“SOCIAL SOLECISMS” AND THEIR DISCONTENTS:
THE POLITICS OF BRITISH IDEALISM AND
EMERGENT MODERNISM IN THE WORKS OF
MAY SINCLAIR AND GEORGE GISSING

Kunio Shin

1. Introduction

In recent years, May Sinclair’s connections with important modernists such as Ezra Pound, H.D., and Dorothy Richardson have caused her work to resurface after a long period of obscurity. In Sinclair’s later novels, such as *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922), the previously established Edwardian writer attempts literary experimentation. In view of her experimental shift away from conventional Edwardian techniques, Sinclair’s case offers literary historians the opportunity to chart a tentative transition from Edwardian novelistic conventions to emergent modernist aesthetics. In the wake of Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* (1986), it has become customary to view the emergence of high modernism as a negative reaction against the commercialization of mass culture. Yet, Huyssen’s thesis, which associates high modernism with the values of masculinity and commercialization with the problems of feminisation (44–62), leaves a wide margin to be explored in the cases of female modernists such as May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf, who could not easily accommodate themselves in the gendered divide between high and low cultures. For a better understanding of this difficulty, this paper proposes reading Sinclair’s works in comparison with that of George Gissing. Gissing’s early debut as a novelist in 1880 and untimely death twenty-three years later contrast with Sinclair’s later beginning in 1897 and her longer literary career. This difference gives the impression that they are from different periods when, in fact, Gissing was born in 1857, only six years before Sinclair. Self-educating themselves as novelists in similar periods and circumstances, Gissing and Sinclair share concerns with the
expansion of the literary marketplace. I shall suggest that Gissing’s work might have served as an important predecessor for Sinclair—as a cultural marker of certain attitudes—to which Sinclair agrees to a certain extent, yet against which she has ultimately to define her own practice in order to defend the values of the emergent literary modernism.¹

In what follows, I shall first consider Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) and Sinclair’s *The Divine Fire* (1904) in order to discuss their shared pessimism about the transformation of the literary world. Both these works register the two authors’ ways of reacting against the contemporary expansion of the literary marketplace—a transformation they regard as a corrupt commodification of culture. However, if Gissing indulges in a pessimistic renunciation of authentic public recognition, Sinclair, in *The Divine Fire*, seems determined to narrate a victory of modern innovation over commercialization by using the discourse of gift and honour and thus engaging in the task of imagining alternative spaces for authentic artistic creation. Yet what enables her to overcome the naturalist pessimism of Gissing is not simply her commitment to the residual values of aristocratic culture; rather, her poetics in this novel is strongly inspired by a vision of inclusive social reform articulated by T. H. Green and his philosophy of British Idealism, a predecessor of the Edwardian New Liberalism.

Thus, in the latter part of this essay, I shall closely examine Sinclair’s inclusive social vision—what I choose to term “social solecisms,” which is a phrase from Sinclair—by turning to the problem of gender inequality inherent in the discourse of gift and honour. In a short story titled “The Gift” (1908), about a female poet, we can especially observe the limits of “social solecisms” which once enabled her to combine a modern *Künstlerroman* with the naturalist observation of contemporary culture in *The Divine Fire*. We might understand that Sinclair’s later modernist novels about single women figures originate largely from her dissatisfaction with her own earlier social vision and the growing awareness of the difficulty of the female creative subjects.
2. From *New Grub Street* to *The Divine Fire*

Beginning around the 1880s, the British literary world underwent a drastic expansion, one seen in some quarters as the commercialization of culture. While its objective conditions were defined by an expanding population and increasing literacy (owing to the legislation concerning elementary education in 1870), technological advances in the field of printing and transportation made possible faster reproduction and wider distribution of cheap printed matter. The appearance of *Tit-Bits* (1881) is often seen as the key historical point in the rise of “new popular journalism,” followed by mass circulation papers, most notably and notoriously the *Daily Mail* (1896). Also, the demise of the ‘three-decker’ and consequent decline in the controlling power of circulating libraries in the 1890s are seen as marking the transition from the custom of book-borrowing to that of book-buying. While it can be argued that the expansion of the literary market enhanced diversity and so created a market niche for modernism (Trotter 62–7), many writers of the period perceived the increasingly commercialized literary marketplace, marked by a quick turnover and wider distribution, as a threat with the potential to make artistic merit and literary value a thing of the past.

Gissing’s *New Grub Street* has long been regarded as the most thorough expression of such cultural pessimism. Indeed, it has been considered so paradigmatic that it is often seen as the halfway marker between the Victorian honeymoon with readers (represented by Dickens and Thackeray) and the modernist struggle with public reception (Keating, *George Gissing* 13). The novel presents a set of parallels between the fates of Edwin Reardon, a novelist with a genuine passion for the classics and Greek and Italian cultures, and Jasper Milvain, a pragmatic and clear-headed journalist who outspokenly proclaims that “the end of literary work—unless one is a man of genius—is to secure comfort and repute.” Reardon, who is able to travel on the continent and marry Amy Yule after his novel’s success, soon becomes trapped in a downward spiral, partly because his inspiration is temporarily exhausted and partly because Amy cherishes a respectable and expensive lifestyle. Oppressive poverty is inimical to his conscientious workmanship, and this alienates...
his wife. A man unable to ‘compromise’ with popular or commercial taste, he cannot be saved even when Amy at last inherits a large fortune, and he eventually dies. On the other hand, Jasper Milvain has a clearer, if cynical, recognition of the state of affairs from the start: “Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the market” (9). All the steps he subsequently takes—from making influential friends to breaking his engagement with Marian Yule (a cousin of Amy’s)—are designed to let him rise above ordinary people, and his final marriage to the now-widowed Amy completes the contrast between his success and Reardon’s miserable end and hammers home the triumph of the new commercial spirit.

