

THE GISSING NEWSLETTER

“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”
– George Gissing’s *Commonplace Book*

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New Grub Street
Some Suggestions for an Approach Through Form

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Gissing is a remarkably popular novelist with academics who want to write about something other than novels. Turn to any book on social history or cultural history in the Victorian period and Gissing is almost certain to appear in the index. Turn to a book on novel theory and Gissing is more than likely to be omitted. Of course this has more than a little to do with the nature of his novels; a point P. J. Keating makes clear in his useful book on *New Grub*

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Street:

although some critics, most notably Q. D. Leavis and Irving Howe, have had no hesitation in proclaiming it a work of art, its continuing interest for the twentieth-century reader lies in Gissing’s astute and probing analysis of the “business” of literature. First and foremost it is a sociological document; a sociological document of genius written in the form of a novel. (1)

This might be overstating the case, but it does describe accurately the nature of much of the critical interest in Gissing. However, recent developments in novel criticism, both in England and elsewhere, have shown a swing away from an approach through content and context, and an

increasing emphasis on form. The question this prompts is whether Gissing will receive attention from those who wish to concentrate on the structural and linguistic qualities of fiction, and who show nothing but impatience with the sociology of the novel. Quite simply, if formalism becomes central in the university teaching of fiction will Gissing be pushed even further towards the fringes, remaining a subject of academic interest only to an ever dwindling minority.

Initially the prospects seem gloomy, in a formalist approach Gissing is of more immediate interest for his weaknesses rather than for his strengths. The shortcomings are easy to list. First of all he is a realist, which in the eyes of some proponents of structuralism is, of course, equivalent to saying that he is not worth bothering with at all. But the real problem with Gissing's realism is that it is often combined with a hectic plot structure. Even in *Born in Exile*, where the mechanics of the plot are less obvious than in many of his novels, there are things which arouse suspicion. In particular, Peak's imposture stands out as a piece of ingenuity, a plot device to make the novel happen, which we would not normally expect in a work in this mode.

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What one admires in a realistic novelist are the insights into character and situation on a vertical scale, whereas the horizontal progression of the story must be something we are all but unaware of, or subtle enough to match the local density. In Gissing the horizontal progression is frequently obvious and awkward. In reading *New Grub Street*, for example, one's awareness of local insights and felicities is frequently marred by an awareness of the relentless progress of the plot. One's readiness to attest to the credibility of the material is undermined by an awareness of overwhelming artifice. Not that artifice is necessarily a bad thing. But it works, as in a Dickens novel or a Hardy novel, where it is deliberate, whereas Gissing all too often seems to be plundering the storehouse of recurrent situations simply in order to keep the thing going.

Another major problem in his novels, although this does not affect *New Grub Street*, is the old one of the narrator's voice in a work containing working-class characters. The narrator's voice is inevitably middle-class, and must appear somewhat out of sympathy with the characters being presented. It is a problem which no novelist has ever really solved, but the unfortunate result for Gissing is that he might appear to be an awful snob, simply because of his preference for working-class subjects. It is the very lowness of his subject-matter which emphasises the superior manner of his own voice. *New Grub Street*, of course, does not present this problem, because the material is not at odds with the narrator's voice.

But there are problems with this novel besides the artificiality of its plot. One is the mechanical efficiency of Gissing's prose, evident as early as the first sentence: "As the Milvains sat down to breakfast the clock of Wattleborough parish church struck eight; it was two miles away..." (2) One can see what the sentence is achieving – the notion of a settled, ordered, community is immediately established through the reference to the church, and the choice of even, rather than odd, numbers. A sort of pastoral calm is conveyed in the name Wattleborough,

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and we already know a lot about the Milvains, because of the civilised regularity implicit in their taking breakfast at a set hour. But the objection to the sentence is that this complex impression is achieved by a cataloguing of facts which, continued over a long period, can become wearying. There is a lack of metaphoric richness to the prose, and when symbolism is used it seems obtrusive and clumsy. The first page, for example, contains the symbol of a hanged man, but it does not seem to gell with Gissing's preferred method of detailing information. The subsequent picture of Milvain waiting for the train to pass, with the all too apparent parallel of energy between the two, also seems forced, as if Gissing is only really at

ease with the most prosaic style. And this prosaic style can seem dull and uninventive.

His language is not the final problem. The opening setting, and the first three chapters, are a piece of obvious pastoralism, which again seems to indicate a certain clumsiness in Gissing's handling of the work. It is not real countryside, but countryside derivative from literature, serving the function of idyllic retreat which countryside so often serves in art. And the dependence upon literary sources is even more obvious when we come on to the minor characters. Whelpdale, for example, is Dickens' perennial hopeless suitor lifted wholesale into another man's work. It is all promising material for the formalist, but material which can be used to denigrate Gissing. Not only do his plots lean upon earlier fictions, but his characters are also derivative.

