

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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The Annual Return to Old Grub Street:

What Samuel Johnson Meant to Gissing.

David Grylls
Middlesex Polytechnic.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was among that small group of writers who exercised a profound effect on Gissing’s imagination. Yet whereas the impressions left by others – by Dickens and Turgenev, by Schopenhauer and Goethe – have been frequently noted and partially traced, the influence of Johnson has been scarcely acknowledged. The reason lies probably in the nature of this influence. For Gissing, as for many nineteenth-century readers, it was not so much Johnson’s

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Editorial correspondence should be sent to the Editor:

10, rue Gay-Lussac, 59110-La Madeleine, France,

and all other correspondence to: C. C. KOHLER,

12, Horsham Road, Dorking, Surrey, RH4 2JL, England.

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literary output as his character and values that compelled respect. Johnson was more than a critic or journalist, more than a poet or dictionary-maker: he was a hero, an exemplar, a pioneer – a moral and intellectual force. It would be better, in fact, not to think of Johnson as primarily a literary influence on Gissing. He was rather a personal inspiration.

Gissing’s attachment to Johnson was lifelong. As early as 1876 he wrote from America in

praise of Boswell; as late as *Henry Ryecroft* (1903) he quoted repeatedly from both Boswell and Johnson.¹ He included Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* in a list of his seven "favourite Books."² Though he often returned to the *Lives of the Poets* – he mentioned especially those of Pope and Milton³ – it was Boswell's biography that he always relied on for encouragement and entertainment. He was familiar with at least three editions of the book.⁴ "Boswell," according to Morley Roberts, "he read yearly at least, for he had an amazing admiration for old Johnson, a notable truth-teller."⁵ Recurrent entries in Gissing's Diary – "Evening read in old Boswell, *more meo*" – lend credibility to Robert's claim.⁶ It was not just the standard snippets from Boswell that Gissing could allude to easily (about brandy being the drink for heroes, about the man who had tried to be a philosopher though "cheerfulness was always breaking in").⁷ His knowledge of the book was extensive and intimate; he took heart from the example of Johnson's values; he gave thought to the meaning of his career. He was also attracted to other books by or about Johnson. In August 1885 he bought a good edition of the *Dictionary* (he'd already equipped Mr. Tollady with one in his first published novel, *Workers in the Dawn*; some years later, in *New Grub Street*, he wove a definition from the *Dictionary* into Alfred Yule's dialogue).⁸ Writing to Algernon from America, he recommended Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes*; apparently forgetting he'd dipped into them, he recommended them again in 1889.⁹ Attacks on his hero provoked his resentment: Macaulay's

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celebrated essay struck him as "unjust, in a shallow way, against both Boswell & Johnson."¹⁰ In April 1894 he visited Johnson's house in Gough Square, "the last remaining of those he inhabited – which is shortly to be pulled down." Surprised by its size, he mused on the differences between Johnson's circumstances and his own: "Rent must have been low in Sam's day." A fortnight later he went again, this time with his sister Nelly; they also looked in at St. Clement's Church "and saw Johnson's pew."¹¹

Why did Gissing like Johnson so much? The answer is available in Boswell's biography, a book which Gissing once declared "makes an epoch in one's life."¹² Boswell's classic has of course been popular with all sorts of readers since its publication. Packed to bursting with anecdote and argument, switching from terror to hilarity to pathos, it offers not only a minutely rendered portrait of a hugely impressive and formidable man, but a matchless panorama of Augustan England – a world of coaches and punch and patrons, of bluestockings and black servants, of pieties and cudgellings, of elegant dedicatory epistles and public executions. It was also – especially alluring to Gissing – an hospitable source for anyone in search of literary discussion. Gossip and analysis hum through its pages; styles and authors are compared and contrasted; and since the talk nearly always springs up from a dinner or other convivial occasion, the book provides a sense of community as well as a portable library. Boswell is a very companionable author; it is easy to see how his *Life of Johnson* would appeal to the thwarted gregarious instincts of an isolate like Gissing.

