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

Knowing Your Place: Place and Class in George Gissing's "Slum" Novels, Part 1

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Between 1880 and 1889 five of Gissing's seven novels—*Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Unclassed* (1884), *Demos* (1886), *Thyrza* (1887), and *The Nether World* (1889)—were set in deprived neighbourhoods. All were concerned with life in penury, and had major characters who were working class. Contemporary novelists and readers tended to see the poor as a cause; by the time *Thyrza* was published in 1887 George Gissing did not. By then he was not romanticising the working classes, nor presenting them as victims, nor necessarily as unhappy, and in this he can seem, to the reader expecting the established Victorian norm of philanthropic compassion, uncaring, even contemptuous. But his distinct representation of the poor—good, bad, and average—as they are, in the same way that novelists were already presenting the middle and upper classes, is respectful rather than jaundiced. He sees them as individuals with differing characteristics, values, abilities, and aspirations, not as a *lumpenproletariat* in need of rescue and redemption. Gissing goes further than other novelists in

being willing to criticise the inhabitants as well as the slums, and he differs from them in his frequent presentation of the family as a scene of conflict rather than as the more familiar Victorian ideal of refuge.

Although engaged with politics, Gissing was writing not about political movements or philosophies but about the imprisonment of poor individuals by class, realised symbolically and actually by the places they inhabited, which formed, informed, and deformed them. Starting in the earliest novels with naturalistic depictions of place as background, developing the portrayal of place as determinant force, even as substitute family, and, in the later work, place as integral to the warp and weft of working-class life, Gissing's portrayals of the slums are unsurpassed. His proletarian districts brutally synchronised imprisonment with alienation—an existential motif for him. Those with the imagination to dream of something beyond what they had are isolated; the route to lack of conflict, if not actual happiness, lay in passive acceptance, "knowing your place."

This paper will argue that these novels are not about poverty but about class, and use the slums as a metaphor for the unshiftable permanence of the class system. It will highlight the unifying characteristic of alienation, and show that alienation is the inevitable result of aspiration; the only way to avoid misery is to "know your place." It will, finally, conclude that Gissing's depiction of alienated and disappointed individuals is, whether or not he realised it, autobiographical.

Gissing's position on the proletariat has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Peter Keating argues that he moved from radical sympathiser to snobbish critic; Jacob Korg suggests a shift from patronising radical commentator to interested observer and presenter, and the resultant creation of

a new type of English novel. "He began to regard poverty as a normal rather than a pathological condition, to observe that virtue and happiness existed among the poor, and to feel that improvement, if it was possible at all, would be brought about by practical measures, not acts of conscience. The expression of attitudes of this kind entailed the emergence of a new strain of social fiction" (x). Pierre Coustillas believes that he matured, and his change of opinion was the inevitable shedding of a youthful phase (vi), a view dismissed by Alan Lelchuk: "this theory is neither wildly wrong nor willfully tendentious. But neither is it useful or accurate"(360), but endorsed and expanded upon by Raymond Williams, who presents a picture of Gissing as a "precarious" radical whose early views are based on the normal youthful lack of sympathy with the values of one's own class but, in his case, this idealized notion of the working classes is damaged by his enforced actual relationship with them (178-79). Some attribute the changes of position in the novels to artistic maturing, but Frederic Jameson argues differently, suggesting that Gissing's early works are not "proletarian" novels at all, that Gissing, in his struggle to reconcile literary quality and representative depiction, is actually continuing the established tradition of presenting the lower orders in a readable, rather than in an accurate manner, and John Goode concurs: "it has all the makings of a 'Mudie' novel' (205). This though is difficult to reconcile with Gissing's criticism of Dickens for the very same thing (*Dickens* 67). My own view is that these novels are proletarian but not socialist, and they are innovative in presenting the lives of the poor in an informed and uncompromising way, and without resolution.

Demos has particularly intrigued scholars because it is vigorously anti-working-class, and does not seem the natural successor of *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Unclassed.* Gissing differentiates between the deserving and undeserving

poor, and in working-class hero Richard Mutimer presents even the industrious, generous, and well-read working man as incapable of social or intellectual finesse. Keating writes "*Demos* is the most didactic and the most snobbish of Gissing's novels" (78). Its position on working conditions and organized labour is, to be charitable, inconsistent. Poole describes it as "Gissing's most exasperating novel" (70). However there is little doubt in Lelchuck's mind: "It is in fact the one serious fictional guide—all of the industrial novels notwithstanding—to working class radicalism" (357). Michael Collie sees the novel as evidence of Gissing's growth to a better understanding of psychology, and a greater recognition of powerlessness. "Initially in the more 'socialist' novels there is a documentary quality which might betoken a failure to understand motivation, relationships, etc, but *Demos* is about hapless alienated individuals with no self determination" (50). This is a judgement I do not endorse since it is true only of secondary characters; the major figures, Eldon, Adela, and, of course, Mutimer are examples of people not only possessing self-determination but prepared to suffer for it.

Workers in the Dawn, the first novel and first attempt to present working-class life, is somewhat clumsy, but the intention and the political stance are clear. By *The Unclassed* Gissing's skill was greater and he displayed more understanding of society's workings at different levels. As Frank Swinnerton has it, "the conscious sociologist and artist begins to express himself" (38). This use of the word "sociologist" helps one to refocus on Gissing's work, because it is a truer representation of his writing than the political definitions. He is a sociologist, not a socialist; he enjoys studying and representing people, but has little interest in reforming them, nor in the manner of achieving such reform. His abiding concern was people and their lives.

These novels appear misanthropic viewed against contemporary "Condition of England" novels with their vision of improvement and their conviction that exposing wrongs can precipitate reform.[1] Stephen Gill suggests that Gissing appears less sympathetic because his "testimony against the 'accursed social order' is eloquent, unflinching, and without hope" (xiii). It was not only because Gissing saw the usual reforms as inadequate, though he did consider them merely palliative, that he refused to profer them. The reason he thought them superficial and ineffectual was that, unlike his contemporaries, he did not recognize the behaviour of the poor as a problem, but saw it as an alternative (if repellent) culture. As Korg says, "Instead of exploiting the poor for polemical purposes, [*Thyrza*] examines their way of life with respectful curiosity and even affection" (x). Gissing wanted improvement, not transformation. Writing immediately after his first wife's death in squalor and penury, he committed himself to the exposure of class inequality. (Characteristically, this commitment was not sustained.)

> But as I stood beside that bed, I felt that my life henceforth had a firmer purpose. Henceforth I never cease to bear testimony against the accursed social order that brings about things of this kind. I feel that she will help me more in her death than she balked me during her life. (*Diary* 23)

Gissing was not seeking wholesale reform, and he sympathized with the poor; he saw the social structure, though mercilessly constricting, as permanent, and, despite his

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[1] The "Condition of England Question" was a phrase coined by Thomas Carlyle in 1839 to describe the state of the English working-class during the Industrial Revolution. Novelists of the genre include Disraeli, Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and Kingsley.

uncompromising bluntness, he provided reassurance, not, like Besant, by emasculating the working-class, nor, like Mrs. Gaskell, by offering a cultural rather than a moral opposition to industrialisation, but sharing with them and his readers a fear of disorder. His revolutionary or simply reforming characters all fail, so their threat is impotent.

