Seafoam and Water: Thyrza as Artist in George Gissing's *Thyrza* (1887)

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"the verses were noble, and pure as the sea-foam." (*Thyrza* 165)[1]

Walter Egremont, the idealistic hero in George Gissing's 1887 novel, *Thyrza*, spends Christmas on Jersey composing poetry and apostolic lectures on culture while hearing the "roaring music of the channel breakers" (165). A trusted water sprite warns against incorporating the poem into a lecture, so he sends it to the philosopher, Mr. Newthorpe, and his daughter, Annabel. Despite recently refusing Egremont's proposal, Annabel replies, equating seafoam with artistic value, thereby calling to mind the "foam-born" Greek goddess, Aphrodite, who "arose perfect from the foam of the sea complete in herself, in perfect balance" (Ruin 482) to become "an allegory of artistic form and beauty" (Goth 18-19). A potent and enduring symbol of creativity across western culture (15), the legendary figure of Aphrodite and her Roman counterpart Venus signified in the early nineteenth century "the dangers of an unrestrained imagination and interiority … or the creative power of artistic autonomy, of originality and divine inspiration" (23). I begin with Aphrodite and seafoam because a central contention of this essay is that in *Thyrza,* Gissing links the sea to artistic expression through the titular heroine, the sea-loving singer, Thyrza Trent. A working-class hat maker in the Lambeth district of London, Thyrza has a voice "well worthy of cultivation, excellent in compass, with rare sweet power" (67), and her singing unfailingly enraptures audiences, including Egremont with whom she falls tragically in love.

Gissing's earlier novel, *The Unclassed* (1884), deploys the figure of Venus Anadyomene to suggest that bathing in the ocean purifies the prostitute, Ida Starr, but links neither Ida nor the sea to art or creativity.[2] In *Thyrza*, however, Gissing associates his heroine with artistic expression through various analogies, including her musical antecedent, Thyrsis, her own enchanting singing, and her delight in the foam-producing sea.[3] I posit that the novel expresses Gissing's developing ideas in 1886 about art and creativity in relation to the external world, both natural and social. Gissing places the musical artist, Thyrza, "sadly out of her element in the narrow streets of Lambeth" (Unsigned Review 605), in the in-between space of the littoral, where she experiences a oneness with nature that corresponds to Arthur Schopenhauer's views on music as the ideal art and the artist's privileged connection to universality.[4] In this respect, Gissing gestures toward the concept of oceanic feeling regaining currency today, among not only psychoanalysts concerned with artistic inspiration but also political ecologists searching "for what it means to belong to the whole of a world in our time of ecological, humanitarian, and political emergency" (Balsom 9). Reorienting our

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[1] George Gissing, *Thyrza*. Ed. Pierre Coustillas. Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2013. Subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

[2] "As she came forth on to the beach again, it was another Venus Anadyomene. Heaven gloried in her beauty, and overshone her with chaste splendour" (Gissing, *The Unclassed* 168). See also Richard Dennis, "Hastings and Gissing" (28-29).

[3] Gissing feminizes the name "Thyrsis," the shepherd singer who in Theocritus's first idyll outshines "all others in herdsman song" (ll. 119-20). The novel's epigram concerning song is also from *Idylls* (l.4).

[4] C. J. Francis observes Schopenhauer's influence across Gissing's writings (59).

perspective to incorporate the terraqueous offers a different slant on the sentimental and idealistic elements in *Thyrza,* since its expression of wonder and reverence for the planetary correspond to what ecologists recommend that we recover, "some kind of feeling that this is much bigger than I am" (Chakrabarty 216).

From seafoam to marine aquariums, clouds, and lakes, water plays a vital role in *Thyrza*, though criticism is mostly terrestrial in orientation. As Richard Dennis argues, "specificity of place is central to Gissing's method" ("*Thyrza's* Geography" 560); and as Rebecca Hutcheon asserts, "Gissing's writings bear an acute sensitivity to place" (*Writing Place* 1). Discussions on *Thyrza* often centre on its Lambeth setting, the working-class district of London through which Gissing walked during composition (Halperin 88; Gissing, *Letters* 1, xxii). Putting water at the centre of my inquiry, however, I observe that the dynamism of the novel's terrestrial spaces stems equally from the aqueous forms bordering them. Key events occur in the watery locations of Lake Ullswater in the Lake District, the seashore at Eastbourne, and the Thames River as it flows past Lambeth. Water's multiple forms shore up the main characters' constitutional responses to their surroundings, whether it be the quiet lake, flowing river, or wild seashore, which Gissing associates, respectively, with the intellectual aesthete, the factory worker, and the sensitive artist.

Shifting from a terrestrial to a terraqueous interpretive angle casts a spotlight on how the novel's multiple references to water portray a materiality consistent with Gissing's phenomenological approach to fiction, while illuminating the artist's sensitivity to external forces both manmade and natural. Pierre Coustillas writes that Gissing "reacted to his environment –visual, auditive, and emotional – with the sensitivity of a seismograph" (Introduction, *London* 11); and the novelist renders his musical heroine equally receptive to her surroundings from London fog to ocean foam. The text's oscillations between literal and metaphorical allusions to watery and terrestrial spaces direct our attention to the conflict between an ideal of art and artistic expression as an unbounded radical force analogous to the ocean's unceasing motion, matter, and music – and the polluted inhospitable city that confines, limits, and destroys the aspiring subject.

