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

"The unceasing questioner; to whom, indeed, there is no reply": Life, Death, and Meaning in Gissing's Fiction

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Abstract

This study focuses on George Gissing's representations of life, death, and meaning in his correspondence and selected literary works, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* in particular, and argues that although he had a sceptical approach to the meaning and purpose of life, his intellectual idealism, interest in art, and sympathy for the sufferings of mankind made his life more tolerable and meaningful. In Gissing's life and literary works, it is possible to observe a gradually transforming understanding of the will-to-live, death, and meaning. In his early socialist and slum novels such as *The Unclassed* and *Demos*, Gissing expresses a stronger will-to-live and idealism in drawing attention to the miseries and struggles of the lower classes. Yet, he later finds that they share fundamentally different objectives and understandings of life. Towards the end of his life, his pessimism seems to have given way to wisdom and disinterest regarding everyday life and troubles. In Gissing's novels, death is not something to be feared since it means an ultimate release from worldly sufferings and the miseries of existence. Instead, it is endowed with positive connotations rather than being depicted as a fatal end for his fictional characters. For the analysis, the article utilises Schopenhauer's "will-to-live" theory, Freud's "death drive" theory, and key philosophical readings on the meaning of life, death, and mortality.

1. Introduction:

In "The Subversive George Gissing" (1990), Evelyn Toynton notes that "the greatest pleasure to be derived from reading him [Gissing] is an intellectual one – that of watching a fiercely independent mind in the act of reflecting on life" (p. 126). In both Gissing's life and his literary works, it is possible to trace his continuous interest in questioning the meaning of life and death. The influence of his experiences of hard work, disillusionment, and poverty on his outlook on life is primarily reflected in his correspondence with family members and friends, which discloses continuous engagement with existential questions

throughout his life. Gissing's quest for the meaning of life and death also underlies the plots and contents of almost all his novels. His literary works mirror his sceptical outlook on finding the meaning of life and display a gradually transforming understanding of the will-to-live, death, and meaning. Some questions raised in this quest include: Does life have any meaning or purpose? Is death something to be avoided or desired? How does the will-to-live (or death drive) influence our experiences? What is the relationship between mortality and art? What is the significance of capitalism and religion? All Gissing's novels, and his semi-autobiographical work *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* in particular, tackle these questions as well as a number of critical issues in Victorian culture, such as inheritance, graveyards, illness, and suicide. In the light of Gissing's representations of life and death in fiction, this study argues that although he had a sceptical approach to the meaning and purpose of life, his intellectual idealism, interest in art, and sympathy for the sufferings of mankind made his life more tolerable and meaningful in a subjective way. His views on death as a refuge for the poor or a release from the miseries of existence are reflected in his novels by the way in which death is endowed with positive connotations rather than being depicted as a fatal end for the characters.

Before moving to an analysis of Gissing's novels, this study focuses on a theoretical approach to life, the will-to-live, mortality, death, the death drive, and meaning. Questions about the meaning of life and death have long been a subject of philosophy. Analytical existentialism, in this respect, offers a set of questions on "life and whether it has meaning, our mortality, and about what attitude we should have to our condition" (Benatar, 2004: p. 3). In *Life, Death, and Meaning* (2004) Benatar describes two ways in which life can/cannot be meaningful: in the subjective sense and the objective sense. When individuals find their own lives meaningful and/or when they feel satisfied and fulfilled with the way they live, this condition is referred to as the subjective sense. This approach is a personal view/feeling of one's own condition regardless of other people's influence or opinions. The objective sense, in contrast, suggests that the meaning of life does not necessarily depend on the way a person feels. If a person's life meets some objective conditions (such as a religious purpose, a moral life, or a level of creativity), it is considered meaningful. This sense, however, requires the life to have some "meaning-endowing objective condition[s]" (p. 7). In this case, in the absence of a meaningful purpose, some lives cannot have meaning. Many people therefore assume either a subjective or objective approach to whether their life is or is not meaningful.

The meaning of life is also intimately associated with the end of life. An awareness of our mortality is another crucial reason for questioning the purpose of our lives. Mortality, in this sense, is frequently believed to be a negative/harm

and it leads to death-avoidance behaviour (Benatar, 2004: pp. 10-11). In "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" (2004), Robert Nazick suggests that "certain limits […] are necessary for meaningful organization" (p. 72). That is, the limited time span of human life helps us make sense of the world we are dwelling in. Life is an in-between condition and a brief period between our unknown prior states before birth and after death. In this sense, as Victor Frankl notes, "death itself is what makes life meaningful [...] If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever" (qtd in Nazick, 2004: p. 70). Death itself also "draws attention to the fragility of life" (Kristeva, 1982: p. 4). The meaning or meaninglessness of life, therefore, is closely connected with our awareness of mortality. In his essay on mortality and "meaningless existence" entitled "The Meaning of Life" (Benatar, 2004), Richard Taylor, like Albert Camus, uses the ancient myth of Sisyphus as an example to describe "the perfect image of meaninglessness" or the absurdity of life (p. 20). Sisyphus is an immortal mythical figure punished by the gods to repeatedly roll a stone to the top of a hill, only for it to immediately roll back down again. This condition symbolises a continuous struggle and determination to try again despite constant discouragement. Taylor suggests that our life in this world resembles a vast machine, "feeding on itself, running on and on forever to nothing" and the Sisyphus myth reflects "the image of meaningless activity and existence" of human beings regardless of their own will or their distaste (pp. 22-24).

The will-to-live, a term proposed by Schopenhauer, is a psychological need for preservation of life (survival) and it is directly linked with hope of future improvement. With hope, individuals retain some belief in the possibilities of life and this helps them to find meaning and to continue their life. The nature of this will urges individuals to achieve certain goals in life although these cannot provide a sense of permanent satisfaction. Interest in art and a moral life based on sympathy tend to reduce suffering. The denial or suspension of the will is defined as passivity, whereas "striving is its assertion" (Francis, 1960: p. 60). Dissimilarly, the death drive presents an antithesis to the belief that human beings desire the preservation of life (O'Connor, 2010: p. 24). This is a natural and psychological negation of the will-to-live. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud defines the death drive as "a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state" (p. 46). In Freud's terms, "Eros" refers to life-instincts, such as survival, love, or pleasure, whilst "Thanatos" is the death instinct and the goal of all life. This unconscious desire for death is explained through its capacity to negate worldly tensions entirely. In Freud's pleasure principle, death is the ultimate release of energy, which should therefore evoke pleasure, rather than discontent. Human life consists of a continuous struggle and will-to-live towards death as its ultimate

aim (O'Connor, 2010: p. 24). This view of death is also held by Schopenhauer, whose influence on Freud and Gissing has long been acknowledged (p. 24). Schopenhauer believed that constant struggle in life meant "dissatisfaction or deficiency in life" and death could remove this friction (p. 38). Both Freud and Schopenhauer understand death as a "release," and in Gissing's fiction the protagonist is released from his/her tensions or anxieties through death, disclaiming any resolution or satisfaction for the reader (p. 37).

Walter Benjamin notes that fiction provides us with "the knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives" (qtd in O'Connor, 2010: p. 38). In Gissing's novels, death is not "senseless"; instead it is "desired, welcomed, needed," it helps the reader make sense of the protagonist's life (p. 39). Indeed, a fatal end is inevitable because the protagonist is unable to find a quick or easy solution to their troubles in life. In Gissing's fiction, the life of the poor, in particular, might be deemed as either having "no intrinsic value" or "not directed to any goal" since the world they are living in "prevents the required end [success or wealth] from being achieved" (Joske, 2004: p. 49). Even if the poor have a compulsive impulse or will-to-live to strive constantly in life and/or feel satisfied with their lives and find them meaningful, their life might still be meaningless since it ultimately meets no objective conditions. That is, their subjective sense of their own lives might be irrelevant if the objective sense of the meaning of life is futile and denies any meaningfulness. In this case, for Gissing, in a world in which money is God and striving for a better life is pursued in vain, death (or suicide) is a release from the meaninglessness of life and poverty. Indeed, inheritance through death subverts the meaning and value of death, making it an instrument for accessing capital, rather than a fatal end for the dead. In this sense, Gissing seems to share the idea that death might bring beneficial results for the remaining characters in need of money. Gissing does not regard suicide as an immoral act either, since the characters in his novels choose death as a dignified end and/or as a way of exercising control over their lives.

2. Life, the Will-to-live, and Meaning

In *The Heroic Life of George Gissing* (*Part One*, 2011), Pierre Coustillas suggests that Gissing was "an optimist and idealist" and despite all the hardships and disillusionment in his life "even in his darkest days, his zest for life never quite deserted him" (p. 2). In view of Gissing's correspondence and his representation of life in his fiction, it is hard to consider him an "optimist"; however, he clearly had a strong will-to-live due to his intellectual ambitions, which was gradually transformed into a peaceful obscurity or disinterest in life in later years. Gissing improved his intellectual capacity with continuous self-learning and he endeavoured to draw attention to the issues of urban poverty, the

commercialisation of literature, outcast intellectuals, women's emancipation, and the controversy of science and religion in Victorian society (Korg, 1950: p. 201). The style he chose for conveying his social messages was neither sentimental nor falsely romantic, and his observational skill and characterisations were stronger than his imagination, which has led to an understanding of his novels as naturalist or realist narratives. Toynton notes that his talents "might have been more suited to essays than to fiction" since his observations led to questioning life in a serious manner in his narratives (1990: p. 126). Yet, the revival of interest in Gissing's publications and life since the 1960s confirms his success as an author who wrote original and artistic works that transcended time and space (Halperin, 1976: p. 103).

In fact, Gissing's intellectual and independent musings on life led to some criticism of his skills as an author. Yet, as Arthur St John Adcock noted in the English *Bookman* in August 1905, despite being criticised for choosing "sombre themes and wr[iting] of them sombrely," he refused to change the gloomy outlook and style in his narratives (qtd in Coustillas, 2016: p. 7). In one of his letters to his sister Ellen, dated 29 April 1891, Gissing clarifies his view on life and his determination not to reflect on it in any other way:

> As for your comments on the philosophical tone of the book [*Born in Exile*], well, it is too late for me to change my views of the universe. I do not dogmatize, remember; [...] on the whole I confine myself to giving pictures of life as it looks to my observation. The outlook, certainly, is not very cheerful; impossible for me to see the world in a rosy light. At best it looks to me only not-intolerable [...] The problem does not trouble me, either; I have reached the stage at which one is content to be ignorant. The world is to me mere phenomenon (which literally means that which *appears*) & I study it as I do a work of art—but without reflecting on its origin. (*Collected Letters, Vol. 4*, 1993: pp. 292-293)

Gissing's approach to life, art, and the universe in the 1890s is neatly summarised in this passage. He openly rejects any pretention of optimism in his novels and tries to convey the way he sees the world. He relies on his observations and his subjective view of life. As St John Adcock wrote in 1905, Gissing's pessimistic outlook on life and its reflection in his novels did not provide a valid reason for criticising his artistic skills: "Some of his critics used to reprove him for his gloomy views of life, as if it were desirable that all novelists should be of the same optimistic temperament and monotonously regard the world from the same standpoint" (qtd in Coustillas, 2016: p. 7). Although the world does not seem a hopeful place for Gissing, it is not "intolerable" either. Furthermore, in his later years, his pessimism seems to have given way to wisdom and indifference regarding everyday life and troubles. He seems to have tried to refrain from questioning the meaning of life, but was determined to continue his struggle to the end of his journey.

Gissing's well-known agnosticism or scepticism is deeply rooted in the views on the meaning of life and death that he developed in his youth. The fact that he never adopted Christianity or any other religion in the later years of his life is also associated with his belief that accessing the absolute truth about the purpose of life is not practically possible. Faith or this unknown purpose transcends human intelligence and senses. In a letter to his brother Algernon on 16 May 1880, Gissing transmits his thoughts on the issue as follows:

> But remember, one of my principles is that *absolute* truth is—at present, at least,—unattainable, & I do not *condemn* those who think otherwise; merely differ from them. Herein you are unjust to me. Yet again, in a matter like this, the burden of proof certainly rests upon the Supernaturalists. An agnostic, like myself, i.e.,—one who says of things beyond his senses he *knows & can know nothing*,—is very justified in refusing to be converted by those who, you will surely grant me, are convinced merely by their *sentiment*. […] I only wished you to sympathize with me, & believe *I* was genuinely convinced. Above all, *condemnation* of opponents, *as long as they confine themselves to intellectual regions*, is a word out of my vocabulary. (*Collected Letters, Vol. I*, 1990: p. 273)

Although Gissing seems to agree that there might be a coherency or purpose to life, he rejects the idea that human beings could really understand this. He respects those with different opinions but emphasises that we cannot access the truth only through feelings. Not only religion, but also supernaturalism fails to provide solid proof of the purpose and meaning of life. Therefore, his stance is comprised of "the impossibility of belief" since he claims "a knowledge of the purpose behind the universe cannot be ascertained" (Brewer, 2010: p. 204). Jacob Korg suggests that Gissing "felt with equal force the attraction and the impossibility of faith" (1980*:* p. 175). Indeed, this approach should be conceived as Gissing's constant quest for the meaning of life, from a philosophical standpoint rather than a religious one. Gissing believes in the existence of meaning, yet he rejects the possibility of it being confirmed by human beings.

