influence of a classical education. Chilvers' character is also depicted with reference to the classics. This emphasizes the dishonesty of Chilvers, and stresses the irony of Peak's inevitable defeat.

Secondly, a number of Latin quotations are introduced, intertwined with the theme of the novel. They are natural and fitting, and enhance the quality of the novel. In his earlier works, the classical references appeared only as simple metaphors, but those in *Born in Exile* show Gissing's maturity as a classicist.

To conclude, the abundance and significance of the classical references in this novel can be explained by the character of the novel as "a study of a savagely aristocratic temperament."<sup>(12)</sup> Gissing was well aware of the elite atmosphere surrounding an education in the classics, so classical references are most fitting to a novel such as this. But the fact that Gissing was able to infuse the story with so much classical reference is itself a proof that Gissing already belonged to a class that was familiar with the classics. Therefore, it shows that Godwin and Gissing are alike in many respects, though by no means identical, as Gissing himself explains :

In judging the tendency of "Born in Exile," it is probable that you have been misled by the fact that the character of Godwin Peak is obviously, in a great degree, sympathetic to the author. But you will not find that Peak's tone is to be henceforth mine—do not fear it. Indeed, it seems to me that tone of the whole book is by no means identical with that of Peak's personality ; certainly

I did not mean it to be so. Peak is myself—one phase of myself. I described him with gusto, but surely I did not, in depicting he other characters, take his point of view.

To be more precise, unlike Godwin, who had a taste for both science and arts, Gissing had no taste for science and was always firm that he was a literary person. In addition, Gissing did indeed come first in the Oxford Local Examination in the Manchester district, and was granted a scholarship at Owens College, whereas Godwin missed his scholarship by coming second. Finally, Gissing did collect all the prizes open to him, including Greek and Latin, and also the English Poem Prize, which in *Born in Exile*, was given to Earwaker ; Godwin failed here, too. To be sure, Godwin Peak does represent some important features of Gissing's life, but that is a phase which Gissing has already outgrown. Indeed, "'Born in Exile' was a book [Gissing] *had* to write."<sup>(14)</sup> He had to write the book in order to bid farewell to his old self and overcome completely what is sometimes referred to as his "Manchester trauma."<sup>(15)</sup> Therefore, Godwin is doomed to die young, even though he was given the chance to start life anew with Marcella Moxey's inheritance.

Gissing really felt that his own life was restarting. He had only recently been married a second time when he began writing *Born in Exile*, and his career prospects were looking better and better with the success of *New Grub Street*. Moreover, he was now more confident of his classical knowledge ; he had traveled through both Italy and Greece, and seen the land of the classics. He was feeling that '[o]nce more a new epoch is beginning with [him] & under reasonably favourable auspices.'<sup>(16)</sup> After Gissing had written *Born in Exile*, he "felt a sense of relief."<sup>(17)</sup> It was because he could throw off his older self, and begin

once again. Thus, from then on, he could write from a totally different perspective, and “present the other side of the shield” in the novels that would follow.<sup>(18)</sup> He no longer needed to stress his classical erudition, which is why classical references in Gissing’s novels are so few after *Born in Exile*. An examination of classical references in *Born in Exile* proves that this work was a watershed in Gissing’s literary career.

## NOTES

- (1) George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Brighton, Sussex : Harvester, 1982) 59.
- (2) Original emphasis. George Gissing, “To Morley Roberts,” 10 February 1895, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, Eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (Athens, Ohio : Ohio UP, 1990-7) 5 : 296.
- (3) See Gissing, “To Henry D. Davray,” 16 October 1901, *Collected Letters*, 8 : 262-3.
- (4) George Gissing, *Born in Exile* (London : J. M. Dent, 1993) 23. Pages from *Born in Exile* will hereafter be given in the text in parentheses.
- (5) Virgil, *Aeneid*, VIII, 560. The same quotation is found in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, 263-4.
- (6) Martial, *Epigrammata*, V, xx. Along with the quotation Gissing introduces his own experience of seeing the figures of the two Greek dramatists in the Vatican who were revered as Christian saints. Paganism in Christianity demonstrates the inconsistency of the Church, something Gissing, and Peak, cannot bear. See Gissing’s diary of December 12, 1888, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England : The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*. Ed. Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks, Sussex : Harvester, 1978) 96.
- (7) John Carey points to the concept of “natural aristocracy” as an idea generated in this period. See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses : Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London : Faber & Faber, 1992) 71-90.
- (8) This is an ancient Roman saying, which means, “May they perish who have used our words before us.” Gissing made a note of this saying in his Commonplace Book between September 1887 and December 1888.

See George Gissing, *George Gissing's Commonplace Book : A Manuscript in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library*. Ed. Jacob Korg (New York : New York Public Library, 1962) 58. He also quotes it in his letter to Bertz concerning his historical novel, *Veranilda*. See Gissing, "To Eduard Bertz," 15 June 1897, *Collected Letters*, 6 : 302.

- (9) Gissing put this quotation down in his *Commonplace Book* as the "motto of liberals of the late Renaissance." See *Commonplace Book*, 58.
- (10) Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period : The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* (London : Longman, 1993) 103.
- (11) The Latin means, "We are the (greater) number."
- (12) Gissing, "To Eduard Bertz," 8 April 1891, *Collected Letters*, 4 : 282.
- (13) Gissing, "To Eduard Bertz," 20 May 1892, *Collected Letters*, 5 : 36.
- (14) Gissing, "To Eduard Bertz," 20 May 1892, *Collected Letters*, 5 : 36.
- (15) As a student at Owens College, Gissing fell in love with a young prostitute, Nell. He wanted to buy her a sewing machine so that she could earn her living without walking the streets. He was caught stealing money in the student locker room. He was expelled from Owens College just before the final examinations for his BA degree.
- (16) Gissing, "To Ellen," 1 February 1891, *Collected Letters*, 4 : 268.
- (17) Gissing, "To Eduard Bertz," 20 May 1892, *Collected Letters*, 5 : 36.
- (18) Gissing, "To Eduard Bertz," 20 May 1892, *Collected Letters*, 5 : 36.