Readers are tempted to equate the novel's hero with the conflicted author (Gapp 13; Halperin 91), since Egremont is an educated man of culture who idealistically embarks on ill-fated reform and briefly succumbs to a cross-class passion. Yet only Thyrza has an artist's identity, which Gissing foregrounds through direct contrasts with other characters. Robert Selig calls Thyrza an "idealized aesthetic angel" (35), and observes the novel's "disquisitions on philanthropy, love, and art" (22). Other compelling studies centre on the love, spirit, and divinity of Thyrza's music (Losseff 3-26), but ignore her identity as an artist, though Patricia Pye observes Gissing's characteristic "contrasts between an 'artistic' versus a 'plebeian' spirit" (85). My reading builds on these interpretations but looks at Thyrza as both an emblem of art, and a poor artist denied access to an unpolluted natural world necessary for creating music in comfort and health. Imposed by an unforgiving social and economic order, her deprivations crystallize into a lack of time – for leisure to cultivate and produce art – and ultimately, for the body itself. The sea, conversely, is presented as a joyful space of timelessness and envelopment for the artist.

Displaying the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will, nature, music, and the artist's sacrifice, Gissing's text includes the human body in capitalism's destruction of natural objects through environmental degradation, alienated labour, and urban poverty. Pierre Coustillas notes how dull Gissing found rural Devon (Introduction, *London* 7-8), but the

novelist consistently loved the sea, “detested urban sprawl and the disfigurement of the countryside by industry, and was an ecologist before anyone knew what ecology was” (Halperin 3). Hubert Eldon in *Demos* (1886) famously offers Gissing’s ecological view of art, stating of the future, “there will not be one inch left to nature. ... And with nature will perish art” (77). Halperin calls Gissing’s Lambeth an “ecological presentation of city as region” (4), and I extend that perspective to the planetary, showing how Gissing designs an ecosystem based on the human capacity for artistic expression, and portraying characters’ opportunities, choices, and fates through their associations with diverse forms of water.

Lake Ullswater and Connoisseurs of Culture

Scenes of calm water aligned with the studious Annabel Newthorpe frame the plot of *Thyrza*, which concludes with her calm, intellectual and aesthetic partnership with Egremont. In the opening chapters, Annabel initially rejects him when reading Virgil in a pastoral retreat beside Lake Ullswater (43-47). Gissing here drew on time spent at the Lake District home of Frederic Harrison in 1884, after which he felt London’s “noise and dirt more keenly” (Halperin 56-57). In line with Gissing’s synaesthetic interest in human experience, the pastoral setting highlights the links between water, art, and sound. Scarcely audible at all, the surrounding lake murmurs (30), or is so quiet “that every wing-rustle in the brake, every whisper of leaf to leaf, made a distinct small voice” (30). Likewise, “the gnats hummed,” and a spring flowing into the lake “babbled poetry of the twilight” (39). Schopenhauer deploys the lake metaphor to evoke the philosopher seeking “light and perspicuity” (*The Fourfold Root* 4), and a thinker like Annabel resembles the peaceful lake that can “unite great depth with great clearness, … rather than a turbid, impetuous mountain torrent” (*The Fourfold Root* 4). The distinct shape and quiet sound of the lake and its objects emphasize intellectual beauty, scholarly thought, and tranquil reflection. Later, Annabel nostalgically recalls her summer on the “calm, voiceless shore” (322), confirming her preference for living in still waters.

The narrator reveals on occasion, however, that strong feeling and a proximity to nature (29-30; 180-83) associated with the artist also lie within Annabel. A receptivity to nature’s sounds exemplifies her capacity for artistic expression, but she chooses philosophy instead. Intellectually equal to Egremont (183), Annabel is nonetheless a highly accomplished piano player, and Egremont observes that her “delight in poetry was spirit-deep” (46), and her “voice had the true music” (46). She responds to Egremont’s compliments with the “chords of her being smitten to music” (46), and her face is “sensitive to every note of the soul’s music” (529). But Annabel regulates her creativity and limits her piano playing to the drawing room. Only when Egremont turns away temporarily to the beautiful Thyrza does the sea momentarily sing to Annabel a “voice of craving, and her heart responded with desire for completion of being, with desire for love” (322-23). Distinctions dissolve here between the human and non-human as the sea voices emotions instrumental to creativity and desire; but having buried her art and passion, Annabel hears only a melancholy “sea-dirge” (323).

Despite her acuity, Annabel embraces bourgeois womanhood, locking feeling under layers of self-regulation, and looking almost austerely on nature (30). The rejected Egremont cannot imagine her “voice uttering passionate words” (105), viewing her as a “calm intellectual” (105). She consistently expresses “the sober consciousness which comes of self-study and experience” (529) and accepts Egremont’s second proposal as a rational choice. Preferring “to live and express herself in a minor key” (529), she suits Egremont: “He too would choose

restraint in preference to the outbreak of emotion" (529), and both seek "a path of life where there was small risk of their stronger faculties being demanded" (529). Neither, therefore, desires to experience the intense emotion vital to the artist's life to which Gissing dedicated himself.