He depicts a very similar outlook on the meaning of life more than two decades later in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. In this novel, Gissing draws attention to wisdom, as a quality that humans cannot attain "by deliberate effort of thought" (Gissing, 1903: p. 165). Human beings are far from discovering the truth about life. In a state that Gissing calls "the intellectual mood of the quietist," a person contemplates life and gets an idea through his/her soul and emotions in a quiet place at an unpredicted moment (p. 165). Putting all our passions and senses aside helps us to access unknown thoughts in silence and nature. Having no understanding of the meaning of life, however, does not mean that "life has no meaning beyond the sense it bears to human intelligence" (p. 180). Nevertheless, reason and intelligence themselves would reject such an assumption:

> No theory of the world which ever came to my knowledge is to me for one moment acceptable; the possibility of an explanation which would set my mind at rest is to me inconceivable; no whit the less am I convinced that there is a Reason of the All; one which

> transcends my understanding, one no glimmer of which will ever touch my apprehension; a Reason which must imply a creative power, and therefore, even whilst a necessity of my thought, is by the same criticized into nothing. A like antinomy with that which affects our conception of the infinite in time and space. Whether the rational processes have reached their final development, who shall say? Perhaps what seem to us the impassable limits of thought are but the conditions of a yet early stage in the history of man. (p. 180)

In this passage, the possibility of an explanation is denied because none would fully satisfy the mind as an acceptable reason for existence or for the meaning of life. The presence of a creative power is rejected as it fails to provide sufficient clues or proof through reason. The implication of its possibility is at the same time denied through criticism. That is, rational thinking prevents a final decision on the matter since it is not possible to confirm it entirely in human existence. In this respect, Gissing refers to the concept of infinite time and space in order to highlight the ambiguity of our status in our own timeline since the endpoint of human existence is as yet unknown. Thus, he refuses theoretical approaches to the meaning of life and embraces a sceptical view, highlighting the impossibility of accessing the truth.

Gissing's religious scepticism and agnostic view also allow him to question the possibility of discovering the meaning of life (Brewer, 2010: p. 191). Gissing believes that "meaning exists," but humans will never be sure of "what the purpose of things might consist" (p. 191). However, Gissing's criticism of religion proves that he did not completely ignore it (p. 11). Indeed, the powers and privileges of the Church intimidated Gissing because they signified the capitalist involvement of the Church as a religious institution (p. 23). In his 1882 essay, "The Hope of Pessimism" (unpublished in his lifetime: [1970]), Gissing criticises Protestantism for its optimism and capitalist tendency, and claims that it is far from the primitive form of Christianity:

> Christianity in its modern form of optimistic protestantism is a delusion and a snare. In accommodating itself, step by step, to the growth of material civilization, this so-called religion of Christ has directly encouraged the spirit of egotism which inevitably accompanies an optimistic faith; its latest outcome is the predominance of commercial competition, with its doctrine of "Every man for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost." What has the Christianity of to-day in common with the "Imitatio Christi," what in common with the teachings of a prophet whose birth from a virgin mother, and whose own virginity, symbolized that renunciation of the world of flesh which was the strait and narrow way to the kingdom of heaven? (p. 96)

In his life and fiction, Gissing first substituted religion with aestheticism (with the ideal of unifying beauty in life and social reform) and then with Positivism (God as collective humanity or humanity as the children of God) (Brewer, 2010: pp. 17-23). Even though direct references to God and religion are limited in his novels (except in *Born in Exile,* based on religious scepticism), they are often substituted by the presence of money and "worldly motives and passions" (p. 21).

His subtle references to faith, his use of biblical language, his critique of "poverty and Evangelical philanthropy," and his emphasis on the relations between economic activities and clergymen (of the Church) in his narratives disclose his continuous involvement with religious matters (p. 11). For example, "Hell" is used as a metaphor in novels such as *The Nether World* to describe the daily life of the lowest levels of the working classes, or the unclassed in the slums. Death, on the other hand, is considered to be beneficial as it has the potential to end the miseries of existence among the poor. Death further releases humans from their sins, such as Arthur's death in *Workers in the Dawn*.

The will-to-live is considered a sin in Christianity and something that should be avoided. In *The Unclassed*, Miss Bygrave describes sin as "fondness for the world," pleasure, and "desire for happiness" in life (Gissing, 1991: pp. 34-35). She argues that people should avoid all of the temptations of life since this makes people cling to life and unhappy when they face losing it. Human beings should hate life so much that they are "ready at any moment to give up on their life with gladness" because "death is the greatest blessing in the gift of God" (p. 35). The will-to-live, therefore, should be avoided. Despite this, a person should not aim for death before its time as suicide is regarded as a sin. Sufferings of the body indicate the "delight of the soul" and death should produce "perfect happiness" (p. 35). This religious approach is opposed in the same novel by another character: Waymark. In a conversation with Maud, he admits that he never felt any "religious consolation" in the prospect of death, and indeed he might have felt fear (p. 225). He self-consciously regards sin of no significance and admits that he has never worried about it since his childhood. However, he acknowledges the idea of destiny as "an instinct" rather than a religious concept and claims that it exists because he lacks complete control over his future, despite some of his motives in life. Lack of faith in religion, therefore, does not prohibit a sense of fate and it diminishes an understanding of life as a sin, or death as the ultimate happiness. Whilst Christianity tends to explain the mystery of the universe and existence as something black and white, it does not allow any opportunity for discovery. For the others, who do not believe in this, "the mystery of life and death begins and ends with a vast doubt, whose every thought is the fruit of, and leads to, boundless conjecture": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," as Gissing notes in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880: p. 42).

In Gissing's novels, the will-to-live is unstable, yet it remains as strong as the death drive in a number of ways. Most of Gissing's fictional characters are deterred from enjoying the life they expect or are prepared for due to financial hardships and poverty, but they constantly struggle in the hope of a better future. Their unceasing aspirations allow them to cling to life even at their lowest

moments. Life is not a source of happiness or pleasure, but their life instinct keeps them alive. Nancy Lord in *In the Year of Jubilee*, for instance, is described as a woman who has a strong will-to-live and she makes claims for women's agency in the patriarchal Victorian society: "All she knew was, that she wished to live, and not merely to vegetate" (Gissing, 1895: p. 13). Reardon and Biffen in *New Grub Street* and Jane Snowdon in *The Nether World* also have a strong will-to-live and they continually strive until they lose all their hopes and aspirations for a better future. Death, however, does not represent a fatal end to the journey of Gissing's fictional characters since it provides the ultimate release from their worldly miseries and should be sincerely welcomed. In this respect, Gissing creates an ambiguous balance between the will-to-live and the death drive in his novels, by depicting the struggle and gradual degradation of his characters in their journey towards death. The hardships they encounter on this journey ultimately change their view of the meaning of life and death as well.

For example, in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* the author's past experiences simultaneously alter his will-to-live and perspective on the meaning of life. In the novel, Ryecroft is depicted as a man in his fifties who has spent his youth labouring and living in poverty. Fear of the future haunts him and he cannot tolerate any type of dependence on others. He is afraid his life might end without any improvement in his condition after all the hard work and long struggle (Gissing, 1903: p. ix). In fact, he finds fear of the future more dreadful than death itself. In this way, Gissing emphasises the difficulty of maintaining and striving for a decent life. Adopting a retrospective outlook on his literary career, Ryecroft defines his life as "merely tentative, a broken series of false starts and hopeless new beginnings" (p. 263). These fluctuations in his past decrease his enthusiasm and aspiration for success. Ryecroft further refers to life as something to be lived for living's sake, rather than living solely for money or wealth (p. 3). He criticises the human condition for having had to work hard to earn money, and for this becoming the ultimate objective in life instead of an instrument for achieving purpose (p. 3). This underlies a belief that money should not be the ultimate goal for a fulfilling and satisfying life. However, poverty and constant toil distort the feelings of happiness or satisfaction with life. In this sense, Ryecroft regards financial difficulties and striving for a better future as a handicap that makes life meaningless, whilst a lack of money creates serious problems. The role of money in society is further criticised because its absence can change almost every aspect of life in a degrading way. A person can lose his/her loved ones, become alienated, and refrain from meeting friends even though he/she longs for their companionship, simply because he/she is poor (p. 15). Ryecroft also experiences "the conflict of intellectual desire and bodily need" at utmost poverty when he wants to buy a volume of a book at a discounted

price, but buying it means giving up his dinner (p. 36). Insufficient income puts him in an in-between condition in which he has to make a decision and prioritise either his biological needs or intellectual desires.

Nevertheless, despite his poverty, Ryecroft does not consider himself as a member of the lower classes because he believes that their aims are not fundamentally compatible with his (Gissing, 1903: p. 194). Even if they tried to understand each other, each side would ultimately fail because total sincerity and comprehension is in fact impossible: "What they at heart desired, was to me barren; what I coveted, was to them for ever incomprehensible" (p. 194). In this way, he distinguishes himself, with his intellectual ideals in life, from the poor and their daily concerns. Since their subjective sense of life and goals are different, a mutual understanding does not seem possible to him either. Ryecroft also muses on the different ways in which the middle and upper classes feel meaningful and satisfied in their lives, through deliberate choices when socialising in both the day and night in cities, in drawing-rooms, public eating-houses or theatres: "They call it life; they call it enjoyment. Why, so it is, for them; they are so made. The folly is mine, to wonder that they fulfil their destiny" (p. 114). He seems to have accepted other people's subjective sense through which they feel their life is meaningful and fulfilled. However, Rycroft does not differentiate on whether their life has an intrinsic value, or whether it is directed towards any meaningful goal regardless of their subjective sense. Instead, he seems to explain it through their nature, the way they are, something that can never change. Still, he cannot refrain from wondering at the common human life and sometimes from finding its effect on his mind to be like "a haunting illusion" (p. 220). He finds human deeds such as "fretting, raving, killing each other [...] so trivial" that he falls into amazement when he thinks of them (p. 220). This does not mean that he is free of any weaknesses or passions. He sees himself as a proud and strong man with weaknesses since he feels a sense of revolt against the hardships he goes through. He is also aware of the power of human beings to adapt to impoverishment, whilst continuing to question the contradictory nature of human beings (p. 236). A life consumed with hard work and constant anxiety is not considered to have met its objectives and it is pointless because it is not directed towards any meaningful goals. Ryecroft's youth, full of future plans and hopes, feels like only yesterday to him and he finds it difficult to accept that he is near the end of his life. At this point, his subjective sense of time and temporality overwhelm him in an astonishing manner:

> I said to myself: My life is over. Surely I ought to have been aware of that simple fact; certainly it has made part of my meditation, has often coloured my mood; but the thing had never definitely shaped itself, ready in words for the tongue. My life is over. I uttered the sentence once or twice, that my ear might test its truth. Truth undeniable, however strange; undeniable as the figure of my age last birthday.

> […] How is it possible? But, I have done nothing; I have had no time; I have only been preparing myself—a mere apprentice to life [...] And this is all? A man's life can be so brief and so vain? [...] I can look back upon its completed course, and what a little thing! I am tempted to laugh; I hold myself within the limit of a smile. (Gissing, 1903: pp. 217-218)

With this sudden revelation, Ryecroft oscillates between accepting his brief existence in the order of the universe and rebelling against its meaninglessness for not having achieved his goals. The thought comes to him as "an instant but dreadful" realisation that the time allocated to him has passed quicker than he expected (p. 218). He is not sure whether his questions about his existence, the purpose of his life, and the end of it are ever satisfactorily answered. He likens life to a play in which players just play their "little part" and then disappear from the stage (p. 219). This understanding, at the same time, shapes his outlook on life as a "task duly completed – a piece of biography" with its faults and good memories before it ends (pp. 292-293). Gissing carefully uses the term "nature" to describe the place of human beings in the order of the universe and he states that Ryecroft will never understand what the purpose of his life and experiences were: "So it was to be; so it was. For this did Nature shape me; with what purpose, I shall never know; but, in the sequence of things eternal, this was my place" (p. 18). Questions about reason and "the dictate of Nature" are significant even though neither human beings nor philosophy seem to have a definite answer: "Thus the unceasing questioner; to whom, indeed, there is no reply. For our philosophy sees no longer a supreme sanction, and no longer hears a harmony of the universe" (p. 186).

3. Representations of Death in Gissing's Fiction

In his novels, Gissing widely made use of "death" as a narrative strategy in both plot and content, with a particular focus on the meaning of death. Inheritance through death, burial grounds, metaphors of Hell and suicide appear in his narratives as a plot device to provide a sense of relief to his characters. Although references to religious ceremonies are limited and funerals are not described in detail, graveyards play a significant role and symbolise death as a dignified end for mankind in peace and silence. Illness and long deathbed scenes are mostly avoided in his narratives since Gissing considered them a weakness before death. The lives and miseries of the poor in urban slums are described with metaphors that refer to "Hell," and suicide provides a refuge for the outcast young intellectuals in his fiction. In this way, Gissing seems to endow death with positive connotations that help individuals either continue their life in a better financial condition, or escape the burden of life through the denial of the will-to-live.

Inheritance through death is one of the most common plot devices used by Gissing to provide his characters with financial relief. It also reflects the English death culture and patriarchal social structure in the late nineteenth century. In Victorian England, the formation of inheritance practices depended largely on the social order. The patriarchal structure of society constrained women from having economic, political, or social power due to the idea of female fragility, weakness, and inferiority (Davis, 2008). Within this social framework, men had greater access to properties such as houses, estates, crops, and mineral rights than women, who often only obtained personal property, such as stocks, bonds, furniture, and jewellery. Although there were no specific inheritance laws in England, the final will or desire of the owner of all properties was carefully carried out. The oldest son in the family usually inherited his father's entire estate (termed "primogenitur") unless otherwise stated in a written document, or expressed. Although unmarried women could gain inheritance by the will of their father, all their rights of inheritance would pass to their husband once they got married. Furthermore, real property and personal property were subject to different systems of law until 1926 and legal systems such as civil law, canon law, equity and common law complicated inheritance problems (Mitchell, 2011: p. 396). These complications also led to issues of inheritance prevailing in Victorian novels as a plot device.