Cataloguing a novel's shortcomings is a dreary, and not very admirable, critical activity, and it is now probably time to call a halt, but enough has been said to suggest that there are very real problems involved in assessing *New Grub Street* as a work of art. To summarise the problems, they seem to centre on a mechanically relentless plot, a flat prose style, symbolic poverty, and derivative characterisation. The formalist might concede that the portrait of

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Reardon is remarkable, but this is only one element in a novel which, as a whole, can seem very shaky. This is the point at which it is tempting to suggest that the novel might have these faults, but that in emphasising them one is likely to overlook interesting things in the content of the work. The extension of this is to point to the limitation of formalist criticism which seems to blind itself to the intrinsic interest of novels for a sterile pursuit of abstractions; but the purpose of this article is to consider the novel from a formal angle, and it seems only appropriate to try and defend it in similar terms.

To make a start, there is one aspect of *New Grub Street* which offers a tempting promise to formalist critics, attracted as they are by novels in the *Tristram Shandy* tradition, that is, novels about novel-writing, and this is the possibility that the novel itself, in its form, is the perfect illustration of the problems about novel-writing raised in the content of the novel. That is to say, we understand Reardon through the experience of reading a work in which all the strains of writing a three-volume novel are in evidence. It is certainly tempting to emphasise the reflexive qualities of *New Grub Street*, and there seems no limit to the ingenious levels of self-reference a determined critic could discover in the work. But such a reading would seem ingenious rather than perceptive, for one very simple reason. *New Grub Street* is not a bad novel about writing bad novels because it is not a bad novel. However, the view that the formal strains in evidence in the work do add something to our appreciation of the content of the novel should not be dismissed completely. The only objection is to taking the argument too far, to transforming Gissing into a very different novelist from the one he obviously is. In order to defend the novel formally some more straightforward explanation of its formal strength needs to be sought.

In fact, the formal strength of the novel seems to be the frequency with which Gissing heads in a direction which is the mirror opposite of his formal weaknesses. It is most evident

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when one considers the relentless pace of the plot. Gissing, in his plot, seems reconciled to the simplest form of linear coherence, but at significant stages in the novel this tendency is brilliantly subverted. A novel which is full of action contains some of the best presented moments of inactivity in the whole of fiction. This can be seen in our first view of Reardon. After three brisk chapters of exposition, in which Reardon has been referred to on several occasions, we are suddenly confronted with the man himself:

One evening he sat at his desk with a slip of manuscript paper before him. It was the hour of sunset. His outlook was upon the backs of certain large houses skirting Regent's Park, and lights had begun to show here and there in the windows: in one room a man was discoverable dressing for dinner, he had not thought it worth while to lower the blind; in another some people were playing billiards. The higher windows reflected a rich glow from the western sky.

For two or three hours Reardon had been seated in much the same attitude. Occasionally he dipped his pen into the ink, and seemed about to write: but each time the effort was abortive. At the head of the paper was inscribed 'Chapter III,' but that was all. And now the sky was dusking over; darkness would soon fall. (3)

The obvious, and perhaps rather strained, contrast here is between light and dark: the contrast not really contributing much to the novel because of the lack of reticence so frequently in evidence in Gissing's more poetic writing. But it is a remarkable scene nonetheless, and is so because of its lack of movement, lack of progress, which contrasts so dramatically with the rapid pace maintained for the first three chapters. Up until this point words have rattled forth confidently, but here we are confronted with the novelist with nothing to say. The formal

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originality is that Gissing has dared to present the sterility of so much of the process of writing by bringing the novel to a complete halt, so that the only encounter is between a man and a blank piece of paper.

Frequently our insights into Reardon are achieved by this sort of formal device, but there is an added richness here due to the contrast with the world of activity. In the man dressing for dinner and the people playing billiards we have a beautifully simple illustration of the world moving along in front of the artist, but the artist unable to enter this world of movement, either in his life or in his work. A scene like this shows up the inadequacy of Irving Howe's comment that "*New Grub Street* remains in structure a Victorian novel, but the subject and informing vision are post-Victorian...." (4) Howe's comment is obviously suspect, because he seems to envisage the possibility of a quite amazing divorce of form and content, in which an old structure can contain a whole new set of perceptions. The obvious riposte is that if the informing vision is post-Victorian then the structure must be as well; and it is such things as these scenes of total inactivity which contribute to the formal and thematic originality of the novel.

Across the novel there is a readiness to experiment with structure in order to present the picture of Reardon, and these experiments always acquire increased force by contrasting so dramatically with the standard story-telling pace of the novel. There is, for example, the formlessness of Reardon's days, the description of which necessitates Gissing providing a fairly shapeless passage of prose, in contrast to the shaped structure of the work as a whole. His rows with his wife are similar in structure. They are circular rows, in which, if it were left to Reardon, nothing would be resolved. The point is that we come to know Reardon by contrasting this formlessness not only with the mechanical rigidity of Milvain's day but with the efficient inventiveness of the plot as a whole. Of course, the excessive linear coherence, the over-reliance on neat formulations of plot, can never be fully defended, but the other side of the coin needs to

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be considered as well. Excessive ingenuity of structure is frequently matched by a brilliantly

innovative lack of obvious structure for passages featuring Reardon.