But Gissing's compulsive liking for Boswell went further than the vicarious enjoyment of a stimulating social life. It was Johnson's character that called to him – his character, and his comparable position as a struggling writer, living in London, battling with poverty and his own depression. Undoubtedly Gissing identified with Johnson: he found in his Grub Street ancestor a

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temperamental affinity. This was one reason for Gissing's attraction. Another was that where Johnson differed from Gissing – and the differences are of course manifest – he usually embodied qualities that Gissing would have liked to possess. The similarities between the two men, in

character, predicament and moral values, were notable enough to make Johnson seem a sympathetic suffering ally. The differences were of such a kind to make him an inspiring model.

There were three general aspects of Johnson's life in which Gissing could recognise a kindred spirit: literature; poverty; and melancholia. As an eighteenth-century man-of-letters Johnson was an almost legendary figure. "No man," reported Boswell, "had a more ardent love of literature or a higher respect for it than Johnson."¹³ Like Gissing, an accomplished classics scholar (and particularly proficient in Latin), he was marvellously versatile as a writer, adorning nearly every branch of literature, and frequently composing against the clock: his *Rambler* articles were sometimes dashed off, sheet by sheet, for a printer's runner; *Rasselas* was written in a single week to pay for his mother's funeral. At times, indeed, his "facile pen" prefigured Jasper Milvain's: once, without knowledge of the book's contents, he rapidly supplied a preface for a *Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.¹⁴ Even so he always exerted himself to produce the finest work that he could. He contended for "the dignity of literature";¹⁵ and he believed implicitly in its civilising force. "The mass of every people must be barbarous where there is no printing," he asserted.¹⁶ Gissing agreed, and in *Henry Ryecroft* he cites with approval Johnson's belief that the difference "between a lettered and an unlettered man" is as great as that "between the living and the dead" (in fact Johnson, quoting Aristotle, spoke rather of the learned and the unlearned: Gissing's version even steps up the claim for the vitalizing power of literature).¹⁷ Committed to literature, Johnson saw himself as

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transcending the established divisions of rank; "he asserted his own independence as a literary man."¹⁸ Scornful of patrons, independent, writing for money, but maintaining his standards, Johnson could readily be revered as the tutelary deity of Grub Street. "No man of humble birth," said Boswell, "who lived entirely by literature, in short no author by profession, ever rose in this country into that personal notice which he did."¹⁹

Johnson rose to personal notice, and indeed to fame and eminence; but he never rose to riches. In 1760 he painfully discovered that the great fame of his *Dictionary* had not released him from daily toil.²⁰ Boswell expresses astonishment at the prices Johnson was willing to take for both *Rasselas* and the *Lives of the Poets*.²¹ It is true that in 1762 he was awarded a Crown pension of £300 a year; after this, though never wealthy, he was never exactly poor. He had, though, known the most abject poverty. Like Gissing, he left College without a degree, though not for a scandalous reason. His father became insolvent, and then died, and Johnson returned to Lichfield destitute. Like Gissing he ended up in London and his struggle for survival in the grimy metropolis determined his values as a writer. He contrasted himself with an old acquaintance: 'Meeke was left behind at Oxford to feed on a Fellowship, and I went to London to get my living: now, Sir, see the difference in our literary characters!'²² In his early poem, "London," he wryly explained the disadvantages of penury, "SLOW RISES WORTH BY POVERTY DEPRESSED." As Boswell sympathetically comments, "We may easily conceive with what feeling a great mind like his, cramped and galled by narrow circumstances, uttered this last line, which he marked by capitals."²³ We, in our turn, may easily conceive with what feelings Gissing read Boswell's comment.

Johnson's experience of poverty had a number of effects which made him, as an author, especially congenial to Gissing. Firstly, it left him acutely sensitive to the hardships of the poor. Gissing observed about himself: "I do not love the people – true. But my passion of sympathy for

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the suffering poor."²⁴ Johnson might have said the same. Extremely generous in a personal capacity,

he also maintained that “a decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization.”²⁵ The parsimony of Swift disgusted him; and Swift’s inflexibility as a money-lender, his lack of the necessary “patience and pity” excited his contempt.²⁶ Nor did he accept the Panglossian solace that poverty, seen in the scheme of things, was a blessing in disguise. His scathing review of Soame Jenyns, who conjured away the evils of poverty by resort to Leibnitzian incantations, is eloquent evidence of this. “Poverty,” wrote Jenyns, “is generally compensated by having more hopes and fewer fears, by a greater share of health, and a more exquisite relish of the smallest enjoyments ... It is a cordial administered by the gracious hand of providence.” Johnson’s reply was a lethal explosive at the end of a slow-burning fuse:

That hope or fear are inseparably or very frequently connected with poverty, and riches, my surveys of life have not informed me. The milder degrees of poverty are sometimes supported by hope, but the more severe often sink down in motionless despondence. Life must be seen before it can be known. This author and Pope perhaps never saw the miseries which they imagine thus easy to be born. The poor indeed are insensible to many little vexations which sometimes imbitter the possessions and pollute the enjoyment of the rich. They are not pained by casual incivility, or mortified by the mutilation of a compliment; but this happiness is like that of a malefactor who ceases to feel the cords that bind him when the pincers are tearing his flesh.²⁷

Gissing’s response to the sufferings of the poor was perhaps at times more equivocal than Johnson’s. All of his early books, and many of his later ones, are alive to the lacerations inflicted by a pinching shortage of cash. In *Demos*, however, Mr. Wyvern’s lay sermon sets up an embarrassing

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echo of Jenyns: “happiness is very evenly distributed among all classes and conditions ... The life of the very poorest is a struggle to support their bodies; the richest, relieved of that one anxiety, are overwhelmed with a mass of artificial troubles ... life [is] enjoyed every bit as much in the slum as in the palace.”²⁸ When he wrote *Demos*, Gissing, it seems, had temporarily extended his habitual conviction that the evils of poverty could not be cured into a provocative polemical belief that they did not need to be. But Wyvern’s complacencies could not long silence the novelist’s deepest instincts. Within two pages the parson himself is predicting that callous indifference “will let poverty anguish at its door”; later the fate of Emma Vine casts doubt on the notion that the very poor have only their bodily anxieties to cope with and enjoy life as much as in a palace. Even Johnson, it should be remembered, was occasionally tempted to deny the fact that the poor had a harder lot than the rich (for example, in “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” lines 32-36).²⁹ His reasons for this were similar to Gissing’s: a radical pessimism about *all* human states, which give rise to a political conservatism.

Sensitivity to suffering was one effect of poverty on Johnson: sensitivity to exclusion was another. As with Gissing, in his early life poverty barred him from his intellectual peers. The result was a pent-up testiness about social condescension or disdain. Despite his belief in subordination, he “could not brook the smallest appearance of neglect or insult, even from the highest personages.”³⁰ Gissing, who likewise could not bear neglect, and who sometimes suspected that his social superiors (the Frederic Harrisons, for instance) were treating him with careless disrespect, responded warmly to Johnson’s predicament.³¹ He latched particularly onto incidents that exposed Johnson’s alienation. In *The Nether World* he interrupts the narrative to dilate on the historical

association of St. John's Arch in Clerkenwell:

In the rooms above the gateway dwelt, a hundred and fifty years ago, one

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Edward Cave, publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and there many a time has sat a journeyman author of his, by name Samuel Johnson, too often *impransus*. There it was that the said Samuel once had his dinner handed to him behind a screen, because of his unpresentable costume, when Cave was entertaining an aristocratic guest. In the course of the meal, the guest happened to speak with interest of something he had recently read by an obscure Mr. Johnson; whereat there was joy behind the screen, and probably increased appreciation of the unwonted dinner.³²

Although a major theme in *The Nether World* is the impossibility of surmounting social barriers, the passage quoted relates more precisely to Gissing's own position and emotions than to any developments in the novel itself. Poverty, hunger, and a social exclusion so extreme that the victim is literally screened off these elements, together with the compensatory power of literary rather than social repute, would have leapt to Gissing's attention. Also clothed with significance, though, is the hypersensitivity to appropriate dress. At the end of 1890 Gissing turned down a respectable invitation to dinner because he had sold his dress suit. "I suppose," he gloomily mused in his Diary, "I shall never again sit at a civilized table."³³ Another Diary entry for 1890 also illuminates the Johnson story. Returning by ship from Italy, Gissing discovered that his name was known to a clergyman travelling in the first class. "This is symbolical of my life," he wrote. "It is the first-class people who know me, while I myself am always compelled to associate with the second class."³⁴ The parallel with Johnson is obvious: commended as an author by the upper class, but exiled as a social being. In fact, though, the neatness of the parallel depends on a subtle falsification in Gissing's account of the original incident. In Boswell, Cave's guest is not an aristocrat: he is Walter Harte, a worthy academic, who about a year after this incident became the