Inheritance has a direct influence on the financial status of impoverished male and female characters in Gissing's novels and it sometimes even allows for an upgrade in their social class. In such a case, the meaning of death gains some positive connotations as a beginning, a new life for those that remain, instead of a fatal end. Fortune in Victorian fiction, for instance, means inheritance, rather than income. In *The Unclassed* Ida Starr inherits money after the death of her landlord grandfather and she changes her profession from sex work to philanthropy. In *Demos* (1886), there is a continuous search for the missing will of Mr Mutimer after his unexpected death: "Two days before his death, he had his will from Mr. Yottle, saying he wanted to make changes – probably to execute a new will altogether. My dear, he destroyed it, and death surprised him before he could make another" (Gissing, 1888: p. 14). The will plays a significant role in the novel and determines the flow of events. In the 1896 short story "The Firebrand," Catterick receives four hundred per annum (Gissing, 1915: p. 38), while Miss Barfoot in *The Odd Women* comes into "possession of a modest fortune" (Gissing, 1893: p. 70). In *Born in Exile*, Godwin claims that there is no harm in accepting life as a short journey and death as a passage from "being into nothingness":

> I see no harm in hoping that his life may be short – that's a conventional feeling. If two people can be benefited by the death of a single person, why shouldn't we be glad in the

> prospect of his dying? Not of his suffering – that's quite another thing. But die he must; and to curtail the life of a being who at length wholly ceases to exist is no injury. You can't injure a nonentity. (Gissing, 1893: p. 195)

Jane Snowdon, in *The Nether World*, on the other hand, rejects an inheritance from her grandfather and chooses to live in poverty with philanthropic ideals because she believes wealth will adversely impact her moral values.

In the preface to *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the reader is informed that after the death of one of his friends, Ryecroft will inherit an annual income of three hundred pounds (Gissing, 1903: p. ix). Once more, Gissing uses death as a means of beneficial financial upgrade. Through inheritance, Gissing also makes an explicit connection between money and death. Death carries a positive connotation in offering financial relief to Ryecroft, a loved friend. This strategy is used to enable Ryecroft's experience of a more comfortable life in Devonshire. With the unexpected inheritance, he is able to achieve some of his objectives, such as having a home and living in a quiet place in solitude for the rest of his life. In this semi-fictional work, Gissing also departs from the conventional themes of hardship and poverty in his earlier novels and instead provides an optimistic future for the protagonist at the start of the narrative. This approach allows Gissing to move away from the hardships of life in the narrative and to focus on Ryecroft's happiness and enjoyment in the comfort and solitude of nature. Ryecroft's retrospective outlook on his previous years helps him muse on the meaning of life and death. The novel, in this regard, is distinguished from Gissing's earlier novels by its narrative technique, its semi-autobiographical account, its plot and dominant themes such as the struggles of the working classes, and the emancipation of women in Victorian society.

Ryecroft's outlook on death is fundamentally shaped by his views on life and this presents the reader with a meaningful outlook that conflicts with the widely held beliefs about death as a harmful or dreadful end. Thinking about death does not trouble the protagonist as much as fear of the future (Gissing, 1903: p. 182). Instead, he dreads the possibility of "long deathbed torments" because he believes this distorts the dignity of death after a decent life (p. 183). He longs for a quick death in silence and solitude. In this part, Ryecroft refers to his life after inheritance as "quiet enjoyment" and death as "the final peace" or "the great silence" (pp. 166 & xi). The death of Rycroft (from heart disease) is described by Gissing as an easy and quick one as he "pass[es] from slumber into the great silence" after a long walk on a summer evening (p. xi). These sections in the narrative evoke Gissing's own distaste for illness before death. Gissing himself died of emphysema on 28 December 1903, in France, after a long lung illness (Toynton, 1990: p. 136). The image of graves in country churchyards also seems more attractive to Gissing than the ones in cities (Gissing, 1903: p. 183).

Gravestones reflect a "happy accomplishment" or "the eternal peace" with a dignity attributed to it (p. 183). In "The Hope of Pessimism" Gissing also claims that "[t]he grave will become a symbol of joy; those who have departed will be spoken of as the happy ones, and the tears of the mourner will be checked by his bitter reason" (Gissing, 1970: p. 97). Ryecroft's feeling about the dead is not sadness, but instead "a brotherly tenderness" for a "vanished life" (Gissing, 1903: p. 184). Silence is considered an encouragement for the living man who should take his place with "the tranquillity of the mature mind" (p. 292). For someone who had experienced life with ease, it would be difficult to accept death. For an individual who had lived with no purpose, "the end would have seemed abrupt and meaningless" (p. 292). The meaning a person attributes to life, therefore, determines his/her outlook on death, regardless of whether life or death is objectively meaningful or not. In this sense, after his tranquil moments in the countryside, for Ryecroft death is regarded only "as a friend, who will intensify the peace [he] now relishes" (p. 112). Death will mark a definite end to his past sufferings and therefore it should be welcomed rather than feared. In this way, death does not represent a disastrous end to be avoided. If life is a journey that reaches its final point with death, death is an instrument for an eternal release of tensions and struggles in human life.

Although references to religious matters are relatively few in Gissing's novels, Hell as a metaphor is frequently used in his slum novels such as *The Nether World* and *The Unclassed* in referring to the lives of the poor and the miseries of their existence. These novels provide a criticism of urban slums through religious terminology and draw attention to the urgency of rehabilitation in the East End. For example, Mad Jack in Clerkenwell describes this condition as a punishment for the poor due to their egotism, sinfulness and degeneration:

> Then the angel said: "You are passing through a state of punishment. You, and all the poor among whom you live; all those who are in suffering of body and darkness of mind, were once rich people, with every blessing the world can bestow, with every opportunity of happiness in yourselves and of making others happy. Because you made an ill use of your wealth, because you were selfish and hard-hearted and oppressive and sinful – in every kind of indulgence – therefore after death you received the reward of wickedness. 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. From poor you shall become poorer; the older you grow the lower you shall sink in want and misery; at the end there is waiting for you, one and all, a death in abandonment and despair. This is Hell – Hell – Hell!" (Gissing, 1999: p. 345)

In a similar way, Ida in *The Unclassed* associates Hell with poverty and slums, although she also ponders whether it would have been better to stay poor so as to not forget who she is. Through inheritance, she is "lifted out of Hell" but because this is not done "by her own strength" she wonders whether it would

have been better to "share the misery of that dread realm of darkness with those poor disinherited ones" (Gissing, 1911: p. 255). She is afraid of losing her passion and past self in refinement and dreads any excessive change in her self-identity. In Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Unclassed*, "hellish miseries" is another term frequently used to associate the living standard of the poor with Hell to indicate the degree of their suffering.

The miseries of the poor and the impoverishment of intellectuals alleviate their will-to-live and enforce their death desire in Gissing's novels. For the poor, death is sometimes desired as a refuge from the miseries of life, whilst suicide often takes place once Gissing's intellectual protagonists lose all hope of improvement in the future. The theme of death as a release is repeatedly used in Gissing's slum fiction, as well as in his novels on women's emancipation. In *The Odd Women*, for instance, Monica thinks of death as an escape from her problems and sufferings, but the terror of death also keeps her awake at night (Gissing, 1934: p. 406). The juxtaposition between day and night alters her perspective and feelings towards death. Although death seems like a solution in the daytime, she dreads it at night. Self-willed suicide is another common end for characters in Gissing's novels and it allows the characters to have some agency in their own lives one last time, following their ultimate failure in life. Losing hope of a better life or failing to achieve their goals, the characters choose death to escape from the miseries of life. Benatar suggests that suicide "run[s] counter to the deep-seated, natural instinct of self-preservation of life" and this is why it is difficult to carry out (2010: p. 327). Suicide also largely depends on the actual or perceived quality of life, which may involve either underestimating or overestimating one's own quality of life. This means that the subjective view of life is highly significant in making the decision to commit suicide or not. However, issues such as a considerable burden on life may increase a person's desire for death and he/she might not choose to stay alive for the benefit of others.

In philosophy, there is also an ongoing argument about whether "suicide is ever morally permissible and whether it should ever be legal" (Benatar, 2004: p. 11). In his fiction, Gissing seems to conceive of it as a morally acceptable occurrence and a narrative strategy to solve the problems of his characters. The character's death signals not only the end of his/her life as a journey, but also the end of the narrative. At the end of *Workers in the Dawn,* for instance, Arthur Golding commits suicide at Niagara Falls:

> And she who, through good and evil, had never in reality ceased to be his ideal – she who had been noble and worthy effort personified […] Helen Norman was gone. And she being gone, what remained? […] Why had he ever lived? In vain he surveyed his life for the traces of any positive result, of any real good accomplished, any real end gained – he could find none. Failure was written upon it, written irrevocably.

> Why should he live? [...] He stood upon a vast mass of mingled ice and snow, and his garments were drenched with the rising vapour […] For a moment his blood boiled, his pulses leaped, his brain was on fire with the fierce joy of madness; in the next he shrieked in a voice which overcame that of the Falls, "Helen! Helen!" and plunged into the abyss. (*Workers in the Dawn*, pp. 440-442)

In *The Unclassed*, in a conversation with Ida, Waymark also admits that he had thought about suicide before, but he could not do it because he still had hope of joy. Ida gives a similar answer and confesses that she cannot stop hoping for a better life:

> "People kill themselves in despair," Waymark went on, "that is, when they have drunk to the very dregs the cup of life's bitterness. If they were wise, they would die at that moment – if it ever comes – when joy seems supreme and stable. Life can give nothing further, and it has no more hellish misery than disillusion following upon delight."
>
> "Did you ever seriously think of killing yourself?" Ida asked, gazing at him closely.
>
> "Yes. I have reached at times the point when I would not have moved a muscle to escape death, and from that it is not far to suicide. But my joy had never come, and it is hard to go away without that one draught. – And you!"
>
> "I went so far once as to buy poison. But neither had I tasted any happiness, and I could not help hoping."
>
> "And you still wait – still hope?"
>
> Ida made no direct answer. (Gissing, 1911: pp. 130-131)

In *New Grub Street*, on the other hand, Reardon has suicidal thoughts (although he dies from an illness) and his friend Biffen commits suicide towards the end of the narrative once he loses hope for the future and his will to continue. Their striving in the literary marketplace of late-Victorian London ends in failure and their disinterest in meeting the commercial demands of the publication world leads to a denial of the will to continue with their lives.

After Ryecroft's death, the literary papers provide an account of his death with the necessary information, such as "the date and place of his birth, the names of certain books he had written, an allusion to his work in the periodicals, the manner of his death" (Gissing, 1903: p. vii). Gissing emphasises that these kinds of obituary paragraphs are regarded as sufficient to honour the dead and "required no further celebration" (p. vii). He also states that Ryecroft lived and died like other mortals, and therefore this refers to the vanity of human life. Indeed, after Gissing's death, a similar description was published in the papers:

> DEATH OF MR GEORGE GISSING.
>
> The death is announced of Mr George Gissing, the well-known novelist, which took place on Monday afternoon at St. Jean-de-Luz, near Biarritz. There had been no previous announcement that he was out of health, and the news will therefore come with a painful shock of surprise to the many admirers and readers of his books.
>
> Mr Gissing, who was in his forty seventh year, was the author of about a score of novels, beginning with *The Unclassed*, which he published in 1884. (*Rhyl Record and Advertiser*, 2 January 1904, p. 7)

This includes a criticism of death culture and the ubiquity of death news in Victorian culture as well. The death of a writer also draws our attention to the issues of mortality, art, and immortality. In a letter written shortly after the death of his brother William in April 1880, Gissing draws attention to the immortality of human beings through their influence on others "like circles spreading in a pool, [which] exten[d] to the whole future human race" and he asserts the importance of setting an example of an individual "bent upon using his faculties to the utmost" (p. 69). An artistic outcome, such as a good book, may survive its author. This is referred to, in Gissing's terms, as "posthumous glory" (1903: p. 5). However, Ryecroft privileges temporary comforts over posthumous fame, which does not bring any comfort to the writer in his lifetime. Whilst Gissing was praised and respected as a novelist and could believe in the possibility of posthumous fame Ryecroft loses his faith since he considers his literary career a total failure. Ryecroft's approach contradicts a widely held belief that the artist aims at immortality through his/her work of art. Yet, at the same time, it confirms that financial concerns can trigger a change in a person's objectives with regard to aestheticism or making art for art's sake. Art itself has an intrinsic value that helps the artist make sense of the world he/she is living in. It also helps to decrease the sufferings of the artist. Its posthumous existence sustains and expands its meaning across generations. However, it cannot alter the mortality of its creator, whose posthumous glory will only help him/her survive in the memories of his/her readers. At this point, Gissing in fact turns his attention to the short duration of human life in the infinite time order, which substantially decreases the value and meaning of human life.

4. Conclusion:

By considering Gissing's correspondence with his family and friends, and his representations of life and death in his fiction, it is possible to observe a gradually transforming approach to life and death due to his past experiences and an intellectual outlook on religion, philosophy, and art. In his early socialist and slum novels, Gissing seems to express a stronger will-to-live and idealism in drawing attention to the miseries and struggles of the lower classes. Gissing was obviously sympathetic towards the poor; however, in time he realised that they shared fundamentally different objectives and understandings of life from him, as he makes clear in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. He aimed to depict life in his novels as he saw it and his interest in making art for art's sake and having a moral life seems to have alleviated his sufferings as an impoverished intellectual. Gissing had an agnostic view of life and believed that even if life had a meaningful purpose it would not be possible for human beings to know or understand it. However, possibly due to his disillusionment

and disappointments, Gissing instinctively had faith in fate and he could see the vanity of striving to alter it solely with one's own will. He could also see how capitalism distorted the value and meaning of a person's life and he detested the embroilment of religious institutions with money and their financial power. Using his intellectual capacity to the utmost in art and living in comfort seemed to be sufficient for him to have a better perception of the quality of his life. In fact, Gissing's subjective view of life determined his approach to death too. For Gissing, death is not something to be feared since it means an ultimate release from worldly sufferings and the miseries of existence. Illness before death distorts the dignity of death, and graveyards symbolise an eternal relief in nothingness. Inheritance provides financial relief to those that remain; that is, death not only marks an end to one person's life, but it might also signal a new life for others. Suicide is the denial of the will-to-live and a conscious and courageous option to escape the burdens of life, which is closely linked to a subjective view (a perceived view) of the quality of a person's own life. Although death means the avoidance of certain benefits the person would have enjoyed if he/she had not died, it is considered more meaningful than a meaningless existence.