The consequence of these experiments with structure is a picture of Reardon of undeniable brilliance. But it is not only the structural originality that makes the portrait so impressive. There is also Gissing's irony, which affects the presentation at every turn. We are never allowed to lose sight of Reardon's egotism, his selfishness, his readiness to blame others for his failure. It is there in his attitude to his wife and child, and also in his relations with Biffen. An example is the scene of his first encounter with Biffen after the fire which has destroyed the man's home, and nearly destroyed his manuscript. Biffen goes to Reardon's rooms at eleven o'clock at night and finds Reardon sitting by the fire. Biffen speaks first:

"Another cold?"

"It looks like it. I wish you would take the trouble to go and buy me some vermin-killer. That would suit my case." (5)

In spite of Biffen's near tragedy the conversation thus begins with a discussion of Reardon's problems, who seems too self-absorbed to wonder why his friend might have appeared so late in the evening. In addition, Reardon's conversation is marked by his usual maundering self-dramatisation. And this insistent self-reference is seen whenever he appears in the novel. Yet Gissing never labours the point. He never editorialises in his presentation of Reardon, but trusts to the action to reveal the man. Again we see the credit and debit quality of Gissing's form. His touch with his main character is as certain as it is uncertain with his presentation of minor characters, who are never presented with the same reticence. The conclusion on character presentation is the same as on the mixture of realism and obvious plotting in the novel.

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Although the novel is over frenetic in its plot there are moments, in the treatment of Reardon, where Gissing reveals a whole new sort of formal sophistication. Similarly with character, there is much in the novel which is derivative, but in the presentation of Reardon Gissing not only shows unusual restraint and artistry but manages to create a character who is radically new.

But where this ability to produce something running counter to his apparent limitations is possibly most in evidence is in the alleged prosaic flatness of his style, and the related lack of any effective symbolic dimension to the work. It is the flat style which creates the impression that it is "First and foremost a sociological document..." The implication is that a more flexible style could have led to a more complex novel. Of course, the portrait of Reardon does depend upon a more complicated style, a style which incorporates irony, and it would be absurd to describe the interest here as merely sociological. But it is possible to feel that the context in which he is presented is principally of documentary interest, because of the fact that the style in which it is presented is the fairly mundane descriptive style of the social historian. But it is possible to argue that there is a mode of aesthetic ordering in the novel which runs counter to the apparent descriptive method. That it has not been widely appreciated is, I think, due to the nature of the traditional content-based criticism the novel has received, which, finding what it wants to find, ignores other qualities in the text. Here is an area where a formalist approach can actually make Gissing seem a better novelist than even an admirer such as Keating would acknowledge.

The alternative mode of ordering in the book is symbolic, but not the rather forced symbolic moments, rather a more thoroughly integrated symbolic structure. It can be seen, for example, in the use of rooms in the novel. Milvain is presented as passing through a series of rooms. In fact, we hardly ever seem to see him in the same set of rooms twice, and we certainly never see him in his own lodgings. They are referred to, but never described, as this might

suggest a sense of confinement inappropriate to his personality. Biffen we also see in a series of rooms, but he is oblivious of his surroundings. Whenever he arrives he immediately makes contact with the person without pausing to reflect on his surroundings. In the Yule household we get a sense of separate rooms, of a territory which is Mrs. Yule's, and of a territory which is Yule's, so that when Marian is summoned to her father's rooms there is a sense on his part of extending a privilege. But the character who is most sensitive to rooms is Reardon. We are alerted to this in his response to the British Museum reading-room, which he has come to love although at first it gave him a headache. If it had this effect it is only natural that more dismal rooms will oppress and upset him even more. And the novel makes full use of Reardon in drab and draughty rooms, stripped of furniture, and oppressively closing in on him:

A street gas-lamp prevented the room from becoming absolutely dark. When he had closed the envelope he lay down on his bed again, and watched the flickering yellowness upon the ceiling. (6)

This makes an impact in itself, but the effect is reinforced by the chapter almost immediately concluding, to be followed by a chapter beginning, "The rooms which Milvain had taken for himself and his sisters were modest, but more expensive than their old quarters." (7) Gissing does not need to underline the fact that as Reardon becomes progressively more confined Milvain finds space to expand. There is, though, a curious ambivalence in Reardon's attitude to the rooms he occupies. He sees them as representing his isolation and loneliness, but they also attract him because they offer the seclusion he craves. So rooms in the novel present a threat, but also represent privacy.

The dome of the reading-room also seems to carry the same dual significance. It provides a sheltering roof for the devoted scholar, but it is also an umbrella to a whole network of human problems. It is perhaps only for Reardon that the reading-room represents nothing but

a retreat, and a significant feature of the novel is that we never see him at work there. It is those for whom the dome does not have the power of sanctuary who are presented undergoing their daily toil beneath its shadow. It is under the dome that Marian sees Milvain, and it is under the dome that the infighting and politics of the literary world are conducted. It also acts as a central symbol, though, through the sense the novel gives of the reading-room being the hub of a web of literary activity. The novel conveys a clear impression of a grid imposed on London with literary activity in remote parts.

