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

Mapping the City: The Problems with Mimesis in *The Nether World*

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In the literary climate of the *fin de siècle* there was a poised interchange between urban fiction and social science. Charles Booth, whose extensive eight-volume work *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889)—including his famous Poverty Map, which endeavours to map geographically social class—notes this analogy when he recommends Gissing's 1886 novel *Demos* as an accurate depiction of working-class conditions. From this, Richard Dennis identifies a parallel between what he defines as "Booth's systematic social survey" and "Gissing's topographical realism": each, he notes, is panoramic in ambition, but then plunges into the detail and diversity of experience on the streets (Dennis, "Henry Ryecroft Meets Henry Maitland" 3; "George Gissing: Restless Analyst" 6). Thus, in Dennis's view, Gissing and Booth can be seen as equivalent in their aims and methods of reading the city. However, when it comes to writing the city, Booth himself expresses his hope that

> Some great soul, master of a subtler and nobler alchemy than mine, [will] disentangle the confused issues, reconcile the apparent contradictions in aim, melt and commingle the influences for good into one divine uniformity of effort, and make these dry bones [of my research] live. (Booth 157)

Booth's choice of overtly scriptural language, aggrandising and mythologising, acts as a distancing method between fiction and social science and problematises Dennis's concept of a direct relation between the two. Rather than accepting the identity of the two, Booth seems to see science and fiction working side-by-side, with the latter providing an idealising rhetoric in which to translate and organise seemingly disparate facts into a holistic discourse of life. According to Booth's conclusion a wide gulf remains between observing the city and writing its discourse.

Gissing's correspondence concerning his aims in writing life in London confirms this disparity. On 7 September, 1887, when writing *The Nether World*, Gissing explains to Ethel Harrison (wife of Frederic Harrison):

> Yes, I feel the book must be of a more solid kind . . . . It must be sterner, for one thing; I dread anything like a temptation to make London life pretty. The glorious black depths must not be lost sight of. . . .
>
> [B]ut one part of my nature is at home in London alleys, & fortunate that it is so. (Mattheisen, Young, Coustillas 3: 148)

The impetus towards a "more solid," "sterner" and, with the manifest avoidance of the beautiful, decidedly unidealising

approach implies an initial confirmation of the mimetic objectives of social science. While the definition of London life as the "glorious black depths" can be understood in terms of the commonplace discourse of the slums as the abyss, it implies an alternative kind of observation through the shift into figurative rhetoric. However, it is the description of his innate affiliation with the London alleys that most marks the contrast with the detached observations of the middle-class social explorer. Thus, in writing *The Nether World,* Gissing recognises the multiple ways of reading the city and the manifold discourses it contains.

With this in mind, this paper will present how Gissing exploits the ostensibly objective methods of writing the city at the *fin de siècle*. Whilst drawing on journalistic methods of description like those of Zola and other naturalists, Gissing's portrayal of Clerkenwell moves beyond the bounds of detached survey. In Gissing's novels, the antiquarian fascination with layers of history, the creation of personal and nostalgic geographies, and the overriding sense of figurative space create a tension which recurrently questions the rigidity and authenticity of mimetic, Realist London.

Watching the City: Panoramas

The difficulty Gissing faced in attempting to present his reading of the fast-developing city is understood as a particularly contemporaneous issue. Alan Robinson, for instance, explains how the Victorian

> desire to grasp the city in its totality was inevitably doomed to frustration. It eluded them because of its scale, its inscrutability, and because there was no exhaustive rationale holding

> together its centrifugal expansion and apparently arbitrary accretions. (Robinson 81)

One attempt at containing the multiple and mobile city in a singular and static gaze can be made through the panorama. Panoramas first became prevalent in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Traditional panoramas were seen as a method of physically mastering the environment by imposing an imaginative order on what exceeds the perceptible grasp. This desire to encompass the city's greatness in one holistic image can also be seen in the growing nineteenth-century popularity of the balloon trip. In 1862, J. Binny, a co-researcher in Henry Mayhew's extensive mid-Victorian social survey, writes of the novel experience of the aerial view:

> Indeed, it was a most wonderful sight to behold that vast bricken mass . . . all blent into one immense black spot, . . . to contemplate from afar that strange conglomeration of vice, avarice, and low cunning, of noble aspirations and humble heroism, and to grasp . . . all its incongruous integrity, at one single glance. (Binny and Mayhew 9)

Viewing poverty from the liberty of the air relates to the possibilities of distance offered by the position of the detached narrator. Writing almost thirty years later, Gissing draws on these spatial opportunities of the panoramic perspective. In *The Nether World*, when Clara Hewett looks down upon "a wide extent, embracing a great part of the City," the comprehensive cityscape of the panoramic convention seems invoked (*The Nether World* 280. All future references from this edition and given as *NW*). From the position high above Farringdon Street, the narrative catalogues "the dome of St. Paul's," "the surly bulk of Newgate" amid "many spires and steeples," "the markets of Smithfield, Bartholomew's

Hospital," "the tract of modern deformity . . . which spreads between Clerkenwell Road and Charterhouse Street," nominally mapping the scene and, by creating an image of a known and identifiable prospect, appearing to impose a sense of order. However, the superseding atmosphere of the scene, with its "gloomy impressiveness well in keeping with the mind of her who brooded over it," challenges this initial evocation of the conventional panoramic perspective by initiating a connection between observer and observed. The "ragged patches of smoke from chimneys innumerable" that part-conceal the prominent landmarks characterise the remoter cityscape with an obscurity. Furthermore, this same smoke, now defined as "flying scraps of mirky vapour, " exaggerates the vastness of St. Paul's and, giving it the "appearance of floating on a troubled sea," introduces a movement which contests the stasis and fixity of the verbal map. Thus the scene which emerges is one of a contention between the insistent mapping and identifying of the narrative voice, and the uncertainty and obscurity which Clara's projection impresses upon the prospect.