Throughout the narrative, in fact, Gissing pointedly emphasizes that Egremont is incapable of being an artist. He had not written love poetry, and "warm feeling … was never disassociated from that impersonal zeal" (36). Mrs. Ormonde contrasts him with Thyrza, who "has art to aid her, a resource you and I cannot judge of with assurance" (488), reinforcing our impression of Thyrza as the novel's artist. For her part, Annabel tells her father how "disagreeable" (523) it would be if Egremont tried to write a novel, and her father acknowledges that only an "extraordinary" (523) man could produce one. She astutely suggests that Egremont devote half his time "to something practical, and the other half to the pleasures of a man of culture" (523). And Egremont finally admits that he "looks on contemporary things with an artistic interest but lacks the artistic power to use his observations" (532). Equally, his marriage to Annabel will include intellectual and aesthetic companionship, but not passionate love, for as she insists: "You missed the greatest opportunity of your life when you abandoned Thyrza. Her love would have made of you what mine never could" (534). This conversation occurs on the cliffs overlooking the ocean; but though the tide is full, the sea is soundless and lake-like with barely a ripple breaking its surface, mirroring their trajectory as a couple. Annabel points out that each has "missed something that will never again be offered us" (534); but as members of a monied and educated elite, they have the time and material comfort to live leisurely lives as connoisseurs of culture unlike Thyrza, or Gissing, for that matter. [5]

The Thames River and the Aspiring Worker

While Gissing aligns calm waters with leisurely high culture, he associates the lack of time afflicting the poor with the incessantly flowing waters of the Thames and the ringing of church bells in Lambeth where Gissing sets most of the action. Poverty prevents most Lambeth inhabitants from leaving unless for work but as Dennis notes, while "Thyrza and Lydia appear becalmed in their 'village'" ("*Thyrza*'s Geography" 564), the plot turns on "a series of spatial transgressions, wandering off-limits" (564). Nonetheless, only the upper-class philanthropist, Mrs. Ormonde, enables Thyrza to travel to the seashore, a subject to which I return shortly. Christine Huguet sees the river as evidence of Gissing's reliance on metaphor to exemplify class distinctions and "the course of human life" (170). Viewing water as elemental across Gissing's fiction, she labels the river a "natural locus" for "establishing links between man and urbanised matter," and a "plot mechanism for its triple specificity – it is deep, it is wide, and it is a reflector" (165). In *Thyrza*, the river, the embankment, and Lambeth Bridge merge into a site of promising but failing transcendence of social, affective, and physical borders.

Climactic events occur by the river or on the bridge while overhead discordant church bells imply that the social hierarchy rejects working-class emancipatory dreams, emphasizing

[5] There is insufficient space here for Gissing's views on aesthetics, but see Diana Maltz, "Practical Aesthetics" (63), and "Gissing as Thwarted Aesthete" (203-14).

instead the clock-time demarcating the long working hours. Potentially a "liminal" space (Hutcheon, "George Gissing's *Thyrza*" 3) for the aspiring Gilbert Grail and Thyrza, Lambeth Bridge ultimately signifies their suffering and failure. The industrious intelligent candle-maker sometimes "stood there and wished that the dread tide would whelm him" (134). Offered a better life running Egremont's free library, Gilbert proposes successfully to Thyrza, his neighbour. Some weeks later, he walks the streets digesting the "great joy" (134) of a transformed future, but ominously ends up at the "unsightliest," "meanness," "grim severity," and "ignoble misery" of Lambeth Bridge (133). Forced to listen to the "harsh" and "clamorous discord" (134) of clock-time in the parish bells ringing above, he stands on the bridge gazing into the "voiceful, mysterious" (134) water rushing below. Rather than maintaining the joyful dream, Gilbert finds his hands are numbed; and both the clashing bells and chill railings foreshadow the future collapse of his plans. In later chapters, Thyrza and Egremont fall for each other; but then Egremont rejects her, and Thyrza runs away, leaving Gilbert devastated, and the library is abandoned.[6]

The narrator insists that like Egremont, Gilbert is not an artist and lacks the creative capacity necessary for transcending his disappointment after the death of his dream. Books are Gilbert's "fountain of life" (89), and he ruined his health by reading them into the night when he should have been resting from oppressive hours of factory labour, thirteen per day: "Every minute of freedom, of time in which he was no longer a machine but a thinking and desiring man, he held precious as fine gold" (89). But the disaster with Thyrza and Egremont reduces him to mute bitterness. Had Grail been an artist, the narrator assures us, his tragic "song would lead battle against the hoary iniquities of the world" (91). Though exceptional in other ways, Gilbert's only "protest against the outrage of fate [was] a desolate silence" (91). Regardless of his intentions or capacity for emancipation through intellectual and cultural education, external forces condemn Gilbert to a lifelong scarcity of time. When Egremont delivers his lectures, Grail enthusiastically listens, but the former is oblivious to the inhumanly long hours of work preventing his audience from reading and thinking their way into their best selves through culture. Ultimately, Gilbert gives up reading books and lives miserably in conditions over which he has no control despite their man-made origin. Though Gissing subsequently adopts a more conservative approach to the working classes, *Thyrza* implies that only the gradual reforms of dubious politicians like James Dalmaine will increase the time necessary for working-class emancipation.[7]

