

The Gissing Journal

Volume XXXVIII, Number 2, April 2002

“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”
Commonplace Book

New George Gissing Letters at The New York Public Library

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The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, has acquired thirteen autograph letters signed by George Gissing, addressed to his brother Algernon and spanning the years 1880-1895. Six of these letters have never previously been published. Portions of the remaining seven letters appear in Mattheisen, Young, and Coustillas (eds.), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990-97), where their textual sources are identified as *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family* (London: Constable, 1927) and no manuscript citations appear.

The letters form part of the Richard John Levy and Sally Waldman Sweet Collection, which was given to The New York Public Library in December, 2000 by Mr. and Mrs. Morris Sweet of Brooklyn, New York. The collection as a whole comprises letters and documents signed by prominent American and European political figures, authors and scientists of the 18th-20th centuries. Notable individuals represented include Susan B. Anthony, Robert Browning, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. A complete inventory of the collection is available via the Internet at:

<http://digilib.nypl.org:80/dynaweb/ead/human/msssweet/>

This impressive gathering of manuscripts was amassed primarily by Mrs. Sweet's first husband, Richard John Levy, and mostly by purchase from private dealers and auction houses. Nothing was added to the collection for several decades prior to its acquisition by The New York Public Library. The donors have no knowledge of the specific provenance of the Gissing letters, which constitute the largest group of items written by any individual represented. Dating, pagination and publication information for the letters, all of which lack their envelopes, is as follows:

- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 5 Hanover Street, Islington, 25 January 1880. 4 pages. Portions published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 1, pp. 235-36.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 5 Hanover Street, Islington, 18 July 1880. 4 pages. Unpublished.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 5 Hanover Street, Islington, 26 December 1880. 5 pages. Unpublished.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 55 Wornington Road, Westbourne Park, W., 27 March 1881. 8 pages. Unpublished.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 55 Wornington Road, Westbourne Park, W., 22 May 1881. 4 pages. Portions published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 2, page 37.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 55 Wornington Road, Westbourne Park, W., 29 July 1881. 3 pages. Portions published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 2, page 54.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 29 Dorchester Place, Blandford Square N.W., 7 August 1882. 4 pages. Unpublished.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 29 Dorchester Place, Blandford Square N.W., 3 September 1882. 3 pages. Fragment published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 2, page 99.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 17 Oakley Crescent, Chelsea S.W., 20 September 1882. 4 pages. Fragment published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 2, page 99.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 24 Prospect Park, Exeter, 7 August 1891. 3 pages. Unpublished.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 1 St. Leonard's Terrace, Exeter, 31 March 1892. 4 pages. Unpublished.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from 84 Old Church Road, Clevedon, 17 June 1894. 3 pages. Portion published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 5, page 210.
- Gissing, George. ALS to Algernon Gissing, from Eversley, Worpole Road, Epsom, 30 May 1895. 3 pages. Portion published in Mattheisen, *et al*, Volume 5, page 340.

The content of the previously unpublished letters and passages concerns literary business, politics, family matters and domestic affairs. Perhaps the most interesting are the two items dating from September, 1882, only fragments of which have been available until now. The full texts of these letters allow us to pinpoint the date when Gissing resumed living with his first wife, Marianne Helen Harrison (“Nell”) after many months of separation. In the brief passage of the 3 September letter which has been published, Gissing advises Algernon that he will move to 17 Oakley Crescent, Chelsea, S.W. on “Wednesday next” or 13 September. The newly available holograph of this letter reveals the background to this change of address:

You are surprised of course. I am going because I have resolved to take Nell back once more, and make a fresh attempt. There have been several rather hopeful signs of late, and then things will be more favourable externally than ever before. Black, strange to say, has been getting married, and to a most admirable girl, of very serious moral character, who is desirous to afford frequent companionship, and do her best to be of use to me. We shall be only ten minutes' walk away from them...

I enter upon the new arrangements with considerable hope ; not only because I think there is something of a moral awakening, but also because the circumstance of a really desirable female friend will do so much – its absence has been always the great failing, of course. Happily, too, the fits have ceased ; though other ailments only get worse.

The holograph of Gissing's letter of 20 September provides a glimpse of his new domestic situation:

It is time to report how things are going on. Everything here is extremely satisfactory: good cooking, good attendance, and a quiet house...

Helen is in the usual state, and threatened just now with blindness, owing to acute inflammation of the eyes. Of course, owing to our satisfactory arrangements here, she has nothing whatever to do. She goes to St. Thomas's two or three times a week. But in other respects, things have vastly improved, as I anticipated. We see a good deal of the Blacks, exchanging visits several times a week, and Helen gets on very well with Mrs. Black, I am glad to say...

The complete texts of these important letters fill in the picture of a hopeful episode in the troubled first marriage of the author.

This new correspondence complements The New York Public Library's extensive holdings of George Gissing material, most of which is in the care of The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. Nearly half a century has passed since John D. Gordan, former Curator of the Berg Collection, arranged a comprehensive exhibition of the Library's Gissing resources.¹ In his introduction to that landmark presentation, Gordan remarked upon the scarcity of critical attention paid to Gissing in the decades following his death in 1903.² It was Gordan's hope that the 1953 exhibition would contribute to a revival of interest in the neglected author. Since that time, numerous volumes of criticism, biography and correspondence concerned with Gissing have been published, his most important novels have been reprinted in popular and scholarly editions and an academic journal and web site devoted to his work have been established. The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, is pleased to support this fresh interest in George Gissing by making available to scholars an important new series of his correspondence.

¹George Gissing, *1857-1903: An Exhibition from the Berg Collection*. Opened 28 December 1953.

²John D. Gordan, "George Gissing, 1857-1903. An Exhibition from the Berg Collection," *Bulletin of The New York Public Library*, Vol. 58, No. 10, October 1954, pp. 489-490.

**“There’s many a true word said in joke”:
Quixoticism in *The Nether World***

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With a few notable exceptions, Gissing’s contribution to the family of nineteenth-century British narratives commonly referred to as “condition of England” novels is in my judgment undervalued.¹ For many critics, his relentlessly deterministic Social Darwinism appears to set him apart from his relatively more sanguine predecessors in this subgenre. Consequently, his work is sometimes critically overdetermined and its aesthetic innovations overlooked or discounted in larger studies of British literary realism. This essay proposes a corrective for such readings, one that at once places Gissing squarely within the tradition of the “condition of England” narrative and demonstrates some of Gissing’s innovative methods of reimagining that tradition.

As I will outline in a reading of *The Nether World* (1889), Gissing, just as earlier novelists, affirms the necessity of an aesthetic solution, as opposed to a political one, to Britain’s social and economic ills. He further accepts those earlier novelists’ conclusion that this solution must be based on the development of what I call the “comic consciousness,” an essentially aesthetic mode of imagining the relationship between the individual and the collective. Derived from eighteenth-century comic theory, in which Whig aestheticians such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele imagined Cervantes’ Don Quixote as a model for British civility and social virtue in contrast to savage Tory satire and the Hobbesian laughter of superiority, comic consciousness was developed by nineteenth-century British novelists in an attempt to combat radical individual isolation implied by eighteenth-century philosophical skepticism, secularism, and economic industrialization. The realist novel, the dominant literary mode of the British nineteenth century, both modeled and disseminated comic consciousness to a nation of alienated readers, promoting an essentially aesthetic vision of social reform

and reconnection of the individual to the collective. I would submit that even at the dark end of the nineteenth century, faced with the ultimate failure of political reform to achieve economic and social equity and improvement in living conditions for the British working classes, Gissing powerfully argues for the ability of the realist novel to continue propagating the positive, liberating potential of comic consciousness. For Gissing, Don Quixote and Whig aesthetics are not dead yet.²

I would like briefly to place Gissing and *The Nether World* in context with four other “condition of England” novels: Edgeworth’s *The Absentee*, Kingsley’s *Yeast*, Gaskell’s *North and South*, and Disraeli’s *Sybil*. Other novels could have been chosen, but I believe Gissing’s contribution to the subgenre can most clearly be seen in relief of these prior texts. Obviously, we have not the space for a detailed exegesis of all the ways in which the texts interact and reflect upon each other, but I want to begin with the simple observation that the progression of almost a century of narratives concerned with social conditions in nineteenth-century Britain reveals an obvious but nonetheless noteworthy “downward” trajectory. Edgeworth’s comedy of manners deals almost exclusively with upper class characters; her representation of Irish lower class life is vivid, but limited to a somewhat paternalistic perspective on the consequences for the tenantry of absentee ownership and the grasping dishonesty of corrupt estate agents. For Edgeworth, the problems of the laboring poor can largely be solved through the symbolic union of an attentive Anglo-Irish landlord and his pure and noble Irish wife, not to mention the employment of a straight-shooting land manager. Kingsley shifts the focus of his narrative to the English laboring poor, although for the most part we experience them only through the eyes of the privileged, superfluous man Lancelot Smith and the intellectualized gamekeeper Tregarva. Like Edgeworth, Kingsley represents no fully realized lower class characters, and his only proposed remedy for their plight is in the hope of some future state of sympathy created externally to existing social and economic conditions.

In *North and South*, however, we begin to “descend,” not only into the English working classes, but into the “master” class of factory owners and new capitalists. Gaskell gives us two imaginative creations, Higgins and Thornton, which enact her allegory of the mutuality of social and moral responsibilities and stand as models of one theory of amelioration of the “two nations” crisis. Her narrative perspective is also increasingly fragmented among competing views of historical and social “reality,” moving us further away from the paternalistic views of Edgeworth and Kingsley. Disraeli

extends Gaskell's pier-glass narrative theory into subclasses within the working class, attacking the concept of characterizing class conflict as a struggle between monoliths even while diagnosing England's general malady as bluntly oppositional: rich and poor. His remedy for the condition of England is specifically aesthetic and performative, involving a concerted effort to rewrite history and to improve social conditions through the critical interplay of visionary leaders and informed audiences. Although each of these writers imagines the nature of and cure for England's ills somewhat differently, they all construct a moral-aesthetic model for individual and social relations based on comic consciousness. The formation of a reflective and projective self-consciousness is always the first step to redefining "Englishness" in a way that narrows the schism between the two nations. In short, English identity must be reshaped as a specific type of comic moral-aesthetic construct before political and economic conditions can be effectively addressed.

In *The Nether World*, the narrative loses contact with the upper classes altogether. In contrast to the other novels, Gissing's *Middlemarch*-like representation of the conditions of the working class in squalid London suburbs is completely lacking in upper class characters.³ As its title implies, the novel, like its predecessors, is as concerned with conditions in the upper world as it is with those in the lower. However, Gissing's narrative perspective is solely a "nether world" point of view; the narrator clearly identifies with his oppressed subjects, eschewing any pretense to objectivity.⁴ But unlike Zola's naturalistic narrative style, for example, which submerges the narrative voice within an exhaustive rendition of even the most lurid and brutal living and working conditions, Gissing maintains the stance of the didactic narrator. *The Nether World* in this important sense is much closer to *Vanity Fair* than it is to *L'Assommoir*, a novel it resembles in subject matter, tone, and ideological position. This is an important distinction to bear in mind because even as the narrative trajectory of the British novel moves "downward" into the working classes, it does not lose its "family" relationship to the previously established novelistic conventions of Scott, Austen and Thackeray.