Similarly, Sinclair’s The Divine Fire has no shortage of episodes detailing the cultural ‘decay’ of the 1890s. At the book’s beginning, “the Junior Journalists’ club” is peopled by individuals who are affiliated with two different kinds of journals. One kind is represented by Horace Jewdwine, “an Oxford don, developing into a London Journalist” (34) and at this point a staff member of The Museion. The other is represented by “the three wild young spirits of The Planet” (27), a periodical which can only be described as a coterie journal. Towards the middle of the novel, Jewdwine is appointed editor of The Museion and charged with revitalizing its “protest against the spirit of anarchy in the world of letters” (308). However, his proclaimed resolve waivers when he is confronted with a change in the proprietors’ policy. The journal is soon rechristened The Metropolis, and Jewdwine lets himself be seduced by the money and position he gained for becoming “the slave of whatever opinion was dominant in his world” (643). Meanwhile, The Planet also comes to enjoy prosperity, not because of its serious commitment to literary value, but because of the commercial success of Rankin, a novelist and one of “the three young spirits.” The key to his success is said to be that he instinctively knows “which genre should be chosen at any given moment” (587), a trait which shows him responsive to the growing generic diversity which characterized the new age of cheap commercial fiction (Kemp x). When Rankin faces the moral dilemmas
posed by the Boer War, he views this “more as a personal grievance than as a national calamity,” because other Boer War novels are soon proliferating, competing with his own, and so harming his “royalties” (DF 589). Commercial success, Sinclair seems to suggest, cannot be attained without sacrificing one’s own conscience, whether as a ‘man of letters’ or a moral citizen.

But if Gissing and Sinclair both engage in bitter satire at the costs of commercial success, they differ in one important aspect. Though Milvain in New Grub Street habitually refers to “men of genius”—a category of writers he invokes only as an alibi for his own indulgence in mercenary pragmatism—“genius” is always absent from Gissing’s fictions. In contrast, the hero of The Divine Fire, Savage Keith Rickman, seems to embody the qualities of “genius” so that the novel itself turns into a straightforward Künstlerroman. Though Sinclair appears to subscribe to Gissing’s vision of decadent commercialization, she problematises the issue by enabling her protagonist to avoid the degradation of the marketplace without completely escaping the taint of commerce. At the beginning of The Divine Fire, Keith is a paid shop assistant in the second-hand section of his father’s newly built bookshop in the London Strand. The commission of cataloguing the Harden library (an illustrious private library owned by the Harden family in Devonshire) makes him cross paths with Lucia Harden, who is also a cousin of Horace Jewdwine. As Suzanne Raitt argues, at its beginning, the novel is “structured around the contrast between two spaces, a domestic library and a bookshop” (86). On the one hand, the London bookshop, which comprises first- and second-hand sections, is a modern commercial institution catering to “the great book-buying, book-loving Public” (DF 72) of the 1890s. On the other hand, the Harden library in a Tudor country house is “the work of ten generations of scholars beginning with Sir Thomas, a Jacobean maker of madrigals, and ending with Sir Joseph, the Victorian Master of Lazarus” (84). The London bookshop stands for the modern commercialized literary market (a “Gin-Palace-of-Art” [37] in Keith’s words), while the Harden library stands for the historically transmitted, high culture of an aristocracy.

This clear contrast, however, is doomed to collapse. While
cataloguing the library, Keith comes to develop a refined love for Lucia. Meanwhile, the sudden bankruptcy and death of Lucia’s father result in Keith’s father buying the Harden library for a fraction of its actual worth, with the help of an ex-journalist financier, Richard Pilkington. Feeling ashamed of his involvement in what he regards as cheating, Keith resigns from the bookshop and starts his career as a journalist, while dreaming of one day restoring the library to Lucia. The bankruptcy of the bookshop and the death of Keith’s father give him the chance to realize this plan, if only he can pay the balance on the debt from the loan Pilkington gave Keith’s father for the mortgage on the library. When Keith achieves long-awaited public recognition as a genius-poet, he acquires the means to repay the loan. In his reunion with Lucia, which occurs after a long separation, Keith ‘gives’ her back the library, along with a sonnet dedicated to her. After refusing his gifts at first, Lucia finally accepts, and in return offers him her love: “Very slowly he realized that the thing he had dreamed and despaired of, that he dared not ask for, was being divinely offered to him as a free gift” (621; emphasis mine). In commenting on this crucial moment, Raitt remarks that, although at first, “Lucia represents the possibility of non-commercial economies: economies of learning and of love” (88–9), the exchange of herself for the library means that even the love between Lucia and Keith finally succumbs to the “logic of the market” (92).