As the passage continues, Clara's aerial view of Farringdon Street, where "human beings, reduced to their due paltriness . . . bound on errands, which were a mockery, driven automaton-like by forces they neither understood nor could resist," re-invokes the familiar view of the city from above. The ostensibly objective gaze recalls the mechanised populace of Carlyle's city in turmoil. Yet whereas in *Sartor Resartus* the narrative celebrates a position of lofty calm, in *The Nether World* this is subverted. In Gissing's rendering, rather than embodying the freedom and detachment implicit in the outward-looking perspective that the narrative gestures towards, Clara's view becomes increasingly embroiled in the propinquitous scene. The encroaching advance of the focus grounds the viewer, from the fragmentary, half-mysticised

points of distance to the immediacy of the streets below, resulting in Clara's realisation that "the world was her enemy . . . fate flung her to the ground" (*NW* 281). In *Moving through Modernity*, Andrew Thacker explains how, in the modernist mode, "even though there is, for many writers, a desperate desire to maintain borders and boundaries, rooms bleed into streets" (7). This sense of the distorted margins is discernible, too, in Gissing yet in *The Nether World* the process is reversed. The street is transported into the room and the elevated position can offer no distance from the scene below. Thus, in Gissing, the separation inherent in the mid-Victorian view is made uncertain in a way which prefigures the volatility, multiplicity, and instability of the modernist city of Woolf, Conrad, and Joyce where, like Clara's Clerkenwell, the urban landscape figures as a state of mind rather than a grounded experience. (See, for a further example, Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's cityscape, where panoramas provide an example of the view of the urban as the dream house of the collective.)

Walking the City

A further aspect of Gissing's rendering of the city is the recurrent naming of places and verbal mapping of routes. This trait has led Michael Irwin to propose how "it might seem reasonable to accompany an edition of George Gissing's . . . *The Nether World* . . . with a reproduction of the relevant page from a London *A to Z*, as a response to the topographical scrupulosity of the text itself" (30-31). Indeed, the most recent editions of *New Grub Street* (1890) and *The Odd Women* (1891) display contemporaneous maps of London as appendices to the text. This relationship between the fictional space of texts and supplementary maps is so established it seems almost requisite: fictional sites as disparate as Hardy's

Wessex, Arthur Morrison's slum in *A Child of the Jago* and Tolkien's Middle-Earth all provide accompanying cartographies. However, unlike these instances, none of Gissing's books contained maps on publication, and their inclusion constitutes an assertion by editors and, accordingly, critics of mimetic London denying alternative locations and ways of locating in the novels. For instance, the result of the rigorous scrupulosity in Gissing's portrayal of Clerkenwell is the creation of habitual movement. Bob Hewett spends hours walking "about the City, in complete oblivion of everything external" (332). Here, movement represents thought; the cyclic activity parallels the interior turmoil. Hewett continues this trance-like motion:

> From Merlin Place he struck off into Pentonville and walked towards King's Cross at his utmost speed. Not that he had any object in hastening, but a frenzy goaded him along, faster, faster. . . . From King's Cross, northwards; out to Holloway, to Hornsey. . . . From Hornsey by a great circuit he made back for Islington. (334)

Having performed "a great circuit" Hewett's destination becomes his origin. Gissing's depiction of Bob's movement suggests indebtedness to Dickens's portrayal of Bill Sikes's circular journey in *Oliver Twist*. After killing Nancy, Sikes, "unsteady of purpose, and uncertain where to go," covers "miles of ground, and still came back to the same old place" (364). From an outsider's perspective of recorded place, Bob's analogous walk occurs within a continually charted journey, and his travelling without purpose or destination reveals movement as a physical enactment of his lack of progression. Thus, despite these verbally-constructed zones, for Bill and Bob oblivious movement within them illuminates an active

experience of lived-in place which contests the static aspect of its mapped equivalent.

Clara Hewett, having escaped London to pursue an acting career, is finally offered a leading role. The night before leaving for Bolton, "excitement compelled her to walk incessantly round and round the scanty space of floor" (206). The markedly reduced scale and persistent association with agitation of the familiar circling motion suggest that the movement is a reaction against a feeling of entrapment. Clara's movement is a further representation, in microcosm, of what characterises the novel. Circles and the "incessant" nature of Clara's activity carry implications of both the classical and Dantean images of Hell. This correlation is qualified by Mad Jack's image of Clerkenwell: "This life you are now leading is that of the damned; this place to which you are confined is Hell! There is no escape for you" (345). The frequent recurrence of the circular walk, also represented, in a larger sense, by the wanderer (Michael Snowdon) or temporary escapee (Clara Hewett) returning home, is demonstrative of the repetition created by the geography of the text. Journeys are denied and, as a result, movement is restricted to symbolism. From an internal perspective, the exhausting physical attempt to escape symbolises psychological states in the city. The restless movement in undefined space looks towards the figurative city of Gissing's 1890s novels, particularly *The Whirlpool* (1897) where, as the title implies, the city is repeatedly described in terms of its uncontrollable cyclic activity entrapping and, vortex-like, continually drawing inwards.

Michael Irwin concludes his assertion of the crippling accuracy of Gissing's texts with the suggestion that Gissing's vision of the city was "obsolescent" as soon as his novels were written because they occupy a "space enclosed by time," asserting that the space "erodes, transforms and destroys" the vision Gissing presents (30-32). By concentrating solely on Gissing's record of London's geography, and implying that the novels display an explicitly contemporaneous image of place, Irwin's emphasis denies a significant aspect of Gissing's approach to place. Gissing's Clerkenwell is fused with historical projections which display a fascination with antiquarian facts. St. John's Arch, for instance, is described as "a survival from a buried world—the embattled and windowed archway which is all that remains above ground of the great Priory of St. John of Jerusalem," (50) where the phrase "buried world" seems to endorse the image of the Arch as a relic of enclosed time expressed by Irwin. Yet the narrative continues depicting "other and nearer memories" of the publisher Edward Cave who lived in the rooms above the gateway. A rich sense of historical continuity is evoked, the London of a hundred and fifty years earlier. Here, "it was said," Samuel Johnson, as yet "obscure" received his dinner hidden from the aristocratic guest "behind a screen, because of his unpresentable costume," only to be praised by the visitor from whom he was hidden (51). The inclusion of the literary figure establishes an alternative space—within an otherwise exclusively modern landscape—in which the Arch becomes a site of cultural memory. Place is presented as a container of multiple discourses of collective memory, where remnants of a Norman and medieval history persist alongside an anecdotal account of Augustan Grub Street, which allows the past to survive into the present.