Indeed, a frightening sense of London emerges in the novel. From Reardon's rooms we might glimpse fine views in a pastoral distance, but London itself is hot and polluted, or else cold and foggy. But it is always a London where people wander aimlessly in the streets, or find themselves trapped in lonely rooms. Throughout the novel we gain a sense of people lost in a gigantic maze. Streets and rooms proliferate to the point where we are overwhelmed, and the sense of place is generally confusing and threatening. Frequently what dominates in the novel is not a sense of character, but a sense of alien and changing environments. And there is no escape from this bewildering jungle as the pastoral calm has been left behind in the first three chapters.

Throughout the novel, then, we are wandering through mean streets into bleak and unwelcoming houses. And this sense of a huge unmanageable city is also conveyed by the inclusion of many characters who are referred to but never seen. The object of this is not inclusiveness, but to increase the sense of an anonymous city. The idea of a traditional community, where everybody knows everybody, and where breakfast is at eight o'clock, and

where the church is exactly two miles away, is accordingly destroyed. Consequently, Gissing's flat prose style has to be seen not as the norm, but strategic. It is a way of carefully and confidently delineating experience so that he can play off against it a far more intangible sense

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of the world his characters occupy. As a whole the novel does not present a documentary account in the appropriate style, but moves from this to a sense of human existence which can only be suggested by symbols such as the dome, and rooms, and streets, and London. The accusation of prosaic flatness thus crumbles, for the novel moves beyond realism towards symbolism. But it is a level of richness in the text which can be overlooked if one is too insistent on seeing the novel as a documentary account of literary London.

In fact, by emphasising this formal dimension the conventional view of the novel takes some knocks. It is not going too far to say that, apart from Reardon, the other main characters are not Milvain, Biffen, and the rest, but houses and streets. It begins to seem something other than an "astute and probing analysis of the 'business' of literature ...". What it begins to seem is a work primarily concerned with the question of the relationship between man and his whole environment, a work about man and the modern city.

Seeing it in these terms, though, inevitably raises the question of the status of all the minor characters, just what function are they serving in the novel, beyond being a collection of isolated men in the waste land of London. There is a sense in which nearly all the details of their lives could be sacrificed, and the symbolic force of the novel would remain unimpaired. Indeed, it could be argued that the clumsy derivativeness of their presentation is due to the fact that they are superfluous to the problem Gissing is really exploring. But why then did he not abandon them to produce a more austere, more single-minded, novel? I think it was due to his lack of awareness of just what an original novel he was producing. The novel is moving beyond conventional realism, but Gissing does not seem to be aware of just how powerful his symbolic effects are. So he clings conservatively to conventional characters, even though they are almost irrelevant to the work he was producing. The direction in which the novel is heading is towards the lean integrity of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, but Gissing's lack of awareness of his own

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originality, or possibly his awareness of what novel readers expected, means that some of the force of the novel is dissipated by flaccid character development. But the blundering presentation of minor characters can be overlooked. The novel is a success; but a success, and this is where a formalist approach would come in conflict with a content-based approach, not because of its realistic picture of literary London, but because it turns away from the moral realism of mid-Victorian fiction, to explore a more frightening, more impersonal, world, which can only be properly conveyed by a reliance on symbols.

1 - P. J. Keating, *George Gissing: New Grub Street*, 1968, p. 9.

2 - *New Grub Street* (1891), Penguin Edition, 1968, p. 35.

3 - *Ibid.*, p. 77.

4 - Irving Howe, *A World More Attractive*, New York, 1963, p. 184.

5 - *Op. cit.*, pp. 470-71.

6 - *Ibid.*, p. 419.

7 - *Ibid.*, p. 420.

[The edition referred to is that published by A. H. Bullen in 1901.]

- p. 35, l. 11.

“foregone all custom of exercise, as Hamlet says.” See *Hamlet*, II, II, 315 (“forgone all custom of exercises”).

- p. 71, l. 3

“quantum mutatus.” From Virgil: *Aeneid*, II, 274 (“Quantum mutatus ab illo”).

- p. 123, l. 11.

“and was seen of men.” Perhaps inspired by St. Matthew, 23: 5. (“But all their works they do for to be seen of men”).

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- p. 133, l. 1.

“who is a citizen of no city at all.” Perhaps a biblical echo (“a citizen of no mean city”) in *Acts*, 21:39.

- p. 136, l. 13.

“Even in the sadness of hope deferred.” Cf. “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick” (*Proverbs*, 13: 12).

- p. 159, l. 13.

“it left his withers unwrung.” A Shakespearean echo: “our withers are unwrung” (*Hamlet*, III, II, 256).

- p. 161, l. 10.

“like Samuel Johnson, he was well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity.” From *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, I, 169: “You will observe that I am well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity.”

- p. 177, l. 3.

“Like the wise man of old, though in a somewhat different sense, he knew that he knew nothing.” Apparently a reference to Socrates: “... whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know” (Plato, *Apology*, 29).

- p. 179, l. 6.

“much given to the melting mood”: Shakespeare, *Othello*, V, II, 348, “Albeit unused to the melting mood.”

- p. 191, last line

“noble rage.” Perhaps a Tennysonian echo: “The captive void of noble rage” (*In Memoriam*, XXVII).