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tutor to Lord Chesterfield's son. Writing to a French acquaintance in June 1745, Chesterfield praised Harte's "*érudition consommée*" but added: "*il ne sera guère propre à donner des manières ou le ton de la bonne compagnie: chose pourtant très-nécessaire.*"³⁵ Since Chesterfield was also Johnson's patron, Cave's guest was not so remote from Johnson as Gissing's version of the story makes out. Gissing's unwarranted elevation of Harte, dramatically extending the social distance, does however bring Johnson's position even closer to his own.

The third effect of poverty on Johnson was indisputably Gissingesque: Johnson became unshakably convinced that poverty was productive of evil. In a section on poverty in *Henry Ryecroft* Gissing quotes from Johnson twice. In the first passage Johnson sardonically observes: "Sir, all the arguments which are brought to represent poverty as no evil, show it to be evidently a great evil. You never find people labouring to convince you that you may live very happily upon a plentiful fortune." Ryecroft adds: "He knew what he was talking of, that rugged old master of common sense."³⁶ Carefully annotating the evils of poverty, Ryecroft shows how they go beyond personal misery, for poverty inhibits the exercise of kindness and companionship. "I think it would scarce be an exaggeration to say that there is no moral good which has not to be paid for in coin of

the realm.” He then quotes from Johnson a second time: “Poverty is so great an evil, and pregnant with so much temptation, so much misery, that I cannot but earnestly enjoin you to avoid it.”³⁷

In the section of Boswell from which this last passage comes Johnson elaborates the argument that poverty demoralises. Alarmed by Boswell’s extravagances, he warns him not to get mired in debt by presuming upon his inheritance. Anticipating Gissing, he insists that money is a pre-requisite of virtually every good. “Resolve not to be poor,” he concludes: “whatever you have, spend less. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes

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some virtues impracticable, and others extremely difficult.”³⁸ It would be needless to enumerate the Gissing characters who would bitterly second these sentiments. The power of money is a ubiquitous theme throughout Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*.³⁹ Undoubtedly this was a major reason for its lasting appeal to Gissing.

Poverty and literature were powerful loadstones in Gissing’s attraction to Johnson. But quite probably an equal force of gravity was Johnson’s melancholy temperament. Johnson was notoriously an inveterate depressive. His fixed belief, declared in *Rasselas*, and defended on several occasions in Boswell, that “Human life is every where a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed,” was set by his own gloomy cast of mind.⁴⁰ Boswell referred to “that miserable dejection of spirits to which he was constitutionally subject.”⁴¹ Although the sources of Johnson’s depression were intellectually distinct from Gissing’s (Johnson lived in fear of death and damnation), the psychological results were remarkably similar. It contributed to his abiding sense of alienation (he described himself as “broken off from mankind ... a gloomy gazer on a world to which I have little relation”).⁴² And it led, as with Gissing, to a stubborn sense of worthlessness, a haunting persuasion that life was passing without any solid achievement. Entries in Johnson’s *Prayers and Meditations* (some of them reproduced in Boswell) are strikingly evocative of those in Gissing’s Diary. For example, Johnson wrote in 1777: “When I survey my past life, I discover nothing but a barren waste of time, with some disorders of body, and disturbances of the mind very near to madness.” Gissing wrote in 1902: “And how often in my life have I spent such a day as this, – blank, wearisome, wasted! A sort of destiny of idleness and wasted time seems to oppress a great part of my life.”⁴³ The continuation of Gissing’s entry – “Each time a day such as this comes, I make a resolve that it shall never happen again. But circumstances are too strong for me” – can also find its equivalent in Johnson: “I have now spent fifty years in resolving ... I have done nothing.”⁴⁴

