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No Exit From Here: Spaces in Gissing and Zola

Writing is a political act. The manipulation of public and private space is a political activity. In the 19th century there were two authors who were acutely aware of this, George Gissing and Èmile Zola. Both Zola and Gissing were concerned with social and economic justice, though Zola is perhaps more well-known in this area. Each author is known for their attempts to realistically portray the conditions of the poor and working classes; making the case that said conditions are not just socio-economic but also biological and environmental. Making the plight of lower classes the focus of their work was innovative (and political) for the time, extending even to the use of contemporary slang in character dialogue. Gissing and Zola are most often associated with the literary school of 'naturalism', which attempts to bring the theories of Darwin to literature. Generally, both authors worked with predominantly urban landscapes and the effects of the industrialisation in a very stark way, in opposition to more romantic conventions.

A capital city is often a focal point of national pride and popular trends; a physical manifestation of the collective hopes and dreams (or nightmares) of an entire nation. George Gissing's *The Nether World* [3] and Èmile Zola's *L' Assommoir* [5] each make use of a capital metropolis (London and Paris, respectively) that has become an increasingly efficient engine of human despair and destruction. Such a city allows the authors to broadly comment upon the vicissitudes of an entire country in the throes of industrialisation and population growth. The pressures of industrialisation and ever-increasing population growth not only make space a valued commodity, they redefine and re-inscribe it. Both authors, through each novel's respective characters, also seek to redefine and re-inscribe space as a means of reflecting the fallout of the Industrial Revolution.

The Nether World is a place where biological, economic and social pressures have cruelly carved a space out of Victorian London. In the novel, Clerkenwell Green has been isolated by civil and social engineering, with its inhabitants de facto prisoners. To drive home this point, Gissing has a character walk by (after just passing through a graveyard) the "Middlesex House of Detention" (pg.2) [3] upon his arrival in Clerkenwell Green. The area is populated by characters who are caught up in "the sordid struggle for existence" (pg.51) [3]. These characters where "circumstances had marred the purpose of Nature" (pg.1) [3] are the ignored foundation upon which 'polite' society rests. The people who live and work in Clerkenwell Green are in a space which is 'outside' the traditional; it is a community without any sort of collective impetus except survival. In such a space which exists between the instinctive (irrational) and intellectual (rational), cultural

definitions become more fluid. The 'community' becomes an almost liminal space wherein socio-cultural elements are redefined.

In traditionally polite society the kitchen was a place of warmth and comforting food smells; a nourishing womb of cooking and life-affirming activity. For Jane Snowdon, Gissing redefines the kitchen space as a one of cruel slavery filled with hopeless drudgery and the violent ministrations of Clem Peckover. It is a space where Clem can "indulge to the uttermost her instincts of cruelty" (pg.5) [3]. Gissing further redefines the kitchen by having its adjunct room or "back-kitchen" (pg.7) [3] serve as a place to keep a family-member's corpse till it is buried. This blurs the functional and traditionally Western cultural separation between spaces dealing with life and death. Such redefinition or re-inscription not only changes the space (almost a total inversion), but it re-inscribes the persons and roles within it. The kitchen seems to have become a space where definitions are losing their rigidity, wavering between life and death.

This "back-kitchen" also serves as Jane's sleeping space, with the corpse providing "a ceaseless occasion of dread and misery" (pg.7) [3] for the poor girl. Gissing now redefines the bedroom space. Among other things, the bedroom is traditionally associated with procreation, rest, safety and surcease. And like the kitchen, the bedroom also has womblike properties. For most of the characters in *The Nether World* the bedroom has been redefined as a place of cold, dirt, rags, sickness and little else. For the Hewett family, the bedroom is no longer a 'bedroom'. The Hewett's two rooms serve many functions (e.g., bedroom, dining room, family room, bathroom, etc.); they are spaces where the functional boundaries have broken down. Without such traditional boundary cues behavioural relationships can become confused or chaotic, even dissolve.

The Hewett family's collapse is presaged by the collapse of traditional spatial relationships; simply put, chaos breeds chaos. This is reflected in Gissing's title for the third chapter, "A Superfluous Family" (pg.19) [3]. It would seem for Gissing that his characters are *victims* of processes **only**, unable to make positive use of such liminal spaces to redefine themselves (e.g., the inability of Clara, Jane, or Sidney to completely escape). The gravity of Clerkenwell Green and its associated processes do not allow for escape (or even hope of escape) in Gissing's universe. The universe that Émile Zola creates in *L' Assommoir* is just as dark and bleak, but Zola allows some light to shine through, if only to more clearly delineate the darkness for the reader.

Zola's universe in *L' Assommoir* is bleak. Zola states in his preface that "I wanted to depict the inexorable downfall of a working-class family in the poisonous atmosphere of our industrial suburbs" (pg.3) [5]. Yet, tellingly enough Zola goes on to state that "my characters are not bad, they are only ignorant and ruined by the conditions of sweated toil and poverty in which they live" (pg.3, 4) [5]. Although Gervaise cannot escape the biological, socio-cultural, and economic pressures which force her life down an inevitably destructive path, Zola creates for her liminal spaces where she and other characters achieve temporary escape.

The most obvious of these within the pages of *L' Assommoir* is the honeymoon party at the Louvre.

The procession of the couples through the Louvre, led by Monsieur Mardinier, could be seen as an inversion (or reversal) of similar processions by the royal court. The procession can be seen as a comedic referencing of the socio-political changes that had occurred in France which now allowed the poor to wander freely in the fallen nobility's halls. The honeymoon procession also conjures up possible resonances with harlequinades and the myth of the "Wild Hunt" (a group of the dead (hunters) or faeries led in a fantastic hunt or revelry by a lost soul)[1, 2, 4]. The "Wild Hunt" was one explanation for thunderstorms in pre-Christian Europe and their chaotic rampage was viewed as a sign of coming disaster by any who saw them. Before the Louvre, the honeymoon procession encounters a rainstorm. Eventually, the honeymoon procession gets wilder and more chaotic as it meanders on through the Louvre (with an ever more confused Monsieur Mardinier at its head), much like the "Wild Hunt" was said to do. The 'hunt' ends by the imposition of order from the outside by the attendants. In fact, Gervaise and her neighbours could be viewed as the "Wild Hunt" winding its ever more dissolute way through the entire novel. The revelries must sometime end. The Louvre has been transformed into a liminal space, its socio-economic borders made permeable by myth, revolution, and time. Whether Zola intended such a reference is immaterial; via the almost universally-known cultural image of a honeymoon procession Gervaise and her friends temporarily enter a space where they are outside socio-cultural limitations.

For Gissing, the city has become for the poor a hellish prison made possible by human greed and socio-economic class distinctions. It is as Mad Jack states, "hell"; a tortuous lower world of walking dead without any hope of extricating themselves from torment….and Gissing offers little relief….minds and bodies are just palimpsests overwritten by forces beyond their control. Unlike Gissing, Zola allows his characters to see some light in the darkness, much as they might in actual life, even if that life is a disastrous one. Both authors redefine spaces to fit their respective artistic visions, illustrating how conventions can be warped by biological and socio-economic forces. These forces impinge upon the mind and body making waste of human lives. The texts are created spaces where class distinctions are no longer opaque; spaces where perhaps real communication can then take place.

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