Symbolic structures of moral authority linked to the Thames's tidal waters and the clanging sounds of man-made time are instrumental also in the pivotal chapter, "Good-Bye," detailing the disastrous cross-class passion of Thyrza and Egremont. Overhearing Egremont's voice, "desire became act" (280), and a mesmerized Thyrza follows him down the street addressing him under the "harsh clanging" (280) of the church bells. Thyrza struggles to make her words heard, implying once more that religious authority, civil society, and social conventions disapprove of inter-class union and working-class transcendence. Deafened by the discord, she begs Egremont to walk across Lambeth Bridge where the "jangle of bells was softened" (282), but portentous modifiers such as "dark," "black," and "gloomy" (282) foreshadow the destruction caused by their meeting. While Egremont admits his feelings to himself after recognizing Thyrza's love, his conscience refuses her; and he decides that "he should have

[6] Near the conclusion, they briefly reconcile until Thyrza's sudden death.

[7] Labour hours were hotly contested when Gissing was writing *Thyrza*. Tom Mann's *The Eight Hours Movement* was first published in 1886, but only in 1889 did some workers achieve eight-hour day shifts (Matthews 52).

left her on the other side of the bridge, where the harsh bells allowed no delicacies of tone" (281). He says goodbye and departs, while Thyrza "crept into a dark place whither no eye could follow her, … and wept her soul from her eyes" (282). Though Egremont soon returns guilt-stricken at leaving Thyrza in such a place, they never meet again.

Before leaving England for two years, Egremont declares to Mrs. Ormonde that he will return to marry Thyrza; and secretly overhearing the conversation, Thyrza decides to wait for him while taking voice lessons and educating herself under Mrs. Ormonde's wing. But Egremont returns only to choose Annabel, and the irregular, out-of-time heart of the heartbroken Thyrza stops beating shortly thereafter, as I discuss next. The novel certainly foregrounds the failure of cross-class romance, and Egremont somewhat mirrors Gissing's retreat from idealistic social reform into cultured aesthetics, but this interpretive lens overlooks Thyrza, whose association with the third watery location, the seashore and ocean at Eastbourne, returns the discussion to seafoam and the oceanic feeling linked to Gissing's views on creativity and art.

The Seashore at Eastbourne and the Sensitive Artist

In recent decades, the materialist turn and oceanic studies have challenged both the "hydrophasia" or "forgetting of the sea" characterising much twentieth-century literary criticism according to Margaret Cohen (657), and, as Hester Blum asserts, traditional figurations of the ocean that now require "new forms of relatedness" (671). Blum argues for more comprehensive theories of the "history, literature, and culture of the oceanic world" that go beyond treating the ocean simply as an "exemplar," or "empty … highly fluid space" (671). Studies of sea workers and marine materialities thus challenge historical ideas of the sea as wild and untamed (Dobrin 1; Kerr 5), "foreign and hostile" (Adamowsky 13), space of shipwreck and death, or salvation through resorts and tourism (Dobrin 1; Kerr 5). Though Matthew Kerr investigates the exceptions, he suggests that most nineteenth-century authors deploy the sea traditionally as "a setting … prompt to plot and character, … structuring motif, and as a source of metaphor" (2). Gissing follows these patterns in *Thyrza*, representing the "illimitable sea" (205) as salvatory, a symbol of "infinity" (205), and "the eternal" (208).

Nonetheless, surfacing alongside the conventional portrait is the sea as a vital living presence, its motion, sounds, and objects delighting the artist. For as Coustillas remarks, Thyrza's "artistic sensibility is repeatedly stressed, through her valued capacities for singing, but also through her enjoyment of the sea" (Introduction, *Thyrza* 11). With her superlative singing voice, passionate imagination, and depth of feeling, Thyrza is alien in the polluted metropolis but belongs to the seaside, representing an interconnectivity that closes the gap between human and non-human objects and exemplifies the ecological dimension of Gissing's views on art and artistic identity, at least in the mid-1880s.

Throughout his life, Gissing enjoyed the seaside, portraying in letters his delight with its wildness from childhood visits spent collecting shells, wandering the beach, and playing in the seafoam and waves. In 1870, for instance, he describes excitedly to his father how "the foam after the sea went down lay in huge masses all up the shore and kept blowing about and when you put your hand in, it was as hot as fire" (Gissing, *Letters* 1, 9). During difficulties writing *Thyrza,* Gissing sought respite at Eastbourne and Beachy Head (*Letters* 1, 59), incorporating his experiences into the novel; and the ocean waves were close to his mind

when first visiting to Italy in 1888.[8] Even when ill with emphysema and chronic bronchitis in 1902, Gissing told his mother that he went to the beach after writing each morning: "In the afternoon I go and lie down on the seashore and breathe all the air I can" (*Letters* 8, 416). French doctors urged him to move inland to benefit his health, but he still viewed the ocean as a physical space of inspiration and belonging, writing to Clara Collet in 1901 of being "possessed by a ceaseless longing for movement & above all (of course) for the sea" (*Letters* 8, 161).