-p. 192, l. 14.

“erectos ad sidera tollere vultus.” From Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I. 86.

- p. 197, l. 3.

“time and fate.” This might be an echo of Fitzgerald, *Omar Khayyám*, ed. I, XXI: “That Time

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and Fate of all their Vintage prest.”

- p. 200, l. 17.

“limiting her charity to a mite at church collections.” A reference to the widow in St. Mark, 12: 42 (“And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing”).

- p. 200, l. 27.

“And now she saw herself justified of her faith in Providence.” Another biblical echo. (“Therefore being justified by faith” in Romans, 5: 1).

- p. 203, l. 8.

“He recited ‘Horatius.’” The well-known poem by Macaulay: *Horatius*, in *The Lays of Ancient Rome*.

- p. 208, l. 11.

“Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof.” From St. Matthew, 6: 34 (“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”)

- p. 216, l. 24.

“confusion grew worse confounded.” Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II. 995, “With ruin upon ruin, rout on rout, | Confusion worse confounded.”

- p. 218, l. 16.

“to him, nothing human was alien.” Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, I. I. 25: “Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto.”

- p. 226, last line.

“Character is fate.” First found in Heraclitus. Cf. “Character,” says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms – “character is destiny.” (George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, III, 6.) Schiller wrote: “In deiner Brust sind deines Schicksals Sterne” in his *Wallenstein*.

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- p. 226, last line.

“of necessity we attribute to mortals a share in the shaping of their own ends.” This may be an echo of “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, | Rough-hew them how we will.” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V. II. 10).

- p. 238, title.

“The Beggar’s Nurse.” Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, V. II. 8.: “The beggar’s nurse and Caesar’s.”

- p. 238, l. 7.

“now lost to sight and enquiry for some ten years.” Cf. “Tho’ lost to sight, to mem’ry dear | Thou ever wilt remain.” (From a song attributed to George Linley).

- p. 241, l. 24.

“I found that my own heart was hardening.” From Psalms 95: 8: “Harden not your heart.”

- p. 242, l. 3.

“Rattle his bones over the stones, he’s only a pauper whom nobody owns.” From Thomas Noel: *Rhymes and Roundelays, The Pauper’s Drive*.

- p. 242, l. 22.

“you remember that passage of Milton, about the ‘lazar-house’?” A reference to lines 479 ff, in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XI.

- p. 251, l. 6.

“Never having spared the rod.” Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, pt I, c. I, 457: “Love is a boy, by poets styled | Then spare the rod, and spoil the child.” Ultimately a biblical allusion: “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” (Proverbs, 13: 24).

- p. 264, l. 7.

“her tongue at once bewrayed her.” Cf. “thy speech bewrayeth thee” (St. Matthew, 26: 73).

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- p. 264, l. 24.

“She did not flash of a sudden upon the world that amuses itself.” Perhaps an allusion to a play by a French writer, Edouard Pailleron (1834-1899), called *Le Monde où l’on s’amuse* (1868).

- p. 292, l. 5.

“heard these tidings of great joy.” Possibly from a Christmas carol by Tate and Brady (*While Shepherds Watched*): “Glad tidings of great joy I bring.”

- p. 305, l. 15.

“the spirit was willing and the flesh did not fail.” An allusion to St. Matthew, 26: 41 (“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”).

- p. 305, l. 17.

“her words – weighed as women’s seldom are – .” Perhaps vaguely inspired by Ecclesiasticus, 28: 25 (“And weigh thy words in a balance, and make a door and bar for thy mouth”).

- p. 306, l. 23.

“Mary knew that man cannot live by bread alone.” From *St. Matthew*, 4: 4 (“Man shall not live by bread alone”).

- p. 307, l. 2.

“Then Mary lay in the valley of the deep shadow.” A reference to the “valley of the shadow of death” in Psalms, 23: 4.

- p. 307, l. 9.

“She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.” See Proverbs, 31: 12.

The last story (“Out of the Fashion”) owes its atmosphere partly to the biblical allusions. Its subject is in fact summed up in the quotation from the Proverbs.

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Review

George Gissing, *La Nouvelle Bohème (New Grub Street)*, translated by Suzanne Calbris and Pierre Coustillas, Publications de l'Université de Lille III (S. P. 18, 59650 - Villeneuve d'Ascq, France), 1978, xiii + 455, 48 francs.

This is the second translation to appear in French of the novel which is considered by many to be Gissing's masterpiece. The first translation, published in 1902, was by Gabrielle Fleury, whose name did not appear for obvious family reasons. It was entitled *La Rue des Meurt-de-Faim*, which was a brave attempt to find a suitable French title. The present translators have preferred *La Nouvelle Bohème*, reminiscent of Murger's famous *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*. While Murger included painters, musicians and other artists in his Bohemia, and while there was much sentimentality and lightheartedness in his heroes, Gissing confined himself to struggling writers and took a grimmer view of their desperate efforts to force their way through the barrier of London publishers, editors of periodicals and puritanical owners of lending libraries.