Although he was not writing about politics, Gissing *was* writing about class and in these novels neighbourhood is a metaphor for class. Gissing's depictions of urban working-class environments are brutal and hopeless. He was, as Collie says, "fascinated intellectually and imaginatively with place, habitat, environment and, though his interest in social reform weakened, his fascination with London's dark and dangerous areas continued" (68). This interest is acknowledged by Gissing's sister who appears discomfited defending his insistence on presenting the shadier picture. "His 'realism' [was] no prurient probing into unsavoury things for the fun of it" (Gissing and Gissing 401). Although preoccupied with them, Gissing rarely presents class relations directly. Instead he embeds them in districts, streets, houses, and rooms; he chooses to express class signals and structure in physical terms, and makes tangible the Victorian caste system, still entrenched despite the massive changes in the nation's social composition and distribution, geography denying demography. Neighbourhood had become important in a way that had not mattered before. The proletariat was carefully corralled in what Peter Bailey calls "the self-enclosed working-class neighbourhood" (11). Gareth Stedman Jones describes the situation thus:

> The social distinction between rich and poor expressed itself in an ever sharper geographical segregation of the city. Merchants and employers no longer lived above their places of work.... Vast tracts of working-

> class housing were left to themselves, virtually bereft of any contact with authority except in the form of the policemen or the bailiff. The poor districts became an immense *terra incognita* periodically mapped out by intrepid missionaries and explorers who catered to an insatiable middle-class demand for travellers' tales. (13-14)

In London, rich and poor lived in districts geographically close though socially distant, and this contiguity of the influential and the impotent is constant. Westminster, with its power and politics, is separated from *Thyrza*'s Lambeth only by the Thames: Walter Egremont and Thyrza Trent part on Lambeth Bridge, midway between their two spheres, not ultimately bridgeable at all. These representations of segregated urban life dramatise social divisions; were Egremont to take Thyrza to his own part of the city, his unacceptably plebeian physical desires would become apparent. Near-yet-far neighbouring communities enabled Gissing to bring to the capital a hint of the class antagonism of earlier industrial novels,[2] though, according to Bailey, the perceived ethic of work and self-improvement was not seen in the capital: "London was regarded as the Mecca of the dissolute, the lazy, the mendicant, the 'rough,' and the spendthrift" (31). Some of Gissing's most vivid passages reveal the working-class world at its best and worst, stating and reinforcing class identity. The minutiae of life in Lambeth, or Clerkenwell, or Pentonville are there, revealing the inhabitants' sense of themselves. Bailey goes on to posit the notion that while they may have rejected outright revolution, the proletariat did not acknowledge the superiority of its "betters": "the tactics of the diurnal … the

[2] A subclass of the social novel, the industrial novel portrays the difficult conditions of life of the urban working class during the Industrial Revolution. Novelists of the genre include Disraeli, Kingsley, Dickens, Gaskell, and Eliot.

micro-politics and implicit knowledge of everyday life ... mixing the reactionary and conservative with the potentially subversive" (11). Even working-class respectability was not always what it seemed. Genuine uprightness manifested itself in many ways: the cleanliness of the humble single room, the leisure activities, even the clothing, "those who do, and those who do not, wear collars" (*The Nether World* 69). Some were careful to appear superior to neighbours: you may be poor, but you don't have to be rough. For some it was a wilful distancing from wrong or illegal behaviour. It was certainly an expression of the universal need for status. But survival in these closed communities required an urban knowingness too; it cannot be assumed that those who adopted respectable ways had absorbed middle-class values. This garb could also be donned as a defence against invading do-gooders: it demonstrated that you desired and were working toward middle-class standards so the reformers would move on to those seemingly more needful of their attentions. Bailey sees this as "a sublimation of the overt class hostility of the Chartist era" (31). When, in *The Nether World*, a middle-class reformer takes over and "improves" the quality of the soup kitchen, the regulars revolt.

> Soup and refinement must be disseminated at one and the same time, over the same counter.... What was the result? Shooter's Gardens ... brought back their quarts of soup to the kitchen, and with proud independence of language demanded to have their money returned. On being met with a refusal, they—what think you?—emptied the soup on to the floor, and went away with heads exalted. (251-52)

The rough and criminal proletariat was recognized as sly, and likely to cheat; the respectable could share their knowingness but be taken at face value as straightforward and trustworthy.

Both rough and respectable were capable of misleading the outsider. This street-wisdom is evident throughout Gissing's poor neighbourhoods, especially and uneasily in *The Nether World*, where parents, partners, and police exist to be outwitted. Usually it is the malevolent who display it: John Snowdon, for instance, who provides an ironic alternative to the naïveté of daughter Jane. But more likeable characters also display this alternative *modus operandi*; Totty Nancarrow has developed an independent understanding of the ways of the world which enables her to enjoy her life.

Knowingness is the subversive opposite of the compliance Victorians desired, and the middle class was realising that, however enclosed geographically, the working class could not be relied upon to know its place literally or metaphorically. But George Gissing knew that place, and portrayed it both in set pieces and by allowing the permanent and all-pervading culture of these areas to speak for itself. The opening of *Workers in the Dawn* views Whitecross Street from an appalled distance, its texture reflecting the moral life of the inhabitants—the standard contemporary approach—exemplified in the frequent use of pejorative adjectives intended to horrify, and implying that this is not merely a place, but a symptom of the larger social problem.

> The fronts of the houses, as we glance up towards the deep blackness overhead, have a decayed, filthy, often an evil, look; and here and there, on either side, is a low, yawning archway, or a passage some four feet wide, leading presumably to human habitations. Let us press through the throng to the mouth of one of these and look in, as long as the reeking odour will permit us. Straining the eyes into horrible darkness, we behold a blind alley, the unspeakable abominations of which are dimly suggested by a gas-lamp flickering at

> the further end. Here and there through a window glimmers a reddish light, forcing one to believe that people actually do live here; otherwise the alley is deserted, and the footstep echoes as we tread cautiously up the narrow slum. If we look up, we perceive that strong beams are fixed across between the fronts of the houses—sure sign of the rottenness which everywhere prevails. Listen! That was the shrill screaming of an infant which came from one of the nearest dens. Yes, children are born here, and men and women die. Let us devoutly hope that the deaths exceed the births. (3-8)

Gissing was writing near the end of the nineteenth century and his writing reflects this. He is very much a Victorian, but the naturalistic style as well as the unexpurgated content made his proletarian novels unique. While his values look backward, his technique looks forward. Bailey considers *The Nether World* "the greatest slum-life novel in English" (18), and John Halperin expands on this:

> Where Dickens retreats into metaphor, Thackeray into amused tolerance, Mrs Gaskell into hope and prophecy, Gissing stands unflinchingly literal, brutally honest. Perhaps no other novelist except Trollope evokes so fully the texture, the atmosphere, the feel of daily life in the nineteenth century; certainly no other English novelist—not even Dickens—deals so specifically with the consequences of economic systems and failures in the lives of ordinary people. (6)

But not all of Gissing's working-class districts were slums framing the residuum. As Keating says of *Thyrza*, "All the inhabitants of Paradise Street belong to the working-class but no longer does this automatically equate them financially with

the beggar or culturally with the beast" (79). Only in *The Nether World* is the whole story set in a slum: Arthur Golding, hero of *Workers in the Dawn,* is born near Clerkenwell but spends most of the novel around Gower Street and Goodge Street, and heroine Helen Norman does good works in the unspecified "East End"; the eponymous Thyrza has a brief interval in sordid Caledonian Road, but starts and ends in neighbourly Lambeth; the proletarians in *Demos* live in respectable Hoxton. It is one of his achievements, born of his developing respect for the working-class community, that each working-class area is individual: even *The Nether World's* Shooter's Gardens has a fellowship that makes life bearable, and *Thyrza*s's Lambeth market is a lively place:

> On the outer edges of the pavement, in front of the busy shops, were rows of booths, stalls, and barrows, whereon meat, vegetables, fish, and household requirements of indescribable variety were exposed for sale. The vendors vied with one another in uproarious advertisement of their goods. In vociferation the butchers doubtless excelled; their "Lovely, lovely, lovely!" and their reiterated "Buy buy, buy!" rang clangorous above the hoarse roaring of costermongers and the din of those who clattered pots and pans. Here and there meat was being sold by Dutch auction, a brisk business. Umbrellas, articles of clothing, quack medicines, were disposed of in the same way, giving occasion for much coarse humour. The market-night is the sole out-of-door amusement regularly at hand for London working people, the only one, in truth, for which they show any real capacity. Everywhere was laughter and interchange of good fellowship. . . . . The hot air reeked with odours. From stalls where whelks were sold rose the pungency of vinegar; decaying vegetables trodden under foot blended their putridness

> with the musty smell of second-hand garments; the grocers' shops were aromatic; above all was distinguishable the acrid exhalation from the shops where fried fish and potatoes hissed in boiling grease. . . . the fried fish and potatoes appealed irresistibly to the palate through the nostrils. (37)

This market is vivacious ("Everywhere was laughter and interchange of good fellowship"), and tempting ("the fried fish and potatoes appealed irresistibly to the palate through the nostrils") but as an example of Gissing's varying portrayals, here is a repellent picture of exactly the same goods, purveyed in the same way in Whitecross Street: the same characters are there, but with different personalities, ("turning to abuse each other with a foul-mouthed virulence surpassing description"), the same surroundings, but not the same ambience ("a reek stronger than that from the basket of rotten cabbage on the next stall").

> Here is exposed for sale an astounding variety of goods. Loudest in their cries, and not the least successful in attracting customers, are the butchers, who, with knife and chopper in hand, stand bellowing in stentorian tones the virtues of their meat; now inviting purchasers with their – "Lovely, love-ly, l-ove-ly! Buy! buy buy buy – buy!" now turning to abuse each other with a foul-mouthed virulence surpassing description. See how the foolish artisan's wife, whose face bears the evident signs of want and whose limbs shiver under her insufficient rags, lays down a little heap of shillings in return for a lump, half gristle, half bone, of questionable meat—ignorant that with half the money she might buy four times the quantity of far more healthy and sustaining food.

> But now we come to luxuries. Here is a stall where lie oysters and whelks, ready stripped of their shells, offering an irresistible temptation to the miserable-looking wretches who stand around, sucking in the vinegared and peppered dainties till their stomachs are appeased, or their pockets empty. Next is a larger booth, where all manner of old linen, torn muslin, stained and faded ribbons, draggled trimming, and the like, is exposed for sale, piled up in foul and clammy heaps, which, as the slippery-tongued rogue, with a yard in his hand turns and tumbles it for the benefit of a circle of squalid and shivering women, sends forth a reek stronger than that from the basket of rotten cabbage on the next stall. (4-5)

Not only are poor dwelling-places differentiated from one another, there is a clear class structure within working-class districts. John Sloan points out, "The real significance of *The Nether World* lies then in the revelation of the defensive, sometimes self-lacerating strategies of autonomy and identity which are the historical reality and lived experience of lower-class life in a stratified and refusing social order" (79). The all-pervading structure of contemporary capitalism reached into proletarian enclaves too. Areas, streets, houses, rooms, and even contents are clearly differentiated to represent different degrees of respectability or roughness, capabilities, incomes, intellects, imaginations, and aspirations. Paradise Row is rougher than Walnut Tree Walk (*Thyrza*), and even opposite ends of that thoroughfare differ:

> After going a short distance along Lambeth Walk, she turned off into a street which began unpromisingly between low-built and poverty-stained houses, but soon bettered in appearance. Its name is Walnut Tree Walk. For the most part it consists of old dwellings,

> which probably were the houses of people above the working class in days when Lambeth's squalor was confined within narrower limits. The doors are framed with dark wood, and have hanging porches. At the end of the street is a glimpse of trees growing in Kennington Road. (34)

The Mutimers (*Demos*) have a whole house with a front parlour; the virtuous Lydia Trent (*Thyrza*) has only one room but always has flowers on the window-sill; her neighbour, the worn and worthy Mrs. Grail, has three. The room is sanctuary against the hugger-mugger of the roads outside and its importance is poignantly underlined on those occasions when those characters with no place of privacy are obliged to use the street as their parlour. But the single room is also the locus of the highest emotions, especially despair: Arthur Golding's after his marriage, and Gilbert Grail's on Thyrza's disappearance. Each detail of individuals' environments works to build the character.

Every character in *Thyrza* (apart from Thyrza herself) is precisely positioned in the social hierarchy: the Bowers, he a foreman, she a shopkeeper, are above the others, while their lodger Mr. Boddy, old, too infirm for regular work, largely dependent on the neighbourhood's good will, and under the perpetual threat of the workhouse, lies at the bottom. Gissing had a profound sense of this layer of the English class system, having lived in both Manchester and London, the two shock cities of the century. As Keating puts it, "his 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"(72).

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Gissing Reviewed on Amazon

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[Readers of the *Journal* will remember that two previous collections of Amazon reviews by Robin Friedman have appeared, in January 2012 (48.1) and October 2012 (48.4). Our thanks to Mr Friedman for permission to print this third instalment.]

The Paying Guest, 5 January 2009

The still underappreciated novelist George Gissing (1857-1903) is best known for his books cast in the three-volume Victorian mould, such as *New Grub Street*. Gissing's books explore themes of class structure, commercialism, love, and failure. In 1895, Gissing temporarily abandoned the three-volume convention and published three short, highly readable novels: *Eve's Ransom*, *Sleeping Fires*, and the book under review, *The Paying Guest*, each of which offers a distinctive approach to Gissing's characteristic themes. Of the three books, *Eve's Ransom* is one of Gissing's best works. The other two are good but less significant. I have been enjoying revisiting Gissing by rereading these three short works of 1895 and by reviewing them here on Amazon with the hope of interesting other readers in exploring Gissing.

The Paying Guest is unusual among Gissing's output in its lightness of touch and in its comedy. The book tells of the encounter of a rising middle-class suburban family with a young girl, caught between two suitors, of a distinctly different background. Clarence Mumford, age thirty-five, and his wife Emmeline, just under thirty, live in rural Sutton in a home they call "Runnymede," about fifteen miles from London with their

two-year old son and their three domestics. In order to secure supplemental income, they advertise for a boarder, a "paying guest." The guest they receive will soon disrupt their peaceful routines.

Louise Derrick is a young woman of twenty-two with no education, no skills, a temper, and a taste for frivolity. She is looking for a place to live due to difficulty with her mother, with her stepfather, Higgins, and with her stepsister, Cecily Higgins, age twenty-six. A young man named Bowling is courting Cecily Higgins, but he appears to prefer Louise. Higgins wants Louise to leave home and agrees to pay her expenses to avoid discord between Louise and Cecily and to allow Bowling's courtship of Cecily to proceed without a rival for his attentions. Besides Bowling's interest, Louise is also being courted by a man named Cobb, a working-class person with a good income and prospects. Cobb has a rough, possibly violent, disposition and his courtship of Louise is a stormy, on-again, off-again affair. Louise does not seem to know her own mind but wants to marry. With some trepidation, the Mumfords accept Louise as a boarder.

Louise's temper, what the Mumfords perceive as her vulgarity, and her attempts to draw the Mumfords into her relationship with her family and with Cobb lead to discord between the couple. They repent of their paying guest and try to find a tactful way to get her to leave. As the story develops, Louise has a private meeting with Mumford at Mumford's railway commuting station which provokes jealousy in Mrs. Mumford. Louise, thinking that Bowling's relationship with Cecily is at an end, encourages his matrimonial advances. Cobb pays an unannounced visit to Runnymede to pursue Louise and, as a result of a foolish accident, sets the drawing room of the home on fire, resulting in an injury which leaves Louise bed-ridden for several weeks. Mrs. Mumford, in her refinement, and Mrs.