Something of this observation has been made by Erich Auerbach, who, in his seminal work *Mimesis*, dismisses nineteenth-century British novels for their sentimental and insufficiently "serious" representations of the appalling conditions of the mass of humanity.⁵ Certainly even Auerbach could not fault Gissing, or Hardy for that matter, for shying away from a "serious" representation of the human condition, but I think part of what bothers

him is this didactic Thackerayean narrator, who is always reflecting on the infinite folly and absurdity of human vanity. Gissing and Hardy perpetuate this paradigm of the didactic narrator, even though their subject matter turns exclusively to the representation of the “low” and “tragic” in everyday life.⁶

In my view, Auerbach does not account for the persistent hold on the English novel of the moral-aesthetic philosophical tradition that makes literature an instrument of social and economic improvement through a mutually sympathetic relationship between narrator and reader. English writers from Shaftesbury and Addison to Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Carlyle attempt to cope aesthetically with the epistemological crisis precipitated by the twin evils of extreme skepticism and Hobbesian economic materialism. To resolve this crisis, they construct a moral-aesthetic model of comic consciousness to stand in for the failure of empiricism to fill the epistemological gap between perception and external reality. According to this model, the self consciously experiences its own division and projection onto another in sympathy with the other’s pleasure and pain. The formation of this comic consciousness, which humanizes the individual in genial sympathy with the other, is a response to the simultaneous crisis of irremediable individual isolation on one hand, and complete absorption of the individual into a mechanistic, totalitarian collective on the other. Comic self-identity is thus a moral-aesthetic construct, a conscious fiction, in which the isolated self, unable to truly know anything beyond its own perceptions, may live cooperatively in the world as though it can. The enabled self thereby imagines itself in relation to others and to an external community that exists in a fictional context called “time” and “history.” This imagination is comic because it clearly recognizes, and moreover endorses, an inherently incongruous and paradoxical conception of “reality” as a story, a moral-aesthetic decision (in the face of all facts to the contrary) to live in accordance with a literary narrative. The voice of the didactic narrator of the British novel never allows us to forget this model, even in a novel as close to “naturalism” as *The Nether World*.⁷

To put it another way, Auerbach fails to understand the “seriousness” of comic theory. It is not that the nineteenth-century English novel is inconsiderate of the tragic plight of the economically oppressed, but that it is engaging fundamental epistemological and ideological questions at their very level of formation. The novel attempts no less than to restructure consciousness – and British self-identity along with it. The purpose of this restructuring is to help transform the suffering of the economically oppressed,

not simply by representing them and evoking the pity and sympathy of the privileged classes, but by effecting the comic self-division in each individual necessary to secure real, permanent changes in those conditions. For Auerbach, it seems, realism is an objective matter capable of scientific determination and verification, but even he characterizes it in aesthetic terms when he speaks of realism as involving the serious representation of the “tragic” elements of everyday human life. By comprehending reality as a structure of consciousness informed and in part created by aesthetic forms, however, English novelists not only take a surprisingly “modern” view of the relationship between mind and matter. They take very seriously indeed the responsibility for both the conditions they seek to alter and the moral consequences of their art.

There is another important aspect in which *The Nether World* in particular challenges Auerbach’s conclusions about the British novel. In its relentless focus on “low” life, Gissing’s text returns in a sense to the conventional subject matter of comedy. The “downward” trajectory of the condition of England narratives refers to their increasing commitment to representing the lives of those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, but it might also refer to their descent in terms of the *literary* hierarchy established by Aristotelian aesthetic theory.⁸ Comedy’s association in classical theory with the representation of the ordinary, everyday life of the lower classes is powerfully reflected in *The Nether World*. The text literally rings with the sound of Hobbesian laughter and derision, as base and animalistic schemers attempt to dominate, ridicule, and ultimately destroy their competitors for food, love, and social position.⁹ We find that, even in the nether world, class distinctions not only exist, but are aggressively and savagely enforced, often with the tool of the laughter of superiority.¹⁰ For example, in Chapter 12, entitled “Io Saturnalia,” Bob Hewett’s and Pennyloaf Candy’s marriage and honeymoon excursion to a working-class carnival at the Crystal Palace are disrupted by this unremitting sense of class conflict. “Even as a young man of good birth has been known to enjoy a subtle self-flattery in the thought that he graciously bestows his name upon a maiden who, to all intents and purposes, may be said never to have been born at all, so did Bob Hewett feel when he put a ring upon the scrubby finger of Pennyloaf. Proudly conscious was Bob that he had ‘married beneath him’ – conscious also that Clem Peckover was gnawing her lips in rage” (p. 104). Bob overcomes Pennyloaf’s resistance to the marriage on the grounds of social difference with a laugh of “contemptuous defiance. He carried his point, and now he was going to spend his wedding-

day at the Crystal Palace – choosing that resort because he knew Clem would be there, and Jack Bartley, and Suke Jollop, and many another acquaintance, before whom he was resolved to make display of magnanimity” (p. 105).¹¹

The outcome of this wedding-day excursion (and the marriage itself) is predictably disastrous. Bob becomes drunk, and when Jack “uttered a phrase of stinging sarcasm with reference to Pennyloaf’s red feather [...] Bob smote him exactly between the eyes” (p. 108). Bob dances with other women “and whirls round the six-foot circle with a laugh of triumph” (p. 111). When the distressed Pennyloaf is finally able to drag the besotted Bob away from the fracas, Clem is waiting with a vile practical joke: “Just as they issue from the station Pennyloaf feels herself bespattered from head to foot with some kind of fluid ; turning, she is aware that all her enemies have squirts in their hands, and are preparing for a second discharge of filthy water. Anguish for the ruin of her dress overcomes all other fear ; she calls upon Bob to defend her” (p. 112). In the ensuing brawl, Bob and Jack “amid a press of delighted spectators, swelled by people just turned out of the public-houses [...] fought like wild animals. Nor were they the only combatants. Exasperated by the certainty that her hat and dolman were ruined, Pennyloaf flew with erected nails at Clem Peckover. It was just what the latter desired” (p. 112). This scene is a formal comedy, a scatological farce in miniature, in which the common vices and vanities of lower-class characters are pitted against one another, culminating in entertaining, but essentially harmless, fisticuffs – a kind of Punch and Judy performance. The scene ends with Bob snoring in drunken slumber, and Pennyloaf “thinking all the time that on the morrow it would be necessary to pawn her wedding-ring” (p. 113).

In formal comedy this scene functions to objectify the comic characters, emphasizing their peculiar “humors” and stereotyping them in terms of their most prominent vices. The archetypal treatment of “low” life distances the audience from the subject matter, allowing the audience to laugh in the security of its own superiority at the moral defects depicted on the stage. In the cathartic laughter provoked by comic objectification, the audience may theoretically excise its own “humors” and anti-social vices, creating a community of laughers bound by shared moral-aesthetic values. At the same time, however, the moral-aesthetic standards enforced by this type of formal comedy tend to exclude the objectified class, to deny its members any capacity for more elevated “human” sentiments. It is interesting that Gis-sing plays this scene to a presumably upper-class

audience, as if to confirm that audience's own Hobbesian superiority to the predictable, stereotypical immorality of the lower classes. He even writes the scene with appropriate humorous irony to emphasize Clem's wild jealousy, Pennyloaf's absurd vanity, and Bob's affectation of generosity in patronizing his pathetic bride, evoking the same type of cathartic laughter and social bonding influence on his audience. But, as we discover as the narrative progresses, this is no conventional comedy at all. Rather than objectifying working-class characters, Gissing invests them with a humanity far beyond the scope of the comedy of (im)moral archetypes. Bob's fall from relative respectability into crime and guilt is represented as a series of incremental moral compromises, much as Eliot depicts Lydgate's descent from idealism to disillusion in *Middlemarch*.¹² Pennyloaf's degraded life and ultimate redemption under the influence of Jane Snowdon are represented with a pathos and dignity that belie her characterization as "a maiden who [...] may be said never to have been born at all." And the depth of Clem's vicious animalism, which is fully realized in her scheme to kill her husband and poison her abusive mother, transcends any formal comedic treatment of the vice of "pride."

By humanizing the objects of Hobbesian derision in this manner, Gissing effects a radical restructuring of the conventions of formal comedy. Upon rereading the Saturnalia scene in the context of the narrative as a whole, one's laughter ceases to be of a Hobbesian nature. The cathartic, objectifying effect of the scene is suddenly and violently reversed; the Hobbesian laughs are no longer secure in their fortresses of moral superiority. This reversal is not solely a function of an increased sympathy with the suffering of the poor, who are represented not as moral types but as fully dimensional, individuated characters worthy of pity and fellow-feeling. Rather, the formal comic nature of the scene recoils back on the audience, creating an internalizing, instead of a cathartic, effect. What I mean by "internalizing effect" is that the audience must confront its own laughter in terms of the comic object's paradoxical position as a subjective entity. In an important sense, the laughter faces not an objectified, one-dimensional representation of an abstract moral idea, but a projection of the laughter's own sublimated fears and desires – the fear of ridicule, the anxiety of material want, the desire for domination and exultation over a fallen enemy. From this perspective, one can see the full implications of Gissing's representation of the lower classes as infected by the same hypocrisies and vanities of the upper. It is not merely that, in Thackeray's parlance in *Vanity Fair*, "human nature" is essentially uniform, and that each

individual must simply look into a mirror and see embodied there the collected wisdom and folly of the whole race, although there is certainly an element of that consciousness here. It is more accurate to say that the narrative imagines Hobbesian laughter as a self-reflexive, self-protective act, engendered at the level of the survival instinct itself. For Gissing, the “nether world” is one of animalistic, Darwinian darkness, in which basic instincts war incessantly with the moral-aesthetic fictions of culture.¹³ Even more emphatically than Gaskell, who likewise wrestles with a form of biological determinism that must be countered and overcome by a moral-aesthetic model of human relations, Gissing sets the standard of human nature at a radical, pre-evolutionary stage and suggests that the *only* thing that can save us from that nature is our moral-aesthetic fictions.¹⁴ The construction of those fictions can only be carried out by those who internalize their Hobbesian laughter and accept full responsibility for their savage instincts and sub-conscious motives.

An adumbration of this model emerges at the very center of Gissing’s Saturnalian debauch, when Bob and Pennyloaf happen upon a band concert. The narrative describes the musical interlude as a kind of lacunae, a serene moment of spiritual elevation within the basest material environment imaginable: “Here at length was quietness, intermission of folly and brutality. Bob became another man as he stood and listened. He looked with kindness into Pennyloaf’s pale, weary face, and his arm stole about her waist to support her. Ha ! Pennyloaf was happy !” (Chapter 12, p. 109). This moment of “quietness” and geniality leads the narrator to reflect didactically:

Well, as everyone must needs have his panacea for the ills of society, let me inform you of mine. To humanise the multitude two things are necessary – two things of the simplest kind conceivable. In the first place, you must effect an entire change of economic conditions: a preliminary step of which every tyro will recognise the easiness ; then you must bring to bear on the new order of things the constant influence of music. Does not the prescription recommend itself ? It is jesting in earnest. For, work as you will, there is no chance of a new and better world until the old be utterly destroyed. Destroy, sweep away, prepare the ground ; then shall music the holy, music the civiliser, breathe over the renewed earth, and with Orphean magic raise in perfected beauty the towers of the City of Man. (p. 109)

The narrator’s self-deprecating irony emphasizes just how seriously we are to take his prescription of society’s ills. Is this the voice of Erasmian folly, or that of the didactic overweening narrator ?¹⁵ It can certainly be said that by downplaying the legitimacy of his “panacea,” the narrator draws more attention to it. In so doing, he rhetorically marks it as the ironic crux of a

chapter structured as a conventional “low” comedy. The overall farce-like effect of the Saturnalia scene stands in stark contrast to the moral sanctity of this “intermission of folly and brutality” clearly demarcating this brief efflorescence of humanity and heightening its meaning to the text. It should be remembered that Disraeli evokes a similar contrast in the scenes in which Egremont and others hear Sybil singing sacred verses, as does Kingsley when the young laborer regales the crowd at the village revel with his melancholy love lyrics. These moments of musical communication function to freeze narrative time, to suggest a moment of shared transcendent vision even in the midst of deterministic despair.