Indeed, Gissing's frequent allusions to the sea suggest that a life-long delight in and affinity to the ocean were integral to his views on artistic expression, perhaps prompting the question in his *Commonplace Book*: "Might one define *Art* as a satisfying & abiding expression of the zest of life?" (69). Certainly, Gissing's characteristic pessimism evaporates in enthusiastic descriptions of the sea across his writings. In *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), for instance, Gissing's autobiographical narrator asks:

> Is it I who used to drink the strong wind like wine, ran exultingly along the wet sands and leapt from rock to rock, barefoot, on the slippery seaweed, who breasted the swelling breaker, and shouted with joy as it buried me in gleaming foam? At the seaside I knew no such thing as bad weather; there were but changes of eager mood and full-blooded life. (76)

The same zest surfaces in *Thyrza*: when first seeing the sea, Thyrza longs to return to the beach and runs towards "a glimpse of blue horizon, … like a child" (212). Once there, distinctions dissolve between the human and non-human as she is transported into the sea's vital energy:

> And at length she was on the beach, down at length by the very edge of the waves. Here the breeze was so strong that with difficulty she stood against it, but its rude caresses were a joy to her. Each breaker seemed a living thing; now she approached timidly, now ran back with a delicious fear. She filled her hands with the smooth sea-pebbles; a trail of weed with the foam fresh on it was a great discovery. (212)

Thyrza's absorption in the materiality of the sea's objects echoes Gissing's statement: "To lose oneself, is a great thing, lose oneself in study of outward objects" (*Commonplace* 34). Here and throughout the narrative, her character emerges gradually as an Aphrodite-type symbol of the ideal artist due to her raptness with the sea, golden beauty (176; 269; 270), and fluid voice.[9]

Gissing develops the symbolism attached to Thyrza through contrasts with characters who lack, repress, or turn from artistic expression and so encounter the sea very differently. Egremont initially writes poetry aware of the sea's sound but becomes deaf or chooses not to listen to it. Returning to England, he visits Eastbourne where Mrs. Ormonde dissuades him

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[8] Crossing the Ionian Sea in 1889, Gissing writes to his mother of the "grand sea, covered with great foaming waves. It does not trouble me in the least, I eat heartily and enjoy myself." (Gissing, *Letters* 4, 144).

[9] Monica Cyrino calls Aphrodite "intrinsically *chruseē*, 'golden.'"

from marrying Thyrza.[10] Pondering whether to leave town before seeing her, Egremont observes: "The stars and the night wind and the breaking of the sea – the sea which Thyrza loved – spoke to him. Could he not understand their language? … (490). The ellipsis creates a point of suspension, but the next sentence begins: "On Monday morning he took the rain to London, thence northwards" (490), implying that in rejecting Thyrza, Egremont also repudiates nature's language, and by association, artistic creativity. His hero joins other characters incapable of or repressing artistic sensibility, who cannot hear the sea's language. Consider Thyrza's practical sister, Lydia, who enjoys the sea air's "wondrous sweetness" (376) after Lambeth's choking air but otherwise reflects dismissively: "But what was the sea to her!" (376).

Thyrza's singular affinity to the sea surfaces even before she sees it when travelling by train from London to Eastbourne. As the possibility of hearing the waves increasingly absorbs her attention, access to language disappears. Thyrza "listened eagerly if, even above the noise of the train, she might catch the sound of great waves" (204), losing her capacity for speech the closer the train moves to the coast: "She could not speak much, now that every moment brought her nearer the sea" (204). Avid listening and strong feeling disorder thought, reducing Thyrza to silence upon arrival when Mrs. Ormonde drives along the beachfront: "The almost painful suspense with which she waited for a first glimpse of the sea completed her inability to think or speak with coherence" (205). Proximity to the sea is so enveloping and mesmerizes Thyrza so deeply that she sees or hears nothing else: "Her eyes were fixed straight onwards" (205), and she has no interest in the landscape upon losing sight of the sea (206). The absorption and voicelessness persist on the cliffs overlooking the ocean where "Thyrza had no response to utter" (206). Gissing here repeatedly draws attention to the ocean's power to silence speech and thought in the spell-bound artist.

Thyrza's unique and consistent sensitivity to hearing both non-human and human sounds means that key moments involve her listening to or overhearing other voices, including Egremont's conversation, Annabel's piano playing, or the "loud surge" (205) of breaking waves. Only on the beach, however, does she fully merge with the sea as "the keen breath of the sea folded her about and made warmth through her whole body; it sang in her ears, the eternal sea music" (208). Michel Serres highlights the aural in the bond established between creativity, the ocean, and Aphrodite, writing that the "beautiful goddess, invisible, standing up, is born of this chaotic sea, this nautical chaos, the *noise*" (25). Goth likewise sutures the sound of the sea's turbulence that produces seafoam to artistic creation, "the genesis of forms to Aphrodite and to the creation myth of her birth." Thus, he goes on, "[i]t is from the clamorous chaos – which the sea as a fluid, 'smooth space' represents – that cultural and material forms emerge" (22). In *Thyrza*, Gissing surely draws on this interpretive tradition, attaching his singing heroine to the ocean through their shared capacity for entrancing sound.