It is true that the novel sometimes emphasizes the mutual implication of love and mercenary motives, but the unmistakable tone of comedy sounded in the narrative of Keith’s ascent will jar if it must be accorded with grim view of market determinism. If Sinclair, in some parts of her novel, fully subscribes to Gissing’s vision of decadent commercialization, how does she manage to let her protagonist escape from a hopeless struggle in the commercial marketplace, a fate which haunted Gissing’s Edwin Reardon, and allow him to achieve a breakthrough which might point towards ‘authentic’ achievement? So much depends on the exchange of a “free gift,” and the accompanying vision of an alternative economy. To understand this point, we have to see how the exchange of this “free gift” connects with the discourse of honour. His contact with Lucia and especially his inadvertent implication
in his father’s scheme to ‘cheat’ Lucia’s estate out of the library strengthen Keith’s “soul of honour”:

Now he realized, as he had never realized before, that the foundation of Rickman’s [bookstore] were laid in bottomless corruption. It was a House built not only on every vile and vulgar art known to trade, but on many instances of such a day’s work as this. And it was into this pit of infamy that his father was blandly inviting him to descend. He had such an abominably clear vision of it that he writhed and shuddered with shame and disgust . . . . He came out of his shudderings and writhings unspeakably consoled and clean; knowing that it is with such nausea and pang that the soul of honour is born. (259; ellipsis mine)

Born out of such a magnified “shame and disgust” against what one might regard as usual commercial bargaining, it is as though “the soul of honour” guaranteed his transcendence of a market economy. Keith subsequently regards his project of giving the library back to Lucia as the act of repairing his own “dishonour” (204), the “debt of honour” (516) which he owes. He even sees the dedication of the sonnet as “a partial payment of a debt” (346), besides the commercial value of its original manuscript.

For a full theoretical consideration of the gift economy which is situated within a system of honour, here we need to turn to Marcel Mauss. According to Mauss’s anthropological observations in The Gift (1925), the exchange of gifts is a paradoxical institutional practice, one which is in appearance voluntary and disinterested but in fact obligatory and interested. In ‘archaic’ societies, the triple obligations of giving, receiving, and repaying coexist as conditions for such gift exchanges. The principle of reciprocity is the norm. However, Mauss is also keenly aware that not all aspects of gift practices are completely beneficial, as he notes regarding the custom of “potlatch.” “Potlatch” is a seasonal ritual in which various Native American tribes gather to spend winter together and tribal chiefs generously exchange gifts and feast with each other. This apparently generous exchange is in fact a “war of
property,” “a competition to see who is the richest and also the most madly extravagant” (47). It is “a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date” (8). The chief who pays back his obligations most extravagantly gains the highest of honour and obligates others in return. Hence, the failure to repay a gift appropriately or adequately may lower one’s social position. Therefore, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, the gifts given may be seen as challenges to the honour of recipients and may even be perceived as an affront—a potential dishonour. According to Bourdieu, “[g]enerous exchange tends towards overwhelming generosity; the greatest gift is at the same time the gift most likely to throw its recipient into dishonour by prohibiting any counter-gift” (14). Despite the potential dishonour, this system of exchange also marks the recipient as a legitimate participant in the elaborate rules of reciprocity and obligation which characterises the ‘game of honour’.

As a whole, the institution of gift-exchange seems provocatively ambivalent. While Bourdieu has paid attention to its implications in the maintenance of social hierarchy, what fascinates Mauss is its potential as an alternative to the market exchange of impersonal goods and profit motives; gifts have the ability to preserve the personal quality in the goods and the power to create collective moral bonds through the principles of reciprocity and obligation. When Mauss published his book in the inter-war period, his project was to investigate the archaic survival or the resurgence of the spirit of gift-exchange, which he termed “aristocratic extravagance” (88), within the dominant, modern monetary economy in modern Western societies. Whether the custom of gift-exchange has survived or been revived, Mauss appears to view this regression towards past conventions as a desirable, progressive move.

From this perspective, we can now see that Sinclair’s *The Divine Fire* also explores the system of gift-exchange and honour associated with aristocracy. Noticing Keith’s poetic personality while working with him in cataloguing, Lucia decides to offer him a private secretarialship during her Italian travel, as a form of patronage. For Lucia, this act of ‘generosity’ occurs naturally, as it reflects the attitude her family would have traditionally taken towards a talented poet of plebeian origin. For
Keith, however, having already started to apply to himself the codes of honour traditionally reserved for the aristocracy, this ‘gift’ only enhances the “dishonour” he thinks he suffers in hiding from her his secret knowledge of her father’s economic crisis. After the bankruptcy of Lucia’s father, the plot turns to pivot on whether Lucia will receive the library and the dedicated sonnet from Keith. Her acceptance of these is significant as it will indicate that he is a social equal. As his equal, Lucia would then be obliged to give something in return. This dilemma, posed by her persistent awareness of the “social gulf” between them, finally dissipates with the continental fame Keith achieves at the end of the novel; now Lucia can (and must) accept the gift of the library and sonnet, and is sanctioned (and obliged) to offer herself in return as a “free gift.” The process of justification is mutual; while Lucia’s love for Keith is justified by his attainment of fame, Keith’s commercial success is redeemed through his reparation of “dishonour” and his marriage to Lucia, an aristocrat’s daughter. The ‘honourable’ exchange between Keith and Lucia and their subsequent marriage represent the force of cultural regeneration in battle against the current of commercialization. The novel ends in a happy moment when the couple is planning to leave for Italy together: a realization of Lucia’s initial plan to act as Keith’s patron which has been transformed into something which does not offend his “soul of honour.” At this final moment, the higher values of tradition and Keith’s individual ‘genius’ are reconciled, re-enchanting a world disenchanted by the force of commercialization.