In the context of formal comedy, they may also serve, as they sometimes do in Shakespeare, to deepen an audience’s emotional response to the comic action by sentimentalizing the lovers’ bond, thereby emphasizing its sanctity and social significance. It is a commonplace that marriage is the primary vehicle by which dramatic comedy revalidates disrupted family relations and restores social order, and musical lacunae within the comic drama stand in for the underlying, unnarratable welter of individual desires that constitute the marriage bond. But at the same time it represents moments of tranquil equilibrium, comedy likewise recognizes that such moments endure for only an instant; Pennyloaf’s happiness, as does the happiness of all brides, is fleeting. As soon as the music ends, the crush and awfulness of life rushes back in. Deformed by the conditions in which they live and toil, the women pass arm-in-arm with their equally degraded men: “They are pretty, so many of these girls, delicate of feature, graceful did but their slavery allow them natural development; and the heart sinks as one sees them side by side with the men who are to be their husbands” (p. 110). Bob’s subsequent treatment of his wife passes from benign neglect to physical abuse. He even plots with Clem to kill Pennyloaf and her children, although he ultimately shrinks from carrying out the murders. The musical idyll within the low comic farce turns out to be a “jest in earnest,” the cruel joke of an economic system that offers a moral-aesthetic model of happiness without really meaning it.

The term “jest in earnest” illuminates in another way the paradox inherent in Gissing’s comic treatment of the nether world. Low comedy of the sort Gissing imitates in the Saturnalia chapter appears to assume an *economic* structure that objectifies its comic subjects. In other words, it is not the comic form itself that creates these literary archetypes, but the economic conditions that determine how particular cultural products are manufactured. Consequently, the narrative calls first for “an entire change in

economic conditions” ; moral-aesthetic fictions of happiness alone, such as those constructed by the beauty and sublimity of music, cannot transform material “reality” and effect needed economic and social changes until the means of cultural production themselves are transformed. While the narrator does not specify the means by which the “old world” must be destroyed, he implores that a fundamental change in the relations between capital and labor must somehow be effected. If that is the case, and economic equality is the necessary prerequisite for individual and collective happiness, “music the civiliser” then becomes the basis for renewed individual and social relations. Again, while it is unclear precisely how music achieves this civilizing effect, the narrator implies that it somehow precludes or neutralizes base, instinctual fears and desires, permanently suspending them in an ethereal region of infinite sensibility. Paradise, the perfected beauty of the “City of Man,” is thus a purely aesthetic condition (“Orphean magic”), very much like Augustine’s City of God, Bunyan’s Land of Beulah, or Blake’s Jerusalem. Yet the narrator recognizes that this transcendent vision is a paradoxical “jest in earnest,” a joke intended to be taken seriously. How are we meant to interpret this “serious joke” ? Is the narrator parodying the didactic narrative convention, like Thackeray’s theater manager manipulating the play ? Does he imply that the narrative itself is a deception, a false construct, determined and produced by a corrupt economic system and not to be believed ? Is the “realist” narrative tradition, as it has been bequeathed to Gissing, part of the “old world” that must be destroyed in order to clear the way for an aesthetic form that transcends that narrative tradition ? Or is the “jest in earnest”, the serious joke, a call for the comic as a basis for restructuring social and economic relations in a way that lays a foundation for the perfected City of Man ?

Two scenes in the novel bear significantly on these questions. In the first, Clem and Bob are conspiring to acquire Michael Snowdon’s wealth. The plot involves murdering both Clem’s husband, Snowdon’s son Joseph, and Joseph’s daughter Jane (the Peckovers’ former domestic slave), who has been living with her grandfather since his return to England. Clem further suspects that Sidney Kirkwood is scheming to marry Jane and gain the inheritance. Jane has befriended Pennyloaf, but Bob, motivated by nothing more than the impulse to control, has forbidden his wife to see her. Clem is attempting to convince Bob to change his mind, hoping that Jane will tell Pennyloaf something of value:

She leaned forward on her elbows, and said imperatively, ‘Tell Pennyloaf to make it up with her again.’

‘Why ?’

‘Because I want to know what goes on in Hanover Street. You was a fool to send her away, and you’d ought to have told me about it before now. If they was such friends, I suppose the girl told her lots o’ things. But I expect they see each other just the same. You don’t suppose she does all *you* tell her ?’

‘I’ll bet you what you like she does !’ cried Bob.

Clem glared at him.

‘Oh, you an’ your Pennyloaf ! Likely she tells you the truth. You’re so fond of each other, ain’t you ! Tells you everything, does she ? – and the way you treat her !’

‘Who’s always at me to make me treat her worse still ?’ Bob retorted half angrily, half in expostulation.

‘Well, and so I am, ’cause I hate the name of her ! I’d like to hear as you starve her and her brats half to death. How much money did you give her last week ? Now you just tell me the truth. How much was it ?’

‘How can I remember ? Three or four bob, I s’pose.’

‘Three or four bob !’ she repeated, snarling. ‘Give her one, and make her live all the week on it. Wear her down ! Make her pawn all she has, and go cold !’

Her cheeks were on fire ; her eyes started in the fury of jealousy ; she set her teeth together.

‘I’d better do for her altogether,’ said Bob, with an evil grin.

Clem looked at him, without speaking ; kept her gaze on him ; then she said in a thick voice:

‘There’s many a true word said in joke.’ (p. 261)

The second scene occurs late in the novel between Kirkwood and Clara, whose frantic desire to escape the poverty and sameness of Clerkenwell leads her to attempt a career in the theater, which ends disastrously when a rival actress douses her with vitriol.¹⁶ Kirkwood, whom Clara once refused, feels partly responsible for her disfigurement and again offers to marry her. Believing the marriage to be her only exit from a lifetime of seclusion in a squalid tenement with her father and three siblings, she accepts Kirkwood, who undertakes the support of the entire Hewett family. Their continued struggle with poverty plunges Clara into depression.¹⁷ Lamenting her blasted hopes, she wishes for death and blames Kirkwood for marrying her instead of Jane Snowdon:

‘Clara ! Clara ! When you speak like that, I could almost believe you are really mad. For Heaven’s sake, think what you are saying ! Suppose I were to reproach you with having consented to marry me ? I would rather die than let such a word pass my lips – but suppose you heard me speaking to you like this ?’

She drew a deep sigh, and let her hands fall. Sidney continued in quite another voice:

‘It’s one of the hardest things I have to bear, that I can’t make your life pleasanter. Of course you need change ; I know it only too well. You and I ought to have

our holiday at this time of the year, like other people. I fancy I should like to go into the country myself ; Clerkenwell isn't such a beautiful place that one can be content

to go there day after day, year after year, without variety. But we have no money. Suffer as we may, there's no help for it – because we have no money. Lives may be wasted – worse, far worse than wasted – just because there is no money. At this moment a whole world of men and women is in pain and sorrow – because they have no money. How often have we said that ? The world is made so ; everything has to be bought with money.'

"You find it easier to bear than I do.'

'Yes ; I find it easier. I am stronger-bodied, and at all events I have some variety, whilst you have none. I know it. If I could take your share of the burden, how gladly I'd do so ! If I could take your suffering upon myself, you shouldn't be unhappy for another minute. But that is another impossible thing. People who are fortunate in life may ask each day what they *can* do ; we have always to remind ourselves what we *can't*.'

'You take a pleasure in repeating such things ; it shows how little you feel them.'

'It shows how I have taken to heart the truth of them.' (p. 377)

The scene concludes with Kirkwood imploring Clara to listen to his words: "“They may be only words, but if I have no power to move you with my words, then our life has come to utter ruin, and I don't know what dreadful things lie before us”" (p. 378). To Sidney those words become everything, the basis for their humanity, both the form and content of their mutual bond: "“Only one word – only one promise [...] We are husband and wife, Clara, and we must be kind to each other. We are not going to be like the poor creatures who let their misery degrade them. We are both too proud for that – what ? We can think and express our thoughts ; we can speak to each other's minds and hearts. Don't let us be beaten !”" (p. 379) He requests Clara to spend the following Sunday reading to her and her father: "“When they go out in the morning, you shall read to father and me – read as you know how to, so much better than I can. What ? Was that really a smile ?”:

'Let me go, Sidney. Oh, I'm tired, I'm tired !'

'And the promise ?'

'I'll do my best. It won't last long, but I'll try.'

'Thank you, dear.'

'No,' she replied, despondently. 'It's I that ought to thank you. But I never shall – never. I only understand you now and then – just for an hour – and all the selfishness comes back again. It'll be the same till I'm dead.'

He put out the lamp and followed her upstairs. His limbs ached ; he could scarcely drag one leg after the other. Never mind ; the battle was gained once more. (p. 379).

I have rendered these parallel scenes at such great length in order to capture something of the narrative's extraordinary emphasis on the performative nature of the word in a world of corrupt narratives. In the first instance, Clem and Bob indulge their savage desire for money in speculation over the possible deaths of those who stand between them and Snowdon's wealth. As Clem unfolds her plot, her own narrative, she induces Bob to "joke" about killing Pennyloaf and the children. Her chilling acknowledgment of the truth imbedded in jokes – jests in earnest – recalls us to the narrative's formal comedic treatment of low life as distant and objectified. The laugh is now on the Hobbesian laughers, who once laughed at their own sublimated vices but are now forced to swallow them whole. The relatively harmless comedy of the Saturnalia, of the holiday from everyday life, is now playing out *in* everyday life. The violence is real; the codes of collective conduct, the narratives by which we govern individual and social relations, have been corrupted by the material conditions under which those narratives have been produced.¹⁸ Ironically, Bob, who shies away from the implications of the joke and later dies after being injured in guilty flight from the police, maintains a faith in the joke's fictive nature and in the legitimacy of the corrupt social codes Clem's discourse exposes. Clem, on the other hand, fully internalizes the comedic role thrust upon her, ultimately poisoning her mother after the frustration of her schemes. In short, Clem is a kind of comic monster, the product of a malevolent aesthetic in which "low" characters become sites for disposing the "negative" waste emotions of the upper classes. She herself is a "jest in earnest," a serious joke that fully realizes the social implications of Aristotelian and Hobbesian comedy.