Other characters experience aesthetic moments when hearing human music but never produce art themselves, apart from Annabel, the piano player. But having repressed her artistic soul and heart's desire, Annabel hears the sea's music but once and as an index of pain and loss. Likewise, in her agony after Egremont's rejection, Thyrza temporarily loses her voice, and, by extension, her capacity to hear the sea's music. But for most of the narrative, she is the only character to respond zestfully to the ocean's sound *and* to human music, revelling in a

[10] Mrs Ormonde underhandedly thwarts Thyrza's cross-class emancipation, her class rigidity analogous to her containment of the wild sea in "two large aquarium[s], full of water-plants and fishes" (101).

listening grounded in the physical body, which simultaneously expands her consciousness. In such moments, the narrative evokes a timelessness and universality absent from the grim particulars of her Lambeth life where Thyrza but briefly escapes through “emotional reverie” (59). The sounds of ocean waves and melodies offer alternative, active transformations through their mutability, motion, and beauty.

The suturing of music and nature through the sea in *Thyrza* likely stems from the influence of Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). Gissing’s ecological representation of Thyrza as musical artist echoes how Schopenhauer describes the world as “embodied music” (1: 263), pairs music and nature’s harmonies, and treats humans as not unlike “the rest of the beings and things in nature” (2: 174). Indeed, in *Musical Vitalities* (2018), Holly Watkins titles her chapter on Schopenhauer “Musical Ecology” because he treats “the phenomenal world, or nature and music” as “different expressions of the same thing” (Schopenhauer, *World as Will* 2: 262). Watkins finds that despite his contradictions, Schopenhauer implicitly critiques anthropocentrism in suggesting that “organic and inorganic entities alike” are equal “expressions of will on the planet” (Watkins 68). To Schopenhauer, the will is “vital force” (2: 311), what Watkins calls “vital energy” (69), and “endless striving” (69). It exists in all things including inanimate and animate objects of nature.

Gissing’s merging of nature, art and music also accords with Schopenhauer’s view of art as the objectification of the will and the elevation of music to the highest art. Schopenhauer suggests that of all the arts, only wordless music “reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain” (1: 381). Melodious sound “floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet externally remote, and it is so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable” (1: 381). In *Thyrza,* hearing the sea music, Thyrza’s psyche expands organically as a “close-folded bud” opening into a “flower with its glow and its perfume” (212), heralding a “wonderful new life” (212), prompting Hutcheon to note Thyrza’s “existential connection to the ocean” (*Writing Place* 86). Likewise, recalling Annabel’s piano playing, Thyrza states, “There was something she played, Gilbert, that told just what I felt when I first saw the sea” (230). Gilbert experiences a similar “transfiguration” (248) at a musical concert: “the strong wings of that glorious wordless song bore him into a finer air, where his faculties of mind and heart grew unconditioned” (248). But while multiple characters are mesmerized into silence when hearing human-created melody, including the narrator in the much-quoted passage on the street organ (132-33), only Thyrza is entranced by the sea music and enraptures those who listen to her. [11]

Thyrza is distinct from other characters, therefore, not only because of her acute sensitivity to and delight in the sea’s objects, but because her body’s beautiful sounds are unmediated by words, artistic training, or man-made instruments such as the piano. She transfixes her audience with her beautiful melody at the public house, where “her pure and sweet tones touched the hearers profoundly, not a foot stirred” (67), and “again the room hushed itself, every hearer spell-bound” (67). Gissing often foregrounds the aesthetic quality of sounds not through description but through their capacity to absorb and silence the listener. In parallel, after Thyrza spends the entire day at the beach, she cannot describe her experience in words

[11] Gissing often attended musical concerts in 1886 and 1887, writing that the famed soprano Adelina Patti’s performance was “a glorious memory for a lifetime” (Gissing, *Letters* 3, 122-23).

(213). On each occasion, the experience is a vital bodily immersion in the present moment outside of human language, a wordless and sensory contact preceding cognition.

Other ideas of Schopenhauer help us to recognise Thyrza as the novel's representative artist, including her vocal range, artistic genius, and degree of suffering. While no woman can be a genius in Schopenhauer's hierarchy of forms, within the art of music he curiously positions the soprano voice at the apex, the "highest grade of the objectification of the will," whereas the bass is the "lowest grade," analogous to "the still inorganic bodies manifesting themselves" (qtd. in Watkins 67). Moreover, Thyrza does in fact mirror Schopenhauer's definition of artistic genius with her "passionate instincts" (*Thyrza* 418) and "passionate imagination" (531), which correspond to Schopenhauer's "passionateness of willing" (2: 389), presented as a "condition of genius" (2:389). Selig concludes that Thyrza is "an outright music genius" (37), following Mrs. Ormonde's allusion to Thyrza's "latent genius" (*Thyrza* 418). And Mrs. Ormonde's reflection that "there are but few of her kind whom in the end the fire does not consume" (418-19), matches Schopenhauer's genius artist, who frees the intellect from the will to produce art, but only at great personal cost.