Concerning this form of public or collective memory, Ben Highmore suggests that all cities are "haunted by fragments of the past." His view, that "urban experience is punctuated by an accumulation of images" (4-5), correlates with Gissing's presentation of Clerkenwell where St. John's Arch appears a site singularly alive with vestiges of the past:

> After a walk amid the squalid and toil-infested ways of Clerkenwell, it impresses one strangely to come upon this monument of old time. . . . So closely is it packed in among buildings which suggest nothing but the sordid struggle for existence, that it looks . . . tainted by the ignobleness of its surroundings. The wonder is that is has not been swept away, in obedience to the great law of traffic and the spirit of the time. (51)

At first, the presence of "this monument of old time" seems only to embellish the dominance of contemporary Clerkenwell, in which surrounding buildings, suggesting "nothing but the sordid struggle for existence," represent the dominating discourse of social space. The force of the contemporary, expressed as the "spirit of the time," and ruled by the "great law of traffic," is associated with destruction and change. However, the way in which "St John's Arch had a place in Sidney Kirkwood's earliest memories" attributes a personal significance to the site. "From the window of his present workshop" Sidney "could see its grey battlements, and they reminded him of the days when . . . he used to listen to such stories as his father could tell him of the history of Clerkenwell" (51-2). That Sidney's sense of place is centred on the Arch enhances the sense of its defiance, conveyed by the "wonder" of its endurance, against its surroundings. Accordingly, later in the novel, "the glimpse before him of St. John's Arch aided the revival of old impressions; his hand ceased from its mechanical activity, and he was absorbed in a

waking dream"; personal memory corresponds with antiquarian history (60). As the Arch triggers thoughts in Sidney of "many a lane" in the Surrey of his boyhood, his recollections simultaneously evoke those of Clerkenwell's past as "a rural parish, distant by a long stretch of green country from the walls of London" (51). This impression is strengthened by its position within "a waking dream" which legitimates the power of fantasy. The sites of history disrupt and destabilise the singular view offered by the visual present and instill Gissing's London with a sense of place made valid through constancy.

Conclusion

Gissing's representation of historical and figurative space reveals a desire for a sense of place which goes beyond strictly contemporary, sociological explorations. The difficulty, as he expressed it in 1887, lay in " how to get into a lifetime the work suggested by this myriad-voiced London" (Mattheisen, Young, Coustillas 3: 139). Through the mimetic representation of the physical zones of London, Gissing acknowledges a contemporary space only to create doubt, through the presentation of the view from within and the movement around lived-in space, about direct rendering. The fixed sense of place is further countered by the way in which Gissing's delight in merging the seemingly formal historical narratives with personal memories reveals an attempt to preserve a sense of wonder. Yet, at the same time, as the dreamscapes linger beyond the concrete bounds of Clerkenwell, there remains an unshakable awareness of the danger that antiquarian nostalgia can be a mere shield from the actual oppression of the immediate confines.

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Knowing Your Place: Place and Class in George Gissing's 'Slum' Novels (concluded)

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A notable lacuna in all these novels is a complete and functioning family. Such families as do appear are often centres of conflict, even violence; any relative who is loving, functional, and present at the critical time is rare. There are surrogate parents: Samuel Tollady (*Workers in the* Dawn) and Mrs. Ormonde (*Thyrza*), who is stand-in mother to Egremont, Thyrza, Annabel, and a host of little girls from the slums. Frequently place is surrogate family—protector and progenitor—and exerts significant pressure on its members. It is difficult for the individual to find an authentic voice, to be unique is to be conspicuous, and to be conspicuous is to be maligned. Patricia Johnson takes this further, suggesting that Gissing's slums make the poor turn upon each other rather than on outsiders, and that these localities seethe with plotting and malice: "The Darwinian slum worlds of George Gissing . . . envision working-class life as a jungle where the strong prey upon the weak. In these worlds women evolve into naturally violent creatures, who compete with each other for men, and sometimes into monsters who are deadlier than the

male" (134). And, while Sloan does not go as far as Johnson, he does follow the same thread—"a world whose only law is the 'survival of the fittest'" (79).

Certainly the magnificently malevolent Clem Peckover and her malicious cohort behave in precisely this way:

> Why, Suke Jollop (ostensibly Clem's bosom friend, but treacherous at times because she had herself given an eye to Jack)—Suke Jollop reported that Clem would have killed Pennyloaf had she dared. Pennyloaf had been going about in fear for her life since that attack upon her in Myddelton Passage. "I dursn't marry you, Bob! I dursn't!" she kept saying, when the proposal was first made. But Bob laughed with 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. (105)

But Johnson's perception of Gissing's slums as sites of internecine conflict is selective. Lambeth and Hoxton, if not Clerkenwell, have a sense of community. In *The Nether World* Sidney Kirkwood makes the plea to Clara Hewett, "Mustn't all of us who are poor stand together and help one another?" (378). Sloan sees this not as an expression of a positive proletarian fraternity but as a symptom of imprisonment by the indigenous culture:

> This is not a plea for defiance and solidarity, but for enslavement in a mutual sacrifice that demands subservience. Gissing offers here an almost unbearably accurate account of the real conditions of

> bondage among the poor for whom oppression is not simply external but internal, an amalgam of sexual and social pressure and roles that, for all the hopes of the reformers, perhaps remains the greatest obstacle to social change. (31)

The title *The Nether World* allegorises Clerkenwell and the deforming nature of its poverty and necessary way of life. The view from Clara's window depicts a depressingly determining environment:

> Amid many spires and steeples, lay the surly bulk of Newgate, the lines of its construction shown plan-wise; its little windows multiplied for points of torment to the vision. Nearer again, the markets of Smithfield, Bartholomew's Hospital, the tract of modern deformity, cleft by a gulf of railway, which spreads between Clerkenwell Road and Charterhouse Street. Down in Farringdon Street the carts, waggons, vans, cabs, omnibuses, crossed and intermingled in a steaming splash-bath of mud; human beings, reduced to their due paltriness, seemed to toil in exasperation along the strips of pavement, bound on errands, which were a mockery, driven automaton-like by forces they neither understood nor could resist. (280)