3. British Idealism and “Social Solecisms”

Although Gissing and Sinclair begin with a similar vision of commercialization, their novels create markedly different impressions as they approach their conclusions. After all, while Gissing’s New Grub Street is a classic work of naturalist pessimism, Sinclair, in The Divine Fire, grafts the romantic plot of Künstlerroman onto the naturalist observation of contemporary culture. However, if this is achieved only by Sinclair’s use of aristocratic discourse of honour and gift, her poetics
might impress us as rather regressively feudal. Although Arlene Young argues that the novel’s innovation lies exactly in its dramatization of the union between a patrician lady and a poet of lower-middle class origin, which “breaks a novelistic taboo in transgressing a virtually sacrosanct class boundary” (188), we might still sense a tinge of class snobbery in the idealized portrait of Lucia. Yet, this is different from a simple fetishization of aristocratic tradition and lineage on Sinclair’s part. That merely belonging to the aristocracy does not guarantee immunity from commercialization is visibly demonstrated in the case of Jewdwine, Lucia’s cousin, whose ‘degeneration’ stands in sharp contrast to Keith’s ‘regeneration’. Moreover, in a discussion with Jewdwine, Keith clings to the values of modern individuality that Jewdwine denies. Against Jewdwine’s objection, Keith boldly declares that, “in the modern art, I take it, the universal absolute beauty is subdued to the individual” (DF, 314). As if to approve his ambition, the narrator observes at one point in the novel, “[Keith’s] muse, Modernity, had begun to turn her back resolutely on the masters and the models, to fling off the golden fetters of rhyme, gird up her draperies to her naked thighs, and step out with her great swinging stride on perilous paths of her own” (329). These passages suggest that Keith’s poetics does conform to the general “individualising tendencies” that Michael Levenson observes in the genealogy of modernism (15). Therefore, if Sinclair manages to balance between the residual values of aristocracy and the emergent values of modernism, we need to determine what finally separates her affirmative vision from the cultural pessimism of Gissing.

Fredric Jameson argues that Gissing’s fiction should be regarded essentially as a product of “high naturalist specialization that seeks to pass itself off as a map of the social totality”—a form which emerged after the crisis of classic realism (190). This claim is particularly persuasive if we consider the early changes in Gissing’s literary objectives. In his first self-published novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), he sought a means of political engagement by portraying the deprivation of the urban poor, which led to his temporary association with a circle of radical intellectuals around the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Yet, he was also quick to abandon his early hope for social reform towards a position of Schopenhauerian
pessimism. As Raymond Williams points out, this turn is already evident in Gissing’s second novel (175-6). In *The Unclassed* (1884), a novelist named Osmond Waymark at first declares that “Art, nowadays, must be the mouthpiece of misery, for misery is the keynote of modern life” (157). Yet, by the time he finishes the manuscript of his novel, he comes to dismiss his early political motives. As Waymark confesses to his friend, “Is it artistically strong? Is it good as a picture? There was a time when I might have written in this way with a declared social object. That is all gone by. I have no longer a spark of social enthusiasm. Art is all I now care for, and as art I wish my work to be judged” (201). Combined with this exclusive devotion to art is a lofty disdain towards public reception. In *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), Gissing asserts that Dickens’s high-Victorian attitude as a public moralist is merely old-fashioned, an attitude “especially hard to maintain in face of a literary movement which devoted itself to laying bare the worst of popular life. The brothers Goncourt, Flaubert, and M. Zola were not companions likely to fortify a naïve ideal” (217). According to Gissing, a naturalist writer “takes for granted that the truth can be got at, and that it is his plain duty to set it down without compromise” (67). From this standard of naturalist intransigence, Gissing judges Dickens as a non-realist who often compromised artistic truth to accord with popular tastes, citing as an example the major changes Dickens made to the plot of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in response to the declining number of subscriptions. While admiring Dickens’s novelistic output on the whole, Gissing also argues that it was only “his genius” which “saved him from the worst results of the commercial spirit” (66).

From this perspective, the figure of Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street* can be regarded exactly as that of “the commercial spirit” who is not equipped with the saving grace of genius. Simon James argues that, whereas the high-Victorian novels often produce “a moral economy” in which the deserving is endowed with material rewards, Gissing’s fiction decisively “dissociate[s] the concepts of reward and justice,” which culminates in the success of Milvain (104-6). We can see this dissociation most clearly in the disintegration of the discourse of honour in the novel. Regarding the early career of Adrian Yule, a figure who
typifies an old-fashioned, embittered ‘man of letters’, the narrator observes, “Had Yule been content to manufacture a novel or a play with due disregard for literary honour, he might perchance have made a mercantile success; but the poor fellow had not pliancy enough for this” (NGS 96). Instead, Yule’s high ambition has only led to a series of bitter controversies which gradually relegates him to the margins of literary journalism. By the end of the novel, he suffers from blindness, while Clement Fadge, his erstwhile enemy, ascends to “the place of honour” in a prestigious literary journal (506). Yet, according to Yule, Fadge is the “most malicious man in the literary world” (26); even Milvain dismisses him as “that ruffian” (513). Similarly, when Edwin Reardon produces “a wretched pot-boiler,” he says, “I shall be ashamed to see it in print,” from the viewpoint of his workmanship, whereas his wife Amy feels ashamed because of “people’s talk and opinions” (129). As the narrator revealingly says, “Now she was well aware that no degree of distinction in her husband would be of much value to her unless she had the pleasure of witnessing its effect upon others; she must shine with reflected light before an admiring assembly” (133). While the honour and shame of literary work is primarily the question of its autonomous quality for artists, such as Reardon and Yule, for a reader like Amy, the “distinction” is completely heteronomous, since it is essentially subject to the viewpoint of others. Here, the traditional moral economy is decisively dismantled and split according to the private value of culture and public value of commerce. In the world of New Grub Street, no shared standard of values exists by which a serious artistic practice can vindicate itself against the encroaching force of commercialization.