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Addicted to the puritan work-ethic, yet temperamentally depressive, both men convicted themselves of sloth and unproductive futility. In 1779 for instance, just after publishing his *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson recorded: “I am now to review the last year, and find little but dismal vacuity ... much intended and little done ... In this last year I have made little acquisition. I have scarcely read any thing.” At the end of 1892, after publishing *Denzil Quarrier* and *Born in Exile*, and writing *The Odd Women*, Gissing confided to his Diary: “The year 1892 on the whole profitless ... Have read next to nothing; classical studies utterly neglected.”⁴⁵ Many other passages might be noted in this counterpoint of self-torment.⁴⁶

Johnson, of course, was not always gloomy: in company he was usually vigorous and cheerful; and at times he would burst through his pall of morbidity with loud peals of convulsive laughter.⁴⁷ Gissing would have understood this reflex, for he too tended to alternate between deathly dejection and ebullient mirth.⁴⁸ But the resemblance between them was not merely a question of

mood and temperament. The character of each man influenced his values, and on a number of revealing subjects the pessimism or anxiety of Johnson created a complex of attitudes analogous to those in Gissing. Two subjects might be briefly mentioned: politics and women.

Johnson, the Tory pamphleteer and irascible authoritarian, might seem to be a far cry from the nervous, diffident, liberal Gissing who toyed with progressive ideas. Yet when we have made due allowance for period, their political instincts – if not their policies – appear to be closely akin. Johnson's politics developed, like Gissing's, from a pessimistic outlook on human affairs. Convinced that "the greatest part of men are gross," he asserted that "we hardly wish that the mob should have liberty to govern us."⁴⁹ Inequality and subordination were inescapable facts of life. Nor were they wholly deplorable facts, for without them mankind would not be happier but "would soon

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degenerate into brutes."⁵⁰ Power would become the main motive for action and the civilized values preserved by rank would collapse when exposed to strife.⁵¹ Thus far Johnson's view were traditional; but his extrapolation of some of the consequences had a pristine sharpness that Gissing could prize. "All intellectual improvement arises from leisure; all leisure arises from one working for another."⁵² In *Henry Ryecroft* Gissing arrived at an almost identical conclusion: "I understand, far better than most men, what I owe to the labour of others ... I know very well that every drachm is sweated from human pores."⁵³ Like Gissing, too, Johnson despaired of reformist or meliorist political action. If life was everywhere a state in which more was to be endured than enjoyed, then attempts at reform were at best absurd – "most schemes of political improvement are very laughable things," he declared – or at worst pernicious.⁵⁴ The miseries of life, in Johnson's opinion, were mostly immune to political remedy: "How small of all that human hearts endure, | That part which kings or laws can cause or cure."⁵⁵ Politics was therefore a marginal pastime attractive mainly to self-serving frauds. In Boswell's account, "Johnson arraigned the modern politicks of this country, as entirely devoid of all principle of whatever kind. 'Politicks (said he,) are now nothing more than the means of rising in the world. With this sole view do men engage in politicks, and their whole conduct proceeds upon it.'"⁵⁶ Johnson's words might be printed as an epigraph to *Our Friend the Charlatan*. Nor did he have much faith in philanthropy; his flashing scepticism about its practitioners – "No Sir; to act from pure benevolence is not possible for finite beings. Human benevolence is mingled with vanity, interest, or some other motive"⁵⁷ – irradiates vast tracts of Gissing's early fiction, especially *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*. In all these respects both Gissing and Johnson were instinctive conservatives.

The political affinities ran together even into inconsistency. If the whole of politics is futile

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and irrelevant, then why the particular indignation against Whiggish, or Socialist, politics? In the essay on Johnson which Gissing disliked Macaulay harpooned this contradiction. Quoting some dialogue in which Johnson announced that he would not give half a guinea to live under one form of government rather than another, he pointed out that a moment later Johnson's was accusing his interlocutor of being a "vile Whig."⁵⁸ Temperamentally sympathetic to Johnson, Gissing also contrived to be at once apolitical, anti-political, and anti-democratic.