Whilst moral decay is the most malign influence place has on its inhabitants, its evil operates at a mundane level too. Poverty begets poverty, lack of inner resource likewise, and this continues down to the level of basic skills. Pennyloaf Candy (*The Nether World*), hapless daughter of an alcoholic mother and quintessential product of the slums, simply cannot manage, as Goode explains:

> Gissing never lets us sentimentalise Pennyloaf. She is not a poor girl villainously exploited by a selfish husband. Part of the reason her marriage breaks up is that she is totally incompetent as a housewife, and she is incompetent because she is a child of the nether world. . . . the values of the nether world perpetuate themselves. (*George Gissing's* The Nether World 221)

For determinist Darwinist Gissing, this cultural coercion is worse than irresistible, it is self-fulfilling. Goode tells us, "Gissing's characters . . . are mobile but not travelling, and they occupy a marginal enclave which is both a determinant condition . . . and a determinant psychology" (*George Gissing : Ideology and Fiction* 105), and D. A. Williams sums it up thus, "The individual is a pearl-like product of the secretions of society" (273). However, Gissing avoids presenting working-class stereotypes; despite suffering the same influences his characters are clearly differentiated. Clem and Pennyloaf are both the products of the slums, yet are different, though both are defeated by their birth.

Within this caste-system-within-a-class, there is social shifting. As they become more or less affluent, characters change lodgings, and even status, with impunity. A minor character in *Thyrza*, Totty Nancarrow, inherits a modest yet life-changing sum, and finishes looking forward to marriage to a good man, with the double happiness—for one characterised as loving to shop—of becoming a store owner, the top of the working-class social ladder. But from the outset she is independently minded and seen as different: "'That's Totty Nancarrow,' said Mrs. Bower, reappearing from the shop. 'What a girl that is, to be sure! She's for all the world like a lad put into petticoats. . . . Eh, she's a queer 'un!'" (30).

But, while they can move when things improve, these denizens are also forced to shift when their circumstances are straitened. Property is impermanent for the poor, the pawnbroker is ever-present, the workhouse a constant shadow. A man may signal his respectability with a Sunday best suit, but it may be borrowed against on Monday. The hapless Pennyloaf Candy has to pawn her ring the day after her wedding! Even in death there is class difference: a decent burial is not certain. The responsible working men of Clerkenwell, in the same novel, are defrauded of their funeral club savings; cemeteries, even simple remembrance, reflect status, as the bedtime story of Emma Vine (*Demos*) narrated to her niece and nephew reveals:

> "Yes, they died on the same day, and they were buried on the same day. But not in the same cemetery, oh no! Blanche's grave is far away over there"—she pointed to the west—"among tombstones covered with flowers, and her father and mother go every Sunday to read her name, and think and talk of her. Janey was buried far away over yonder"—she pointed to the east—"but there is no stone on her grave, and no one knows the exact place where she lies, and no one, no one ever goes to think and talk of her." (395)

There are occasional exceptions: Golding is removed before the slums can corrupt him and Ida Starr (*The Unclassed*) and Thyrza are not rich or clever, but are positioned, like Golding, as out of place in working-class settings.

By *The Nether World*, claustrophobically limited to the one district of Clerkenwell, Gissing has finished his shift from a generalizing view of the slums to a restricted but immersing one, and from slums as background to slums as lifestyle. This geographical discipline lends a pervading sense of enclosure

made almost tangible by the relentless refusal to leaven the dreadful in any way. This threatening naturalism is further enhanced by Gissing's use of real, named London districts which, deliberately unfamiliar and remote to the Victorian reader, can be visited, the districts recognized as they are crossed, the separation confirming the distance between the classes. Goode describes Gissing's representation of repressive areas in this way:

> A range of places from dingy to respectable, but all within a "neighbourhood," remote but actual, out of the way but in London, described but nondescript. Gissing's London—not "the city" as a conceptualized response, as a totality, but an area, a limited and limiting location. Mobility is problematic—Ida's journey to her grandfather in Islington in Chapter II is like a trip abroad. There will be other areas—Kennington, Fulham, Chelsea—but all delimited spaces that have to be lived in or crossed. A mixture, too, this neighbourhood, but a mixture within strict boundaries. (*George Gissing : Ideology and Fiction* 73-74)

But, contained and demoralised as it was, the proletariat, mobilized by the new railways, invaded public spaces on high days and holidays. Unaccustomed to free time and without the discipline that comes with sustained autonomy, the working class could actually be or appear to be uncontrolled and menacing when it made day excursions out of its own areas and into common spaces. Matthew Arnold wrote of:

> the working class which, raw and half-developed, has long lain half-hidden amidst its poverty and squalor, and is now issuing from its hiding-place to assert an Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he

> likes, . . . meeting where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes . . . . (105)

Incited thus, it is unsurprising that middle-class Victorians were prejudiced against the poor. Already afraid that the sacred barrier of culture might be breached, they hoped that the lower orders would adopt middle-class behaviours. For Gissing too, restraint and highbrow tastes betokened refinement. We see his superior individuals visiting the museums and galleries he himself frequented when living in poverty. The cultivated girls rarely enjoy public places—Emma Vine for instance, refuses a day's excursion—but they find in the museums a desirable combination of recreation and learning. The inferior Clem Peckover is altogether more comfortable disporting herself in the theatre pit; she does visit the British Museum, but uses it for an illicit tryst. But generally the working class did not want to be improved in its precious leisure time; it sought compensation for the hardship of life in its own manner. This period saw the growth of mass entertainment, and a rich working-class culture. The workers wanted to relax with their own people, and Gissing, unusually among novelists, recognized that they had, in organ-grinders and the like, their own version of artistic solace, and respected this. By *Thyrza* his accounts of working-class culture are neither patronising nor prurient.

The Nether World is anchored in the slums and the inexorable corruption and dehumanisation of their inhabitants, but *Thyrza* is the novel most insistently concerned with imprisonment. It is a compassionate portrayal of the population of Lambeth, each an individual, which demonstrates how the decent but not exceptional are powerless in the trap. The dwellers of Gissing's poor districts are imprisoned partly by their culture, by their involuntary psychological self-bondage, and overridingly by poverty. Personal impecuniosity influenced all

his novels but it is the relationship between poverty and class that preoccupies him in these early texts. Goode says, "The working class operates in a sequence of internal rivalries and oppressions motivated by a single external form of oppression—poverty—which is common to everybody and derives from the relationship of the nether world to the upper" (106).