Nonetheless, if this is the case, how does Sinclair manage to re-enchant her fictional world by using the discourse of honour that Gissing dismantled in his vision of naturalist disillusionment? Here, we need to recognize that Sinclair’s use of the discourse of honour in The Divine Fire does not so much reflect regressive adherence to the aristocratic values as represents a progressive renovation of its social potential. In The Divine Fire, Sinclair is informed not by a pessimistic vision which starkly divides private art and the public world, but by the idealist philosophy of T. H. Green which, according to Hrisay Zegger, offers a
more harmonious vision of the relationship between individuality and society (18–22). In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Green and the tenets of British Idealism were hugely influential as a moral and political philosophy which could metaphysically justify the ideal of self-sacrifice and social service; such justification was especially appealing at a time when Evangelicalism was rapidly losing its hold as a religious faith because of the advance of scientific naturalism (Richter 19). Within the field of concrete politics, Green’s idealism encouraged various philanthropic activities, especially in the East End of London, while his philosophy also inspired New Liberal thinkers of social reform, such as L. T. Hobhouse (Meadowcroft xiii). We might be able to consider Green and his British Idealism a major predecessor of Edwardian New Liberalism in the field of political philosophy. The point of his quasi-theological philosophy is to regard society as a moral organism to which each individual contributes through “the self-realisation of the divine principle” within himself or herself. In *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), Green claims:

> human society presupposes persons in capacity—subjects capable each of conceiving himself and the bettering of his life as an end to himself—but it is only in the intercourse of men, each recognised by each as an end, not merely a means, and thus as having reciprocal claims, that the capacity is actualised and that we really live as persons. (191–2)

According to this view, individuals and society are engaged in a relationship of mutual enrichment, and members of a given community are morally united by a shared recognition of “reciprocal claims.”

According to Stefan Collini, Green’s ethical philosophy was evidently coloured by “a streak of the puritanism of the active radical who combines an austere asceticism with an exclusively political moral philosophy” (127). It seems that Sinclair was initially less attracted to this ascetic side of Green’s teaching. According to Theophilus Boll, around 1893, Sinclair wrote a manuscript of a verse drama (which remains unpublished), titled *A Debt of Honour: A Tragedy in Three Acts*, in which
the hero, Walter Brandon, abandons his promising career as a poet for a life devoted to philanthropy, though he ends up killing Honoria, his wife, who has objected to his choice (47–8). However, in the same year, Sinclair published her first paid essay, “The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism,” in which she gives a very favourable account of Green’s ethical philosophy. According to her interpretation, Green’s idealism does not demand a complete surrender of individuality for the sake of the larger whole; yet, it “reconciles the conflicting claims of so-called egoism and altruism.” In this view, an individual is “under a positive obligation to develop to his utmost all the powers and latent capabilities of his nature,” since “through the highest self-culture and self-fulfilment he becomes a more valuable member of society.” Sinclair therefore claims, “No development and no culture of the individual is complete that does not take into consideration his relations to his brother-men” (701–2). Moreover, this amounts to an implicit rejection of Gissing’s naturalist pessimism and the stark dichotomy he projects between art and the commercialized world. Sinclair argues:

The true idealist is neither optimist nor pessimist. He does not sit still in sleek content, believing that this is ‘the best of all possible worlds,’ nor, oppressed with Schopenhauerian hypochondria, does he bewail that not only it is no better than it should be, but that it is as bad as it can be. Between these two extremes the idealist preserves the juste milieu. (703)

Therefore, we might now understand that, by regarding culture as an act of self-realization in Green’s vision of society as a moral organism, Sinclair is trying to situate her literary practice within an ideal community in which its members are morally united through the social network of “reciprocal claims.”

It is exactly this community of “reciprocal claims” that Sinclair tries to construct by using the discourse of gift and honour in *The Divine Fire*. It is for this reason that we can regard Sinclair’s discourse as different from a simple adherence to aristocratic values. Significantly, this community is meant to be as inclusive as it can be. Earlier in the
novel, Keith reflects on the contradiction between his obscure social origin and the process of refinement he has undergone through his contact with Lucia: “He was, through that abominable nervousness of his, an impossible person, hopelessly, irredeemably involved in social solecisms” (DF 138). However, what Lucia loves, as she herself later recognises, are exactly these “social solecisms” of Keith, compared with the degenerate flabbiness of Jewdwine: “Who was more finished than Horace? And yet her heart had grown more tender over Keith Rickman and his solecisms. And now it beat faster at the very thought of him, after Horace Jewdwine” (632). It seems that the novel’s vision of community is also based on these “social solecisms” among different ranks of people. For example, when Lucia visits and stays with Miss Roots, her former governess, in a boarding house where Keith also lives, she associates with other sorts of plebeians who crucially lack Keith’s genius. However, she finds that she is not disgusted, and even admits that she prefers the lives of those uncultivated obscurcs: “after the wear of incessant subtleties and uncertainties [in Jewdwine’s house] there was something positively soothing in straightforward uninspired vulgarity” (464). Even though we may still recognise the persistence of the upper-class perspective in Lucia’s reference to “straightforward uninspired vulgarity,” the novel celebrates the culminating point of such inclusive “social solecisms” in the marriage between the plebeian genius and the patrician lady. It is by means of this social vision that Sinclair manages to overcome Gissing’s naturalist pessimism and imagines an alternative space for authentic artistic creation.