Responsiveness to women is another area where Johnson might seem remote from Gissing – historically remote (in Johnson's day the "Woman Question" was not a live issue) and personally remote (Gissing's dealings with women were notoriously idiosyncratic). However, their temperaments narrow the gap: in both men there was a mixture of anxiety and desire. Mournfully

faithful to the memory of “Tetty,” Johnson spent the bulk of his life as a bachelor. Women disturbed him nevertheless: his attitude towards them was an uneasy blend of compassion and severity. “Johnson had, from his early youth, been sensible to the influence of female charms.” Although he never married a prostitute (unlike his quack doctor friend, Robert Levet), he expressed his pity for their “wretched life,” and sometimes carried his compassion further.⁵⁹ Boswell tells a curious anecdote:

Coming home late one night, he found a poor woman lying in the street, so much exhausted that she could not walk; he took her upon his back, and carried her to his house, where he discovered that she was one of those wretched females who had fallen into the lowest state of vice, poverty, and disease. Instead of harshly upbraiding her, he had her taken care of with all tenderness for a long time, at considerable expense, till she was restored to health, and endeavoured to put her into a virtuous way of living.⁶⁰

The motivation is uncannily similar to that of Gissing’s early heroes – and of course to that

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of Gissing himself.⁶¹ Johnson, admittedly, was incited by charity, and not by charity plus sexual desire. However, in his earlier life, at the time of his association with Savage, he was not always “strictly virtuous.” “It was well known that his amorous inclinations were uncommonly strong and impetuous. He owned to many of his friends, that he used to take women of the town to taverns, and hear them relate their history.” Boswell adds that in these battles with temptation Johnson “was sometimes overcome.”⁶² Later in life these lapses from virtue preyed on Johnson’s conscience. His guilt and anxiety may perhaps have contributed to his rigid insistence on female chastity.⁶³ Like Gissing he found women both attractive and threatening. Although he courted their company, he was not wholeheartedly convinced of the benefits of marriage. Certainly marriage was preferable to celibacy; even so it was not a natural state.⁶⁴ Especially dangerous, in Johnson’s opinion, was the practice of taking an uneducated wife: “He observed, that a man of sense and education should meet with a suitable companion in a wife. It was a miserable thing when the conversation could only be such as, whether the mutton should be boiled or roasted, and probably a dispute about that.”⁶⁵ Gissing must have read this passage with feeling. Johnson’s own marriage, in which he and his wife lived apart while he worked as a journalist, was not unlike the bizarre arrangement at the end of *In the Year of Jubilee*.

Enough has been said to establish the fact that Gissing’s admitted fondness for Johnson was based in part on a sense of affinity, of moral and emotional kinship. But, it might well be objected, what of the manifold *dissimilarities*? Johnson, the robust, the convivial, the combative, practical, decisive, eventually famous – surely Gissing wasn’t able to see himself reflected in this huge figure? In fact the traditional image of Johnson is partly a cartoon simplification: Johnson genuinely differed from Gissing; but where he did so he often embodied a genuine Gissing ideal. It was

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Johnson’s courage and forthright honesty that Gissing particularly admired. In *Henry Ryecroft* he contrasts his own timidity with Johnson’s “blunt, fearless words”: “Brave Samuel Johnson! One such truth-teller is worth all the moralists and preachers who ever laboured to humanise mankind.” He speaks wistfully of Johnson’s readiness to strike at the arrogance of the vulgar rich. “It is thus

commonalty, however well clad, should be treated. So seldom does the fool or the ruffian in broadcloth hear his just designation ... as the world is." Gissing concludes, "an honest and wise man should have a rough tongue. Let him speak and spare not!"⁶⁶ Gissing himself was not naturally abrasive. However, it is interesting to observe that at moments of maximum indignation, the language of Johnson would come to his lips. In 1892 he wrote to his brother to report an inane reviewer's comment that *Denzil Quarrier* had "crude violence of colouring." "Now to this man," he added, "I should reply in Sam's words: 'You lie, and you know you lie.'"⁶⁷

Johnson was equipped with protective strengths of which Gissing was naturally envious. In Boswell's words, he "had no shyness, real or affected"; "the presence of a stranger was no restraint upon his talk."⁶⁸ Johnson had greater powers than Gissing of resilience and resistance. The contrast between them could be illustrated through their attitudes towards the weather. Gissing's spirits soon clouded over when the temperature sank or the sky became dark. As his sister Ellen said, "It is impossible to think of anyone more affected by the weather than was my brother."⁶⁹ Johnson too was oppressed by the weather, but he always roused himself to deny it. He expressed, says Boswell, "a contempt for the notion that the weather affects the human frame." "What is climate to happiness?" he snorted. "How low is he sunk whose strength depends upon the weather!"⁷⁰ One can easily imagine the gales of scorn he would have directed at Gissing's diary, with its gloomily persistent drizzle of facts about the state of the heavens.