In these novels, class exchanges are rare and when they do occur, ephemeral; Gissing saw no possibility of sustained social mobility; the self-perceived social outcast could not contemplate permeable class barriers. These are tales of individuals thwarted and crushed in their attempts to migrate, and of exogamous love denied. "*Thyrza,*" Collie asserts, "is not *about* social reform. Nor does it put a theory on trial. From the outset categorizing Egremont's theories as over-idealistic and flawed, failing to acknowledge class barriers and obstacles, the novel then explores what happens when people of any caste attempt to cross them" (78). Gissing applies this relentlessly to his characters: those who aspire to live elsewhere are forced back where they belong, psychologically shattered, and even mortally damaged. As Margaret E. Mitchell observes, "Clara Hewett . . . is destroyed when she attempts to defy the urban boundaries that define the lives of the characters in *The Nether World*. . . . The one character who attempts to achieve mobility—in terms of both class and geography—is destroyed by her daring" (133).

Gissing offers no salve to the Victorian reader accustomed to redemption and justice. He presents the contemporary economic and class systems without palliative: the reader must simply face the facts of the real world. While he perceives some working-class individuals as potentially capable of responsibility for themselves, and he believes in their entitlement to the freedom of self-expression, through the

course of these novels he denies the possibility of releasing this latent capacity by reform, education, better living conditions, or even self-help, picking off one by one and demolishing alleged solutions throughout the 1880s.

There is one notable escapee from this incarceration, mobilized by that splendid device of Victorian fiction, the unexpected will. This enables *The Unclassed*'s Ida Starr to climb into another rank. She is independently minded, prepared to be different from her peers, she works hard to improve herself and is allowed to achieve contentment in her new surroundings. She and Arthur Golding (*Workers in the Dawn*) both succeed in leaving their original neighbourhoods. Both have flawed parents who are situated on the bottom rung of their social microcosm—Mrs. Starr a prostitute and Arthur's father an alcoholic—but they would not be allowed to make these happy transitions if their circumstances were as simple as that. Arthur's father is an Oxford graduate and Ida's mother the fallen and estranged daughter of a rich man, so they both have a "nobler" lineage. The other characters who attempt this self-upheaval are root-and-branch proletarian, and are not allowed to fulfil their ambitions. Though Ida's mobility is startling given her profession of prostitute she is, in the Social Darwinian way of things, of "superior" stock, and thus hers is not the escape to a better place but a regaining of a rightful one.

There are equally worthy characters who try and fail. The gifted Thyrza is dissatisfied with her working-class situation, as is her morally superior fiancé Gilbert Grail; both are tantalised by the opportunity to improve their lot only to have it snatched from them. Mutimer, although an exceptional working man, is also anchored firmly in the milieu in which he starts and finishes; he fails in his enterprise when he changes locale, and despite marrying into the cultured middle class, he

cannot properly establish himself there. One can argue that this pattern is simply Gissing's pessimistic determinism, or that it is rooted in Social Darwinism, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is more simply his élitist preference.

Thyrza, Grail, Mutimer, and the others are all separated from those around them, sometimes physically, but certainly culturally, and their sense of alienation distances them emotionally too. Gissing's early depiction of alienation featured wrongly-sited characters: *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Unclassed* have whole casts of uprooted individuals. In *Demos* characters are temporarily unsituated, but by *Thyrza* and even in *The Nether World* differentness is coming from within, separateness is occurring between individuals, not classes, and alienation is becoming a choice. Egremont and Mutimer, for instance, are visionaries whose dreams are re-imagined as nightmares; Gissing the Realist interprets the relationship between the individual and society as an illusion and creates a state of separateness for those who do not conform. Conformists felt only hopelessness; those with imagination felt despair and alienation—an existential theme for Gissing. Over the scan of these novels his interest in relationships grew. Initially his characters are excluded from a "better" life by their own inferior natures, which are in truth little more than a function of their surroundings. As he presents more psychologically-based individuals he shifts, via distancing within their own class, to isolation within relationships. Clara Hewett aside, the alienated characters in these novels are a cut above the usual working-class character by talent, diligence, learning, nobility of mind, or generous common decency—or, like Grail and Tollady, all of these. Clara Hewett's differentiating characteristic is imagination, the ability to see a larger world.

Characters are alienated in different ways. Ida Starr excepted, those who choose to step outside their original class are isolated in the new situation and become divorced from the old one; this changing of classes frequently involves exogamy—Egremont and Thyrza, Golding and Carrie—which always fails. Those who are by nature or behaviour unlike others in their own environment, like Jane Snowdon and Totty Nancarrow, are also distanced. This can arise from something as small as being a little eccentric, or choosing to be a reader, or not to drink. And those with the temerity to imagine a more enjoyable life, like Clara Hewett, also suffer isolation. They are condemned by their class, by their superiority, by their imagination, and by their ambition to separateness.

In the course of these novels and beyond, Gissing's emphasis shifted from broad naturalistic social portrayals to a tighter focus on isolated individuals, a trend first evident in *The Unclassed*, which, although set in proletarian districts, has characters mostly removed from the class in which they should rightfully be situated, as the title indicates. There is a strong Social Darwinian thread to this surely autobiographical story of displaced, intellectually gifted, and well read individuals with special qualities who, while they form a well suited clique, as a group are alienated. By *Thyrza* the characters are no longer the passive victims of providence; the emphasis has shifted from displacement by fate to alienation by behaviour; all but Egremont are sited where they "belong." This abandonment of extra-textual events in favour of allowing the characters themselves to fashion the plot demonstrates Gissing's developing novelistic skill. No one is out of place in *The Nether World*; this is a nether world full of nether characters, doomed to a nether existence.