Higgins, in her vulgarity, exchange pleasantries, which ends forever Louise's stay in the house. Ultimately, Cobb winds up with Louise, with an uncertain future in store, and the Mumfords try to piece together their domestic life.

The humour of the book results from the interaction between the Mumfords, with their snobbery and attempted refinement, and their well-meaning but foolish boarder Louise, and with her mother, stepfather, and Cobb. In its portrayal of the effects of class and money on human relations, this book offers a short, upbeat introduction to Gissing's themes. Gissing's portrayal of women is among the strongest features of his work, and his novels frequently, as in *The Odd Women,* address issues involving feminism. By portraying Louise in her shallowness in *The Paying Guest* Gissing stresses the need for expanding educational expectations for women if men and women are to have full intimate and rewarding lives together. The book can be read in a single sitting. While far from the best of Gissing, it is enjoyable. With its two companion novels of 1895, especially the outstanding *Eve's Ransom*, *The Paying Guest* offers a good short introduction to Gissing for the newcomer. Readers who love the Gissing of *New Grub Street*, *The Odd Women*, or *Born in Exile* will gain a broader understanding of the author from these too-little known books in a shorter, more modern format.

The Whirlpool, 21 October 2010

George Gissing's novel *The Whirlpool* is a grim, pessimistic and thoughtful examination of materialistic, fast-paced urban life and of the difficulties of what today is frequently described as companionate marriage. Of all Gissing's novels, this book is probably the most modernistic in tone. Published in 1897, *The Whirlpool* is a late work of Gissing (1857-1903). It was written after the author had achieved a degree of critical and popular

recognition after writing in relative obscurity for much of his life. Most of Gissing's books deal with the London poor or with the middle class. *The Whirlpool* is unique for Gissing in its upper middle-class setting, and the book has some similarities to the writings of Henry James. Gissing wrote best about places and people that he knew. In some respects, he seems uncomfortable in his descriptions of the worlds of finance and the business of music that form the backdrop of this novel. In its pessimism, the book is typical of Gissing. Thus, in an earlier novel, *The Nether World*, Gissing's most detailed look at the London poor, Gissing observes that there is little to distinguish the nether world of the slums from the world of the upper-class. In many respects, *The Whirlpool* is *The Nether World* transferred.

The title *The Whirlpool* is the key metaphor of the book. Gissing and his main character, Harvey Rolfe, describe the world of late nineteenth-century London as "a ghastly whirlpool which roars over a bottomless pit" (Everyman Paperback Classics, p. 47) for its ceaseless and senseless activity devoted to the pursuit of money which draws everyone into its maw. In discussing the difficulties of raising children, Rolfe observes that "There's the whirlpool of the furiously busy. Round and round they go; brains humming till they melt or explode" (p. 147).

The novel centres upon the marriage between Harvey Rolfe, age thirty-seven at the outset of the story, and Alma Frothingham, roughly sixteen years younger. Rolfe is a Gissing-type male character, educated, well-meaning, but passive, rootless, and weak. Rolfe is a reader and appears content to live as a single man on a competence of investments which he manages prudently and modestly. He meets the young, beautiful Alma, however, and determines to marry her. Alma is the daughter of a financier who kills himself when his

investment firm fails, bringing ruin to many people. She has difficulty living this down. Alma also is a violinist of real if modest talent who aspires to turn professional. When Harvey and Alma marry, they promise to respect each other's independence and not to interfere with one another's lives. They agree to escape London and remove to a rural area in Wales where Alma has a son, Hughie, and abandons her violin for a time.

After two years in Wales, Alma becomes restless and frustrated and the couple return to London where they both are soon drawn into the Whirlpool. Alma pursues her ambition to become a concert violinist but the price is high. She must deal with and try to manipulate two men who had earlier tried to seduce her. She also neglects her son and her husband while growing unreasonably and wrongly suspicious that Harvey has had an earlier affair. Harvey, for his part, allows Alma to pursue her musical career but at the price of seeming indifference to her. The story takes a startling turn when Alma makes a surreptitious visit to the home of one of her sponsors, a wealthy rake named Redgrave, the night before her concert. She witnesses a fight between Redgrave and a family friend named Hugh (for whom Hughie was named) Carnaby who punches and accidentally kills Redgrave because he thinks, with some degree of plausibility, that Redgrave is having an affair with his wife, Sibyl. Both Sibyl and Alma have reasons for concealing the affair and for imputing infidelity to the other. Alma becomes feverish and ill, is blackmailed, resorts to drugs, and soon dies from an accidental overdose.

The book is replete with nasty, selfish individuals out for the main chance. Gissing is frequently at his best in his characterizations of women, and his portrayal of Alma, her ambitions, and her weaknesses is particularly insightful. Rolfe and Gissing suggest that the problems of the relationship,

besides the incompatibility of Rolfe and Alma in what they want out of life, is due to the quest of both parties to the marriage for independence and autonomy. The novel shows sympathy for Alma and her ambitions, but her dreams of becoming a concert violinist are shown as unfounded given her level of musical ability and inconsistent with her being a loving wife and a good mother for Hughie. In discussing companionate marriage and its difficulties in an urban, materialistic world, Gissing writes perceptively about an issue which has assumed critical importance in modern life. His thoughts on the matter are not those of most people today. But the value of the book lies in how Gissing presents the issue and in his portrayal of the weaknesses and the frustrations in the many men-women relationships that have a place in *The Whirlpool*.

The book is slow-reading and clumsy, as is much of Gissing. It is also written for the most part in a flat style which is in marked contrast to the passion and the fervid, neurotic behaviour of most of the characters in the story. For all its shortcomings, *The Whirlpool* is an excellent, intelligent novel of ideas and character.

This particular edition of *The Whirlpool* unfortunately is no longer in print. It includes an excellent introduction by William Greenslade of the University of the West of England, Bristol, and good notes which explain Gissing's many topical references to the London of his day. In addition, the edition includes a summary of critical reactions to the novel from its publication to the 1980s. It received mixed reviews upon publication (including a review by Henry James) and then was largely forgotten in the Gissing canon (itself not well-known on the whole) until the latter part of the twentieth century. The book then went through several editions due to its treatment of modern marriage and the role of women. The only new

editions currently available of *The Whirlpool* appear to be computer offprints which are usable but not good. A reissue of this excellent Everyman edition would be highly welcome.

"Gissing Stories and Character Sketches," 22 January 2009

In addition to his twenty-three or so novels, his studies of Dickens, and his travel book, *By the Ionian Sea*, the late Victorian novelist George Gissing (1857-1903) wrote many short stories and sketches. There are a number of collections of Gissing's stories. I am reviewing the first volume, *Human Odds and Ends* (1898), here. A second volume of stories, *The House of Cobwebs*, appeared posthumously in 1906.

Human Odds and Ends is aptly named as it consists of twenty-nine stories and vignettes of down and out, eccentric characters of a type not often emphasised in literature of Gissing's day. The stories are unusual in that, for the most part, they do not lead to a climactic moment, a surprise, or a reversal of fortune at the end. Instead, the stories briefly develop usually one primary character, show that person in a variety of situations and then, frequently, fade away in something of an anticlimax. Thus, for the most part, Gissing's efforts with the short story form are more like vignettes and sketches than developed works. Gissing's descriptions of his odd characters are frequently detailed and compelling. The situations in which his people find themselves are revealing. The vignette-like format of the stories often works well, but it falls flat on occasion. Gissing was an erratic writer, no more so than in these stories.