4. The Limits of the Gift

Nevertheless, rather disconcertingly, we quickly find several drawbacks in this inclusive vision of “social solecisms.” For the novel, if not for Lucia Harden, there are also some serious limits to this bracing intercourse between civility and vulgarity. We can see some of these limits in Sinclair’s treatment of some marginal characters. For instance, we may consider the figure of Richard Pilkington, an ex-journalist
turned financier who mediated the sale of the Harden library to Keith’s father. He is a key figure in the novel insofar as his change of career from journalist to financier illustrates a strange parallel between these two professions which Sinclair draws from the culture of the 1890s (DF 238–9). Moreover, Pilkington stands as a major obstacle to the happy closure of the novel because, in order to return the library to Lucia, Keith must pay the balance of debt from the loan Pilkington made to his father for the mortgage on the library. Yet, conventionally enough, the novel exposes his Jewish origin in the following description of his nose: “Mr. Pilkington’s nose had started with a distinctively Semitic intention, frustrated by the Anglo-Saxon in him, its downward course being docked to the proportion of a snub. Nobody knew better than Ms. Pilkington that it was that snub that saved him” (233). This passage only serves to overemphasize the novel’s critique of commercialism and mar its edge by linking it to a malicious, if facile, portrait of anti-Semitism.

Another and perhaps more serious example is the figure of a prostitute who happens to be Keith’s neighbour when he falls to the bottom of society immediately before his final success. She helps Keith when he has caught a deadly cold, without any of his friends knowing about his predicament. When she offers him a cup of tea, “[Keith] had some difficulty in swallowing; and from time to time she wiped his mouth with her villainous apron; and he was grateful still, having passed beyond disgust” (600). This might be the utmost point of the vision of “social solecisms,” but when his friends, Maddox and Rankin, turn up to take command away from the prostitute, she soon retreats from the scene, exchanging her service with a sovereign “flicked” by Maddox (603). It is as though the boundaries of disgust, momentarily “passed beyond,” have been quickly restored in preparation for the final public recognition of Keith’s genius. These cases suggest the possibility that the economy of honour and gift is actually sustained by the politics of disgust, a politics which demarcates its border by excluding the other. If not because of the conventional marriage ending of the novel, then certainly because of these strategies of exclusion, Sinclair’s vision of an alternative ground for creativity in this novel proves an unacceptable solution to the problem of commercialization.
After all, the fact that a novel which celebrates the modern, innovative poet ends with marriage—the most conventional of all possible endings and one which, by that time, had already increasingly been placed under question by women’s participation in the public sphere—is an ominous paradox which may reveal a number of unresolved dilemmas. Opportunities to pursue various lines of professional work had gradually begun to be made available to women, although still small in number, and this makes it possible to narrate the formation of women’s identity in terms other than those of romance and marriage. Indeed, as Jane Eldrige Miller points out, the important feature shared by most Edwardian novels was the questioning of marriage as narrative closure. However, this is not to suggest that, in 1904, Sinclair still held a comparatively naïve, optimistic view of the possibility of marriage as narrative closure. For instance, her first novel, *Audrey Craven* (1897), which ended with the heroine’s marriage, had been nothing but bitterly ironic. Other early works by Sinclair belong to the genre of ‘marriage problem’ novels, such as *Mr and Mrs Nevill Tyson* (1898) and *The Helpmate* (1907). Most notably, in *Kitty Tailleur* (1908), Sinclair places the figure of a former prostitute at the centre of a tragic narrative; this character finally chooses to commit suicide rather than marry her lover, driven by an oppressive sense of her past shame. If Keith’s innovative practice of modern individuality requires the reciprocal exchange of honours as its precondition, is it possible for a woman to play a role in such an exchange, which is more than merely passive and receptive? Is it possible for her to participate in the public exchange as a fully qualified creative subject, rather than being merely exchanged as a commodified sexuality just like a ‘public woman’?

Once Sinclair turns the focus of her fiction from male creativity to female creativity, the paradoxical happy ending of *The Divine Fire* inevitably unravels. We can observe this problem most clearly in the short story, “The Gift” (1908). The story recounts the failure of a friendship between a man and woman: Wilton Caldecott, a man to whom the idea of honour is so dear that it has made him rigid in his conduct with women, and Freda Farrar, a woman whose spiritualized idea of gift-exchange is too refined to be easily understood. “The Gift” is also
a tragedy suffered by a talented (‘gifted’) woman. At the beginning of
the story, Wilton and Freda have already passed three years of mutual
intimacy, during which Wilton has mentored Freda in her attempts to
write poetry. They have continued meeting each other because both have
recognised Freda’s “gift, her charming, inimitable gift.”
However, the story also implies that Freda’s “gift” (in the sense of her genius) has
also served, for Wilton, as a pretext to continue their friendship without
any troublesome romantic overtones; insofar as Wilton believes himself
concerned with Freda’s literary “gift,” their relationship can be happily
contained in the well-defined roles of mentor and disciple.

It is at this point, however, that Julia Nethersole, another female
friend of Wilton, intervenes, eventually destabilizing the gentle balance
between Wilton and Freda. Julia issues an oblique warning to Freda to
refrain from showing too much affection to Wilton; otherwise, he might
break away. His difficulty in sustaining a friendship with women may be,
Julia seems to imply, traced back to his traumatic experience in his
previous marriage:

“[Wilton] has suffered . . . all his life, from an over-developed sense
of honour. He could see honour in situations where you wouldn’t
have said the ghost of an obligation. His marriage was not an affair
of the heart. It was an affair of honour. The woman—she’s dead
now—was in love with him.”

According to Julia, his “sense of honour” obliges him to offer marriage in
return for the affections which some women friends have shown him, but
the disaster of the first marriage makes this impossible. Consequently,
Wilton has chosen to discontinue his troublesome relationships with those
female friends rather than continue as unmarried friends.