While Clem's and Bob's exchange embodies a corrupt comic aesthetic, Kirkwood's and Clara's searing dialogue purifies that aesthetic and attempts to make it serviceable in an inequitable material world. Although the narrator's City of Man, in which music humanizes individuals already freed from economic hardship, may never be attained, the condition of England may nevertheless be transformed a little at a time between individuals who can "speak to each other's minds and hearts."¹⁹ Instead of finding truth in a joke, Kirkwood finds it in the direct correlation between words and hope, a reunification of the letter and the spirit.²⁰ Clara understands that such moments of reunification, like the musical interlude at the Crystal Palace, can achieve only a temporary peace, until "all the selfishness comes back again." Like the narrator in Chapter 12, Kirkwood recognizes that money is the great equalizer; economic equity must precede general social improvement, the amelioration of the "pain and sorrow" of a "whole world

of men and women.” Yet, for both the narrator and Kirkwood, real paradise is only attainable by way of an aesthetic understanding of the relationship between words and the conditions and emotions they clumsily signify. Selfishness will always rush back in, even if everyone is equally materially comfortable ; otherwise there would be no need for music or for words.

For Kirkwood, the truth of the joke is that a sympathetic, mutually formative bond – the comic consciousness, the bond formal comedy denies – is in all events our only hedge against Hobbesian selfishness and superiority. While political and economic reform must be achieved, it is no panacea ; only an aesthetic remedy can achieve that. Kirkwood’s remedy is Addisonian in nature, deeply comic, manifested and validated by Clara’s bare hint of a smile. It is moreover a matter of narrative, of words, of the fictions we tell one another to express our loves and anxieties. What can corrupt can likewise heal. The formal comedy of the Saturnalia, which fictionally stands in for the oppressive economic regime that produces it, is not without value after all. It can yet reveal the true nature of Hobbesian laughter, the awful truth of a joke, and transform derisive laughers into chastened, humanized life-battlers. Even at the turn of the new century, Cervantes’ don lives on in the British novel.

¹See note 6 for a brief summary of the critical debate surrounding Gissing’s place in the nineteenth-century British literary canon.

²Paulson and Tave are the two leading proponents of the comic basis of eighteenth-century Whig aesthetics. See especially Paulson, chapters 1 and 3.

³With respect to Gissing’s breadth of social representation in the novel, Keating notes that Gissing’s “extreme sensitivity to class distinctions made it possible for him to present in his novels a wider cross section of lower-class society than any other English novelist” (p. 72). See also Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, p. 112.

⁴On Gissing’s well-documented ambivalence about the working class, see Keating (p. 55) and Sloan (p. 11).

⁵See Auerbach at pp. 491-92.

⁶Gissing’s place in the nineteenth-century realist tradition is the subject of critical debate. John Sloan tends to locate his fiction toward the naturalistic end of the spectrum: “Readers have often commented on the defeatist nature of Gissing’s critique of late-Victorian society. They refer specifically to his static and finally fatalistic vision of human misery and oppression, as well as to the impotence of his absolute distinction between culture and progress. Yet Gissing’s subversion of the Romantic structure of the earlier Victorian novel, with its essentially moral solution to the problem of personal and social settlement, is in another respect uniquely effective. For it results in an image of permanent struggle that does not attempt to harlequinise or to colour romantically the harsh realities of lower-class life. In the grouping of characters about some determining influence or force, Gissing’s best novels belong, as Wells suggested, to the more ‘impersonal type of structure’ found in the works of the Continental masters. [...] The creation in these works of vivid intellectual types fretfully immersed in the struggles of modern urban life constitutes Gissing’s major contribution to

the English novel. It is one which closely links his works in a unique way to the traditions of the great European realists” (p. 11). Sloan goes on to argue that Gissing both rejects the “idealist connection between ‘human’ values and existing society found in the English novel of the classic realist period” and “avoids the tendency of the indigenous English novel of the late-Victorian period and after to rest on a merely external, self-satisfied critique of bourgeois conventionality” (p. 11). However, in her reading of Gissing’s early novel *The Unclassed*, Constance Harsh insists that Gissing explores the limits of Zolaesque naturalism, only to fall back on the English novel’s “socially salvific role”: “Despite his intellectual pessimism, Gissing ultimately embraces an essentially Arnoldian view of art reconcilable with the literary critics’ hope for literature” (p. 919). See also Korg, who notes that Gissing rejected Zola’s scientific method and that naturalism illegitimizes personal expression (“George Gissing: Humanist in Exile,” pp. 267-68). Korg likewise places Gissing squarely in the nineteenth-century realist tradition, from Dickens, Disraeli, and Gaskell to Meredith and George Eliot (p. 270).

⁷On the complex, patrilineal relationship between Dickens and Gissing, see especially Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, Chapter 1. This connection in part accounts for Gissing’s vestigial sense of the novel as a moral-aesthetic construct for structuring consciousness, as well as for his focus on London, urban life as the site of his cultural work. However, for a contrary view of Gissing’s continued faith in the kind of sympathetic, audience-identified realism practiced by Dickens, see Arata. He reads Gissing as inscribing a rhetoric of alienation into the novel, rejecting classical realism’s possibilities for social renewal and individual improvement.

⁸On Gissing’s “sociological” interest in representing the working-class urban culture of London in a kind of anti-Dickensian narrative devoid of picturesque animation, see Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, Chapter 3, and Poole.

⁹Donnelly notices this as well: “There is [in *The Nether World*] surprising order amidst a disorder redolent of Hobbes, for in the nether world there are only force and matter and anarchy as each character pursues his own self-interest in blind collision with others. [...] Savagery and pessimism were poured into the book. There is not a single character from an ideal ‘outside’ world, and therefore there is not a single example of the author’s duping himself as he had so often done. For this reason, and for the reasons of unity and slashing realism, the novel must rank as one of Gissing’s best” (p. 118). While Donnelly’s autobiographical criticism and formalist assumptions seem a bit dated to-day, her work nevertheless constituted a major reevaluation of Gissing that continues to influence Gissing criticism today. For “classic” Gissing criticism, see Swinnerton.

¹⁰On the nether world slum as an inescapable trap, see Keating, pp. 83-85. Like Sloan, however, Keating contends that the characters are entrapped not only by external social and economic conditions, but by their internalization of those conditions as a “natural” condition.

¹¹Sloan points to this scene as an example of “those exaggerated representations of working-class life and character which have always been the stock-in-trade of English writers” (p. 76). He notes further that the scene indicates that Gissing’s classical allusions speak to an educated reader, not to the working class; the scene “also measures a distance and enforces a standard. The voice of cultural protest in this case may be fundamentally irrational and defeatist, given the novel’s Social Darwinian vision of absolute struggle as the law of life; but more than this, it becomes a means of evading the duplicity of ambiguity of its own contradictory moralism and self-exemption” (pp. 77-78). Here Gissing’s cultural prejudices are criticized.

¹²Similarly Arata compares another of Gissing's characters to Lydgate, Richard Mutimer in *Demos* (pp. 38-39). However, Arata argues, "Whereas the dark places of Dr. Lydgate's psyche exist so that they may be illuminated by George Eliot's calm intelligence, Mutimer's ignorance elicits little more from Gissing than baffled commiseration. The novelist can only indicate the character's plight, he cannot relieve it" (p. 39).

¹³See Halperin's biographical essay on the origins of this "exile" theme in Gissing's work. See also Grylls, who characterizes Gissing's concept of exile as a "misalignment between poverty and intellect" (p. 115).

¹⁴Francis suggests that Gissing's determinism was informed by contemporary psychological theories holding that human character is determined by heredity, environment, and temperament, yet he declines to label Gissing a "determinist": "He does not over-simplify the theory of environmental influences, but he makes full allowance for it in his psychology. Nor is his handling of the theory so mechanical as this discussion might suggest; he did not write an 'experimental novel,' but sees his characters as inseparable parts of their environments" (p. 89). See also Grylls, who argues that Gissing's work is fundamentally informed by pessimism (Chapter 1).

¹⁵Critics have variously interpreted this well-known passage. Arata has recently read it as bitter irony, an "apocalyptic" form of despair (p. 43). Korg, on the other hand, reads it as decidedly unironic, as an unflinching testament to his deterministic fatalism, his sense that "even the most energetic reforming efforts could not hope to eliminate conditions that were a part of the fundamental order of the universe" (*George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, p. 116). And Donnelly bases her characterization of Gissing as a "grave comedian" on this passage, arguing that Gissing rejects both tragic and comic discourses in favor of a "wry smile and dry tears" (p. 221).

¹⁶On Clara as a parody of the Romantic tradition of the veiled woman "whose danger to male watchers is proportional to the power of the secrets they hide," see Arata, pp. 38-39. Here Clara's veil only "emphasizes the absence of meaning. [...] There is literally nothing on Clara's face to 'read'" (p. 40). I would argue that the text accords Clara something more than that, although Clara's depression is synonymous with the narrative's crushing sense of the material present, which squeezes out any idealization, or even mystification of human feeling.

¹⁷For Poole, this depression is thematic and identifies the urban slum with death (pp. 88-89).

¹⁸As Sloan aptly puts it, "Bondage in the nether world is not simply external but psychological" (p. 80). Savagery in this world is not attributable solely to material conditions, but to self-defensive strategies that lead to the adoption of the same "acquisitive and brutal forces of an inhuman system. The roots of defiance and irrational self-will are located throughout the novel in frustrated energy and a thwarted sense of personal worth" (p. 79). I likewise read this "frustrated energy" and "irrational self-will" in the novel's Hobbesian laughter.

¹⁹On Gissing's intense encounter with Comte's positivist "Religion of Humanity" in the early 1880s, see T. R. Wright. For Wright, *The Nether World* reflects Gissing's lingering faith in Comte's teaching (p. 14).

²⁰As we have seen, critical opinion differs on whether Gissing allows any release from his fatalistic vision. As I do, Keating finds some redemptive possibility in Kirkwood's rejection of Social Darwinism: "Although *The Nether World* presents a bleak picture of working-class life, in the response of Sidney Kirkwood there is established a sense of dignity which prevents pessimism from becoming despair or hysteria" (p. 91). See also Korg,

who argues that characters such as Kirkwood “have somehow managed to preserve their better instincts amid the dark energies of industrial civilization. [...] Their existence does not mean that poverty encourages excellent human qualities, but rather that the anomalous arrangements of modern society are capable of producing anomalous results by placing people in environments where they do not belong” (“George Gissing: Humanist in Exile,” p. 241). However, Korg ultimately concludes that Gissing’s fatalism sees no way out of the deterministic world his characters inhabit. Selig finds that in Sidney and Clara, “the exceptional working-class heroine and hero preserve, in muted form, traces of Gissing’s earlier idealism: a love of art, an urge toward philanthropy, a belief in the perfect mate. Here, though, idealism turns into a handicap of the sensitive, hobbling them from competition among degraded slum dwellers for a few petty gains” (p. 33). Poole argues that “despite the restrictions of Gissing’s language, his ways of recording and judging, there survives this desire to discover the human reality behind the dehumanised appearance, the discovery that can alone redeem and transform the waste land” (102). Finally, Grylls holds that the “paradox” of Gissing is the conflict between his relentless pessimism and the thematic content of his novels: “Strangely for an author who believes that plans founder, that optimism usually correlates with crassness, that passion is most often a source of pain, Gissing believes in effort and endeavour, in striving, persistence and determination. The commitment to pessimism coexists with belief in will power” (p. 6). However, Grylls finds no such basis for optimism in *The Nether World* itself; it is “the most pessimistic as well as the most powerful of Gissing’s proletarian novels” (p. 48). The only positives left are “individual acts of kindness performed in a purely domestic context by Sidney Kirkwood and Jane Snowdon, who meet every year at old Snowdon’s grave” (p. 53).