The stories in this volume reflect the themes of Gissing's novels. They frequently describe the life of poverty in London and the effect of poverty on the spirit. Many of the stories are about money and windfalls, such as inheritances, and the effect

of coming into or losing a sum of money. They are about the difficulties of the writing life, a subject Gissing knew well. Many are about harsh, difficult marriages and about dissatisfied, unhappy people. Many of his characters are criminals or on the make. Others suffer through no fault of their own. Relations between the sexes are a large theme for Gissing, as is, more specifically, the emancipation of women. The stories appear evenly divided between male and female primary characters. They also explore the impact of class in a socially stratified society such as that of Victorian England. The volume is largely pessimistic and sad in tone.

Some of the highlights of the collection include the opening story, "Comrades in Arms," which tells of a failed love affair between a young writer and an older woman. Literature and love also play a role in another good story, "The Poet's Portmanteau." Gissing explores differences in class and the dissatisfaction of successful, well-to-do people with their lot in "The Justice and the Vagabond," in which a magistrate's plans to leave his family and run off with a wastrel, former school comrade are frustrated by his sudden death. "The Day of Silence" is among the darkest stories in the collection as it tells the death of a poor husband, wife, and child on a tragic day in two unrelated incidents. Gissing's experiences with landladies and shabby rooming houses are reflected in "The Prize Lodger" and in several other stories including "The Tout of Yarmouth Bridge," which features an unusually prescient and grasping child already familiar with practices in the "rooms to let" business in a seaside town. The story "Raw Material" describes the making of a fallen woman. "A Song of Sixpence" describes a battered, disfigured, and poor woman who tries to support herself by teaching piano to children even worse off than herself. The final story "Out of the Fashion" is the oddity of the collection, as Gissing tells of a poor woman and her husband who manage to succeed despite the obstacles

that plague the characters in the remainder of the volume. Gissing concludes this tale: "She sits there, with thin face, with silent-smiling lips, type of a vanishing virtue. Wife, housewife, mother—shaken by the harsh years, but strong and peaceful in her perfect womanhood. An old-fashioned figure, out of harmony with the day that rules, and to our so modern eyes perhaps the oddest of the whole series of human odds and ends."

Gissing deserves to be read. Fortunately, his works are now readily accessible through reprints and other sources. Readers coming to Gissing for the first time would do better with his best and most well-known work, *New Grub Street* or some of his other novels such as *The Odd Women* or *The Nether World*. Those readers who already love Gissing or who are familiar with Victorian literature will enjoy exploring these unusual stories.

"The Coming Man," 31 January 2011

It is becoming a rare treat to visit a walk-in used book store and find something wanted and unexpected. I recently had the opportunity to browse in an old used book store, stuffed with two floors of books, in the Capitol Hill section of Washington, D. C. I have the habit of looking for books by the late Victorian novelist George Gissing (1857-1903), and on this visit I found a surprise: a 1976 hardback edition of Gissing's little known book, *Our Friend the Charlatan*, complete with an introduction, notes and variant manuscript readings by the Gissing scholar Pierre Coustillas and illustrations by Launcelot Speed from the original edition of the book published in 1901. I was elated; finding the book made my day.

The edition I found does not seem to be available here on Amazon. Thus, I am doing the next best thing by reviewing the

easily accessible kindle edition of *Our Friend the Charlatan.* Gissing remains relatively unfamiliar to most readers, and this book is a rarity even to his admirers. The book was written late in the author's life, long after his novels set in the poor areas of London and his latter better-known books such as *New Grub Street* (Oxford World's Classics) and *The Odd Women* (Penguin Classics). On the whole, critics have not been kind to *Our Friend the Charlatan.* But I was glad to read the book.

The novel differs from most of Gissing in that it is a sharp political satire and in its setting: it is almost a drawing room novel set largely in rural England and told, as is typical for Gissing, largely in dialogue. Unusually for him, the book maintains a sense of distance and detachment from its characters. The reader does not become emotionally involved with most of them or with the story. Yet in its treatment of character and ideas and in its pessimism the book is worthy of its author.

The main character of the book is a man in his late twenties, Dyce Lashmar. Dyce is described with great irony as "the coming man," which was Gissing's original title before the publisher demanded a change. Dyce is the "coming man" in his individualism, cynicism, lack of feeling, and continued pursuit of the main chance. He is a vocal protagonist of the "new woman," a companion to the "coming man" and distinguished by her independence, intellect, and her freedom from false attempts at chivalry and her contempt for male chauvinism. And in his relationship with women there is nothing of romance, love, or sexuality but only the quest for money and personal advantage. Although he is ever resourceful and opportunistic, the book sees Dyce's, "the coming man's," downfall.

The child of a poor rural vicar, Dyce is Oxford educated but his parents are worried that he has made nothing of himself. His father at last, due to his own fiscal difficulties, cuts off the young man's allowance, and Dyce must leave his position as tutor to the son of a young widow when the boy is sent away to school. The young widow has long been attracted to Dyce, who has his eye on larger opportunities. He inveigles the acquaintance of a dying, wealthy, and autocratic widow, Lady Ogram, who had in her youth been an artist's model and actress but who married well. Lady Ogram sees potential in Dyce and sponsors him in a bid for a seat in Parliament, running as a Liberal in opposition to the ensconced conservative member with whom Lady Ogram has had a personal feud for many years. She is dictatorial and rigid in her old age and insists that Dyce marry her personal secretary, Constance Bride, a "new woman" whose affections Dyce had abused somewhat some years earlier. Dyce is reluctant to do so because he thinks Lady Ogram about to will her money to a long-lost niece, May Tomalin, half-educated, addled, and ambitious. He sets out secretly to woo May and jettison Constance. As ambiguities in Lady Ogram's intent develop, Dyce shifts his attention from one woman to the other depending on where he thinks money will land. At length, he is found out in a sharp, searing scene with both women and with Lady Ogram just before her death. Even after his exposure as a cad, Dyce proposes to Constance, who receives a substantial bequest, but is, finally, roundly rebuffed.

The part of the book that deals with ideas centres around a French book called *La Cité Moderne—The Modern City*—by M. Jean Izoulet, a Professor of Sociology. Dyce Lashmar has read this book and claims its ideas as his own without acknowledging its authorship. As the novel unravels, Dyce is uncovered as a plagiarist and a hypocrite, but Izoulet's book gets explored in its own right. The book, which fascinated

Gissing when he read it in Paris, is an early version of "socio-biology." Izoulet took evolutionary theory and said it could be applied directly to human politics. The book advocates a form of socialism, of communalism, but with a twist. The more gifted, intelligent people are to be put on the top of society and the other people are to be happy with their places. In Dyce Lashmar's hand, Izoulet's theory becomes the basis for rampant egoism and self-pursuit. Gissing's point in the book is that socio-biology or scientific theory cannot be applied to the problems of human society. It is a position still worth taking. Besides exploring Izoulet's book, the novel has critical things to say about Nietzsche—Gissing thinks both Dyce Lashmar and Constance Bride are more like Nietzsche than they care to admit—and admiring things to say about Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and Thomas Huxley. The latter two figures are important to the only sympathetic character in the book, a poor English peer, Lord Dymchurch, who is rebuffed by May Tomalin and settles on the decaying family farm. In so doing, Dymchurch has an experience with a poor gardener which teaches him that human society operates in a manner generally in opposition to the physical rules which govern nature.

At the end of the story, Dyce, rebuffed by both May and Constance, loses his bid for Parliament and is accepted by the young widow whose son he formerly tutored. He believes the woman has an income of about £700 a year but, alas, after the marriage, most of this money is lost to a corrupt trustee. Dyce and his wife and stepson are left to fend for themselves.