Indeed, suffering, sacrifice, and alienation characterize Schopenhauer's artistic genius, which "manifests itself physically" in a life-shortening turbo-charged "energy of the heart's pulsation" (389). In Gissing's extensive narrative, we find parallels in Thyrza's "inward pulse" (482) that beats "painfully" (241) "violently" (482), and "irregularly" (241), and in "unceasing pain" (482), exemplifying the artist who lives "in contradiction and conflict with his times" (2: 390), and "often exits under very wretched conditions" (2: 385). Nicky Losseff offers powerful examples of the artist's wretchedness, noting that when singing, Thyrza must take deep breaths of London's poisonous air, describing her subsequent fainting "a portent of the price she will ultimately pay for the gift of song" (13). As Mrs. Ormonde predicts, Thyrza's flame quickly burns out, and she dies prematurely in a scene that rendered Gissing inconsolable during composition, indicating a degree of identification with his artist heroine (Gissing, *Letters*, 3, 72).[12]

The focus on genius and the artist's special suffering are less palatable to today's readers; but to do Gissing justice, in 1886, he was struggling for a living while developing his views on art and artistic identity, and he was deeply concerned with the external world's impact on his ability to create art. In June that year, he summarised that "in literature my interests begin and end: I hope to make my life and all its acquirements subservient to my ideal of artistic creation" (to Thomas Hardy, Gissing, *Letters* 3, 41). Gissing also travelled to France for the first time, which had a "profound effect" (Gissing, *Letters* 3, xxiv), discovering in Paris "the art of life" and the "life of art" (xxiv). The writer was still poor, obliged to tutor for a living, and lived daily enveloped by London's foul air and dirty streets. The air quality was at its worst in the late 1880s after coal consumption continuously increased from the 1850s, causing frequent spikes in deaths from respiratory diseases that persisted well into the 1890s (Brimblecombe 123). Elaborating the material circumstances of Thyrza's daily life, while absorbed in the pressures of his own, Gissing not surprisingly expresses concern with the artist's physiological relation to her surroundings.

[12] *Thyrza* was apparently Gissing's favourite novel (Tindall 89).

While Schopenhauer posits that only the artist has special access to a universal transcendence, Gissing allows the suffering poor moments of entry through music but develops a more planetary perspective through the experiences of Thyrza. To Schopenhauer, the sole "advantage of genius over other men" (1: 267), is "the pleasure of everything beautiful, the consolation afforded by art, the enthusiasm of the artist which enables him to forget the cares of life" (267). In *Thyrza*, we learn that contented people, by contrast, are "dull, unimaginative beings from whom the gods, in their kindness, have veiled all vision of the rising and the setting sun, of sea-limits, and of the stars of the night, whose ears are thickened against the voice of music, whose thought finds nowhere mystery" (418). The same approach marks Schopenhauer's theory since only the artist hears the "universal language" (1: 256). The ordinary person is deaf to it, and Schopenhauer provides the example of the stockbroker on the exchange, who is oblivious to "the continual humming of the whole exchange, which is like the roaring of the sea," but "hears and understands perfectly what his neighbour says" (1: 262). In *Thyrza,* Gissing concentrates on the artist singer, who literally hears the roaring sea, or what Schopenhauer describes as the artist's unique access to "the essential nature of things in general, the universal in them" (1: 379).

It is the roaring sea that produces the sea foam from which also emerges Aphrodite, and all are affiliated with the oceanic feeling that Sigmund Freud summarises in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929). Freud's friend Romain Rolland wrote him a letter detailing a "peculiar feeling … a sensation of 'eternity,' a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'" (qtd. in Freud 10-11). Rolland calls the feeling a "purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality but is the source of a religious energy" (qtd. in Freud 11). It constitutes "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (12). Having never experienced what Rolland describes, Freud rejects the concept, but current psychoanalysts Richard Chessick and Sarah Ackerman link oceanic feeling to artistic creativity, a oneness with nature, and moments of transcendence. Chessick draws on the ciphers of philosopher Karl Jasper as "subjective 'intuitions'" and "evanescent experiences" (521) that provide a similar sensation of "being part of a stream of humanity and /or of nature" (Jasper qtd. in Chessick 523). But while they bring "transcendence to mind" (521), they can never be analysed or interpreted (521), mirroring the aesthetic moment that psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas articulates as a "deep rapport between the subject and object," but which is "uncanny, sacred, reverential, and outside cognitive coherence" (385).

In Gissing's novel, Thyrza's planetary association with the sea, the stars, and the wind is beyond thought and language; and while her deep rapport with the sea's matter – its salt, seafoam, and pebbles, along with its sound – confirms Gissing's empirical approach to fiction, it also fits Rolland's "bond with the universe" (Freud 15), and Schopenhauer's artist living more in the "macrocosm," not the "microcosm" of ordinary people (*World as Will* 1: 385). Visiting Thyrza at Eastbourne, Thyrza's sister, Lydia, talks while "gazing through the open window, but saw nothing of sea or sky" (379). To Thyrza, conversely, the sea was "the best friend I ever had" (377), highlighting an intimacy that approximates Rolland's account of oceanic feeling as "thrust upon me as a fact. It is a *contact*" (qtd. in Ackerman 10), and hence a sensation (8). Likewise, Thyrza's body is grounded in the sea's materiality that constitutes a synaesthetic contact and absorption: "I shall always love the sound of it, and the salt taste on my lips!" (382).