When weighing up the merits of the translation of a book published in 1891 and reflecting a purely English background, one must try to place oneself in the position of a French reader who has an intelligent and unprejudiced conception of English life and is sufficiently well informed as to the period. While there are certainly some differences in the lives of men of letters in London and Paris, one should not forget that in each capital there exist many of the same fundamental problems. For the bi-lingual reader, it is advisable to read first of all the French text throughout and to refer to the English text only for verification of details. Applying this test in such a manner leads one to the first important conclusion, namely that the translators have done well to follow the English original as literally as possible so that, while using a purely French idiom, they have been able to convey the author's thoughts and feelings with the greater

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accuracy. For a French reader who has never before become acquainted with Gissing's novels, this translation should convince him (or her) of Gissing's important place in English nineteenth century literature.

Without any intention of niggling, it is interesting to point out that this translation manages occasionally to avoid certain difficulties by resorting to understatement, which is usually regarded as the *péché mignon* of many an English writer. For instance, when Milvain boasts "If only I had the skill, I could produce novels out-trashing the trashiest" this becomes in French "Si seulement j'avais le tour de main, je m'empresserais de produire des romans plus minables que le plus minable qui se soit jamais vendu. . . ." (p. 9). And when Reardon is asked how his latest novel has been treated by the critics, and he replies "scrubbily," this is translated as "sans égards" (p. 67). These renderings seem to lack "punch," but it would be unjust to reproach anybody for failing to translate the untranslatable. Thus the translators may well be excused, when faced with "equal to the contents of a mouldy nut," for another understatement, viz. "l'équivalent d'un grand courant d'air." Finally, there is one anachronism, in calling "a mere machine for reading" "un simple robot," for Karel Capek, who first projected that word into innumerable living languages, was only one year old when *New Grub Street* was first published, (p. 91).

These mere trifles have no bearing whatever on the force of the narrative in translation, and for those who do not fear to read of frustration, tragedy and some bitter satire, *La Nouvelle Bohème* will arouse emotions which will last long in the memory. It is to be hoped that some sound French reviewers will study the book and publish their analyses, for there are a number of acute critics in France with a particular taste for English letters. The English novel of the nineteenth century is on the curriculum of several English departments in French universities, and here is an opportunity for a new assessment of an important but comparatively neglected master. – C. S. Collinson.

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

After reading Professor John Halperin's "Book Review" on Gissing's *Our Friend the Charlatan* (Harvester, 1976) in *The Gissing Newsletter*, No. 4, October 1977, I am perplexed – even disturbed somewhat – by what is said against the book. Thank goodness I read *Charlatan* before having read Prof. Halperin's review. He overlooks certain real significant aspects of the book which indeed make Gissing's work so important. The book's value goes beyond nineteenth century English fiction, and makes that period stand for more to-day than it may have yesterday. In many respects much of Gissing's work, while artistically lower than his greater Victorian contemporaries, is more revealing of our own times than their work.

I believe *Charlatan* is more successful than one realizes. In it Gissing definitely reaches beyond his usual "temperamental" agitation that paradoxically amazes us with its energy, yet often limits our full appreciation of his best work because of his tendency toward an inward solipsism. But there are subtleties in *Charlatan* that enhance the significance of the book – some of these subtleties Prof. Coustillas points out in his introduction to the 1976 edition, but are too numerous to expound on in this letter. (Also it is interesting to note that the original title for the novel of "The Coming Man" is not too far from being an accurate one.) Dyce Lashmar is a prototypical twentieth century man. Certainly Americans can recognize him as a kind of precursor to the quack doctor, patent medicine man, gigolo, kept man, political slickster, con artist and hustler supreme. Not a lovable type, to be sure, but ever so real, indeed.

Lashmar connects eras, his to ours, even more so than does Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street*. Like most of Gissing's works, the book does have definite weaknesses. Its major one is structural more than in its depiction of character. Basically it is too long and dragged out. It tries

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to force our attention to pitying both the undeserving Lashmar and some of the other minor characters.

Still, Halperin's review is unfair, as well as misleading. It does not show much willingness to look into those subtle regions of the book that illustrate Gissing's growth as a novelist that followed upon his pivotal *Born in Exile*. According to Halperin, one comes to expect neuroticism in Gissing and is disappointed when he does not oblige us. Thus, the claim is his "strength" is missing. But despite the reference to Gissing's lack of involvement with his characters, there is much of him in Lashmar – however placed at a distance. The self-loathing that he demonstrates in Bernard Kingcote and in Godwin Peak, he has purged himself of in Lashmar. To my mind this makes for a healthier Gissing – at least one that says something more to the general world than what too often gets bogged down in a kind of fetid inward carping in the earlier novels because of Gissing's neuroses, or "hang ups," as we say to-day.

It is not necessarily true that a writer's best work springs always from his neuroses. That he therefore should hold on to them at his peril and to our delight. It is true that several of Gissing's early works rank among his best; but *Charlatan* is not the worst, by far. And to compare it with *The Town Traveller* (which has merits of its own, and is quite a refreshing look at another side of Gissing, despite its failings) is totally misleading. Gissing's quaint domestic comedy is not meant to be anything more than it is – a commercial *tour de force*, and thus gets the attention – or lack of it – that it deserves.