As with all of Gissing, *Our Friend the Charlatan* is a novel of ideas with much of value. It is a novel I might not have read if I hadn't found it fortuitously. It would not be my first suggestion for readers new to Gissing. *Our Friend the Charlatan*, however, is worth reading. It deserves to be remembered.

"A Ramble to Calabria with Gissing," 14 January 2009

By 1897, the English novelist George Gissing (1857-1903) had achieved a degree of financial and critical success after years of writing. He took a vacation to Calabria, the "toe" of the southernmost part of the "boot" of Italy. From his youth, Gissing had loved the ancient world. He was especially fond of Gibbon and had been awarded a set of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* for his early academic accomplishments. Calabria had been the home of the Greeks, Romans, and Goths. Although Gissing had earlier travelled to Italy he had never been to Calabria. He was eager to see the places he knew only from books for himself. Thus with guidebook in hand, Gissing set out for his "ramble" to southern Italy.

In 1901, Gissing wrote a short memoir of his journey titled *By the Ionian Sea*. At the time of his visit, Calabria was difficult of access, little developed, known for an unhealthy environment, and rarely visited by tourists. Friends and people further north in Italy tried to discourage the visit. But in the first chapter of his book Gissing explained with enthusiasm the attraction Calabria held:

> I shall look upon the Ionian Sea, not merely from a train or a steamboat as before, but at long leisure: I shall see the shores where once were Tarentum and Sybaris, Croton and Locri. Every man has his intellectual desire; mine is to escape life as I know it and dream myself into that old world which was the imaginative delight of my boyhood. The names of Greece and Italy draw me as no others; they make me young again, and restore the keen impressions of that time when every new page of Greek or Latin was a new perception of things beautiful. The world of the

> Greeks and Romans is my land of romance; a quotation in either language thrills me strangely, and there are passages of Greek and Latin verse which I cannot read without a dimming of the eyes, which I cannot repeat aloud because my voice fails me. In Magna Græcia the waters of two fountains mingle and flow together; how exquisite will be the draught!

Although almost all of Gissing, including *By the Ionian Sea*, remains too little known to modern readers, this short work is among the best travel books ever written. It ranks with the best of Gissing's work and has rarely been out of print. The book is written in a lyrical, elegant prose with Gissing speaking throughout in his own voice about a place he knew and loved. The book has a sense of ease and happiness that is absent from most of Gissing's novels. It is written with almost painterly detail, as Gissing describes the sea and the mountains, the orange groves, ruins, small dusty towns, hotels, and people that he observed on his journey. Much of the book describes Gissing's search for places of the ancient world. He discusses the sites related to Horace, Alaric, Hannibal, Pythagoras, and Cassiodorus, among others. Without pedantry, Gissing gives a relaxed sense of the ancient riches of Calabria. Throughout the book, he contrasts the ancient history of the region with the contemporary people he met and places he observed.

Gissing's journey began in Naples, just north of Calabria. The story begins with a short vivid portrait of Naples as well as of his steamship voyage to Paola at the northernmost part of the region. Although located on the sea, much of Calabria is mountainous. Gissing describes his journey from town to town by railroad, horse-drawn carriage, and steamer. The towns described include Taranto, Cotrone, Catanzaro, and Squillace. Gissing concluded his ramble at Reggio, at the southernmost tip of Italy just across from Sicily. He describes the mostly

simple and unsophisticated people of the Calabria of his time and the sites. He tells of ancient churches and monasteries, hidden rivers, mountain villages, caves, farmers and their donkeys ploughing the fields as they did a thousand years earlier, tiny book stores, street musicians, museums, and, frequently, bad food.

As had been predicted by his friends, Gissing fell ill with malaria during his visit to the town of Cotrone. He almost died. He recovered his health under the care of a young doctor, Ricardo Sculco, who receives an affectionate portrayal in the story. Even with this serious illness, the overriding tone of the book is one of happiness as Gissing discovered for himself a place he had long only imagined. At the end of his journey, for all his experiences of the sights around him, Gissing's heart remains with antiquity. He concludes the story of his ramble:

> Alone and quiet, I heard the washing of the waves; I saw the evening fall on cloud-wreathed Etna, the twinkling lights come forth on Scylla and Charybdis; and, as I looked my last towards the Ionian Sea, I wished it were mine to wander endlessly amid the silence of the ancient world, to-day and all its sounds forgotten.

In 2000, an American journalist, John Keahey, was inspired by Gissing's travel book. Keahey retraced Gissing's journey of over a hundred years earlier and wrote his own sequel, *A Sweet and Glorious Land* (2000). I found it helpful in reading Gissing's book to examine a map of southern Italy. Because I have no independent knowledge of the area, I also found it useful to read the Wikipedia article on Calabria for brief background on the places Gissing so beautifully describes.

The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (1903) was once the most widely-read work of the English novelist George Gissing (1857-1903). It was Gissing's own favourite among his works. It appeared in the year of his death. Gissing lived a difficult life, which became the basis for much of his over twenty novels. As a youth, he was expelled from Owens College, Manchester, and imprisoned briefly for stealing to support a young prostitute, with whom he subsequently made an unhappy marriage. He lived in squalor for many years in the garrets of London while writing prolifically. His early novels deal with the urban poor while the latter books include a broader spectrum of characters as Gissing's own situation improved. He writes of the commodification of art and of the difficulty of achieving personal autonomy in a commercial culture and in a state of poverty. Today, Gissing's most famous work is *New Grub Street*, a pessimistic story of London literary life.

Many readers see *Ryecroft* as at least partially autobiographical. The book is cast in an unusual form. It opens with a Preface by Gissing himself ("G. G.") which gives the outline of the life of his fictional protagonist. For more than twenty years, Gissing tells the reader, Ryecroft had laboured in obscurity in the poor quarters of London, attempting to make a living by his pen. At the age of fifty, Ryecroft received an unexpected testamentary gift which enabled him to leave London and retire to a modest cottage in Exeter, accompanied only by a woman domestic. He enjoyed a few years of peace and contentment in the country before dying of a heart ailment. Then, the story goes, the narrator went through Ryecroft's papers and found a diary of his observations and meditations which the narrator edited, organised, and published as Ryecroft's "Private Papers." The body of the work is

organized into four chapters, titled "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn," and "Winter." Each of these chapters is, in turn, organized into a number of short chapters, some interconnected and some rambling and discrete.

Ryecroft muses about his life in the country and how he has found a measure of peace at last. Although he is a different type of person in many ways, I thought of Thoreau and Walden in reading Ryecroft's fictitious diary. Both Ryecroft and Thoreau love solitude and both spend much time in long walks through the country observing flowers, rivers and meadows, and birds. Both characters, Ryecroft more than Thoreau, are highly bookish. Many of the memorable passages in Gissing's book describe his character's love for books, especially the classics, and his experiences in purchasing books as a struggling writer, carrying them home, reading them in his garret, and, on occasion, being forced to sell them. Ryecroft in his solitude remains enamoured of his books, not only with rereading them but with their mere sight and even with their smell. Ryecroft's musings also involve, as Thoreau's do not, his life as a young writer in London. He recalls his life of poverty, struggle, and pain, as he tried to eke out a living as a writer.

There is a great deal in *Ryecroft* about the hardships of poverty, which sometimes imparts a materialistic cast to the work. But Ryecroft is unending in his criticism of a commercial, competitive, urban society which, he believes, forces some people to live in squalor and prohibits the development of the mind and heart. When he retires to the country, Ryecroft is not wealthy. But he does have the means he finds necessary for a life of freedom and independence.