To maintain his friendship with Wilton, Julia suggests that women
should be careful not to awake his “over-developed sense of honour”
with too many signs of affection. However, this well-meaning advice of
Julia’s turns out to be fatal. Believing her relation with Wilton to be “the
unique and immaterial tie” (109), Freda takes a step to convince him (and
herself) of the ‘purely’ spiritual quality of their friendship, which has so
well nurtured her “gift” of poetry-making. Freda thinks:

It was only a gift, a thing that Wilton had given her, that if he chose he could at any moment take away. What had come from her came only through him. She owned with a sort of exultation that there was nothing in the least creative in her. She had not one virile quality; only this receptivity of hers, infinitely plastic, infinitely tender. What lay in the lamplight under her caressing hand [the manuscript of her poetry] had been born of their friendship. It was their spiritual child. (117)

By re-reading her “gift” (which, in the sense that it is her own genius, is almost like a property) as one which has been sent to her by someone else (a work of “collaborat[ion]” [125]), Freda tries to assure Wilton that their friendship is more than a worldly affair of mere material men and women. The bitter misfortune is that Wilton cannot see the logic of gift-exchange in Freda’s exalted discourse; indeed, “[h]e had seen nothing but one thing, the thing he was accustomed to see, the material woman’s passion to pursue, to make captive, to possess” (128). Following the dictates of his sense of honour, Wilton goes away, while Freda, suddenly dispossessed of all inspiration for poetry, fades away into a solitary death by the end of the story.

Partly endorsing Julia’s conjecture, the story implies that Freda had been lacking in self-knowledge. She fails to see through her exalted façade of spirituality and recognise that she might after all be in ‘love’ with Wilton. Nevertheless, the story is also hard on Wilton’s “masculine honour” (128), which fails to recognize that the spiritual necessity inherent in Freda’s her “gift” is ultimately different from “the material woman’s passion . . . to possess.” By introducing this gap between the ideal of gift-exchange and the desire for property and possession, Sinclair emphasizes the spiritual/cultural dimension of the “gift,” making culpable the more conventional aspects of honour represented by the “masculine” conduct of Wilton. Honour and gift, which she had previously combined seamlessly in *The Divine Fire*, suffer a fatal split, one that is in parallel with the polarized categories of masculine and feminine. In fact, in
her 1907 novel *The Helpmate*, Sinclair had already made her heroine complain that “A man’s honour and a woman’s honour are two very different things” (389). According to the traditional conventions of honour and shame, as Robert Nye argues, “men are regarded as the ‘active’ and women the ‘passive’ principles” (9–10). Such gender inequality, inherent in the discourse of honour, can be a serious impediment for women, especially when they desire to pursue some sorts of professional career and thus participate in the wider world of public exchange.

Sinclair must have felt this problem keenly as she turned her focus from the male creativity of Keith to the female creativity of Freda. Traditionally, the conventional association of womanliness with feeling has had a disabling effect on women who aspire to intellectual forms of labour. By the late-nineteenth century, the difficulty for intellectual women had been further compounded, for, in the new age of consumerism and commercial fiction, women were often associated with passive indulgence in sentimental frivolity and sensational desire. Therefore, as Rachel Bowlby claims, “In general . . . intellectual achievement on the part of women was accompanied by a conscious refusal of the trappings of femininity” (152; ellipsis mine). Such a refusal of ‘passive’ femininity and implicit approach to ‘active’ masculinity might in turn make intellectual women even more prone to isolation than men, insofar as intimate exchange with others is sanctioned for women chiefly because of their naturalized gender-identity. In her first novel, *Audrey Craven* (1897), Sinclair had already made a case for such a dilemma in the figure of Katharine Haviland, a female painter. Early in the novel, Katharine is said to possess a tinge of masculinity, because, as the narrator observes, “Among all artists there is a strain of manhood in every woman, and of womanhood in every man” (92).11 Towards the end of the novel, she swiftly matures as a portrait painter—a result of the extended observation she has done while nursing Vincent Hardy, a character who quickly dies. Her success grows during the isolation she experiences in the wake of Vincent’s death: “And the voice of her womanhood cried out in anguish—‘All the success in the world won’t make up to you for the happiness you have missed’” (317). Her secret love for Vincent had never been reciprocated because of his fatal, indeed
deathly, devotion to the more conventional feminine beauty of Audrey Craven, a character who is also the central target of the novel’s satirical observations.

As a woman novelist aspiring to intellectual status, Sinclair had herself been forced to confront such a dilemma between creativity and femininity, one shared by other contemporary women novelists. Seen from this angle, Freda Farrar’s re-reading of her “gift” might be understood as a tentative solution to the dilemma. By understanding her own literary creativity as a “gift” from the “virile” Wilton to her feminine “receptivity,” Freda tries to substitute a creative community for the fate of isolation that would result from a career as a serious female poet in a world characterized by commercialized culture. Yet, this solution must ultimately be aborted because of the “honourable” masculinity of Wilton. Whereas Keith in The Divine Fire manages to carve out the possibility that his claim to artistic individuality can be reconciled with the social organism by repairing his “dishonour,” Freda in “The Gift,” like Katharine in Audrey Craven, cannot reconcile her claim to individual creativity and an unproblematic assumption of normalized femininity; for both, individuality leads to isolation. Left by Wilton, Freda silently accuses him of incomprehension: “Is it honourable to take [the gift] away? Don’t you see how you’re breaking faith with me? Don’t you see that you’ve made me ashamed, and that nothing can be worse to bear than that?” (JE, 129) Unlike honour and dishonour, which are depicted as having redemptive potential in The Divine Fire, this sense of shame, suffered by an isolated woman, is strictly irreparable and possibly even worse than death.