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The July 2019 Literary London Society Conference on "Gissing, Clerkenwell, and Coustillas"

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Pierre Coustillas' editions of Gissing's diary, letters, notebooks, and other biographical sources have been foundational to scholarship on the writer and the nineteenth century, enabling critics both to study the biographical, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which his works were produced and distributed and to situate his writing more firmly in the canon of English literature. Critics have used these resources to study his conversations with contemporaries including George Meredith, Walter Besant, Morley Roberts, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wells; analysed his responses to, and reworking of, material by earlier writers such as Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson; and explored his imprint on the fiction of writers like E. W. Hornung. His critical editions have encouraged an expanded readership, and his criticism, in the pages of this journal and beyond, enables deeper engagement with so many issues, from Gissing's writing on Charles Dickens to his imprint on the modernists. This year's panel at the Literary London Society conference, on "Gissing, Clerkenwell, and Coustillas," canvasses, employs, and develops, Coustillas' scholarship.

The meeting took place on 12 July at the University of Notre Dame (USA) in England. It brings together new scholarship by Jason Finch (Åbo Akademi), Andrew Whitehead (Nottingham), and Akemi Yoshida (Kindai University), and resonates closely with the conference's theme: "'Neighbours of Ours': Cities, Communities, Networks." Finch's paper is titled "'The postmark? Yes, it was London E.C.': Clerkenwell Borders and Boarders in Gissing's *Demos*" restores the two meanings of "Clerkenwell": that is, the Tudor suburb which rose out of the medieval precincts of the Priory of St John and St Mary's Nunnery; and the entire, larger pre-1900 civil parish. Finch's emphasis is on the latter, and he focuses particularly on *Demos* to show how it resists clear demarcations of nether and upper worlds, privileging something akin to the London "kaleidoscope" that the scholar Jerry White describes. Finch connects his discussion of geography to the novel's theme, exploring whether Gissing attacks the aspirations of the London working class or the social climbing that characterises English manners more pervasively.

In "Clerkenwell—Gissing's 'Nether World,'" Whitehead looks at the area in biographical and geographical terms. He begins with Gissing's trauma, instigated by Nell Harrison's death, which encouraged him to write about working-class Clerkenwell and to portray the poor as being trapped in a hellish inferno. Whitehead shares Finch's concern regarding the position of Gissing's

implied author on social reform. Where Finch ruminates on the target of Gissing's social critique, Whitehead argues that Gissing finds inadequate both the different ways of breaking the cycle of poverty and deprivation that have been advocated and the radicalism and socialism for which Clerkenwell was known. Yoshida juxtaposes Gissing and Hardy in the panel's final paper "Textual Resonance in the Novelistic Worlds of Gissing and Hardy." The commonalities between the two writers are apparent at first glance: they both worked in the late-Victorian period; their views are agnostic and often pessimistic; and they are sympathetic towards the socially marginalised. The writers are connected biographically: Meredith was an important influence on them both, and they corresponded. Yoshida follows the footsteps of critics including Annette Federico, John Hughes, and Christine DeVine in attending to the conversation between the two Victorians. Yoshida examines a wide range of texts, including *Thyrza* (1887) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891); reveals their parallels in plot and language; and argues for the novelists' co-evolution. The three papers were followed by convivial discussion. Thanks are due to the panel chair Hadas Elber-Aviram (Notre Dame) and her fellow organisers: Eliza Cubitt, Lucie Glasheen (QMUL), and Nicolas Tredell; and to the University of Notre Dame (USA) in England and the Institute of English Studies at the School of Advanced Study in the University of London.

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How a French Scholar Set a Young Student on His Own Scholarly Career

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In 1924 appeared in France the first part of a history of English literature, dealing with the years 650-1660, the work of Emile Legouis, Professor of English at the Sorbonne, the second part, written by Louis Cazamian, also Professor of English at the Sorbonne, published the following year, being devoted to the years 1660-1924. The book covered 1312 pages. It was immediately warmly acclaimed in England, and a translation of it promptly contemplated. Helen Douglas Irvine provided the English version of the first volume, "The Middle Ages and the Renascence," which Dent brought out in 1926, while "Modern Times (1660-1924)," translated by W. D. MacInnes, M.A. in collaboration with the author, appeared the following year. Dent then brought out a revised and reset two-volume edition in 1930 and went on reprinting it for many years, sometimes with some revisions and necessary additions as years went by. In the 1970s it was still selling.

In France, as can be expected, the book was strongly recommended to students of English language and literature, long after Legouis had died in

the 1930s, and Cazamian had retired. It was also reprinted many times, with revisions and indispensable additions devoted to English authors who made a name from the 1920s onwards. Whether it had any special influence on at least some of the students who read the book in French universities through the years, I have of course no idea, but there was at least one whose name became familiar to subscribers of *The Gissing Newsletter*, later *The Gissing Journal*. But let me transcribe what Cazamian had to say of George Gissing who came next to Hardy, who was granted two more pages, and before William Hale White to whom Cazamian devoted only a page and a half. I shall not be using the first English edition, which I do not happen to have, but that of the 10th published in 1948, which ran to 1401 pages and in which Gissing appeared on pp. 1252-1256. The entry reads thus:

Charles Cestre, Louis Cazamian [professeurs d'anglais, Circa 1914]

Nothing is more instructive than to compare Gissing with Dickens. In spite of striking analogies, their works have quite different tones. The inevitable oppositions between personal artists contribute much to this difference, but something is due as well to the distinct tempers of two successive ages. Gissing, like his revered master, early received the stamp of social suffering; his youth underwent severer trials. Bitterness sank to the core of his nature, and permeated all his fibres; it became the very food of his imagination. If the outlook of his thought was thus darkened, while Dickens had preserved his courageous cheerfulness, the reason is first that there was not in him the triumphant surge of humour, the will and the strength to create joy by means of an invincible illusion. But on the other hand the atmosphere of his days fostered the genius which inclined him to pessimism. He inhaled the doctrine of Schopenhauer, and assimilated it; he was confirmed in his realism by the example of writers whom science had marked with its austere stamp. It is certain that he felt the influence of the French naturalistic movement from Flaubert to Zola. A contemporary of Maupassant, he infused like him, into the pitiless determination to see and to point out the truth, the sadness of a closing century, exhausted with cruel certitude, afflicted with the profound starvation of its most spiritual desires.

Dickens had depicted evil in order to seek, in order to announce, its cure; each abuse called for a reform; behind the selfishness of the wicked the charity of the good shone, contagious and reassuring. Gissing describes the diseases of society without any hope of curing them. He believes neither in the philanthropy of the rich, nor in the revolt of the poor. The career of a plebeian agitator (Demos) teaches us the vanity of the Socialist dream. There do exist some generous and pure beings; but few they are, and unhappy, the victims of a society built on greed, indifference, or hatred. This sombre philosophy inspires to the end a work and a life which in their last stage show a perceptibly relaxed strain, without ever being freed from sadness.

Gissing's best novels are those in which he has most strictly focused his attention on the classes whose intimate knowledge and haunting horror he preserved within himself; whether the poverty studied is that of the London slums (Demos, The Nether World), or of starving writers (New Grub Street); or whether, crossing the limit between the two worlds, he relates the adventurous career of a son of the people, who through no other means but his ambitious intelligence, wins acceptance for himself among the elect (Born in Exile). On one occasion he was attracted by a special problem, the woman question, and treated it from the point of view of the middle classes (The Odd Women). With varying concentration and intensity the same heavy atmosphere hangs over those tales; they are, as it were, the several episodes of one harsh prose epic, that of the suffering implied in the social order, or in human nature.

No one has drawn a more striking nor, in some respects, a more exact image of the joyless surroundings among which the lives of the most numerous class are set in London. His realism is only partly rooted in the instincts of his nature; in him the Romanticism of his early years is quivering, still full of life, under the discipline of a will which denies itself the right to feel, because feeling is the refuge of the weak, and entices the mind away from truth. But if realism with him is not part and parcel of his most spontaneous artistic impulses, it is put into practice by a reflective intelligence; it is remarkably robust and sincere. While it is courageous, it is laboured as well; and this conscientiousness is not free from a touch of heaviness. The picture of a mediocre reality is made up of deliberate strokes of the brush, with painstaking precision; each stroke shows us its object with an accuracy which reveals at the same time the correct vision of clear-sighted eyes, and from its outlook. A strong, crushing impression of infinitely sad truth emanates from those images; the sadder, as even the poetry of an inverted idealization, of a dramatic intensifying of ugliness, is almost nowhere to be found in them.

It is not always wanting, however; Gissing sometimes, in spite of himself, or willingly, indulges in imaginative renderings. As if he confessed the bankruptcy of that absolute realism which is the gospel of one of his heroes (Biffen, in New Grub Street), and the unbearable monotony of a perspective ever deprived of all human reactions, he will now and then interpret reality, compress it into shortened views, magnify it into symbols; he discreetly pours out upon it the passion with which his soul is overflowing. Then it is that the drab objectivity of the story assumes its full value; it throbs with a moving eloquence, and the gloomy atmosphere is shot through with tragic gleams.

Gissing's heroes are studied patiently, conscientiously, from the outside, with an uneven penetration which often reaches only the largest springs of their moral being,

but even then reconstructs its mechanism with logical accuracy; which sometimes again, thanks to a more direct intuition, made up of sympathy or hatred, and pregnant with the tacit avowals of a wounded personality, creates characters of a profound or subtle truth. No one of these persons is the author himself; but several are connected by some fibres with his feeling of self. The Godwin Peak of Born in Exile, the Reardon and the Biffen of New Grub Street, the Sidney Kirkwood of The Nether World, owe part of their convincing power to the bitter experience of the unjust decrees through which nature and society will crush noble ambitions; in the same way, a Jasper Milvain owes his truth to the author's acute perception of the easy virtues through which some lax consciences believe they deserve their brilliant rewards, and do deserve them in the eyes of the world, thus depriving a scrupulous and obscure rival of the last revenge which his pride could expect, the pleasure of despising them.

The interrelations of those beings, the succession of their attitudes and acts, the words that pass between them, obey rhythms more firm and laboured, here again, than they are quick, elegant, or facile. The dialogues in Gissing are half-way between the reality of spontaneous speech and the fiction of a thought that explains itself to us. His style is vigorous, rich in suggestions; capable, in its restraint, of an impressive sobriety; incapable, on the other hand, of the crystallized purity of supreme art; subject as well, sometimes, to that slight excess in the use of learned terms which betrays a culture conscious of having to conquer a social prejudice, and wishing to show itself. In spite of his occasional efforts as a destroyer of shams, Gissing, in fact, is no dissenter from the traditional values; his political instincts make him side with order; the enthusiasms of his mind choose their objects in the field of classical humanism.

It is to these aspects of his inner being that the other parts of his work should be traced back: the novels either purely fanciful, or instinct with a freer imagination and a more temperate realism; the sketches of travel on the shores of the Ionian Sea, in which the sense of landscape is refined and developed to a high artistic quality; the critical or personal essays, such as the study of Dickens and The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft. These writings testify to a felicitous variety of talents, in an author who might seem condemned to a cheerless monotony.

His premature death prevented Gissing from reaping the full benefit of his gifts. He might have still renewed himself. But probably he had already stamped his personality most durably on the novel. He will live as the most sincere expression, through his strong and his weaker features, of one of the darkest moments in modern social thought.

(This was preceded by a very few biographical lines, followed by a list of Gissing's novels and other writings.)

Of course by the time of his death in France in December 1903 Gissing was well-known in English literary circles, but Cazamian's study covered such a wide field: poetry, plays, prose, novels, etc, over such a long period (from 1660 to 1924) that he must have had at times some difficulty in deciding which authors among the hundreds that flourished in those years he was bound to include. But he was an experienced scholar, who sometimes wrote his books in English, and he didn't overlook the author of *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street*.

Would Gissing have approved of Cazamian's piece? Perhaps not altogether, but he would probably have found it pertinent in many ways. In any case such was the entry that the young student alluded to in the title of this article discovered in the early 1950s when he reached almost the end of this exceptional French history of English literature. He told me years later that there and then, without having read a line of Gissing, he had sworn to himself that, if possible, he would like to do something some day that would make this particular writer better known. The possibility offered, yes, but he had to wait quite a few years before it occurred. For one thing he had to complete the curriculum at the Sorbonne which would allow him to teach English at a Lycée, or even a University. He reached that stage in the summer of 1955, having passed successfully every year all the exams at the first attempt, but he had been exempted from military service when he was twenty, it being understood that he would have to serve in the army the moment his time at the University was over. The prospect did not really thrill him, as it meant spending 27 months under the flag. When he came back in late 1957 from the Algerian-Moroccan frontier where he was stationed he was appointed at a Lycée on the Belgian border, where he knew nobody, and felt very lonely. Then one day he remembered a girl he had lost sight of for years, for whom he used to keep a seat in the small library at the Sorbonne, where he conscientiously worked from opening time in the morning to late afternoon every day of the week, except of course for the hours needed to attend lectures, and Sundays, also of course. He wrote to her offering to come on a Sunday to Paris, where she worked, and have lunch with her, and, well, they married a few months later. He was granted a new appointment at a Lycée in Paris, and at last was able to make a small beginning on the research he had set his heart on. If his Supervisor suggested he might be interested in some other author it was useless, Pierre knew his mind. Soon the young couple had to move into the suburbs, which meant long journeys to Paris and back, and corresponding hours wasted. Then one day Pierre had a remarkable piece of luck; he was in the staff room at the Lycée having a chat with a lady colleague when he mentioned that he was working slowly on a PhD, and she asked: "What on?" — "George Gissing." Upon which the lady exclaimed: "Ah, but I know a lady here in Paris who is very interested in Gissing. If you like I can introduce you to her." Pierre was of course highly interested and through this colleague came to know Mme Denise Le Mallier, Gabrielle Fleury's relative, who had in her possession a large amount of books and documents that had belonged to Gissing, was keen to hear about anything connected with Gissing, and had even had a plaque put on the house in Paris in which Gissing lived with Gabrielle for his first few years in France. She became and remained a good friend of ours until she died in 1980. Later Pierre purchased from her son all the Gissing material she had left.