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The Fiction of Class at the *Fin de Siècle*: Walter Besant and George Gissing

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[This paper was read at the 2001 Midwest MLA in Cleveland]

In his book *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, P. J. Keating writes:

In the eighties, the two writers most associated with the novel of working-class life were Walter Besant and George Gissing. The first was immensely popular, his best-selling novels widely discussed and influential in serving the cause of philanthropic schemes [...]. The other [Gissing] was almost entirely ignored by the general reading public, and although his novels were praised by a small group of London intellectuals, [...] they appear to have had little practical or literary influence.¹

Yet he claims, "Gissing was one of the best working-class novelists of the nineteenth century, Walter Besant one of the worst" (*Working Classes*, p. 103). While critics like Keating have judged Gissing more *artistically* successful than Besant, they have judged Besant more *politically* successful than Gissing. Ostensibly Besant worked for the betterment of the poor and

believed in their potential for improvement, while Gissing seemed to be disparaging the poor in portraying them “warts and all.”

As proof of the practical political effectiveness of his work, Besant could point to the bricks and mortar of the People’s Palace,² a cultural center built in the East End that was based on an idea in his 1882 novel *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*. However, this paper argues that while apparently evincing empathy with the poor, the world-view of Besant’s novels denies the working-classes their own reality. Besant’s novels attempt to erase social class differences, depicting the poor as if they are simply awaiting the opportunity to emulate the middle classes ; his novels do not seek to change the system but simply to uphold middle-class values and to make his middle-class readers feel safe. Gissing undermines that world-view: his apparent lack of sympathy for the poor noted by critics is an insistence not only on the fact that inequalities exist, but that the working classes have a culture and a way of being all their own. Gissing denied writing with a philanthropic goal, but his unsettling view of the class system, and his condemnation of the middle-class view held by writers such as Besant, was in many ways more provocative and therefore more politically useful.

The London poor became the focus of much political and literary activity in the 1880s when Besant and Gissing were writing their slum novels. Charles Booth’s monumental study of the conditions of the London poor, which began as a study of the East End and Hackney, eventually filled seventeen volumes. Booth’s research revealed that thirty-seven per cent of the population of East London and Hackney lived below what he had designated as the line of poverty, while more than fourteen per cent were “very poor.” Booth’s study, along with others, made it clear to the middle classes that despite reforms, and despite the apparent prosperity of the country as a whole, a great many Londoners were living in appalling conditions.

Rising unemployment resulted in mass marches and strikes in the 1880s, and there was a series of violent events in England and elsewhere including the assassination of the Czar and of President Garfield in 1881, the Phoenix Park murders in 1882, dynamite explosions in the London Underground in 1883, and the bomb explosion in the House of Commons in 1885. Despite the fact that most of the violence in London was connected to the Irish Question, these events along with many other terrorist attacks successful and unsuccessful, became connected in newspaper rhetoric and in the public mind with the problem of poverty and the growing discontent of the working classes.

And it is this fear of some kind of revolution by the underclasses brewing in Stepney and Whitechapel that Walter Besant's novelistic solutions work to lessen. As Kevin Swafford has so eloquently argued in his 1997 article in *The European Studies Journal*,³ while ostensibly proposing a solution to the growing problem of poverty, Besant's covert purpose in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, a novel set in the East End, was to comfort the inhabitants of the West End, the middle classes, and make them feel safer in the face of the growing unrest.

Besant does this by trying to erase the differences of social class, almost by turning the poor and working classes into middle-class people who simply don't have good clothes. In the in-house journal of the real life People's Palace Besant writes:

Some one wrote a most foolish letter to a paper the other day [...] asking scornfully whether the palace attracted the 'class for which it was intended.' The 'class' ? What class ? what is the attitude of this man's mind towards the People's Palace ? Of course there is no such thing with us as class. When one speaks of the People, one means all the people [...].⁴

Besant's 1886 novel, *Children of Gibeon*, flirts with this idea that all are born equal, that there is no real difference between the classes. It is the story of two girls (one from a rich family and one from a poor) who are brought up as sisters by a wealthy woman and between whom no one can tell the difference. Everyone knows that one of them is from a poor family, but no one – not even the sisters themselves – can guess which one. However, despite this ostensibly liberal view of the class system, Besant's novel cannot help returning to the notion that neatness and cleanliness, and a less vulgar way of dressing the hair, will turn a girl who wanders the streets until midnight into one who imitates middle-class behaviour. Valentine (the wealthy sister) tries to help and befriend Melenda, an East End working-class girl. Melenda, however, is skeptical. She says: "Oh ! what's the use ? [...] Look at your clothes and look at mine" (p. 279).⁵ Melenda is right, of course, for while clothes are merely a surface indication of class, they symbolize much. Undaunted, Valentine responds: "My clothes ! What have clothes to do with it ?" (p. 279). She wants to impress on Melenda that, even if they aren't related by blood, they are sisters under the skin, under their differences in clothes. But interestingly, as soon as Melenda succumbs to Valentine's entreaties and agrees to regard her as a sister, Valentine says: "First, I am going to dress you [...]. Everything has got to be changed [...]" (p. 280). With that she runs off to find clothes of her own for Melenda. Once Melenda has changed her clothes, Valentine says: "Now sit quite

steady, my dear, and I will dress [your hair] for you nicely, so as to hide the nasty fringe” (p. 280). She wants to alter Melenda’s hairstyle so that it looks less vulgar and working-class. Besant, then, while evincing ostensible empathy with the poor, is denying the poor their own culture, their own values. He is colonizing the poor into middle-class values, even middle-class hairstyles.

Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* suggests that exposing the poor and overworked classes to culture will instill them with middle-class ways of behaviour. This novel’s wealthy heroine, like Valentine in *Children of Gibeon*, poses as a working-class girl in the East End for philanthropic reasons. She sets up a radical sewing establishment where the East End girls can work in pleasant conditions ; they are fed well, and even given the opportunity to play tennis during their breaks in the back garden. In the evenings, they are exposed to pleasant music and dancing upstairs. The girls all appreciate this new-found culture which transforms them and they start behaving like middle-class young ladies, with one huge difference, of course: they have to work for their living.

The wealthy heroine, under the name of Miss Kennedy, teams up with the hero, Harry – a man from a poor family who has been raised by a wealthy man, but then who passes as poor. They devise a plan to build what is called a “Palace of Delight” that will be a cultural center for the area, and will be run by the people themselves. By the end of the novel the Palace is unveiled, along with the heroine. She is now revealed as the wealthy philanthropist, Angela Messenger: “It was Miss Kennedy indeed,” the narrator tells us, “but glorified into a great lady” (p. 430).⁶ She marries the hero, who had himself been in the dark as to her identity, and great hope for the future is engendered by this cross-class marriage and by the increased cultural activity now possible in the East End.

At the end of the novel the narrator tells us that “The Palace of Delight is in working order now, and Stepney is already transformed” (p. 435). The people of Stepney have been exposed to “music, dancing, singing, acting, painting, reading, games of skill, games of chance, companionship, cheerfulness, light, warmth, comfort,” “all the things that make the lives of the rich happy” (p. 434), and it has transformed them. And, of course, here’s the rub. While their benefactress has spoken of the Palace as “the property of the people, to be administered and governed by them and them alone” (p. 432), what Besant really has in mind is a place where the people of Stepney will be transformed because they will be imbued with middle-class values and tastes.

As I have observed, the idea from Besant's novel became a reality ; a building called the People's Palace – modeled after the Palace of Delight in his novel – was built on the Mile End Road in East London and was opened by Queen Victoria herself in 1887. It could be claimed, then, that Besant had succeeded, perhaps beyond his own wildest dreams, in the philanthropic purpose of his novel, in seeing his fantasy become a reality, in seeing his fiction become solid fact. But Simon Joyce details in his 1996 article⁷ the sort of problems that arose from attempts at funding the People's Palace. The main problem was, of course, that since it depended on West-End donations it must promote itself as worthy to its West-End contributors. If they did not like it, they would not pay up, and what the middle classes mostly wanted was for the poor and working classes to be educated in middle-class values. So that while, like its fictional counterpart, it was intended to be a space for the people and culture of the East End, it was in fact another instance of paternalism.

As Joyce points out, when writing his *Autobiography* in 1892, Besant's "major complaint [about the real People's Palace] did not concern the new priority which was given to technical education over recreation, but the scaling back of original plans for a Palace library" (p. 531). Joyce writes: "His *Autobiography* laments that the Palace literary club, which he had vigorously promoted through his dual role as [editor of the *Palace Journal*] and honorary society President, 'proved a dead failure'"⁷ (p. 532). "By 1890," says Joyce, "the [Literary Society] had been replaced by a Literary Class, which was still badly attended [...]" (p. 533). Besant's intended influence, then, on the real life People's Palace was an Arnoldian one, and focused on bringing culture, especially literary culture, to the poor people of the East End.

Gissing's novel *Thyrza*, published in 1887, the same year that the People's Palace opened, demolishes the idea that culture brought to the poor by their betters will transform them. While his beautiful eponymous heroine is perhaps unconvincing as a working-class girl, his portrayal of Egremont, the wealthy young man who wants to bring culture to the masses, seems to be a definite swipe at Besant and his Palace of Delight. Egremont says: "What I should like to attempt would be the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanic class" (p. 14).⁸ He goes on: "I believe such men as these have a great part to play in social development – that, in fact *they* may become the great social reformers" (p. 14). But he does not want to address social reform directly ; instead his scheme is to inspire men with a moral ideal through his influence. He says: "It seems to me that if I can get

them to understand what is meant by love of literature, pure and simple, without a thought of political or social purpose [...] I shall be on the way to founding my club of social reformers” (p. 16). So Egremont builds a library in Lambeth and starts giving lectures on literature. Of course, the whole scheme is a failure. The only working-class man who has a true love of books suffers greatly from it since it does not fit in with his working-class lifestyle. He is Thyrsa’s fiancé, and in the end he even loses Thyrsa’s love to Egremont. That wealthy gentleman, after having caused her to love him, goes off to America where his ardour for her cools and he forgets her. Incidentally, while he is there the only author he reads is Whitman. Whether that has anything to do with his cooling ardour or not we are not told! Gissing’s novel, then, offers no hope for such fanciful Arnoldian schemes.