5. Conclusion

In the above discussion, I have suggested that May Sinclair in The Divine Fire managed to overcome the naturalist pessimism of George Gissing by means of her paradoxically affirmative vision of the “social solecisms.” While this affirmative vision lent her the power to envision a socially justifiable form of modern literary innovation, I have also pointed
out that the happy closure of *The Divine Fire* was problematic not only because of its adherence to the aristocratic discourse of gift and honour, but also because it relied on the outmoded convention of the marriage ending which Sinclair herself increasingly questioned. However, in order to mitigate the first problem, Sinclair also renovated the aristocratic values of gift and honour by connecting them to a vision of social “reciprocal claims” as articulated by Green in his philosophy of British Idealism. Given that the moral philosophy of British Idealism also inspired the reformist politics of the Edwardian New Liberalism, it may not be going too far to suggest that Sinclair’s early refusal of Gissing’s cultural pessimism in *The Divine Fire* allegorizes a moment when the same matrix of fin-de-siècle thought promoted the emergence of early literary modernism on the one hand and that of New Liberalism on the other.

However, if we turn to the question of gender inequality inherent in the discourse of gift and honour, we can also suggest that it is ultimately not an unquestioning acceptance of British Idealism which pushed Sinclair towards her later modernist concerns with the single womanhood in works such as *Mary Olivier: A Life* and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean*. Rather, as we have seen in our reading of “The Gift,” Sinclair was keenly aware of the dilemma of female creative subjects in the discourse of gift and honour which she had once employed so successfully to narrate a male *Künstlerroman*. She was unable to situate a satisfactory space for authentic artistic creativity either in the public, male space of honourable exchange or in the private space of Victorian domesticity. The resulting confusion of gender identity among female artists, another recurrent motif in Sinclair’s fiction from *Audrey Craven* onward, may be seen as prefiguring Virginia Woolf’s famous argument on the androgyny of creative minds. Yet, if Woolf happily celebrates the creative fusion of two genders in “the androgynous mind” (89) in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Sinclair’s case is instructive insofar as it allows us to see what kinds of historical dilemmas lie behind Woolf’s daring modernist rhetoric. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that this feminist resistance to the tenets of British Idealism finally directed Sinclair towards her later modernist experiments. That said, it is also important to recognize that this was different from pessimist disillusionment like that
of Gissing. While her concerns with female creativity led her to explore the dilemma of single womanhood through her “poetics of celibacy” (Raitt 109), Sinclair continued to engage in various public activities, as evidenced by her support for suffragism and Freudian psychoanalysis or her problematically enthusiastic participation in the British government’s wartime efforts during the First World War. The dilemma of shame we encounter in her later fiction, one that already prefigured in the ending of “The Gift,” is only the most visible sign of her refusal to be satisfied with the standard dissociation between public and private values. Perhaps this was the biggest lesson she learned from T. H. Green, and albeit in a negative way, from George Gissing.

Notes

1. It is known that Sinclair sent her first novel, Audrey Craven (1897) to Gissing and received very favourable comments. After the death of Gissing, Sinclair exchanged letters with Morley Roberts, an intimate friend of Gissing’s, and expressed deep sympathy with Gissing’s novels, especially New Grub Street (1891) and Born in Exile (1892). See Boll, 56, and Raitt, 67–71.

2. The description here is owed to the following two studies: Bowlby, especially chapter 6, and Keating, The Haunted Study.

3. Yet, there is disagreement among critics about whether or not this cultural pessimism anticipates the succeeding generation of modernism. On the one hand, John Goode claims that the novel does anticipate Joyce and Woolf, since “it starkly confronts the domain of literary production with the modern world and, finding no space for negotiation, clarifies the need in the relations of production for modernist opposition” (xix). On the other hand, Patrick Brantlinger dismisses Gissing’s novel merely as “dead-end . . . realism,” unable “to see his way out of the impasse into the coming era of literary modernism.” (191–2; ellipsis mine).

4. George Gissing, New Grub Street, 325. Hereafter abbreviated to NGS.

5. May Sinclair, The Divine Fire, 27. Hereafter abbreviated to DF.

6. For these biographical details, see John Halperin, George Gissing: A Life in Books, 21–48. For Gissing’s essay on pessimism, written around 1882 but never published in his lifetime, see “The Hope of Pessimism.”

7. According to Raitt, Sinclair first came to know his idealism through
Dorothea Beale’s recommendation of it as an antidote to her spiritual crisis (48–50). While there is no direct link which connects Sinclair and Hobhouse’s New Liberalism, it is interesting to note that their path unexpectedly converged in her later interest in psychoanalysis. When Sinclair became one of the thirteen founding members of the Medico-Psychological Clinic of London, the first clinic to use the technique of Freudian psychoanalysis in Britain in 1913, one of the first two Chairmen of the Board of the Clinic was L. T. Hobhouse (Zegger 22).

8. In this connection, it is important to remember Marcel Mauss’s The Gift was also inspired by a reaction against classical liberalism, the same reaction that inspired T. G. Green’s British Idealism and Hobhouse’s Edwardian New Liberalism. According to Mary Douglas, Mauss was the heir of Emile Durkheim, his uncle, whose study of ‘collective representations’ was meant to rival the broadly Anglo-Saxon tradition of utilitarian thinkers and their justification for laissez-faire capitalism (xiv). Vincent Pecora also claims that “Mauss’s political and moral conclusions thus point not necessarily to any form of radically egalitarian communism but to a corporatist inclusion of all social classes in an organic whole bound by moral, not utilitarian, considerations” (231).

9. Different from the respectable connotation of ‘public men,’ the phrase ‘public women’ traditionally meant prostitutes. On this point, see Marshik.


Works Cited