Very soon after this most unexpected encounter, the Sorbonne, where his PhD Supervisor taught, engaged him as an Assistant Professor. But two years later he was pressed to move to Madagascar, where the University was still being partly run by the French, and teach in the English Department there. He did manage to get on a little with his research, but researching from the Indian Ocean by mail was very slow and he grew impatient. He had also been slowed down by having to write a compulsory "Secondary Thesis" (on Gissing of course) which he brilliantly defended before going back to Madagascar after a short holiday in France in the summer of 1967. Then in the course of 1968 he applied for a new appointment for the next academic year and was given a choice of 3 universities: he decided in favour of the University of Lille, the nearest to England, where from the autumn of 1968 he spent the rest of his career. His doctorate he in the end defended in 1970, the subject being a biography of Gissing, which of course doesn't compare with the big biography Pierre published in the present century, but to which his supervisor insisted on adding, if not the many articles he had already published in various journals, and several booklets, at least some books he had also published in previous years: *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury* with an introduction and notes (pp. 174, 1964, New York Public Library), a bilingual edition of *Ryecroft*, with an introduction and fully annotated (pp. 544, 1966, Aubier, Paris), *Collected Articles on George Gissing* (pp. xii + 186, 1968, Frank Cass in England, Barnes and Noble in the USA), and, I believe, *Isabel Clarendon* (Vol. I, pp. lxxv + 293 and Vol. II, pp. xxv + 238, 1969, Harvester Press) – I am not absolutely positive about the latter, a copy may not have been available to the assessors, but the book did appear in 1969. And Pierre was granted his doctorate with full honours. He was now fairly started on the scholarly career Louis Cazamian had unknowingly made him dream of. In 1965 he had founded with Jacob Korg and Shigeru Koike *The Gissing Newsletter*, the editorship of which Jacob passed on to him in 1969; he went on editing it for the next 44 years, the *Newsletter* being renamed *The Gissing Journal* in 1990. In the course of years he came across kindred spirits from various countries, keenly interested in Gissing and producing excellent articles and books, and he felt his own unremitting work on his favourite English novelist may have served as an example and could not have meant he had entirely wasted his time. In the small field of his choice, he proved most efficient, and surely that is the main thing to remember. Additionally, it is worth remembering that he was a teacher appreciated by his students, and that he produced or directed quite a few translations of works by authors like Conrad, Kipling, and Jack London. Altogether a very full life – but is not a busy life the best that can be had?

Gissing and Exeter, Part Two: Reading between the Lines

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In the first part of this essay, I discussed Gissing's two homes, his relations with his landlords and servants, setting material from his diary, letters, and novels in the context of censuses, directories, council records, and newspaper reports. Gissing's diary also tells us a lot about where he walked in the countryside around Exeter, but rather less about the city streets that he traversed. He does not seem to have made any friends in the city – there are no references to particular people beyond the members of the Rockett, Cole and Ascott families, whom he met in his first bachelor weeks in Exeter, his landlord at St Leonard's Terrace, Charles Bryan, successive nurses and servants, the doctor – Dr Henderson – who supervised Walter Leonard's birth and Edith's subsequent ailments, and the dentist – "Mundall, Bedford Circus" – who dealt with Edith's toothache. Most of the clues to Gissing's movements derive from the businesses and institutions, including booksellers and libraries, that he patronised; the hotels where his visitors stayed and the 'sights' which he showed them, most obviously the cathedral; and the handful of concerts and talks he attended.

In this section of my essay, I focus on Gissing's use, both practically and as sources of inspiration, of two Exeter 'networks' – the rival railways that passed through the city and the rival cultural institutions which he patronised. I reserve for Part Three a discussion of his everyday life and his deployment in his writing of sites he would have passed through as he walked around the city. The accompanying map labels all the principal sites associated with Gissing's sojourn in Exeter, including those mentioned in all three parts of this account.

Stations

Given Gissing's propensity to leave the city as often as possible – on holidays to Clevedon, Burnham, Penzance, Weymouth, and Paignton; shorter excursions to East and South Devon seaside resorts; visits to villages within a few miles of Exeter; and business or research trips to Bristol, Birmingham, and London – we should begin with the city's two principal railway stations. Gissing was a frequent user of both Exeter St David's, the Great Western station situated on the flood plain of the River Exe on the north-west margins of the then built-up area of the city, and Exeter Queen Street (now Exeter Central), the more centrally located London & South Western station, squeezed in at the foot of Northernhay Gardens.

Between his first visit for the day on 10 January 1891 and his departure on 23 June 1893, Gissing's diary records at least thirty-five days when he travelled

by one or more trains to or from Exeter. There were also at least seven occasions when members of his or Edith's families are recorded as arriving or departing by train, on some of which he noted (and on others we can infer) that he went to the station to meet them or see them off.[1]

For travel to or from London, Gissing favoured the 10.30 from St David's to Paddington, and the 11.45 from Paddington. This was the 'Flying Dutchman,' which completed the run in around four hours. Edith and Walter also travelled by this train when they returned from London on 28 November 1892 to be met by George at St David's station. The station was on the opposite side of town from both of his Exeter homes. As he described to Algernon's wife, Catherine: "on alighting at the railway-station, you in vain look around for any trace of a city, & only come in sight of it after a steep climb."[2] This was not too far for Gissing to walk, but far enough to require a cab when Mrs Phillips took Walter to stay in Brampford Speke. Gissing's reference to the 'Flying Dutchman' conflicts with some histories of the Great Western Railway, which suggest that the name was no longer used after May 1892.[3] However, there continued to be an express at the same time, scheduled to reach Exeter in four hours, and the name 'Flying Dutchman' continued to be used in newspaper reports, usually of accidents or suicides in which a London-Exeter express was involved. The 'Flying Dutchman' featured in several accidents in the late nineteenth century. It derailed at speed twice in 1876, on one occasion causing the death of driver and fireman,[4] and again when stuck in a snowdrift in Cornwall on 9 March 1891.[5] Two months later, the train was stranded between Plymouth and Totnes when a tunnel collapsed.[6] The most serious accident on the line occurred on 11 November 1890, involving not the 'Flying Dutchman' but a Plymouth-London 'ocean special' which smashed into a train that had been shunted into its path at Norton Fitzwarren, just west of Taunton. Ten passengers were killed and nine others seriously injured.[7]

None of these accidents was attributable to malicious intent, merely human error and foolishness, but an unexplained incident in March 1893, when the 'Flying Dutchman' hit an obstacle on the line, causing the 'lifeguard' on the front of the locomotive to fall off,[8] takes us closer to the news that Serena imparts to Glazzard in Chapter XIII of *Denzil Quarrier*:

> In dearth of matter for conversation (Glazzard sitting taciturn), she spoke of an event which had occupied Polterham for the last day or two. Some local genius had conceived the idea of wrecking an express train, and to that end had broken a portion of the line.
>
> "What frightful wickedness!" she exclaimed. "What motive can there have been, do you think?"
>
> "Probably none, in the sense you mean."
>
> "Yes – such a man must be mad."
>
> "I don't think that," said Glazzard, meditatively. "I can understand his doing it with

> no reason at all but the wish to see what would happen. No doubt he would have been standing somewhere in sight."

Thus does Gissing announce the plot of *Denzil Quarrier*. Three chapters later, Glazzard contemplates plotting his friend's "temporary pulling-down" while travelling by train from Polterham to London:

> The sound of the rushing wheels affected his thought, kept it on the one subject, shaped it to a monotony of verbal suggestion. Not a novel suggestion, by any means; something that his fancy had often played with; very much, perhaps, as that ingenious criminal spoken of by Serena amused himself with the picture of a wrecked train long before he resolved to enjoy the sight in reality (*Denzil Quarrier*, Chapter XVI).

And after Glazzard has met Northway (in a private room at a station hotel midway between Bristol and Polterham), he waits on the station platform for a train back to Polterham. It is past midnight as he listens to "[t]he clang of metal, the hiss of steam" and then a distant "long-drawn whistle, now faint, now clearer, a modulated wail broken at moments by a tremolo on one high note. It was like a voice lamenting to the dead of night." Back in his bedroom in his brother's house, Glazzard continues to contemplate the results of his plotting: "how delightful to have fired the train, and then, at a safe distance, have awaited the stupendous explosion" (*Denzil Quarrier*, Chapter XIX).

The railway was critical to the plot of *Denzil Quarrier* in other ways, too. When the Polterham Literary Institute needs a speaker at only a day's notice, the Secretary, Mr Wykes, recommends "young Mr. Quarrier": "I happened to meet him in the train yesterday; he was coming to spend a few days with his relatives" (Chapter IV). Later, Quarrier learns of the forthcoming election when, "at the station," he meets the editor of the 'Polterham Examiner,' who has just received a telegram announcing the dissolution of parliament (Chapter XIV). And Glazzard's first meeting with Northway is facilitated by the efficiency of the Great Western Railway. At home in London:

> […] Glazzard once more felt his spirits sink, his brain grow feverishly active. Within reach of where he sat was a railway time-table; he took it up, turned to the Great Western line, pondered, finally looked at his watch.
>
> At two minutes to five he alighted from a cab at Paddington Station – rushed, bag in hand, to the booking-office – caught the Bristol train just as the guard had signalled for starting.
>
> He was at Bristol soon after eight (*Denzil Quarrier*, Chapter XVII).

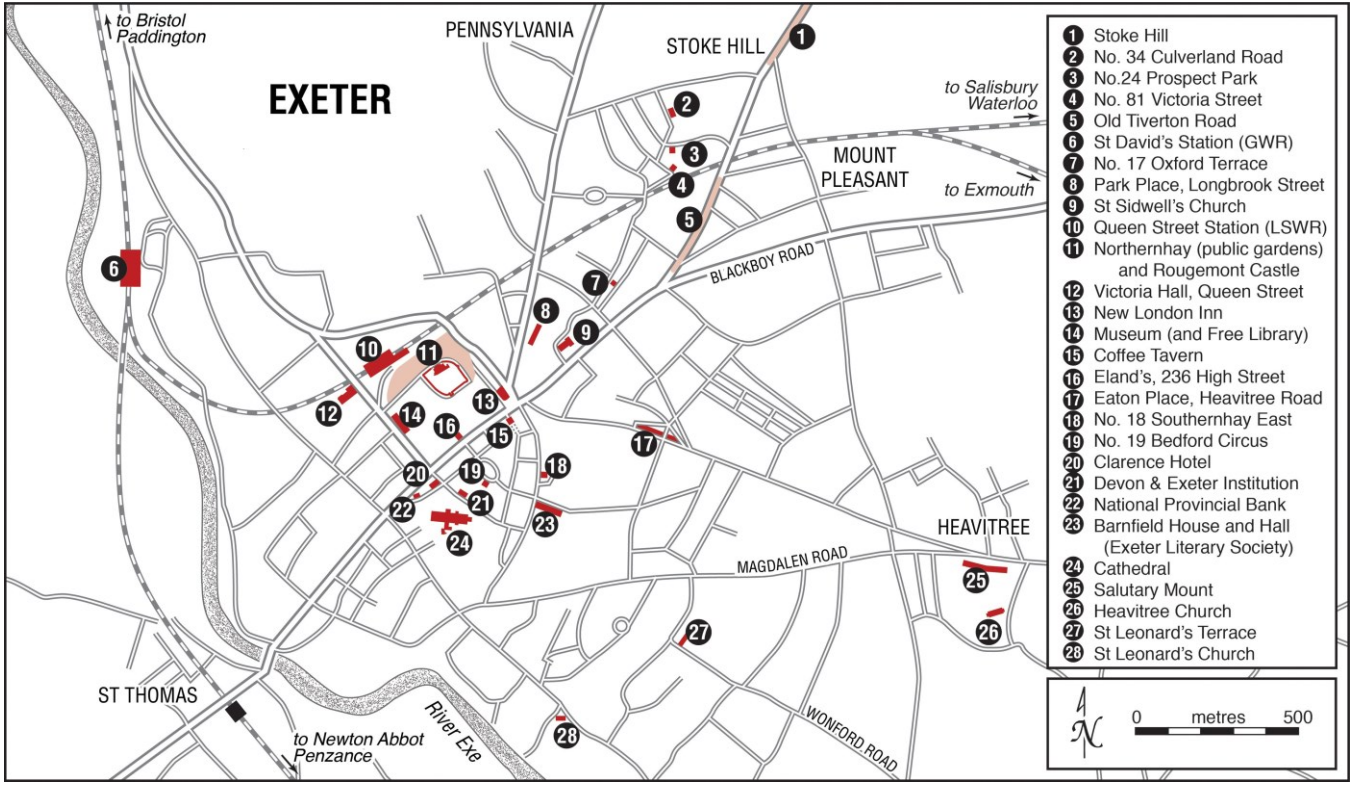
Gissing wrote *Denzil Quarrier* between September and November 1891. Curiously, for such a railway-imbued novel, there is no indication that Gissing travelled by train on any occasion between mid-August 1891, when he returned to Exeter from Bristol, and mid-January 1892 when Walter went to Mrs Phillips in Brampford Speke: writing about trains evidently compensated for not travelling on them!