In the book, Ryecroft offers his thoughts on many subjects including England, which for all the faults he finds in it he

loves dearly, class structure, democracy (which he dislikes), the United States, the rise of science, history, nature, his childhood, philosophy, his attitude towards death, books, friendship, and much else. Interestingly, there is little in the book on relations with women and on the sexuality which proved to be a source of the highest difficulty for Gissing in his own life. The meditations in the book are of a distinctly mixed quality. The sections that for me detracted markedly from the book were those at the beginning of the final "Winter" chapter in which Ryecroft talks interminably of his fondness for English beef and of the qualities of a good pat of butter. The gourmandising is off-putting in the context of the book. Some readers also find a defensive, critical, and defeated tone in *Ryecroft*. On the whole, I think the book tells of a successful effort to attain peace and to accept one's past.

I have returned to Ryecroft and to Gissing frequently over the years. *Ryecroft* remains an unusual book about a difficult character who resists easy conceptualisation. On my latest reading of *Ryecroft*, I concluded with some reluctance that it was not the equal of the best of Gissing in books such as *New Grub Street*, *Born in Exile*, or *The Odd Women*. I was less taken with the book in my most recent reading than when I first encountered it years ago. Even so, the writing is eloquent, ornate, and most of the time moving. I enjoyed reentering Ryecroft's world, hearing his voice again, and sometimes taking issue with him.

"Gissing's Romance of Real Life," 2 February 2009

George Gissing's (1857-1903) last completed novel *Will Warburton: a Romance of Real Life* was published posthumously in 1905. Frequently overlooked or downplayed among his works, *Will Warburton* shows marked shifts for Gissing. Moving from his characteristic pessimism, Gissing's

novel is indeed a romance that ends happily in a successful courtship and marriage between two people much in love. In the book, Gissing's hero moves from the ranks of the upper-middle class to a lower social stratum. The novel is set in London against the background of greed, business speculation, and financial ruin. Thus it has a disquietingly contemporary feel.

As the book opens, Will Warburton, young, open-hearted and generous, is in the business of refining sugar with his improvident and scheming friend Godfrey Sherwood. With the business experiencing difficulties, Sherwood proposes that the pair cut their losses in sugar refining and become involved instead in the manufacture of jam. Warburton acquires the necessary capital from his ageing mother and his sister, who sell a treasured family property to finance the venture. To keep them from penury, Warburton plans on paying his mother and sister a varying share of interest from the profits of the jam business. Alas, the business comes to naught. Sherwood quickly loses Warburton's capital, as well as his own, in a stock market speculation. Warburton is ruined.

With his few remaining funds and the assistance of a man named Allchin, a brusque individual who tends to engage in fighting when unoccupied with work, Warburton opens a small grocery store under the name of Jollyman. Gissing makes much of Warburton giving up his business dress and wearing instead the apron of a grocer as reflective of his diminution in class. Warburton keeps his new occupation, a distinct step down in his own eyes and in the eyes of others, a secret in order to save his mother and sister from embarrassment. The shop prospers and Warburton is able to pay his mother and sister the promised minimal return on their capital. But he remains ashamed and ambivalent about his new career. He also feels guilty over his secrecy and deception.

The novel sets off Warburton's upper-class friends with his newly-acquired friends to the detriment, on the whole, of the former. Warburton's story is contrasted with that of a young painter and friend, Norbert Franks, whose efforts Warburton had encouraged at an early stage of Franks' career with loans. Franks has aspired to serious art; but he becomes a portrait painter who achieves great financial success with no artistic distinction. In his poor days, Franks had tried to win the love of a beautiful amateur painter, Rosamund Evan, who accepts his marriage proposal but then jilts him. Franks then courts a poor but talented artist, Bertha Cross. With the seeming end of the relationship between Franks and Rosamund, Warburton cautiously tries to court Rosamund. She is responsive at first but ends the relationship abruptly when she visits the grocery and sees that Warburton is the proprietor, Jollyman. Rosamund then returns to Franks whom, up until the discovery of Jollyman, she had continued to spurn. Franks is all too willing to leave Bertha for the beautiful Rosamund, even though Rosamund had earlier abandoned him. Warburton begins courting Bertha who is able to look to his heart and not to his grocer's apron. She accepts him. Warburton continues his modest life as a grocer with its independence. He becomes free of social cant and open and accepting about his position in life. The married couple, Franks and Rosamund, want little to do with their former friend Warburton, and Gissing is emphatic that Warburton is well rid of them.

In Gissing's best-known novel, *New Grub Street*, which tells of literary life in Victorian London, Gissing draws a portrait of a poor, serious writer, Biffen, who does not write to please the multitudes. Biffen works diligently on a work of social realism that has no chance of achieving popularity, a novel called "Mr. Bailey: Grocer." The novel explores the lives of those whom Biffen calls the "ignobly decent." In a climactic scene in *New*

Grub Street, Biffen rushes into a burning building to save the manuscript of "Mr. Bailey: Grocer" from destruction. *Will Warburton* is Gissing's own "Mr. Bailey: Grocer" with its portrayal of the unglamorous but stolidly honest life of the hero. In its portrait of love and romance, *Will Warburton* also bears resemblances to another earlier work, the short novel *Eve's Ransom* (1895), in which the young protagonist, Maurice Hilliard, loses the woman he loves to a wealthier man but finds peace and independence for himself.

Unfortunately little read today, *Will Warburton* explores Gissing's familiar themes of love relationships, art, and commerce, with a light, humorous touch and, most importantly, a great deal of hope. Gissing ended his career fittingly with this novel. *Will Warburton* deserves to be remembered and read.

"Gissing's Short Stories," 28 January 2009

In the midst of a troubled and short life, George Gissing (1857-1903) wrote prolifically about late Victorian England. His novels and stories have the charcoal-gray, realistic character of a writer who was trying to portray what he saw. Gissing's themes include portraying the unclassed, alienated intellectual or writer (a theme with autobiographical significance), the life of the poor and lower-middle classes in London, the effects of class structure upon human relations, the impact of materialism and commercialism on English life, and relations between men and women. He pursued these themes not only in his novels but in his short stories as well.

The House of Cobwebs was posthumously published in 1906 and is probably the stronger of the two collections. For many years they were difficult of access. Fortunately, with the coming of digitalisation, virtually all of Gissing's writings are

accessible. They will reward reading. At certain times of my life, in certain sad moods, I have turned to Gissing; and he has spoken to me as few other writers.

The House of Cobwebs consists of fifteen stories, including the title story. The value of these stories consists in their characterizations and in their situations. Each story generally focuses on a single main character and develops the background and circumstances necessary to understand the person. After setting out the characters and their dilemmas, the stories frequently resolve in a way that seems anticlimactic. While the reader may be led to expect a dramatic resolution, Gissing's stories sometimes just come to a halt. The stories are well-written, thoughtful, and realistic, if undramatic. In *The House of Cobwebs* Gissing for the most part explores his pessimistic themes. But unlike the characters in most of his works, including the stories in the *Human Odds and Ends* volume, the characters in these stories are better off at the end, materially or emotionally, than they were at the beginning.

The title story is set in a deteriorating London rooming house which its proprietor, Spicer, has inherited and is about to lose because he only holds a lease for a term of years. He takes a lodger, Goldthorpe, a poor, young, aspiring novelist (based in part on Gissing himself) who is willing to accept shabby rooms in order to complete his first novel in peace. The two men gradually become friends with the landlord proud to share his quarters with a literary man. Goldthorpe finally gets his novel published to Spicer's great delight. The story ends with Spicer feeling a sense of hope in his life even after a serious accident and the impending loss of his property.