Notwithstanding this poor comparison, *Charlatan*, like *In the Year of Jubilee*, tells us much about transitional developments occurring in Britain in the late nineteenth century, a changing of a way of life that neither Dickens nor Thackeray, nor Eliot, had quite foreseen. Only Hardy lived long enough to write about some of these changes from the distant enchanting "Brigadoon"-world of Wessex. Gissing, for good or ill, chronicled the changes of the late

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nineteenth century environment (however against his hopes and to his chagrin) that saw the low middle classes coming to grips with – indeed, adjusting to! – the hyperactivity of industrial commercialism – which is the cynosure of most of the so-called civilized world today. For sure, the book adumbrates a way of life that America has patented and which now – again for good or ill – permeates the Western world and parts of the Oriental world.

Lashmar is a pitchman, a hustler, trying to make it. He is an outsider trying to get into society, and he uses his best commodity – himself. He has nothing else going for him. But the England of his time could still hold off the onslaught of his kind – as it did that of Godwin Peak.

In Lashmar therefore one can find many excellent touches that prefigure characteristics in the works of such early twentieth century novelists as Maugham, Lawrence and Forster – even Evelyn Waugh – in Britain; and Dreiser and Fitzgerald – even Henry Miller – in America. Overall Gissing's works connect with much twentieth century writing, especially of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. And while Gissing may not have liked the association, Lashmar and his methods of achieving success in the world reach deep enough into the popular anti-heroism that is such a hallmark of convention of our current literature. From this position, therefore, I have found my discovery of *Our Friend the Charlatan* an impressive work by an impressive writer who unwittingly felt the pulse of his countrymen's future and our (the British and American) present. Contrary to Professor Halperin, I highly recommend the book for lovers of good fiction, on the one hand, and for those who are thoughtful and sensitive, on the other. And for those who are curious about how many of us got to be who and what we are, I further recommend this book by Gissing.

Yours truly,

W. Francis Browne, Instructor of English, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, Brooklyn, New York 11210.

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An Inter-War Gissing Admirer: A. Edward Newton

Bruce Garland
Trenton, New Jersey

“George Gissing, when he was walking our streets penniless and in rags, could never have supposed that a few years later his first novel, ‘Workers in the Dawn,’ would sell for one hundred and fifty dollars, but it has done so. I have a friend who has paid this price.” Thus A. Edward Newton wrote in his *Amenities of Book-Collecting* first published in 1918.

The noted book-collector’s references to Gissing are admittedly few and far between, but my interest in them and their author was aroused when I acquired Newton’s copy of *Born in Exile*, each volume of which contains his famous Johnson/Boswell bookplate. I do not know whether Newton collected Gissing because he liked to read his novels or whether he bought them as a speculator, hoping they would some day be of value. Anyway he always liked to acquire a book of which he could say: “it is one of which this collector boasteth.” My own theory is that Newton was cajoled into buying Gissing’s books by his friend Christopher Morley, whose fondness for Gissing has already been pointed out in the *Newsletter*.

Evidently Newton himself felt that *Workers in the Dawn* was a good book to own – we find a photograph of it and of *Lorna Doone* on p. 370 of *This Book-Collecting Game*, appropriately captioned “Two Scarce Three-Deckers.” In the same volume, *New Grub Street* appears in Newton’s list of One Hundred Good Novels (no. 60, p. 384).

To find other signs of Newton’s interest in Gissing we must turn to one of his lesser known books, entitled *Bibliography and Pseudo-Bibliography*. In it, on p. 95, mention is made of my personal favourite, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. This time Newton writes of “Essays” and he politely, though somewhat erroneously, devotes a full paragraph to “the grim and talented novelist George Gissing, too much of whose sad and sordid life had been spent in a basement of

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a gloomy tenement in a London slum.”

It was Newton’s wish that on his death his books should be dispersed at auction. Because of this wish, which materialized in April 1941 (see Carl W. McCardle’s fine article with illustrations in the *Evening Bulletin of Philadelphia*, January 17, 1941, announcing the sale), we are fortunate in having a three-volume catalogue with a prospectus, which is as pleasant to read as are his numerous other works. Gissing was well represented with nineteen first editions besides my *Born in Exile*.

Those who are familiar with Newton’s penchant for “condition” and presentation copies are likely to be disappointed by a perusal of this catalogue. Most of the books are described as having defects, and there are no presentation copies. The pick of the bunch is the first edition of *Workers in the Dawn*, described as “the excessively rare first edition of the author’s first book, and one of the most difficult of modern books to find in good condition” (vol. II, p. 29). This is still an accurate statement except for those collectors who would argue that a book printed in 1880 can scarcely be called “modern.” While I could not find a priced catalogue, I feel safe in asserting that A. Edward Newton, when he was walking our streets wealthy and laden with books, would not have been surprised to hear that a first edition of *Workers* sold recently for almost ten times the price he mentioned in 1918.