Gissing was interested in the everyday experience, anxieties, and encounters of train travel, not the idiosyncrasies of particular trains and companies, so we should not be disappointed (as I am, as a railway enthusiast!) that he fails to notice one of the most impressive events in late nineteenth-century railway history, happening on his doorstep: the conversion of Brunel's broad-gauge (7 feet ¼ inch) South Devon Railway to standard gauge (4 feet 8½ inches) in the course of one weekend, 21-22 May 1892. This was a heroic engineering feat in which 4200 navvies converted 177 miles of broad-gauge track west of Exeter in little more than 24 hours.[9] While this was going on, Gissing stayed home, writing Chapter II of a novel that he gave up a few weeks later and reading Robert Louis Stevenson's *An Inland Voyage*, about canoeing through Belgium and France.[10]

Unrecorded though it was, the implication of the gauge conversion is that when George and Edith travelled to Penzance on holiday in February 1892, they would have gone by broad-gauge train, likewise when they visited Teignmouth and Dawlish in the summer of 1891. But by the time George took his sister, Margaret, to Teignmouth (June 1892), and made visits to Torquay, Paignton, and Dawlish, either alone or variously in the company of Edith, his mother, and Morley Roberts (in April and May 1893), the trains were all standard gauge.

When Gissing next visited London, on 30 March 1893, he used the rival London & South Western Railway route from Queen Street to Waterloo, travelling "with excursion ticket allowing me to return on Thursd., Frid. or Sat. of next week."[11] The journey to London had to be by a specified excursion train, taking 5 hours 25 minutes, but the return could be made by any train apart from two mid-morning and mid-afternoon 'expresses.' Gissing's return, on Thursday 6 April, took only 4 hours 34 minutes. The Great Western and South Western companies advertised similar excursion deals to London for what was the Easter holiday weekend.[12] Gissing presumably chose the latter because he planned to stay and explore south of the Thames, for which Waterloo was much more convenient than Paddington.

Queen Street was also the station for trains to Exmouth, a journey made on his own soon after arriving in Exeter, and twice subsequently, first in the company of Edith and later with his sister, Margaret, on each occasion continuing on to Budleigh Salterton by coach. This journey was replicated in *Born in Exile* when Peak visits the Moorhouses only to discover Marcella Moxey among their company (*Born in Exile*, Part the Fourth, III). In real life, Exmouth Station merited Gissing's attention for its Smith's bookstall library, which displayed copies of both his brother Algernon's *A Village Hampden* and his friend Morley Roberts' *In Low Relief*, both published in 1890.[13]



Map of Exeter (with 1891 road layout), showing sites associated with George Gissing
© Richard Dennis & The Drawing Office, UCL Department of Geography

The Queen Street station bookstall plays a small but significant role in *Born in Exile*. Godwin Peak, who had observed the Warricombe family at Exeter Cathedral over the preceding weekend, "loitered towards the South-Western station, dimly conscious of a purpose to look for trains." The choice of station is strange, given that his intended destination had been Start Point, for which the nearest stations in the mid-1880s would have been on the South Devon (Great Western) route from St David's. Presumably, information could be obtained from the South Western station about its rival's trains, thereby obviating the need for a longer walk to the less convenient Great Western station. But in any case, Peak is not so purposeful as to miss an opportunity of browsing the station bookstall, where "he ran his eye along the titles of new novels; he had half a mind to buy one of Hardy's and read himself into the temper which suited summer rambles" (Part the Second, III). In fact, George did just this himself towards the end of May 1891, when he was "past the middle of Vol. II" in writing *Born in Exile*, ordering *Two on a Tower*; and a few weeks later Edith bought, but George read, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (two books described as Hardy's "two 'astronomical' novels"). We are not told where these books were purchased, but George does record ordering a copy of his own *A Life's Morning* from Smith's Library to send to a charity that lent books to "poor gentlewomen."[14] It is while browsing the Queen Street bookstall that Peak renews his acquaintance with Buckland Warricombe, who is buying a London newspaper and invites Peak to his family home "a mile or two off" on Old Tiverton Road (*Born in Exile*, Part the Second, III).

Culture?

Of course, there were other booksellers and other lending libraries in Exeter apart from Smith's. Initially, Gissing seemed happy with the cultural facilities at hand: "There is a fairly good Public Library, &, under the same roof, a more than fairly good Museum, chiefly strong in geology & archaeology." To Bertz he wrote: "Exeter has good libraries, so that I shall not feel out of the world. […] Perhaps it may be useful for me to join a society called the Devon and Exeter Institution, which has a reading room and excellent library."[15] But it was membership by election and the annual subscription of three guineas would have stretched Gissing's finances to the limit. Before long he was complaining about the difficulty of getting new books – "it is much if I now & then find something of moderate interest in our Exeter library" – and lamenting his need for the British Museum and "a big library."[16]

Gissing spent his first evening in Exeter at the public library reading-room and by mid-February 1891 he had obtained a ticket enabling him to borrow books. Whatever the library's shortcomings, it provided him with Lyell's

Elements of Geology, Hugh Miller's *Testimony of the Rocks*, and Grant Allen's *Evolutionist at Large*, all in the space of a week. By the end of May the words "got from library" or their equivalent had appeared twelve times in his diary. He regretted the precariousness of his finances – "I cannot buy books, I cannot subscribe to a library" – but within days of penning his complaint, he had ordered and paid for *Two on a Tower* and taken out a subscription at the Exeter Literary Society, which, he judged, had a "[g]ood reading room, fair circulating library."[17] Thereafter he continued to make use of both libraries and reading rooms, his last loan (Trelawny's *The Adventures of a Younger Son*) recorded less than a week before he left Exeter in June 1893.

Barnfield Hall (now Barnfield Theatre), erected by the Exeter Literary Society in 1891 (author's photograph, March 2019)

The Free Public Library and Reading Room was housed in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (which Gissing also patronised, at least once in Edith's company) in Queen Street, about a mile's walk from each of Gissing's Exeter homes. The Literary Society had moved during the 1880s from 10 Bedford Circus, a Georgian town-house, part of a pair of facing crescents that formed a "gigantic ellipse" in the heart of the city,[18] to Barnfield House on the corner of East Southernhay and Barnfield Road. In 1891, Barnfield Hall (now Theatre) was added along the frontage on Barnfield Road, providing a lecture room-cum-public hall.

The society had been established in 1841 and by 1878 boasted 550 members and what sounds like quite a modest library "of more than 1300 volumes."[19] By the end of 1891 there were 918 members (468 female, 450 male), including Gissing who had joined on 2 June 1891. The Annual Meeting held in February 1892 heard that "[d]uring the past year the library has undergone a complete reconstruction, providing additional space for accommodating the frequent additions of new books, made to meet the demands on an increased number [*sic*] of readers."[20] In 1890, 17300 issues had been made to members; in 1892 21570 issues were made.[21] A city directory for 1894 noted that the library was "open daily (except Thursdays), from 11 to 12.30, 3 to 5 and from 7.30 to 9.30 p.m." There were also chess, smoking, and reading rooms, the two latter "supplied with the leading newspapers and periodicals" and "open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily," and a separate reading room for "lady members" who paid an annual subscription of 7/6, compared to a gentleman's subscription of 10/6.[22] George reported to Algernon: "I have just subscribed to the Exeter Literary Society, – which much resembles the Wakefield Church Institution. They have a reasonably good library – by no means directed by clerical prejudices, for 'The Nether World' is on the shelves."[23]

The Chairman at the 1892 Annual Meeting, Mr T. Andrew, JP, noted that £43 6s 3d had been spent on "books and binding" during the year just ended, compared to only "some £5" two years before:

> He hoped that with their increased expenditure they would purchase books of a useful kind. He was very glad to see in that remarkable bequest which Mr Kingdon had made to the city that the books were to be of an educational and technically instructive nature. He would that there were more books of that kind in the Exeter Literary Society. Unhappily there was too great a demand for works of fiction. Occasionally he (the speaker) enjoyed an hour or two hours read of that description; more especially so when powers of mind and body were somewhat enfeebled by considerable application. It was well for one to be able to sit down and realize recreation of that sort. But he apprehended that the design of their Society was for the education and instruction more than for the amusement and recreation of the rising generation – (applause). […] The great demand now, four out of every five requests, was for fiction, and though they might read novels week after week he did not think at the end of the year they would find their stock of knowledge very much increased; therefore he would like to see the Society spend over £50 more in works that would be likely to permanently benefit the masses who frequented the library.[24]

Gissing did not record attending the 1892 Annual Meeting, though he did borrow a work of fiction (Besant and Rice, *The Monks of Thelema*) from one of his two libraries on the day of the meeting. Apart from one book by Martial, all of the books he recorded as borrowing from the Free Library prior to joining the Literary Society were non-fiction, mostly biographies or books about evolution. But a majority of the books he borrowed from one of the two libraries after June 1891 (he rarely tells us which library) were fiction.[25] What he would have made of Mr Andrew's intervention we can only speculate, but we do know that he

attended the 1893 Annual Meeting: "Miserable speaking – vulgar, foolish."[26] In his *Commonplace Book*, Gissing dismissively quoted a comment at the meeting from "a man who looked & spoke like a plumber."[27] No Chairman's speech was recorded by the local press, merely votes of thanks, a tribute to a founder-member who had died, and a proposal from the floor to raise the annual subscription.[28]

Two other features of the Literary Society found their way into *Denzil Quarrier*. One, Gissing fictionalised as the split between the Polterham Literary Institute, regarded as a "'hot-bed of Radicalism'" by "all who held by Church, State, and Mr. Welwyn-Baker [the sitting Conservative MP]," and reputed to boast a library "which admitted works of irreligious and immoral tendency," and the conservative Polterham Constitutional Literary Society, with a library of "'sterling literature'" (*Denzil Quarrier*, Chapter IV). In real life, there had been a secession of members from the Exeter Literary Society in 1844, only three years after its foundation. A rival "Exeter Scientific and Literary Society, founded on Christian Principles" had been established by members who wanted "the expressed recognition of Christian Principles" to be written into the society's constitution.[29] In practice, the breakaway society lasted only until 1852, but the story of the secession occasionally resurfaced.[30]

Another feature of the Literary Society was its programme of lectures. In autumn 1891, there were lectures on "Art for the Workman," "Snails," "The Food of the Future" and "Curiosities and Humours of the Law."[31] Denzil Quarrier gets his entrée into Polterham politics when he substitutes at short notice as a speaker to the Polterham Literary Institute, choosing to talk on "Woman: Her Place in Modern Life." When the Exeter Literary Society's new hall (Barnfield Hall) opened in July 1891 (while Gissing was on holiday in Somerset), one of the speakers, Mr W. Buckingham, JP, noted that "in the determination of the Committee to establish a large hall for themselves they were looking very largely to what was going on in the country – namely, the great and important part that the ladies were taking with regard to literature. Ladies were taking the field."[32]

The new hall was also the setting for concerts and recitals. Those organised by the society itself included 'An Ethiopian Minstrel Entertainment' and 'The Royal Handbell Ringers'; but the hall was also used for independently organised events. George and Edith attended a concert on Monday 19 October given by Miss Faulkner, her pupils, and artistes including Miss Violet Snow, a violinist, and members of the Cathedral Choir.[33] The *Gazette* reported that "[t]he programme had been chosen with great care, and contained many choice selections from the best composers, but it would have been all the more attractive had a little more variety and brightness been infused into it." The review also criticised "a marked tendency on the part of a certain portion of the audience to insist upon encores, which not only created a strain upon the performers, but

tended to mar the enjoyment of the listeners."[34] Of the performers, Violet Snow is the most intriguing. Aged only 16 in October 1891, yet given prominent billing, she featured frequently in the Exeter press throughout the 1890s, alternately as solo violinist in public concerts and as bridesmaid at society weddings. She seems to have been the Alma Frothingham of Exeter. She married an army captain (later major), fourteen years her senior, in 1900, but continued to give recitals and perform as soloist in violin concertos throughout Devon until the late 1920s, including numerous charity concerts during World War I, often billed as "Mrs Hall Parlby, *née* Miss Violet Snow."[35]

Snow's accompanists at the piano included Mr E. M. Vinnicombe. Edward Vinnicombe taught organ and piano and ran a Piano and Music Warehouse in London Inn Square, close to the New London Hotel. More significantly, he was the organist at what became, even if he never attended, Gissing's parish church, St Leonard's. In June 1892, Vinnicombe gave up his business and moved to 2 Wonford Road, just round the corner from St Leonard's Terrace.[36] In January 1892, while revising 'Godwin Peak' for publication by A & C Black as *Born in Exile*, Gissing altered the name of Sidwell's family from Vinnicombe to Warricombe.[37] There were no Warricombes, but about fifty Vinnicombes, including half a dozen families and a few individuals (servants, lodgers, widows) listed in the 1891 census for Exeter, but E. M. Vinnicombe was the most prominent (the only one to be listed in the city directory), and it seems likely that Gissing made the change once he became aware of either his business (which he could hardly have failed to have noticed, given both its central location next to the hotel patronised by Morley Roberts, and the advertisements frequently placed in the Exeter press) or his association with St Leonard's Church, which we might expect Gissing to have visited during his regular walks, at least to check out its antiquarian interest.