Rolland's encounter with the oceanic was "always a source of vital renewal" (qtd. in Ackerman 10) just as the literal sea was for Gissing. Thyrza too returns to London

experiencing a new interconnectivity between place, space, and nature. Walking along Kennington Road, she compares the "white billow of cloud" above the dirty city with the "fathomless ocean!" (256), seeing the universal in the particular in recalling how "there were clouds like that high up over Eastbourne" (256). Spatial boundaries collapse as she recognises that at this very "moment the sea was singing; this breeze, which swept the path of May, made foam flash upon the pebbled shore. Sky and water met on that line of mystery; far away and beyond was the coast of France" (257). The expansion of perspective approaches the planetary, and is, I suggest, an example of the oceanic feeling that Erika Balsom explains is a "giving oneself over to the sea" (38), and which Sarah Ackerman associates specifically with artists, whose minds must "flow freely, perhaps oceanically" (23).

Seafoam, Broken Beauty, and Ugly Froth

Full of impurities, even toxic micro-plastics, seafoam is literally the opposite of the nobility, beauty, and purity attached to it in *Thyrza.* The wind churns up the ocean's surface, forming bubbles from sea water that contain "dissolved salts, proteins, fats, dead algae, detergents and other pollutants, and a bunch of other bits and pieces of organic and artificial matter" (*What Is Sea Foam*?). Mapping the history of aesthetics, Hans Ruin treats sea foam and Aphrodite conventionally as symbols of perfect beauty, but more fittingly deploys the terms "broken beauty," and "the indisputably ugly" (485) to describe the evolution of aesthetics in the nineteenth century, culminating in the realist and naturalist fiction of Gissing's predecessor, Honoré de Balzac, and contemporary, Emile Zola. And for "many readers and critics George Gissing was the archetypal English writer of realist fiction" (Matz 72). Curiously, however, on further scrutiny, we learn that the dirty froth of seafoam often indicates "a productive ocean ecosystem" (*What Is Sea Foam*?). It thus remains a surprisingly pertinent metaphor for *Thyrza*, given its multiple subplots portraying minor characters thriving in the cohesive community of Lambeth despite the deprivation. Lambeth is, as it were, a productive ecosystem with foamy impurities. Readers admire the novel's sympathetic and even tender portrayal of the urban working poor (Coustillas, Review 23; Selig 34; Tindall 89). Indeed, Coustillas calls *Thyrza* "one of the few nineteenth-century novels which attempt to give a picture of the working classes from the inside" (Review 20).

The salvatory moment of the poor listening to beautiful sound in the public house, street, concert hall, or at the seaside, offers a zestful renewal in an otherwise grim and degraded environment. Despite the social origin of the poverty, pollution, and long working hours, these external forces prevent inhabitants from resting to recover their health, further consuming or producing art and culture, or living long comfortable lives like Mrs. Ormonde, Annabel, and Egremont. In 1886, Gissing was likely an exception, persevering with artistic creation in inhospitable circumstances, and addressing in *Thyrza* a key question that Chessick raises when considering the relevance of oceanic feeling in our own era: "How do we achieve an authentic and creative existence while immersed in the post-Enlightenment culture of rapacious capitalism?" (529). Chessick answers that we stop ignoring the metaphysical moments of transcendence still occurring despite centuries of Enlightenment rationality and science.

Likewise, ecological philosophers, Bruno Latour, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and others search for a viable form of politics today while simultaneously urging a return to wonder and a

"reverence" for the planet (Chakrabarty 217).[13] Twentieth-century readers focused on political reform found *Thyrza* less appealing, calling it idealistic and escapist. Selig considers Thyrza herself an awkward intrusion of "idealized high aestheticism" (32) into "South-London life" (32). And Grylls sees the novel representing art "as an idealistic refuge from everyday life," depicting only "the virtuous, the beautiful, the golden," and foregrounding the artist transcending the limitations of material existence by creating aesthetic objects (70). Yet Thyrza's tale begins and ends in materiality even in its moments of apparent transcendence. To be sure, Thyrza transports her audience and likewise is transported when hearing beauty at the seaside or in the concert hall, but her experience is always corporeal, grounded in a series of affective physiological sensations that dissolve the gap between subject and object and transfix the subject, stopping her in time, but leaving her fully present, nonetheless, in an oceanic listening moment.[14]

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[13] Mary Louise Pratt notes how the contributors to *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017) follow their nineteenth-century naturalist predecessors with their "desire to find magic, to enchant or reenchant the world, to make it possible to inhabit it with love" (G172).

[14] See also Glenn Albrecht's term, "eutierra," the "earthly equivalent" to oceanic feeling, the "positive feeling of oneness with the Earth and its life forces, where the boundaries between self and the rest of nature are obliterated" (165).

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