It is significant that in this decade which saw the growing class divisions embodied in the polarization of London between East and West End, Gissing’s slums are *not* East End ones – he tries to interrupt the East/West binary. While *Thyrza* is set in Lambeth, his best slum novel, *The Nether World*, published in 1889, takes place in Clerkenwell. This novel displays a bleak vision of the working classes, and indeed of all political, religious or philanthropic solutions to their problems. Just as with Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions*, a wedding takes place in Gissing’s novel. This time the happy couple consists of Bob Hewett, a working-class man, and Pennyloaf, who is the daughter of a battered, alcoholic woman, and therefore lower on the social ladder than Bob. The pair get married on the August Bank Holiday and heads off to the Crystal Palace to enjoy the rest of the day. In what could be seen as the forerunner of the People’s Palace, the Crystal Palace, built in the 1850s, housed a museum of sculpture and pictures. But Gissing apparently sees no hope of transformation for these netherworld folk in their encounter with culture. His narrator, describing the Bank Holiday revelers at the Palace, aligns himself with them – ironically rather than empathetically – by using the first person plural pronoun. He says: “We know not what is meant by beauty or grandeur. Here under the glass roof stand white forms of undraped men and women – casts of antique statues – but we care as little for the glory of art as for that of nature; we have a vague feeling that, for some reason or other, antiquity excuses the indecent, but further than that we do not get” (p. 110).⁹ In a comment typical of those which have earned Gissing his reputation as a prig who despises the poor, the narrator describes the middle-aged women in the crowd. He says: “they are animal, repulsive, absolutely vicious in ugliness [...]” Of the men he

remarks: “four in every six have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust [...] their legs are twisted out of shape by evil conditions of life from birth upwards” (p. 109). These are not people who can be transformed by nice clothes, a different hairdo and some tennis playing. But note that it is their living conditions that Gissing blames. The narrator inter-jects a paragraph of sarcasm that seems wrought by his despair at viewing the scene: “Well, as every one must needs have his panacea for the ills of society, let me inform you of mine,” he says, referring to those other nov-elists, such as Walter Besant, who find easy solutions in their fiction. “In the first place, you must effect an entire change of economic conditions [...] then you must bring to bear on the new order of things the constant influence of music” (p. 109). Here Gissing points a satirical finger at his successful rival, author of that wildly popular novel *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*,¹⁰ which resulted in the building of the People’s Palace.

It must have struck Gissing, an adherent of what he called the “school of strict veracity,” as bitinglly ironic that Besant’s fantasy palace had become a reality. For whereas Besant’s East End fictional working girls, given music and books, and an open space in which to play tennis, will start to imitate their middle-class betters, Gissing’s characters, given an August Bank Holiday filled with the pleasures of the Crystal Palace, will get drunk and brawl – both men and women – even Bob Hewett and Pennyloaf on their wedding day. No wonder then that Gissing’s narrator claims that “there is no chance of a new and better world until the old be utterly destroyed” (p. 109).

In her 1888 article in *Murray’s Magazine* comparing Besant and Gissing,¹¹ Edith Sichel writes: “[The] main difference between them lies in the fact that Mr Gissing looks for salvation from the upper, and Mr Besant from the lower classes” (p. 124). Here, I think, Edith Sichel’s analysis of her two writers *seems* to break down, but in fact, she might be more perceptive than at first appears. Assuming that the majority of readers for both writers [and indeed for Miss Sichel’s article] belong to the middle classes, at first glance it would appear that Besant’s paternalistic message, in fact, urges the better off to help their less fortunate fellows, to provide for them through projects such as the People’s Palace. Philanthropy as insurance against revolution; or, as Swafford calls it, paternalism. And Gissing’s complete pessimism about the possibility of solutions for the enormous problem of poverty from either the church, the legislators or the upper-class philanthropists, suggests that he cannot be looking to the upper classes for help.

But let us look at this again. Besant's stories claim that the poor and working classes must organize themselves and decide what they want, not with a view to revolution, but in a sensible, let's-get-something-done kind of way. Harry Goslett, the hero of *All Sorts and Conditions*, says to the East Enders, "whatever you want done you *must do for yourselves*" (p. 259) "It is not," he tells them, "by setting poor against rich, or by hardening the heart of rich against poor, that you will succeed: it is by independence and by knowledge. All sorts and conditions of men are alike. [...] The time for envy, hatred, and accusations has gone by" (p. 435). He exhorts them not to depend on the West Enders. If Besant's readers are the middle classes, then his message of self-sufficiency for East London, while not seriously expected to admonish the working classes to help themselves, is one that simply helps those in the West End feel less responsible for their fellow Londoners, enables them in fact to disengage themselves. While Gissing's ability to make his readers – also mainly middle-class – feel uncomfortable about their position *vis-à-vis* the class system suggests that, despite his skepticism about any kind of social reform, it is indeed a change which is to be wrought in the middle-class attitude that is the only change possible. He does indeed look to the upper classes, for his attitude towards lower-class Londoners makes it clear that he does not expect much from them.

Edith Sichel's depiction of the conditions under which she imagines Besant and Gissing writing, neatly sums up the difference in the world-view of these writers, and represents also the geographic division between East and West End that had come to symbolize class division in London. She writes:

Mr Besant always seems [...] to be writing – from out of the midst of a cozy haze of blue tobacco-smoke, and in a study adorned by Apollos and Venuses, Michael Angelos and olive-green books [...]. Mr. Gissing, on the contrary, writes from a back-alley reeking with putrid vapours, strewn with blackened orange-peel and resounding with hideous din. (p. 123)

Besant's writing room imagined by Sichel represents the middle-class world-view that Besant brings to his work. His is a world-view comfortably padded by the cultural relics of Western civilization. Besant made forays into the East End and writes of "its wonderful collection of human creatures ; its possibilities ; the romance that lies beneath its monotony" (qtd in Swafford, p. 61). But his was a decidedly West-End world-view. Gissing, by contrast, lived much of his early writing years in the less salubrious parts of London with his wife, an alcoholic prostitute ; he knew those

“back-alleys” well. His writing hours could literally have been spent in the midst of “putrid vapours” and “hideous din,” but this description also figuratively represents the world-view from which Gissing looks at the problem. Gissing’s middle-class readers are certainly not allowed to sit back comfortably in their well-padded West End interiors and view the world safely as though through a stereoscope. As a writer who saw himself creating a fiction “to be judged by the standard of actual experience,”¹² Gissing represents a new world-view, one which can both identify with and judge the working classes, and one which enables the author to unsteady any middle-class assumptions brought to the novel by the reader. And while Gissing may not have been writing with a philanthropic purpose, if he could bring a little of that putrid odour to mix with the haze of blue tobacco-smoke hovering over Besant’s olive-green books, then he had indeed struck a blow for real working-class Londoners.

¹P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 31.

²The main hall of the People’s Palace on Mile End Road was opened by Queen Victoria in June 1887. It was intended as a cultural and recreational facility inspired by the “Palace of Delight” conceived by Angela Messenger and Harry Goslett in Besant’s novel. The University of London’s Queen Mary and Westfield College now stands on the site.

³Kevin R. Swafford, “Walter Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* and the Project of Paternalism in the East End of London,” *The European Studies Journal*, Vol. 14, no. 2 (1997), pp. 57-80.

⁴Quoted on p. 524 of Simon Joyce’s article, “Castles in the Air: The People’s Palace, Cultural Reformism, and the East End Working Class,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 4, Summer (1996), pp. 513-38.

⁵The edition quoted from is the 1895 Chatto & Windus edition.

⁶The pagination is that of the novel published in the Oxford Popular Fiction series, Oxford University Press, 1997, introduced by Helen Small.

⁷See note 4.

⁸*Autobiography of Walter Besant*, New York: Dodd Mead and Co. (1902), p. 245.

⁹*Thyrza: A Tale*, ed. Jacob Korg, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984.

¹⁰*The Nether World*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹¹“Sales of *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, already strong in the first four years after publication, were boosted by the building of the People’s Palace and continued at a rate of over 26,000 per year well into the 1890s. [...] A sixpenny edition eventually appeared in 1897 [...] and by the end of the First World War, the novel had sold well over a quarter of a million copies in Britain, while also going through numerous editions – many of them unauthorized – in the United States,” writes Helen Small in the introduction to the Oxford Popular Fiction edition.

¹²“Two Philanthropic Novelists: Mr Walter Besant and Mr George Gissing,” *Murray’s Magazine*, April 1888, pp. 506-18, as reprinted in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Pierre Coustillas and Colin Partridge, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.

¹³George Gissing, *Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York: Greenberg, 1924), p. 52.

Gissing Interviewed and Remembered

PIERRE COUSTILLAS

Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton, the nineteenth-century American poet, appears nowhere in Gissing's *Collected Letters*; yet she marginally belongs to his world. In January 1999 a letter from her to W. H. Hudson was published in this journal.¹ It showed her enquiring about the mysteries in Gissing's life after she read C. F. G. Masterman's obituary of him in the *Daily News* for 30 December 1903. What did the mysteries consist in? Could Hudson tell her? She wished to know because of her admiration for Gissing's work and because of his friendship with Hudson.

Now in the wake of this valuable discovery made by D. C. H. Shruballs, the Hudson specialist, there come two letters from Hudson to Mrs. Moulton which are also of Gissing interest,² one written about two months after he left for Normandy to join Gabrielle Fleury in early May 1899, the other a couple of months after the posthumous publication of *Will Warburton* in 1905. The second of these letters is interesting mainly on account of the judgment passed by Hudson on three late Gissing novels: it shows not only how hard to please he was, but how limited were his tastes for and understanding of literature in general. The first letter has proved of greater importance because it has helped to solve a serious bibliographical problem raised in a letter from Gissing to Wells which could not be annotated satisfactorily in Volume 7 of the *Collected Letters*. On 21 April 1899 he wrote: "An American interviewer came here to see me the other day. She writes that she is soon going "accross"³ again. Merciful powers! What a time we live in!" With no interviewer's name, no newspaper title and no date of publication available, the quest for the account of the interview was an uphill task, which proved a gentler one after reading Hudson's devastating comment on the article forwarded by Mrs. Moulton in conjunction with a passage from a letter from Gissing to James B. Pinker of 11 September of the same year: "Two or three months ago, the Boston 'Transcript' published some 3 columns of interview with me – the second within a twelve-month."⁴ Once a file of the *Boston Evening Transcript* could be located, the article was easily traced. Entitled "George Gissing at Home," it was pub-

lished on 14 June 1899, p. 16, cols. 4 to 6. To all appearances it was not preserved by Gissing, who doubtless shared Hudson's opinion of it.

It is indeed one of the poorest surveys of his work he ever received from America, and its author, H. M. Carter, is mentioned in none of the many reference works, old or new, in which her name has been sought. Her determination to embellish her subject must have annoyed him when he received her article: it is manifest in the description of Dorking and its surroundings and in the shallow account of Gissing's career, whom she makes seven years older than he was. In one or two cases she may have been slightly misled by Gissing himself. He did not teach for a time in Boston, but in nearby Waltham; nor was he on the point of leaving for Switzerland, but for Paris. For at least a dozen factual errors, however, she alone was responsible. Gissing's temporary home in Dorking was not a "charming little villa." He did not make frequent trips to the south of France and Italy, and none of his books was written there. Such words and phrases as "little colony," "aristocracy," "his village companions at the parish school" ring false and point to ignorance. *Workers in the Dawn* did not meet with comparative success in 1880, etc, etc.

Despite these blemishes, the article is not altogether devoid of interest. The passages about Miss Zakrzewska, Dunne, Meredith, Greenough White and the minor clerks' ludicrous protests against the humorous depiction of them in the recently published *Town Traveller* show what Gissing readily thought of when a well-meaning but poorly qualified American journalist begged for some confidences. May some scholar familiar with the history of the *Boston Evening Transcript* succeed in identifying H. M. Carter. She doubtless visited other English writers during her stay in the home counties. Her contribution at least testifies to the persistent interest of that once leading Boston daily in a novelist whose work did not go unappreciated in New England.