The only other concert that Gissing records attending, again with Edith, was a performance of 'Elijah' in December 1892, in Victoria Hall, Exeter's largest venue for public concerts, across Queen Street from the Museum and Free Library.[38] The *Western Times* tried to be kind, given that this was an amateur performance by the Exeter Oratorio Society:

> The music of Mendelssohn's work, as most people know, abounds with difficulties, but the members of the Society have, under the able pilotage of Mr G W Lyon, surmounted them in a highly successful manner. The performance had many merits and few faults, […] The tenors and sopranos would have been better for a little strengthening, but the basses were, as usual, strong. The orchestra […] committed very few faults, the principal one perhaps being a little too loud now and then in the accompaniments.[39]

The solo tenor was "rather thin;" and "[a] little dragging was noticeable among the females" at the beginning of a choral recitative. The chorus was also "a trifle

too loud in one of the *pianissimo* passages" and elsewhere "straggled a little away from the conductor's control." In Part Two, "[t]he music allotted to the Queen was taken by a lady of the chorus, whose voice, although of great merit, was slightly marred by an apparent nervousness."[40]

Gissing was less forgiving, writing to his sister, Ellen:

> We went to hear "Elijah," but it was very poorly done. Curious that the people of Exeter will not support anything good in drama or music. Altogether, I should fancy no town in England has a more unintellectual population.[41]

In his *Commonplace Book*, Gissing substantiated this view with derogatory comments about the Rocketts' ignorance of literature – "They do not know that novels generally appear in 3 vol." and "Rockett (reading 'Robinson Crusoe' for first time at 25, & never even *having heard* of it before) said to me 'some of it seems like fiction'" – and about the triviality and ignorance of people he overheard on the streets of Exeter: "an old, old woman in conversation on the pavement with two smug middle-class females" and "before a picture-window: man & wife looking at picture of cows," he criticising the perspective while she claimed she wasn't looking at the perspective, she was looking at the cows.[42]

For all his claims to genteel poverty, Gissing made occasional purchases of books (fifteen are recorded between May 1891 and March 1893, including three by Hardy, two by Daudet, two by Dostoieffsky, and one each by Carlyle, Björnson, Karl Pearson, Mantegazza, Landor, and Xenophon, plus a present for Edith and and a copy of "Whittaker," presumably *Whitaker's Almanack*). Contemporary directories list no fewer than eighteen booksellers in Exeter in the early 1890s, of which three (Eland's, Smith's, and Upward's) were also subscription libraries and three more concentrated on evangelistic material (SPCK, Gospel Depot, Religious Tract Society). The most well-known bookshops were Commin's and Eland's, near neighbours at 230 and 236 High Street. Gissing favoured the latter: he ordered Daudet's *Sapho* and Dostoieffsky's *The Friend of the Family* from Eland's on 3 December 1891, not volumes likely to be in the regular stock of many provincial booksellers, yet he was reading them at home by 6 December (Daudet) and 8 December (Dostoieffsky), and he apparently did not pay for them until 9 January 1892. A month later Eland's managed to find him a secondhand copy of Dostoieffsky's *Injury and Insult*. And it was looking in Eland's shop window that he learnt within hours of its occurrence of the death of Tennyson on 6 October 1892.

As a subscription library, Eland's offered "a constant succession of the newest and best books" for as little as one guinea per annum (five guineas if you wanted to borrow six books at a time). It also advertised an art gallery: in August 1891 there were "over 200 pictures" in its "Devon and Exeter Exhibition of Oil Paintings, Water Colors, &c" which could be viewed between 10 am and 6 pm,

admission 6d.[43] Henry Septimus Eland, from Thrapston, near Northampton, had purchased an existing bookseller's lower down the High Street in 1869, advertising it as a "Bible and Prayer warehouse," but when he moved the following year to 236 High Street, he created a much more wide-ranging business. Nineteenth-century photographs of Eland's show a 4-storey and attic building with artworks prominently displayed in the first-floor windows and on the left-hand side of the main entrance (perhaps the "picture of cows"?), a packed display of books filling the right-hand window, and a side door announcing 'Agent for Ordnance Maps,' which would have touched a nerve with Gissing, who loved OS maps but, before he left London, had been obliged to sell his own collection.[44] Inside, there was a gallery on the first floor, allowing light to shine through the rear window down onto the ground floor.

Eland's was another victim of the Exeter Blitz in early 1942. The business relocated several times in the post-war period, finally closing in 2006.[45]

For most of 1891, Gissing had been happy with what Exeter had to offer culturally. He told Bertz that he was "greatly better off for periodical literature than ever [he] was in London." He continued to encourage Algernon to join him in Exeter: "There is the reading-room of the Literary Society, very well supplied."[46] A year later his attitude was very different. He had enjoyed his lengthy excursion to Birmingham where "the free libraries are so excellent. Music, too, is obtainable, of good quality, on reasonable terms." Now he wrote to Bertz: "Before long, I shall go back to London for good. I want the streets again."[47] Yet the streets of Exeter were not so lacking in interest, as I hope to demonstrate in the final part of this trilogy.

[1] I have made extensive use of Gissing's letters and diary, especially for the period from December 1890 to June 1893, but I have inserted notes only where I have quoted verbatim. See Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (eds.), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1990-1996); Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late-Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978).

[2] *Letters*, 4, p. 256 (19 January 1891).

[3] "Flying Dutchman (train)" on *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Dutchman_(train); E. T. MacDermot, revised by C. R. Clinker, *History of the Great Western Railway, Volume Two, 1863-1921* (London: Ian Allan, 1964) continues to refer to the 'Dutchman' through the early twentieth century.

[4] David St John Thomas (1960), *A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain, Volume 1 – The West Country* (London: Phoenix House, 1963), pp. 17, 20; "Disastrous Railway Accident," *Illustrated London News*, 5 August 1876, p. 139.

[5] *Illustrated London News*, 21 March 1891, pp. 367, 369.

[6] *Exeter Flying Post*, 30 May 1891, p. 5.

[7] "Norton Fitzwarren Accident 1890" on John Speller, *GWR Broad Gauge – B&ER*, online at https://spellerweb.net/rhindex/UKRH/GreatWestern/Broadgauge/BristolExeter/Norton.html; MacDermot, *History*, pp. 194-195.

[8] *Western Times*, 22 March 1893, p. 4.

[9] MacDermot, *History*, pp. 196-202; see also Peter Kay, *Exeter-Newton Abbot: A Railway History* (Sheffield: Platform 5, 1993), pp. 49-54.

[10] *Diary*, p. 278 (21, 22 May 1892).

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 300 (30 March 1893).

[12] *Devon Evening Express,* 25 March 1893, p. 2; *Western Times*, 25 March 1893, p. 2; *Diary*, p. 301 (6 April 1893).

[13] *Letters*, 4, p. 297 (21 May 1891); *Diary*, p. 245 (2 May 1891).

[14] *Diary*, pp. 239, 247, 249 (12, 14 February, 27, 29 May, 23 June 1891).

[15] *Letters*, 4, pp. 257, 263 (19, 23 January 1891).

[16] *Letters*, 5, pp. 8-9 (13 January 1892), 92 (28 February 1893).

[17] *Diary*, pp. 247-248 (27, 29 May, 2 June 1891).

[18] "The Destruction of Bedford Circus" on 'wolfpaw,' *Demolition Exeter*, online at http://demolition-exeter.blogspot.com/2010/09/destruction-of-bedford-circus.html.

[19] *Western Times*, 25 July 1891, p. 3; William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Devon* (Sheffield: William White, 1878-1879), p. 354.

[20] *Western Times*, 24 February 1892, p. 3.

[21] *Ibid.*, 1 March 1893, p. 4.

[22] *Besleys Post Office Directory of Exeter and Suburbs for 1894-95* (Exeter: Besley & Son, 1895), p. 288.

[23] *Letters*, 4, p. 300 (15 June 1891).

[24] *Western Times*, 24 February 1892, p. 3.

[25] Gissing's diary for his time in Exeter records 52 books that he "got from library," 5 books "got," an increasing number of books that he bought or was sent, plus numerous other books that he "read," but with no indication of whether these were books he already owned, or had bought, or read in other contexts.

[26] *Diary*, p. 298 (28 February 1893).

[27] Jacob Korg (ed.), *George Gissing's Commonplace Book* (New York: New York Public Library, 1962), p. 42.

[28] *Exeter Flying Post*, 4 March 1893, p. 6.

[29] *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 14 November 1844, p. 3; *Woolmer's Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 16 November 1844, p. 3; "Intelligence," *English Journal of Education*, vol. 2 (December 1844), p. 384.

[30] *Athenaeum*, 19 February 1853, p. 226; *Western Times*, 23 September 1875, p. 3.

[31] *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 30 September 1891, p. 3.

[32] *Western Times*, 25 July 1891, p. 3.

[33] *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 30 September 1891, p. 3; *Exeter Flying Post*, 17 October 1891, p. 1.

[34] *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 20 October 1891, p. 8.

[35] *Exeter Flying Post*, 8 September 1900, p. 2, devoted an entire column to her wedding, "one of the most fashionable weddings that has taken place in St Thomas." For examples of her concerts, see *Western Times*, 13 May 1902, p. 1, advertising a charity concert at Barnfield Hall, and *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 4 May 1904, p. 3, reporting a concert by the Exeter Orchestral Society at Victoria Hall, when she was the soloist in a performance of Bruch's violin concerto.

[36] *Western Times*, 15 January 1890, p. 2; *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 28 January 1895, p. 3; 28 June 1892, p. 5.

[37] *Diary*, p. 267 (18 January 1892).

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 292 (20 December 1892).

[39] *Western Times*, 22 December 1892, p. 3.
[40] *Ibid*.
[41] *Letters*, 5, p. 83 (30 December 1892).
[42] *Commonplace Book*, pp. 52, 37, 53.
[43] *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 16 November 1886, p. 1; 27 August 1891, p. 1.
[44] "Eland the Stationers" on David Cornforth (ed.), *Exeter Memories*, online at http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_commercial/eland.php; *Letters*, 4, p. 311 (25 July 1891).
[45] "Eland the Stationers."
[46] *Letters*, 4, p. 306 (20 July 1891); p. 334 (6 November 1891).
[47] *Letters*, 5, p. 80 (25 December 1892); p. 105 (16 April 1893).

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Chit-Chat

Six days after the death of Thomas Carlyle on 5 February 1881, Gissing wrote in a letter to his brother Algernon:

> I have just risen from the memoir of Carlyle in the *Times*. I know well with what interest you will read it. It is an account of a life's work which gives one new supplies of energy, fresh spirit to attack the days [*sic*] work & make it a worthy link between the efforts of yesterday & to-morrow. Does it not seem now as if all our *really great* men were leaving us, &, what is worse, without much prospect as yet of any to take their place. Where are the novelists to succeed to [*sic*] Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot? What poets will follow upon Tennyson & Browning when they, as must shortly be the case, leave their places empty? Nay, what really great men of any kind can honestly be said to have given tokens of their coming? What a frightful thing would be a living generation utterly made up of mediocrities, even though the honest & well-meaning exceeded the charlatans!—

"Where are the novelists to succeed […] What poets will follow upon […] Nay, what *really great* men of any kind can honestly be said to have given tokens of their coming?" These are, of course, the age-old questions that every generation seems to ask. In answer to Gissing, of great up-and-coming novelists one might have pointed to Thomas Hardy who had already published such masterpieces as *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *The Return of the Native* (1878), and to the Anglo-American Henry James who had just produced *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Among the playwrights, George Bernard Shaw would soon emerge after trying his hand as a novelist. And among the poets, one might mention Algernon Charles Swinburne, Kipling, Hardy (again), and W. B. Yeats. As for future great British men and women, among those shortly to announce themselves on the world's stage or already come to the fore in Gissing's day, one might name Alexander Graham Bell, Emmeline Pankhurst, Oscar Wilde, Edward Elgar, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Lily Langtry, Charles Booth, James Keir Hardie, and Cecil Rhodes (the Donald Trump of the late-Victorian era).

Today, Gissing's refrain is of wider relevance than ever before, for one may ask, where are the great novelists of any nationality in our own time?

Could it be, in this age of popular escapism, manifold remakes, countless superhero films, and gimmicky novels, that the "living generation utterly made up of mediocrities" is our own? If so, then, apart from the latest Houellebecq (an outlier among modern-day novelists?), there is always the consolation of turning to Gissing and his great Victorian predecessors and contemporaries, or watching old movies.

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Gissing and the Auditory Imagination: A Survey of Recent Studies

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Midway through *New Grub Street*, Reardon and Amy part ways, and we find him living in a garret and indulging in self-pity. Biffen tries (unsuccessfully) to coax his friend into writing again by means of reading from his work-in-progress "Mr. Bailey, Grocer." Reardon entertains the idea of writing a story, but he could not complete it, even if this would enable him to furnish his criticisms of Biffen with a more concrete example. Their discussions, nevertheless, encourage Reardon to read, and to do so aloud: "He could not read continuously, but sometimes he opened his Shakespeare, for instance, and dreamed over a page or two. From such glimpses there remained in his head a line or a short passage, which he kept repeating to himself wherever he went; generally some example of sweet or sonorous metre which had a soothing effect upon him" (Gissing 343). The subsequent paragraph finds Reardon in Islington's back streets, gazing at a shop window and reciting from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*:

> "Caesar, 'tis his schoolmaster:
> An argument that he is pluck'd, when hither
> He sends so poor a pinion of his wing,
> Which had superfluous kings for messengers
> Not many moons gone by." (343)

Elsewhere, I have discussed Gissing's incorporation and reworking of Shakespeare; but matter and form are equally important in this scene – and, indeed, across Gissing's oeuvre. We do well to attend to the comfort and enjoyment that Reardon derives from the iambic, heartbeat-like rhythm even as he himself is derided by passersby: "The last two lines he uttered a second time, enjoying their magnificent sound, and then was brought back to consciousness by the loud mocking laugh of two men standing close by, who evidently looked upon him as a strayed lunatic" (343).[1] It is unsurprising that Reardon is drawn to this passage: it is rich in alliterations (that is, "messengers," "many," "moon"); "a pinion" and "opinion" are homophonic; and "superfluous kings" is an evocative

oxymoron. The time is ripe for fresh theoretical and historical considerations of sound in Gissing, whether this manifests in the forms of recitation or the noise in the city. In what follows, I concentrate on three case studies: I begin with Francine Prose's reading of *New Grub Street* in *What to Read and Why* (2018), before examining Patricia Pye's *Sound and Modernity in the Literature of London: 1880-1918* (2017) and Daniel Karlin's *Street Songs: Writers and Urban Songs and Cries, 1800-1925* (2018). Where Prose argues for the resonance of Gissing's novel and draws on the idioms of music to describe his prose and meaning, both Pye and Karlin usefully connect sounds to urbanity. The juxtaposition of these three interventions makes especially pronounced their capacity to defamiliarise Gissing, while dis/recovering this sensory aspect of his writing.