Collectivity in alienation is a Gissing trope but its nurturing qualities vary. *Demos* has a group of women—Stella

Westlake, Adela, Emma—from different classes but sharing displacement, and choosing to be together for shared solidarity. *The Nether World* is also a community of outsiders, unified in its mistrust of other classes, but these people have not chosen to be together, and they offer no mutual support (it is a cohort, not a fraternity) and those who do not recognize its norms are isolated: the incongruent are displaced. But few *are* so displaced because the fabric of Gissing's slums, like *The Unclassed*'s Litany Lane, which encapsulates misery and degradation, imprisons its inhabitants by generating and maintaining a depression which prevents them from taking such initiatives.

At home or on an outing, the noise of the slums made it difficult to maintain a distinctive voice of one's own. If you aspired to something better you were obliged, in Bailey's words, "to raise your voice to be heard" (208). Thyrza's naturally pretty singing voice is—in another manifestation of Gissing's moralistic position on refinement and vulgarity—"improved" by well intentioned benefactors, but when she returns perforce to the Lambeth she has temporarily escaped, she renounces singing, thus losing her voice literally as well as metaphorically.

It was not only the working class that demanded conformity; society as a whole exerted pressure, and the middle classes expected the "decent" working classes to adopt their values, which was particularly difficult for the women. "That's mother," sobbed Pennyloaf. "I knew she couldn't get over to-day. She never did get over a Bank-holiday." And she recognizes her own likely propensity: "I know what'll be the hend of it! I'll go an' do like mother does—I will! I will! I'll put my ring away, an' I'll go an' sit all night in the public-'ouse!" (132). The telling phrase here is "I'll put my ring away," which alerts us to the stress imposed upon Victorian

women to be Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House," as Johnson points out, a middle-class ideal impossible for working-class women to achieve.

> To narrate the life of a working-class woman meant describing the hard labor she was made to perform, the money she earned in full-time or part-time labor, and the strength and independence that these tasks demanded, all elements which conflicted with the Victorian view of "the feminine." (7)

Arthur Golding's seemingly benevolent insistence that Carrie work to improve herself is the respectable face of oppression by gentility: he wants her improved to be worthy of him, not to make her life happier; and his enforcing of an alien culture and lifestyle is, at least partly, the cause of her return to drink. Sloan describes it thus: "Carrie, as the recipient of Arthur's contractual love, is driven into a sado-masochistic cycle rooted in class conflict. Indeed it is Carrie's own acceptance of her cultural inadequacy which forces her into war not only with an oppressive society, but with herself" (24). Gissing does not present this as simple one-sided humiliation: the reader is intended to share Arthur's own sense of ignominy at his wife's ignorance and depravity. In 1903 Gissing, in a surely autobiographical entry in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, wrote:

> And to think that at one time I called myself a socialist, communist, anything you like of the revolutionary kind! . . . Why, no man living has a more profound sense of property than I; no man ever lived, who was, in every fibre, more vehemently an individualist. (Summer XII)

And in this last sentence lies the crux of the matter; he did not care for the whole working class, nor, nihilist and pessimist, did he trust in the efficacy of outside agencies, no matter how well meaning, and he could not sympathize with movements, but he did passionately honour the individual, the battle to create and maintain a sense of self. And he honoured, though reviled, the culture of this society, and acknowledged that those within it were not necessarily unhappy.

This exploration of Gissing's working-class neighbourhoods reveals much about the writer. Whilst he lamented the fact of poverty and was infuriated by the barrenness of the lives it created, he wanted only better conditions for its victims, not greater empowerment. His pessimism, determinism, and personal experience led him to see the proletariat as incapable of significant improvement. He explained their shortcomings as philistinism arising from a lack of imagination, which rendered them impervious to culture and higher thinking. However at times he expressed it as a prejudice like racism.

Deeply conservative, Gissing valued the social system and the status quo and, despite being a victim of it, cherished the immutability of class: he would have liked only intellectuals to be socially mobile. There are also hints of an inner tension about the classicist's covert enjoyment of "rough" entertainment.

Throughout Gissing's proletarian novels place is a synonym for class; it is its agent and its mediator. The spawn of the system, it creates and maintains it. Class barriers in *Demos* are immutable and thus demonstrate the inevitable failure of socialism: Mutimer is an inferior person; Thyrza, despite her gift and ability to charm and fit in with cultured people, has to be returned to Lambeth, because that is where she belongs: it is her destiny. Michael Collie says of *The Nether World* "the

thoughts and feelings of the characters belonged as much to the locality as they did to themselves" (94), but he also suggests that in these early works Gissing does not often strongly connect character with place but stresses rather alienation from it. As he moves into the later works, Collie sees Gissing becoming more interested in the subtleties of people and their relationships, and less willing to write in simple deterministic terms of people as a function of their environment. He also sees Gissing's social conscience diminishing while his sense of alienation increased (34).

Place, though largely depicted without metaphor, is a metaphor for class, and class is a metaphor for imprisonment. Gissing's determinism was buttressed by his Social Darwinism: people are formed by the place they belong to. They will not be fundamentally influenced if they are misplaced; so, if genetically superior people are wrongly placed by misfortune, breeding will out; their superiority will be apparent; and they will have some chance of achieving their rightful station.

Succeed or fail, more visionary individuals, like Gissing himself, feel themselves prisoners of place/class and at the same time outcasts, and he particularly honoured this group. This group of novels demonstrates the author's shift from portrayals of mis-sited people alienated from the generality of their surroundings to the examination of the psychological chasms between individuals in the later works.

What was Gissing really writing about in these novels? Politics? Yes, to a degree. Class? Yes, but exogamous love was superimposed upon it. Poverty, place and alienation? Certainly, but to what end? These novels are relentless depictions of real life, yet they are also moral fables. I believe Gissing was writing about himself. Whether or not he realised

it these texts are his life story, his aspirations, his isolation, and this is what makes them so engaging—and so enraging.

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A New Gissing Ph.D.

Congratulations to Rebecca Hutcheon, who has successfully completed a Ph.D., "'The Vision of Place I Know': Mimesis, Subjectivity, and Imagination in the Places of Gissing's Novels," at the University of Bristol under the supervision of Professor Ralph Pite, external examiner Simon J. James. The degree was formally awarded in March 2014 and the thesis abstract follows:

This thesis examines place in the novels and writings of George Gissing (1857-1903). By challenging the hitherto largely reductive critical account of Gissing's places this thesis seeks out the intricacies and nuances of Gissing's interaction with place via detailed attention to its descriptions in his work and an awareness of the complexities modern place theory has revealed.