40 S. Luke's Rd W

June 29.99

Dear Mrs Moulton

I have received your p.c. & the printed papers.⁵ Thank you for both. Interviews have but a moderate interest for me. I cannot venture to criticize *yours*, but of the other I can say that the man knows Gissing about as well as he knows the man in the moon, or someone in Mars. How *can* any little superficial glib literary commercial traveller, who trots in & out again, know anybody or anything! Even a woman doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve for any little impudent fussy tom-tit to peck at.

I am just back from the South Downs, where I have been rambling among the villages, & spending my days in remote & silent places – places I like best where “God stands winding his lonely horn.”⁶ I shall I hope be back in that part before many days, & after as Fate orders. You see, I’m a poor man, & can’t work in London, & can only go where I can find some material, & do something to bring the bread & cheese. But if you come to England this summer & will let me know where you are in town or country I hope to be able to pay you a visit.

I was on a visit to poor Gissing at his Dorking home in May,⁷ & now he has gone abroad to live, finding that his health, [two words illegible], requires a bracing mountain air which is not obtainable here.

God bye from your friend

W. H. Hudson

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George Gissing at Home

A Day with the Novelist of Middle-Class England

His House at Dorking – His early Life and Struggles for a Living in Boston – Characteristics of His Studies of Life in London – His Vogue in Paris

[Special Correspondence of the Transcript]

Dorking, May 30.

Time and space do not permit of dwelling here at length on the beauties that envelop the quaint picturesque village of Dorking, with its interesting history. It is a subject alone that might fill volumes. My first impressions, however, were not only that it was English, “as English” in its loveliness and the rural beauties of the little colony nestling among a range of undulating hills, that rise up out of the valley, but that it was also a land flowing with milk and honey.

Skirting the village at one point is a great wall, through which is cut a deep archway, resembling in appearance a fragment of some old Roman defence. Passing beneath this arch overhung with ivy, a narrow secluded avenue is traversed for a short distance and the distinctive aristocratic region is at once entered upon. A steady climb of fifteen minutes had now to be made. Tier upon tier of stately old English residences, surrounded with bright patches of color were visible at intervals on either side the ascent. At times a glimpse of Vermont was suggested, but this was again quickly dispelled as a luxurious bed of old-fashioned wall flowers caught the eyes, the air filled with the odor of the sweet perfume. Furthermore, the illusion vanished at the belt of box-hedge rows outlining the main road and the short avenues leading to private estates.

Nearing the summit of the hill, the horses took a sharp turn to the left, adding new force to their efforts in taking yet a steeper incline. Presently they pulled up panting, while I descended from the coach and presented myself at the door of a charming little villa. A servant conducted me into her master’s private study, where the novelist was seated at his desk busily occupied. Coming towards me, a frank,

honest hand extended in greeting, in a hearty, cheerful voice, he bade me welcome. He was in personal appearance anything but the misanthropical, "weird," "gloomy," "pessimistic" author.

"You have come in time to see me off to Switzerland," he remarked, under the vein of good humor. "That is," he reiterated after a little mischievous pause, "I hope to leave here in a day or two from now."

At first sight, Mr. Gissing might be mistaken for Greek, rather than English. His demeanor, gait, delicate courtesies, all speak somewhat of the classical. Why it should be so, is not easily defined, unless it be his inveterate love of the old masters, so deeply rooted, is but reflected in his own distinct individuality. Whatever it might be, the impression one receives at first glance is that of a Greek poet, instead of the English realist.

In height Mr. Gissing is about six feet, of erect and stately bearing. His figure might be described as athletic, were it not for the evidences of a certain affection of the chest from which he suffers much at times and in consequence of which he is obliged to make frequent trips to the south of France, Italy and other mild climates, where many of his books are written. A mass of brown hair, which is allowed more freedom in length than is usually the custom with men, sweeps backwards from the broad, frank brow. His regularly defined classic features reveal in every line the depth of a scholarly mind.

Drawing his chair a little aside, opposite to where I sat, he sank into an easy, restful position. A steady flow of speech fell from his lips, never stopping, never hesitating for a word to explain his meaning. It was pleasing to listen to his voice, soft and strangely mellow, full of electric magic. Mr. Gissing spoke at length of the great men and women of the day, well known in the literary and scientific world, of everybody and everything, all except himself. It was difficult to lead him to do that. But when at last he did speak of himself, would that the whole world might have heard and followed him in going, bit by bit, through the varied scenes of his eventful life. A restless, romantic youth, he made his first friends while teaching in Boston ; then followed years of hard, bitter struggles for existence in the heart of London, all dwelt upon with such simple frankness. "Ah, yes," he remarked, "It was long before I could live on what my books brought me." "And which of my books do I consider the best?" "They are all pretty bad," he replied, with a smile. "I do not know that I give them much thought after they are written, but perhaps I have more sympathy with 'New Grub Street,' it is more of my own life, you see."

To come face to face thus with the author in his own home, the genial host, a model of child-like simplicity, yet with a certain dignity of manner which is ever paramount, and to hear his ready speech full of sparkling wit, the wonder grows that he managed so gracefully to escape social lionizing.

To all, with the exception of a privileged few, Mr. Gissing denies himself. Those admitted to the circle of his little sanctum are strictly a number of personal friends, scholars like himself. "Heaven forbid that I should ever become a society man," he exclaimed. Between his neighbour, George Meredith, and himself a

strong bond of friendship exists. It is something to hear those two men speak of one another.

Mr. Gissing's correspondence is an extensive one. Communications reach him from all parts of the world, usually flattering epistles concerning his books from people he has never seen or heard but little of. Many such, as may be expected, come from America. Mr. Gissing always welcomes these letters, and, though hard pressed for time, he manages occasionally to answer a few personally. Even Tennessee, it would seem, is ringing with the praises of the London psychological novelist. Foremost among his enthusiastic admirers in that State, is Professor Greenough White of the Sewanee University, who has written some very interesting letters regarding Mr. Gissing's books in many of the leading newspapers.⁸

The mail bag also brings many requests to the author from heads of colleges in England, soliciting the author to lecture before their students. But as Mr. Gissing heartily dislikes publicity of any kind, he regrets much to be obliged to refuse all such flattering invitations. Besides his health does not permit of over-exertion. And all his reserve force is brought into action when he sets to work on one of his books. Mr. Gissing has not much time at disposal wherewith to become much of a "society man," even if he wished it.

As it is, the reading world is impatient with his slowness of production. The men and women who are wont to devour his works with keen appetite are ever on the qui vive for fresh matter from his pen. Strange to say, the very men who condemn him most for his pessimism may often be caught, absorbed, in some volume of Gissing.

George Gissing's skill is best demonstrated in his portrayal of actual life and scenes about him. The characters he introduces in his books are not myths, not mere phantoms. They live. They are side by side with the reader. He hears them speak, and sees them in the street. Again in his descriptions of local characteristics the writer's genius plays in full sway. It generally happens that most large towns and cities possess some leading principle, some ruling influence which the inhabitants residing therein are more or less susceptible to. Thus in "The Ransom of Eve" [*sic*], who has not felt the warmth and gladness of the glorious sunshine in Paris, or lingered once more in idle curiosity before the busy workshops of Dudley, or perhaps you rushed suddenly towards your open window, shutting it down with a bang, so great was the stifling smoke and mist of the old gray manufacturing city of Birmingham. The same may be said in their leading scenes of "The Odd Wom-en," that masterpiece, "In the Year of Jubilee," and in his score of other novels.

True, perhaps, George Gissing's works are not appreciated by the majority, not wholly understood, perhaps. The taste of the general public is not yet fully educated to the new school of literature, any more than it was a few short years ago to the bold impressionistic school of painting, when we stared aghast at such startling revelations of coloring. It may be that George Gissing's works appeal to the more fastidious, to the men who regard such matters with critical eyes and pronounce judgment upon it [them] from a certain standard of literary merit. These are the

men who are responsible for the author's books being ranked as masterpieces. But the day is not far distant when these works will be welcomed, not only by the critical student, but also by the masses. Mr. Gissing has shown in a cordially admiring critical work on Dickens that he was involuntarily the melodramatist, while he himself is strictly the realist:

“And why have I chosen that field for my work ? Because I preferred to take up that which others seemed to have passed by or forgotten.”

From the earliest days of his literary career his aim has been to depict life without garnish or flourish, but just as it really is, keeping strictly to the actual existence of circumstances and surrounding influences. His portion of the world is the upper and lower middle class life of England, and especially of London, which he has made his chief study.

“An instance, now,” he goes on to say in one of his books. “As I came along by Regent's Park, half an hour ago, a man and a girl were walking close in front of me, love-making ; I passed them slowly and heard a good deal of their talk – it was part of the situation that they should pay no heed to a stranger's proximity. Now, such a love-scene as that has absolutely never been written down ; it was entirely decent, yet vulgar to the nth power. Dickens would have made it ludicrous – a gross injustice. Other men who deal with low-class life would perhaps have preferred idealising it – an absurdity. For my own part, I am going to reproduce it verbatim, without one single impertinent suggestion of any point of view save that of honest reporting.”⁹

Mr. Gissing is wholly absorbed in his work. It is to him his chief pleasure and recreation, and it is with reluctance that he lays aside his genial labor for the necessary sojourn on the continent for his health's sake. But little of his time is spent in London. The dull atmosphere and the big, close buildings are too depressing to one of his artistic temperament, whose love for nature is intense. And looking through his study window in front of which stands his large desk, one fully realizes that here in his house on the breast of the Surrey Hills he is surrounded with all that is beautiful and inspiring in nature. A splendid view of the hills whereon the purple and pink haze play so effectually, and of the country around for miles is obtained from this vantage-point. Beneath, in the valley, the streams wind in and out through the trees and rich foliage, while up the slope is wafted the breaths of myriads of fragrant blossoms.

Mr. Gissing is conversant with several languages, and while he reads a great deal of French fiction, yet his tastes are wholly in sympathy with the classics. The old masters never had a more devoted student than he.

In the village of Wakefield, Yorkshire, in 1850 [1857], George Gissing was born. His early education he received with his village companions at the parish school. Later he entered the university at Manchester, where he remained until his father's death. In the meantime, at the age of nineteen, he was obliged to give up his studies and face the world, of which he knew but little. For let it be remarked here that the English youth at nineteen is not endowed with the same amount of

wisdom or assurance as is his American cousin at the same age. As a rule he is diffident and backward. Nevertheless, of a naturally romantic, sanguine temperament, and full of the fire of ambition, the world before him looked rosy-hued.

But what to do or where to turn his steps he scarcely knew. He had no profession. His tastes were somewhat divided, though he leaned strongest toward literature. He looked towards the New World – the brightest picture of all was there. So, for the New World he sailed in 1877, leaving his mother and all his dear friends behind to mourn his absence. At first his struggles in Boston were hard, hopeless at times. Conservative Boston was not disposed to open up its arms to a stranger and a youth at that, so his lot was cast with the ordinary ranks of bread-winners. But as a boy of indomitable will and much strength of mind, he kept above ground, trying first one thing, then another, ever maintaining his own individuality and inborn-pride. He soon found he was not altogether alone in the “cultured city,” as he had learnt it was termed somewhere in his reading. He made many friends among his associates, and wherever he went he was popular. At last his labors were rewarded, and Boston proved all it is catalogued to be. One morning his heart gave a bound with delight as his eyes caught sight of his name in print for the first time. His first literary article was accepted by one of the big daily papers,¹⁰ and his check came at the opportune moment, when the coppers in his inside pocket were very scant. Success followed, not only in Boston, but many of the large cities, where his services were soon in demand, and soon he was supplying short stories for many of the weekly publications all over the country.