Francine Prose opens her chapter on *New Grub Street*, a version of her 2002 introduction to the Modern Library Classics edition, with a kind of critical reflection. She finds familiar a conversation that she overheard between two professionals in the book-publishing business: they "were not merely echoing but almost precisely repeating the tropes, the rhythms, the substance of the talks in which George Gissing's characters engage—tirelessly, obsessively—throughout his 1891 novel" (64). Like many, Prose sees Gissing offering a frank depiction of his literary world: his "is a marvelously brave book in its refusal to equivocate about the darkness it perceives, its vision of the essential baseness of human motivation"—all the while being "so engrossing, so entertaining, so well made, and—in its ability to take us out of ourselves and convey us to another realm that so eerily resembles our own—so unexpectedly cheering" (64). Prose emphasises the resonance of Gissing, in both biographical and literary terms: she finds the actions that derailed his academic career an experience with which the "gifted, rebellious, and fiercely idealistic teenager of today" (64) can readily relate. She interprets the novel's opening as a synecdoche of its plot and Jasper Milvain not only as "a shallow, soulless opportunist" and "a consummate narcissist" but also as "a sort of prophet" (65, 67). Many of the novel's events and ideas are familiar to writers, yet as Prose finds, the literary scene occupies but a part of Gissing's world, one "ruled by greed and money and wholly determined by the interests and pressures of social class" (68). That the novel succeeds and survives to become a classic despite its forebodings for literature "that does not distract, amuse, lie, and flatter its 'quarter-educated' audience" suggests to Prose that one can prevail over commercial concerns, and that he or she "can speak louder than the clamor of the marketplace" (69).

By contrast, Patricia Pye listens in on a whole chorus of voices, both historical and literary, to illuminate her readings of public speaking in *Demos* as well as music appreciation and making across a number of other texts.

As Pye shows, Richard Mutimer, the socialist orator, is in good company in this period when "popular oratory and the noise of social protest were familiar features of London's soundscape" (42). Where scholarship has regularly approached fictional depictions of social unrest from the perspectives of their writers, Pye argues for the significance of these tropes. Her chapter on *Demos* is a case in point. The first considers literary depictions by Gissing's contemporaries (such as Walter Besant, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Margaret Harkness), productively reading their fiction against historical and cultural developments. "The 1884 Reform Act," for instance, "extended the franchise to most working men, and the emergence of the 'eloquent heroes' who addressed them reveals how the working classes were asserting their right to be heard" (42). At times, one hopes for charts and timelines to map some of these currents. In making Mutimer a populist orator, Gissing adopts "a conflicted figure": "[w]hile having a symbolic status as a mouthpiece of modern democracy, the workman orator can also be regarded as a figure from a noisier and more unruly age" (45-46). The chapter's second half considers Gissing's "representation of working-class speech and the sound of the protesting crowds" (42). Pye agrees with Pierre Coustillas' observations regarding Gissing's ear for dialogue and his realist practice: "[T]his novel is notable for its long passages of direct speech, the orthographic detail of which was no doubt informed both by Gissing's early studies of linguistics and his frequenting of socialist meetings" (55). Pye goes further by encouraging us to listen more closely: "In this novel, it is evident that Gissing was particularly interested in how wider access to education had impacted on working-class speech, and his detailed representation of this consistently draws our attention towards form rather than content: how his dramatis personae sound becomes as significant as what they say" (56). Accordingly, Pye marries large-scale social movements such as the Reform and Education Acts to small-scale linguistic practice: in the latter, she follows the footsteps of Lynda Mugglestone, whose scholarship on accent and social class has been foundational to Victorian literature and culture.

Daniel Karlin shares Prose's fear that one's voice would be drowned out by a noisy and unsympathetic environment. His revelatory discussion of *The Nether World*, in the chapter "Orpheus in the City," has had an earlier airing in the Fifth International Gissing Conference at the University of Bristol. Karlin examines several different treatments of street songs before turning to Gissing's reports of his Italian travels. London's street music differs from that in Italy, partly because of accepted oppositions between the poor in Britain and in the Mediterranean, and partly because of Gissing's project:

> In a novel such as *The Nether World* which so severely limits the scope for redemption, and which treats conventional idealism with such scepticism, music could no more

> function as a means of salvation than religion, or romantic love, or intellectual superiority. Instead, music and street song are appropriated as elements in the novel's symbolic design, in which the London slum is equated to hell, from which escape is not just impossible but, to its inmates, virtually inconceivable. (24-25)

Gissing, Karlin suggests, treats London street music as "a coded language in which the misery and suffering of the poor are articulated, if you know how to listen and look" (24). Karlin offers careful readings of Mad Jack's songs, analysing Gissing's allusive practice and comparing the street singer with those found in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1840s and 1851). He interprets Mad Jack "as a disfigured or denatured prophet, a holy fool who comments on the action without being conscious of his role" (27). The music-hall ditties that Bob Hewett and Pennyloaf Candy hear in their excursion to the Crystal Palace are scarcely more redemptive in light of Gissing's association of the music-hall "with the vices of poverty, prostitution, alcoholism, and obscenity" (33). The orchestral music that they listen to has some, if limited, civilising power; yet it is held in contrast to "the 'barbarous dissonance' of the Bank Holiday crowds" (34). "The five senses are equally assaulted on London's streets," Karlin concludes, "but the sense of hearing is especially battered and brutalized. Music in this environment brings neither healing nor consolation, but is one of the voices of misery itself" (35). His argument encourages us to ruminate on the novel's complex relationships between voice and agency, between the individual and the community: Snowdon, for one, knows Jane to be quiet and reserved; nevertheless, her voice does Pennyloaf good (354, 268). Taken together, Prose, Pye, and Karlin provide us with a vocabulary for reading, and listening to, Gissing, whose ear for sound is so uncannily astute. Helen Norman's speeches in *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) come to mind. As does the eponymous heroine of *Veranilda* (1904), who brings together the warring Goths and Romans in song:

> This afternoon, when Basil sat with her and Aurelia, she took her cithern, and in a low voice sang songs she had heard her mother sing, in the days before shame and sorrow fell upon Theodenantha. There were old ballads of the Goths, oftener stern than tender, but to the listeners, ignorant of her tongue, Veranilda's singing made them sweet as lover's praise. One little song was Greek; it was all she knew of that language, and the sole inheritance that had come to her from her Greek-loving grandparent, the King Theodahad. (83)

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[1] See my monograph *Gissing, Shakespeare, and the Life of Writing*, forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press.

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Notes and News

The next International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), which takes place between 22 January and 2 February 2020 and whose theme is "The Wonders of Nature," will include a fifteen-minute short film entry by Charlotte Pryce entitled "W. H. Hudson's Remarkable Argentine Ornithology." This is a film of, she explains, "a live performance with vintage magic lanterns and handmade lantern slides [which] tells the tale of famed naturalist Hudson's spellbinding recollection of birds seen as a child from the pampas of his native Argentina. But the magic lantern also brings out other, hidden layers, including an encounter with nature teetering between joy and dread."

To read any critical analysis of Gissing's life and his works published in British newspapers and periodicals between 1880 and 1939 is for the most part an irksome chore. In most of these articles, by the end of the first or second paragraph, one is bound to come across a phrase defining Gissing as "a sad-eyed artist," "the spokesman of despair," "the apostle of pessimism," "the high-priest of pessimism," "the leader of the depressed school of literature," or any of a variety of similar phrases, which berate him for being irritating and irrelevant to the general reader who naturally, rightfully, and healthfully prefers uplifting or escapist fictional content. And once the critic gets onto describing the individual novels, he invariably refers to them as "depressing,"

"drab," "dreary," "dull," "bleak," or "morbid." Worse still are those critics who, obviously having enjoyed a long and intimate personal acquaintance with Gissing, go so far as to moralise about "his lack of humour," "his miserable life," and "his constant unhappiness." Now these few sentences I have written would be a true summary of fifty per cent of the critical articles written about Gissing and his novels up to 1960. One might, therefore, argue that either the critics too readily, though more often ignorantly, accepted the tradition of declaring anything Gissing wrote as "depressing" or that many critics of that era simply detested realistic novels about poverty or the struggles of London's working class and lower middle class, and especially novels with unhappy endings. Thankfully, modern Gissing scholarship since 1960 has been built on the work of the more informed and discerning critic. As a result, since this time, thanks to the work of Pierre Coustillas, Jacob Korg, and many others, there has been a seismic change in the critical interpretation of Gissing's life and works; indeed, a far more positive one.

The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History, edited by Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch, Silja Laine and Richard Dennis (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), is another recent book devoted to that fascinating field of scholarship known as urban studies. Richard Dennis informs me that he has contributed a chapter which "discusses Gissing (*Workers in the Dawn*, *The Unclassed*, *The Paying Guest*), Wells (*Ann Veronica*) and Somerset Maugham (*Liza of Lambeth*)" and is wonderfully titled '"Would you Adam-and-Eve-it?': Geography, Materiality, and Authenticity in Novels of Victorian and Edwardian London." He writes, "other chapters that might interest Gissing enthusiasts include Bo Pettersson on slumming in T. S. Eliot's early poetry, Jason Finch on 'hospital topographies' in Margaret Harkness's London, and two papers on inter-war London: Flore Janssen on Ada Chesterton's social investigations, and Lucie Glasheen on the East End in 1930s children's comics. You can see the full list of contents at https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/toc/0367343290/ref=dp_toc?_encoding=UTF8&n=266239."

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Recent Publications

Volumes

George Gissing, *Racconti Americani*, transl. and ed. by John Gatt-Rutter, Luigi Gussago, and Brian Zuccala, with a preface by Susan Bassnet. Roma: Nova Delphi, 2019. Pp. 280. ISBN 9788897376750. €12.00.

J. C., "NB: Silenced," *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 July 2019, p. 36. J. C. devotes half a page to a description of the article on the 1921 silent film of *Demos* in the July issue of our journal.

Mark Connelly, *George Orwell: A Literary Companion* (Jefferson, Iowa: McFarland, 2018), pp. 85-87. These pages have a short entry on Gissing summarising his life and explaining the context for Orwell's interest in him. Connelly also provides a useful short commentary on Orwell's 1948 essay on Gissing, which was published posthumously in the *London Magazine* in 1960.

Richard Dennis, "'Would you Adam-and-Eve-it?': Geography, Materiality, and Authenticity in Novels of Victorian and Edwardian London," in *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History*, edited by Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch, Silja Laine, and Richard Dennis (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 158-176.

Regenia Gagnier, "Crossed Histories: Social Formations in Friction 1783–Present," in *Literatures of Liberalization: Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century* (New Comparisons in World Literature) (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 167-216. Chapter Seven of her book, as Gagnier writes, "focuses on distinct moments of transculturation in distinct contexts. I begin with Dickens's late novel *Little Dorrit* (1857), written at the height of the British Industrial Revolution and emergent scrutiny of the 'Morals of Trade,' and end with George Gissing's 'The Hope of Pessimism' (1882), when Britain was becoming conscious of the social costs of market society and commercial competition."

Anja Müller-Wood, "Alcohol, Sympathy and Ideology in George Gissing's *The Nether World* and *The Odd Women*," in *Drink in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Perspectives in Economic and Social History*, eds. Susanne Schmid and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 103-114.

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Tailpiece: Ellen Gissing on Morley Roberts' Fictional Biography of George Gissing

[Notably, in the months following the publication in October 1912 of Morley Roberts' controversial fictional biography of George Gissing, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, there was no public reaction to the book from the Gissing family. However, on 10 July 1913, just a month before Gissing's

mother, Margaret, died at Sleights near Whitby, there appeared in the pages of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* an article "by a Peripatetic" who had gone in search of a response from the family. The article included a brief interview with Gissing's mother and his sister Ellen, who was at that time employed as the diocesan secretary for women's work at the Church Institute in Leeds.]

GEORGE GISSING AND HIS BIOGRAPHER
Relatives' View of Morley Roberts' Book

Just off Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, down a short avenue of trees, stands a roomy, old-fashioned house with a large primly-kept garden. Here dwell the mother and sisters of the late George Gissing.

In one of his short stories the novelist has limned the portrait of a mother. It will serve as a pen-picture of his own mother.

She sits there, with thin face, with silent smiling lips, type of a vanishing virtue. … Shaken by the harsh years, but peaceful in her perfect womanhood.

"You have read my son's books," she says.

"Why, madam, they must have thousands of readers."

The thin hands tremble with pleasure.

"Oh, but those were happy times when he wrote home and told us what he was going to do. He was clever as a boy, you know, and he took all the prizes at school. …"

One could imagine that, in temperament, Miss Gissing resembles her late brother. The coarse thick thumb of reality has left its impression upon her.

"No," she said, in reply to my question, "I have not read Morley Roberts' 'Private Life of Henry Maitland,' I wouldn't touch the book."

"You have, then, seen some of the reviews," I said.

"Yes, and I think it horrible that such a man as Morley Roberts should dare to write of one so much greater and better than himself in the way that he has."

"Do you say that, as a study of the life of your brother, the book is untrue?"

"No; I say nothing about it, because I have not read it; nor do I intend to. Parts of it may be true in the outline, but so over-coloured that they are quite false—"

"Then why not state the facts?" I asked.

"What is the good? He's dead and so the small fry would cast mud at him. Besides, our friends have advised us to let the thing pass unnoticed. After all, this book of Morley Roberts will be dead and forgotten when the works of my brother are still living things."

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Information for Contributors

The Gissing Journal publishes essays and book reviews on Gissing and his circle. Contributions may deal with bibliographical, biographical, critical, and topographical subjects. They should be sent as a Word document to the editor, Markus Neacey, either by email to forfarmarkus@fastmail.co.uk or by post to:

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