Since Gissing's day, the critical response has, on the whole, viewed Gissing's use of place as exclusively actual or biographical. This has often led to too narrow a focus on him as a writer who mapped and documented working-class, and lower middle-class, London. I challenge this perception by exploring how Gissing uses his characters' subjective reactions to space and place to explore various geographically or topographically rooted dichotomies, including, but not limited

to, north versus south, town versus country, and agriculture versus industry.

I show how Gissing demonstrates these contrasts as much through the characters' individual, subjective perceptions of place, stemming from their states of mind, as through descriptions of the objective reality and appearance of the places themselves. This exploration of Gissing's fictional presentation of contrasting places is complemented by an examination of his personal, changing view of place, as reflected in his travel writing, journals, and letters.

I also demonstrate how Gissing's writings emphasise the connections as well as the contrasts between places, as he (and his fictional characters) move between town and country, or city and suburb, or Britain and the Mediterranean. By examining how mimetic locations in Gissing are frequently imaged through a figurative lens, I show how the same places, and views of places, are sometimes criticised, sometimes mourned, and sometimes celebrated both in Gissing's fiction and his autobiographical writings, again challenging a simplified interpretation of his work.

The thesis is structured chronologically and considers in successive chapters the range of dichotomies which Gissing's culture impressed on place. The first chapter reinvestigates the North-South divide and challenges the stereotyped view of Gissing adhering uncritically to this overworked dichotomy. The second chapter explores the lived experience of London and presents the city in Gissing as the site of multiple, and often diverging, perceptions. The third chapter, through—in part—close attention to Gissing's presentation of the suburbs and the urbanised rural, problematises the clichéd city-country contrast and explores the alternative divide between the universal and the local. The final chapter confronts the

established notion of Gissing as a nostalgic and idealising mourner of antiquity and the ancient South. The examination of his treatment of the Mediterranean proposes a view of place alert to yet influenced by the often alluring stock cultural responses.

Gissing and the Victorian Web

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In October 1996, Jacob Korg published in this journal a brief article entitled "Gissing on the Internet" (32.4: 25-26) detailing the Gissing discoveries he had been able to make using the "navigator" of his university computer. Peter Morton responded in April of the next year ("'Hapless flies caught in a huge web?' More about Gissing resources on the Internet" [33.2: 24-30]), and in a style that will make even the less technologically sophisticated of us realise just how great the leaps in familiarity with computers we have all made in less than twenty years have been: "Uninformed readers should be aware that what is loosely termed the 'Internet' is actually a set of resources, but the two components most likely to interest the Gissing student are the World Wide Web and the Listservs. The first is a vast 'virtual library' of interlinked information, and the second comprises thousands of discussion groups covering virtually every human activity . . . " (24).

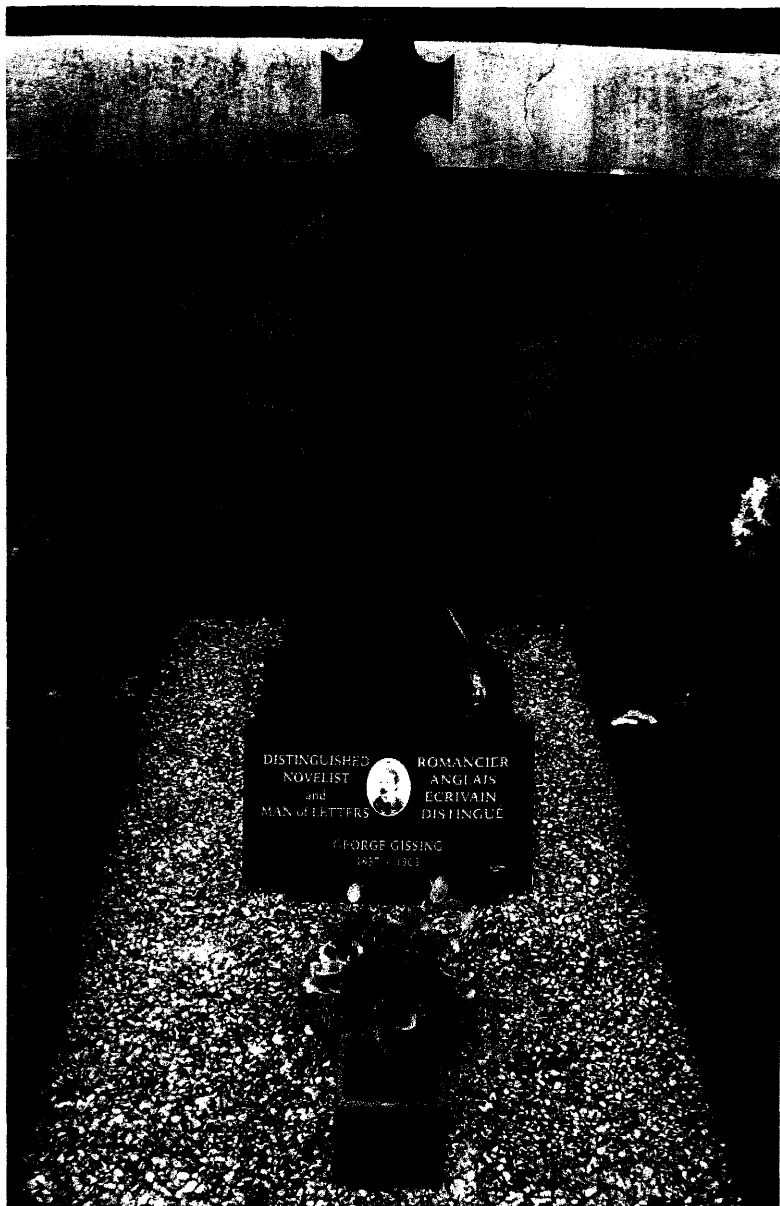
Morton refers to "what is rapidly becoming the site of first resort for all matters of 19th century British history and literature, the Victorian Web at Brown University." But unfortunately, we find that "it contains only one trivial

mention of Gissing, even though an author as minor as George Macdonald has his own page of information" (26).