Mr. Gissing dwells with the keenest pleasure on his reminiscences of his days in Boston. And furthermore on his “dear good friends” of that city. He recalls one especially of whom he spoke with the greatest deference and esteem, which is but her due. “One of my greatest friends when I was in Boston was Dr. Marie Zakrzewska of Jamaica Plain” (founder of the New England Hospital for Women).¹¹ “Many a pleasant evening I spent at her house,” he remarked. “But,” he went on, his eyes beaming at the happy recollection of his youthful days, “I used to consider her then such a very, very old lady to dare cross the Atlantic as often as she used. She was then about fifty years old, and to my mind in those days it was time at that age to turn the thought to things eternal. She has favored me since those days with the same lively interest in all my work up to a few years ago, when she was silent for a long time. But one morning I found a letter on my desk ; I recognised the handwriting. It was from my old friend, Dr. Zakrzewska, telling me she was coming to England with some friends, and wished me to meet them at the station. ‘Coming to England still ?’ I exclaimed. ‘How many years ago now ? Oh, I am quite an old man, and strange I consider her now to be still comparatively young.’ However, my only fear was lest I should not recognize her after such a long time. I was on hand punctually as the train came into the station, and true enough, I saw her at once in the midst of her companions. I had a very happy day indeed, and, if nothing more, helped her and her friends to find their way about in London.”

At these reminiscences an involuntary question escaped me. "Ah, yes, I understand," he replied with a smile. "You, too, consider me severe upon women. My critics all do, you know. On the contrary, I but reflect the types of women I have made a study of, the upper and lower middle classes. To know these well one must live amongst them. I have. Heaven forbid that I should for a moment classify Dr. Zakrzewska and her sisters of America and England – women of education and good-breeding – to the types as a rule I introduce my readers to."

Nevertheless, notwithstanding his success in the new world and his encouraging prospects, his inborn love for home and family was strong, he longed and pined for a breath of his native air, and homesickness at last impelled him to return to England. Now the hardest struggles of all ensued. Life was now dark, without a ray of much hope to cheer the monotony of the gloom. For several years following he was compelled to seek the poorest localities of London, with barely enough to exist upon.

Literary London in those days was appalling in its poverty. The ablest writers had but a penurious existence, and the best work was but badly repaid. Still the courageous youth labored on, working night after night with the aid only of the dim flickering candle light that threw its grim shadows about the gloomy surroundings of his solitary chamber. At times he was fortunate enough to secure a few backward scholars, which he prepared between terms for sundry examinations.

Finally, three years after he left Boston, his first book, "Workers in the Dawn," was published, and met with comparative success. Mr. Gissing today is the friend of all literary aspirants. He is the confidant and source of inspiration to many youths. His chief protégé at the present time is a young American, in whom he takes a keen interest.¹² This youth keeps up a religious correspondence with the author across the ocean, acquainting him with all his endeavors and successes.

The desperate circumstances under which his first book was written offer a striking contrast to the brilliant surroundings in which Mr. Gissing's last book has been completed. And by the way, if "The Crown of Life," which is already in the hands of his publishers, and which is to appear early in September, creates as much comment and debate, disturbing the equilibrium of certain members of society, as has been the case with his last book, "The Town Traveller," Mr. Gissing will be kept very busy with his correspondence. The author will be once more indebted to the public press for all the space in constant demand about his book under the head "Letters to the Editor." Since "The Town Traveller" appeared "respectable London clerks" have been posing in the columns of the daily newspapers with an injured air, bringing the author to account for his unrighteous treatment of their high respectability and honest, upright personalities.¹³

But all such bitter retort is wasted on the realist, who is indifferent alike to laudatory effusions or harsh criticism such as are published in the columns of newspapers. Mr. Gissing agrees with the scholar who remarked that it takes a man ten years to write a book, and it takes ten minutes for his learned critic to review it.

France has welcomed with delight the works of the Yorkshire novelist of London. Most of his books are already under process of translation into French by some of the leading scholars of Paris. "Demos" has been published already in French, and "The Ransom of Eve" has appeared first in serial form in the columns of *Les Débats*, and finally in volume. Not satisfied alone with mere translations, the French people demanded more knowledge of the man whose works they thus admire; so readings from his work have sprung up through the winter to satisfy literary circles. Foremost among these lecturers was Mlle Blaze de Bury, who recently addressed an enthusiastic audience in Paris, taking for her subject "New Grub Street," a most fitting theme, since it is in part most of Mr. Gissing's own life.¹⁴ – H. M. Carter

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40 St. Luke's Road W

August 21 [1905]

Thank you dear Mrs Moulton for your letter. It would be very nice indeed if I could pay you a visit & try the effect of the cure on myself at the same time; but alas! I'm bound to London just now, or should not be here in August.

"In August go he must," but that's the cuckoo, & he's a freer being than I, wingless, can be.

I was at Brighton for a few days to take the sea baths & have come back to attend to affairs, & here I suppose I must remain until some time in September.

About the "Crown of Life," it is almost the only one of G. G.'s books I haven't read. It didn't appeal to me – it was not a good Gissing book. Just now I have been reading "Will Warburton" recently published by Constable, & though it can't compare with the strong bitter work of earlier years it is very readable. "Veranhelda" ["Veranilda"] I did not like, & so it remained unread here on my table until a friend carried it off to read a few days ago. I do not read many books – many books sent me by good friends are left unread & I blame them for wasting books on me – unless it is poetry. Your poetry I always read with rare pleasure & for the good verse you have given the world I, for one, am deeply grateful to you.

I daresay it has been warmer there since you wrote; I hope the "cure" however "dull" may do you good & set you singing.

Ever yours sincerely

W. H. Hudson

¹Pierre Coustillas, "Gissing Observed: Letters from William Rothenstein, A. H. Bullen and Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton about him," *Gissing Journal*, January 1999, pp. 25-32.

²Unfortunately, the correct spelling was restored by the printers in Volume 7 of the *Collected Letters*.

³The first was an article by Kate Woodbridge Michaelis, "George Gissing," which had appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on 9 November 1898, p. 10. He kept a copy of it in his papers.

⁴Both letters are now held by the Manuscript Division, the Library of Congress. The first, written on Zoological Society of London stationery, is addressed to Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton, 28 Rutland Square, Boston, U.S.A.

⁵An article on Mrs. Moulton, which has not been found, and may well have appeared in the *Boston Sunday Herald*, and that on Gissing, which Hudson – excusably – thought had been written by a man.

⁶Quotation from W. B. Yeats, “Into the Twilight.”

⁷This is the only evidence on record that Hudson visited Gissing in Dorking before his friend left for France. His visit must have taken place in late April.

⁸Greenough White (1863-1901), who wrote a long, highly favourable article on *The Whirlpool*, entitled “A Novelist of the Hour,” for the *Sewanee Review* (July 1898, pp. 360-70). No other article by White is known to have been published.

⁹This is Biffen speaking to Reardon, in chapter 10 of *New Grub Street*.

¹⁰It was a long unsigned review of an art exhibition, “Art Notes. Elaine – Rosenthal and Tojetti,” *Commonwealth* (Boston), 28 October 1876, p. [3].

¹¹For Dr. Zakrzewska (1829-1902), see Vols. 6 to 9 of Gissing’s *Collected Letters*.

¹²Brian Ború Dunne, for whom see mainly *With Gissing in Italy*, ed. Paul Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999).

¹³An account of the correspondence which followed the publication in 1898 of *The Town Traveller* is given in the Harvester edition of the novel (1981).

¹⁴This paragraph contains fanciful as well as reliable information. If it is true that *Demos* was published by Hachette in 1890 and *Eve’s Ransom* by Calmann-Lévy in 1898, the latter title was serialized in the *Revue de Paris*, not in the *Journal des Débats*, where *New Grub Street* was to appear in early 1901. Yetta Blaze de Bury lectured on Gissing at the Institut Rudy on 26 December 1894 (*The Times*, 27 December, p. 3). If she lectured again on Gissing in the winter of 1898-99, no record of it has been found.

[For kind permission to publish W. H. Hudson’s two letters, thanks are due to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and its librarian, Ian Dawson, and to the Library of Congress. I also wish to express my gratitude to Lt.-Col. D. C. H. Shrubsall, who drew my notice to the existence of the letters, as well as to Liliane Delaveau and Charles Arent.]

Notes and News

Was a Gissing novel or short story ever adapted for television? Until recently the answer to this question would have been predictably negative, but it no longer is. Cyril Wyatt, the Gissing collector of Tasmania, reports that he has discovered the typescript of a dramatization of the most frequently translated short story, “A Poor Gentleman,” under an altered title, “The Gentleman in Black.” This dramatization was produced by ZIV Television Programs, Inc., 5255 Clinton Street, Hollywood, California. The final master script is dated 9 July 1953. The cover of the typescript reads: Favorite Story TV/36B/“The Gentleman in Black” by Stuart Jerome.

According to a recent catalogue from Ashgate, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature* by Andrew Dowling, of the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, contains a chapter on masculine failure in *New Grub Street*. The book, no copy of which has yet been seen, was announced for publication last December. Another recent volume which probably carries a chapter on Gissing (and *The Whirlpool*) is Jane Wood's *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*, which was briefly reviewed by Dinah Birch in the *TLS* for 25 January 2002 ("Literary Criticism in Brief," p. 31). Also in the *TLS* (22 February 2002, p. 4) Gissing's name cropped up apropos of Orwell in a review by Karl Miller of *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight Macdonald*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001: "During Orwell's last days, he received a friendly letter from Macdonald, which asked him to repay a debt of \$1.35 for a copy of Gissing's *New Grub Street*." The anecdote only makes full sense if placed in its context, which is given by Leo Vanderpot, of Red Hook, New York, in his letter to the editor of the *TLS*, "Orwell and Macdonald," published on 22 March, p. 17.

Recent Publications

Volume

A Garland for Gissing, ed. Bouwe Postmus, Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi B. V., Costerus New Series 138, 2001. Pp. vi + 290. €60.00, US\$56. Pictorial covers. The volume contains an introduction by Bouwe Postmus and 25 papers which were read at the Amsterdam Conference in September 1999.

Articles, reviews, etc.

Mary Burgan, "Mapping Contagion in Victorian London: Disease in the East End," in *Victorian Urban Settings: Essays on the Nineteenth-Century City and its Contexts*, ed. Debra N. Mancoff and D. J. Trela, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996. Gissing and *The Nether World* appear on pp. 50-51.

D. J. Taylor, "The Street of shame," *Guardian (Saturday Review)*, 1 December 2001, p. 3. On Grub Street, past and present. *New Grub Street* included. See also, by the same author and in the same newspaper (19 January 2002, p. 3) "Read the book, buy the goods," with extracts from Gissing's diary.