Notes and News

There will be a special session on Gissing at the MLA meeting in New York next December. The title is “George Gissing and Women.” The discussion leader will be Professor Jacob Korg, of the University of Washington, Seattle. Among the panelists there will be Professors John Halperin, Coral Lansbury and Robert Selig.

Among work in progress – probably not to appear until 1980 – is *An Index of English Literary Manuscripts* (a Mansell publication) which will contain a very thorough section on Gissing. The compiler of this section, among others, is Pamela White.

In response to the various letters he has received about the only missing short story, “A Freak of Nature,” which appeared in the unidentified *London Magazine* in the Spring of 1895, Pierre Coustillas wishes to say that Pamela White’s wide-ranging enquiry has led to the discovery of the original MS of the story at the University of Kansas. Fresh efforts are being made to identify the *London Magazine*.

The Winter 1978 number of *Victorian Studies*, (vol. XXI, no. 2) contains a most interesting article by Leslie G. Bailey (pp. 197-244) on “Victorian Studies Programs in English Speaking Countries: an Update.” It shows that *The Odd Women* is taught at the University of Arizona and the University of Indiana, *Demos* at the University of Sidney, *Demos* and/or *The Nether World*, at the University of Sussex, “Gissing on Socialism and the Class War” at the University of Queensland.

In connection with this it is appropriate to record that *New Grub Street* is one of the set books for the CAPES and *agrégation* in France (1978/79). This means that a few thousand students will be studying this book in the twenty-odd French universities and colleges.

As a footnote to his contribution on “Gissing’s Appearances in Mosher Press Publications” (*Gissing Newsletter*, January 1976), Bruce Garland wishes to add *The Mosher Books*, Printed for Thomas Mosher, Portland, Maine, 1912. The introduction is entitled “The books I shall not read again,” and the relevant passage is quoted from the *Ryecroft Papers*.

Recent Publications

Volumes

Takashi Shimizu, *An Introduction to Gissing Studies*, Tokyo: Kirihara Shoten, 1977, pp. 246; 2200 yen (approximately £5.50). Blue cloth with silver titling. The publisher’s address is 3-4-22, Asagaya Minami, Suginamiku, Tokyo, 166 Japan). Ch. I discusses the establishment of Gissing’s literary characteristics (in *Workers*, *The Unclassed*, *Isabel Clarendon* and *A Life’s Morning*). Ch. II deals with the novelist’s quest of the ideal woman as reflected in *The Emancipated*, *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*. Ch. III is entitled “In the footsteps of a writer in exile” (France and England). It is the record of Mr. Shimizu’s pilgrimage to places associated with Gissing. The book also contains a couple of pages “by way of preface” by Yasuo Yamato (LL.D.) and a number of portraits, facsimiles and photographs of Gissing’s birthplace and of no. 76 Burton Road, Brixton. There is also a select bibliography and an author’s postscript. The book is more descriptive than critical.

The Salt of the Earth and Other Stories, edited by Francesco Badolato, Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 1978, pp. 183; 2600 lire. Stiff, blue-green wrappers. This book contains an introduction and notes.

The Emancipated, edited by Pierre Coustillas, Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977, pp. xxiv + 469. £6.95. Blue cloth gilt. The text is that of the first one-volume edition (Lawrence & Bullen, 1893). The editorial material includes a bibliographical note, an introduction, a study of the two versions of the novel, notes to the text and a bibliography concerning the book.

Articles, reviews, etc.

Adeline R. Tintner, "Eight Ways of Looking at James," *Studies in the Novel*, IX, Spring 1977,

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pp. 73-94. Contains a short passage on Henry James and *New Grub Street*, p. 80.

Jacob Korg, "Cancelled Passages in Gissing's *The Unclassed*," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXXX, Summer 1977, pp. 553-58.

David Crackanhorpe, *Hubert Crackanhorpe and English Realism in the 1890s*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1977. Contains various passages about and allusions to the unestablished Gissing-Crackanhorpe relationship.

Pierre Coustillas, "Gissingiana," *English Literature in Transition*, XXI, no. 1, 1978, pp. 4-5. A note on the two recently identified Gissing short stories in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*. The same issue contains several references to Gissing in the Editor's Fence. Vol. XXI, no. 2, 1978, mentions a possible MLA special session on Gissing in New York next December (p. 75). In the same number the Leonard Merrick bibliography offers some items of interest.

C. J. Francis, "Book Reviews," *Victorian Studies*, XXI, Winter 1978, pp. 279-80. Review of Adrian Poole's *Gissing in Context*.

Pierre Coustillas, "George Gissing," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 24, 1978, p. 351. Letter to the editor about Gissing's two wives.

Francesco Badolato, "George Gissing: romanziere del tardo periodo vittoriano," *Lombardia Notte*, VIII, March 1978, p. 4. Review of the recent Harvester critical editions of *In the Year of Jubilee*, *The Unclassed* and *Our Friend the Charlatan*.

Terence De Vere White, "The Quest of Happiness," *Irish Times*, April 22, 1978. Review of *The Emancipated* (Harvester).

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Michel Ballard, "Reviews," *English Studies* (Amsterdam), LIX, April 1978, pp. 169-72. Review of Michael Collie's bibliography of Gissing.