The Victorian Web is very different now from what it was in 1997. As of March 2012 it had 61,408 documents and images; it receives 1.5 million "hits" a month, and has won more than fifty awards. The London *Times* called it "an outstanding resource" in 2010 (victorianweb.org/misc/vwintro.html). But, surprisingly (or not?), the section on George Gissing has by no means expanded proportionately. Here is how the Victorian Web currently describes itself

> [It] emphasizes the *link* rather than the *search tool* (though it has one) and presents information linked to other information rather than atomized and isolated. . . . The *Victorian Web* . . . differs fundamentally from websites like *Wikipedia* and many reference works, such as *Britannica*, and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: Each of these justly renowned sites . . . aims to present a single authoritative view of its subject. In contrast, the multivocal *Victorian Web* encourages multiple points of view and debate, in part because matters of contemporary interest rarely generate general agreement.

The main page, "The Victorian Web: An Overview," shows the site's twenty-two major divisions, including "Political History," "Social History," "Visual Arts," "Places," and "Book Reviews." For our purposes, the most important is "Authors," an alphabetical listing from Harrison Ainsworth to Israel Zangwill. The instructor, student, or enthusiast who clicks on "George Gissing" will see a page divided into three sections, the first consisting of ten bullet-pointed headings including "An Introduction and Appreciation," "Biographical Materials"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and "Works," these two themselves sub-divided, and "Science and Technology"; the second section is headed "Theme and Technique" (seven sub-headings here: "Themes," "Characterization," "Imagery, Symbolism, and Motif," "Structure," "Narration and Point of View," "Setting," and "Genre and Mode," the last having one sub-heading, "Slum fiction"); the third is entitled "Bibliographical and web materials," with three subdivisions, "Bibliography," "Related Web Ressources" *[sic]* and "Mitsuharu Matsuoka's [Victorian Literary Studies Archive] Hyper-Concordance [which] allows word searches [in] the complete texts of Gissing's works."

Many of the links, especially in the second section, are dead. Both "Themes" and "Narration and Point of View" in that section take us back to the four paragraphs of Peter Morton's "An Introduction and Appreciation"; "Slum fiction," written by Andrzej Diniejko, the VW's Polish Contributing Editor, is a two-page overview with a paragraph on Besant, one on Gissing ("a perceptive, well-informed observer of the working-class life. . . . His slum characters are generally repulsive, unwashed, uncultured and brutish"), and necessarily brief assessments of Morrison, Somerset Maugham, and Israel Zangwill. "Setting" does not give us much more, and the cursor hovers in vain over the other topics, "Characterization," "Imagery, Symbolism, and Motif," and "Structure." To return to the first section, some of the links there are dead (e.g., "Literary Relations") and others take the reader to general discussions (e.g., "Social and Political Contexts"). Elsewhere in this section, Peter Morton has contributed material, as has James Haydock, author of *Portraits in Charcoal: George Gissing's Women* (2004), and Deborah McDonald has lent paragraphs from her Clara Collet website. The third section, "Bibliography" *[sic]*, mentions Korg's and Halperin's biographies but knows nothing of later works, including the three-volume work of Coustillas, and "Related Web

Ressources" is an early version of Morton's piece in the April (not May, as claimed) 1997 issue of *The Gissing Journal.*

A doubtless good-hearted start was made some years ago and bits and pieces have been added since, including, incidentally, the present writer's photographs of Gissing's grave and la Maison Elguë, in Ispoure, where Gissing died, taken in 2008. They are reproduced here not, clearly enough, as an indication of his skill with a camera but rather as an encouragement to this journal's readers to consider filling in at least some of the gaps in a major research tool's treatment of a very considerable talent. George P. Landow, Founder, Editor-in-Chief, and Webmaster, will consider not merely essays that attempt to fill the manifest gaps, or other gaps not yet staked out, but anything that may be useful to the Victorian Web's readers, including reviews of recent scholarship and other images. His e-mail address is george@victorianweb.org. (My two photographs may have some slight interest if compared with those of the grave and la Maison Elguë in the final volume of the *Collected Letters* and *Homage to a Great Man of Letters*.)

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I am grateful for the advice and help of Philip V. Allingham, Professor of Education, Adjunct Professor of English, Lakehead College, and Contributing Editor of the Victorian Web, in the preparation and writing of this article.

Notes and News

Maria Teresa Chialant, "George Gissing, Greece, and the Mediterranean Passion." Read at "Mapping the Imagination: Literary Geography," Università degli Studi di Salerno, 11 March, 2014.

_____. “Mediterranean Landscapes in George Gissing’s *By the Ionian Sea.*” Read at Anglo-Italian Day 2014, “Visions of Italy: Modernism and Modernist,” Università degli Studi Milano, 21 March, 2014.

M. D. Allen, “*Quellenforschung* and George Gissing.” Read at the Twenty-Third Polish Association for the Study of English Conference, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland, 7 April, 2014.

Jacqueline Wilson, D.B.E., F.R.S.L., distinguished author of books for children, cites Gissing as an inspiration: “The best way to do the research is to read Victorian novels, both for adults and children, written in that period. . . . There’s an adult author called George Gissing, and he wrote great, long stories, full of detail—about what people were wearing, what the streets looked like. So I could read these to get the feel of what it was like.” “Jacqueline Wilson: ‘I didn’t think I would write more about Hetty—neither did my publishers!’” *The Guardian* 11 March, 2014. (Thanks to Tom Ue for this item.)

Tony Petyt writes from Wakefield: This year sees the 50th anniversary of the Wakefield Civic Society and they have asked us if we could mount an exhibition of the Gissing Trust and the Gissing Centre. As they, along with the Wakefield Historical Society and the *Gissing Newsletter/Journal*, were the three bodies that set up the Gissing Trust, we were happy to oblige. The exhibition is quite extensive and shows the setting up of the Trust, the opening of the Gissing Centre, and the many exhibitions mounted at the Gissing Centre and other places over the last thirty years or so. The exhibition will run for the entire 2014 season.

Recent Publication

Allen, M. D. "Juvenilia, Money-Makers, & Masterpieces." Rev. of *Collected Short Stories: George Gissing*, ed. and intros. by Pierre Coustillas, with the assistance of Barbara Rawlinson and Hélène Coustillas. *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 57.4 (2014): 556-59.

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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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