Other good stories in the collection include "A Capitalist" and "Christopherson," both of which involve struggling writers or bibliophiles and the effects of their strong passion for books on

those around them. The story "Humplebee" is one of Gissing's best. It tells of a poor young lad at school on a scholarship who saves a wealthy fellow-student from drowning. The student's father tries to reward Humplebee by offering him a place in his firm, a job for which Humplebee has neither interest nor aptitude. After several twists and turns and near disasters, the story comes out well for poor Humplebee.

In "Miss Rodney's Leisure," Gissing turns to the world of landladies and poor rooming houses and tells the story of how a strong-willed young woman makes a satisfactory life in shabby quarters and helps her landlady and her family as well. "Topham's Chance" tells of a young educated man who has hired himself out to a questionable character to prepare people for examinations of diverse types. Topham is able to seize an opportunity to achieve success and end his drudgery. A darker story in the collection is "A Lodger in Maze Pond" in which the protagonist, living in a rooming house, ruins his life by proposing to marry the servant in the house just as he inherits a large fortune. The story "The Salt of the Earth" is rare for Gissing, as he describes the life of a man, Thomas Bird, who perseveres in kindness and goodwill to the people he meets in spite of his poor, unrewarding life as a clerk. The final story, "The Pig and Whistle," is a bittersweet story of a romance in mid-life between two lonely people.

These stories will most interest readers who already know Gissing through *New Grub Street*, *The Odd Women* or through his other novels. The stories also will appeal to readers interested in late Victorian England and its similarities to and differences from our own times. They have a character, however restrained, all their own.

Notes and News

Wulfhard Stahl writes from Berne: Thanks to its new open access policy, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (*NZZ*) is now searchable for all its published issues, starting back in 1780. So it was by a simple mouse click that an article on George Gissing surfaced: "Zum Gedenken an George Gissing" (In memory of G.G.) appeared on Sunday, October 11, 1953, No. 2358, leaf 4 (section "Literatur und Kunst" [Literature and Art]), penned by H.W. Häusermann. The immediate reason for this contribution had been the publication of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, edited and with an introduction by Cecil Chisholm (London: Phoenix House). The reviewer is full of praise for what was already then Gissing's most famous and highly influential work; the last paragraph of this rare piece of Gissingiana reads as freshly as if written today:

> Long before Gissing, other prophetic poets had described the decline of modern civilization, especially in the big cities: the Paris of 1830 becomes a place of death and materialistic evil zeitgeist in Balzac's *Louis Lambert*; approximately forty years later, Whitman in his *Democratic Vistas* outlines quite a similar picture of the civilization of the so-called New World. It seems to us as if Gissing's book, of all these works, is the one anticipating the future the clearest. Moreover, thanks to the inspiration that helped create it, and thanks to the great art of the poet, it is the most readable one.

It must be deplored that since then a book held in such high esteem remained virtually unnoticed by German translators and publishers.

Another mouse click brought to light, in a joint review by Ruth Schirmer, a very short mention of Ulrich Annen's work on Gissing's short stories, until today the only study on that

matter in German; then it was a groundbreaking piece of research, without any further effect, though, on German publishers (*NZZ* Thursday, June 16, 1976, No. 133, p. 38 (section "Miscellaneous / Novel"). The other two books reviewed dealt with Katherine Mansfield and George Moore.

Recent Publications

Menke, Richard. "The End of the Three-Volume Novel System, 27 June 1894." *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History.* Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net.* Web. Gissing mentioned on pp. 2, 4, and 5 but the whole article will be of interest.

Pierre Coustillas has contributed an entry on Gissing to The Fertile Fact, a website (www.fertilefact.com) which is devoted to authors and artists who have been the subjects of recent biographies. The biographers are asked to offer comments on five contemporary issues of their choice on which their subjects would have had an opinion were they still alive. Coustillas selected "Penguin (translated) Classics," "The National Trust and Conservation," "Music, music, everywhere . . . ," "The Odd Women's progress," and "What is it good for?" (i.e., war). Gissing finds himself in the company of, among others, Hemingway, H. G. Wells, Kafka, Cézanne, Wilkie Collins, Camus, and E. M. Forster. To see Coustillas's comments readers should click on "Previous Posts." The site is run by Rhys Griffiths, who can be contacted at thefertilefact@gmail.com

The idea of Gissing as "depressing" dies hard: on 20 January, 2014, *The Daily Telegraph* (London) cited *The Odd Women* as

the second most depressing of fifteen novels. (It was beaten out of top place by *Jude the Obscure.*) The few lines of justification for the selection seem to betray an imperfect knowledge of the work. (Thanks to Tom Ue for this item.)

And finally . . .

"The Gissing Doll"

We know that the austere pages of this scholarly journal are seldom besmirched by frivolity. Its subscribers spend their days, and, indeed, many hours of their nights reading and rereading the works of the Master and those who have studied him. Nevertheless . . .

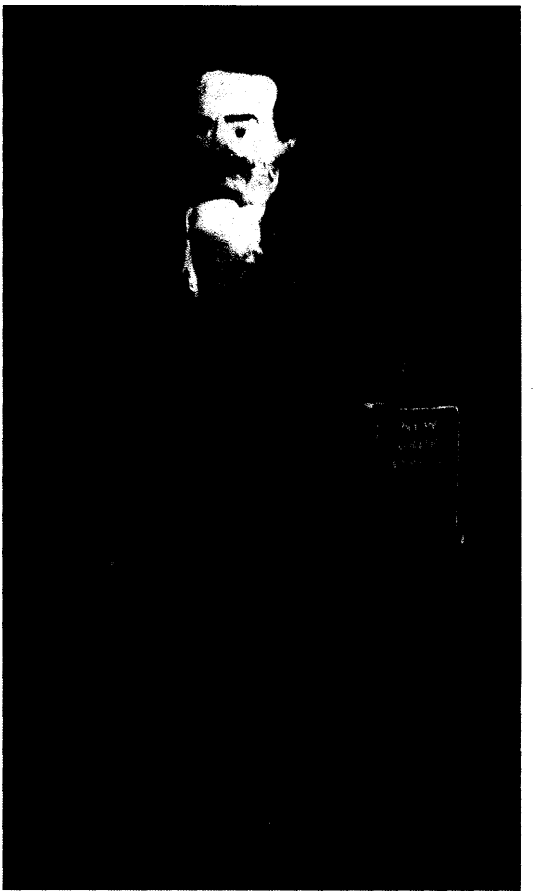
Your editor's younger daughter Elizabeth, universally known as Tizzie for reasons that are lost in the mists of time, ordered, and gave me for Christmas, the Gissing doll. The relevant blurb of UneekDollDesigns begins with a quick Gissing biography—dates of birth and death, major works—then there is a description of the doll itself: "Mr. Gissing is designed in a gray suit with large gold tie and white shirt with wide cuffs. I added fine details such as his hand painted face, real fiber hair and mustache, and a tiny copy of one of his works./This special author character is created from wood, wire, clay, and paint./Stands 4 ½ inches tall, (11.4 cm)."
<uneekdolldesigns.etsy.com>

Your editor was too polite to ask how much Mr. Gissing set Tizzie back but other dolls—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Boris Pasternak, Noel Coward—seem to retail at prices ranging from $41 to $45.

Apparently, these dolls are uneek—I mean, unique. I believe there is presently only one Mr. Gissing in existence.

And I have him (he stands on my desk), and you don't.

MDA



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Information for Contributors

The Gissing Journal publishes essays and notes on Gissing and his circle. Contributions may deal with biographical, critical, bibliographical, and topographical subjects. They should be sent to the editor, Professor M. D. Allen, University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley, 1478 Midway Road, Menasha, WI 54952-1297, USA, or by e-mail to **malcolm.allen@uwc.edu**.

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