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Johnson also resisted depression. Despite his own propensities, he asserted that "though it is wise to be serious, it is useless and foolish, and perhaps sinful, to be gloomy."⁷¹ Gissing – whose own work was a curious amalgam of pessimism and will power – could hardly help but be inspired by Johnson's fortitude as a writer in the face of his psychological handicaps. "It is truly wonderful," Boswell remarked, "to consider the extent and constancy of Johnson's literary ardour, notwithstanding the melancholy which clouded and embittered his existence."⁷² Moreover, Johnson had a tonic effect on the "moods of others. Boswell confessed that his own "wretched changefulness" was stiffened by Johnson's "steady, vigorous mind."⁷³ A recurrent spectacle throughout the *Life* is that of Boswell, away from Johnson, slipping into a slough of despond, and with gentle pressures or impatient tugs, being levered out through letters.⁷⁴ For Gissing, too, Johnson's sentiments were an antidote to despair. They were all the more potent since the serum came from a lifelong fellow-sufferer.

Gissing, then, both identified with Johnson and admired his superior strength. After all, his eighteenth-century precursor had passed through similar rough terrain and come out safely on the other side. At College and after, he was poor and lonely; but unlike Gissing he resisted temptation. "Meanwhile," he wrote in his diary, not long after his father's death, "let me take care that the powers of my mind may not be debilitated by poverty, and that indigence do not force me into any criminal act."⁷⁵ Indeed it could be argued that the weakness of his pocket was responsible for the strength of his character. "Who will say," exclaimed Carlyle, "that a Johnson is not perhaps the better for being poor?"⁷⁶ Gissing was able to respond to this. In his short story "The House of Cobwebs" an aspiring writer tells an acquaintance, "Well, I'm a beginner. I have poverty on my side, you see," and the other replies, "his face glowing with interest," "Why, it's like Dr. Johnson."⁷⁷ In early days Gissing may have thought of himself as rising to the challenge of Johnson.

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Certainly his family regarded him thus: of his early years in London they remarked, "Sam Johnson

himself could not live and work on less.”⁷⁸ Johnson’s independence, his courage, his persistence presented themselves as models to Gissing, as did his exemplary precision of speech (in Wells’s recollection Gissing spoke in “a rotund Johnsonian manner”).⁷⁹ Yet as time went on and he failed to achieve the success and distinction for which he craved, he became embittered about injustice in a way that Johnson never did. Here, then, was a major distinction between them. Was it simply that Johnson was more resilient? Or did it rather have something to do with the ages in which they lived?

At first it seems merely a matter of temperament. “I never knew any man,” said Boswell, “who was less disposed to be querulous than Johnson.”⁸⁰ Gissing, on the other hand, realised that this was the weakness to which he was especially prone.⁸¹ Likewise Gissing was profoundly convinced that injustice was the law of the universe:⁸² large chunks of his work are acrid with the taste of unrewarded merit and unmerited success. Johnson professed to have none of this: “All the complaints which are made of the world are unjust. I never knew a man of merit neglected: it was generally by his own fault that he failed of success.”⁸³ Yet Johnson himself was at times resentful of his failure to attain the good things of life – “he could not but be conscious that he deserved a much larger share of them, than he ever had.”⁸⁴ Like Gissing, too, he deplored the fact that cheap entertainment could supplant true art: he could not “patiently endure to hear that such respect as he thought due only to the higher intellectual qualities, should be bestowed on men of slighter, though perhaps more amusing talents.”⁸⁵ On closer inspection the disparities of temperament become less significant.

Johnson’s appraisal of his literary milieu was nevertheless at odds with Gissing’s; he was starting, as his value judgments reveal, from different premises. In passing, he was capable of

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making a distinction between “an author of merit” and “an author who pleases the public.”⁸⁶ But to Gissing the distinction was always crucial, and sometimes crucifying. Johnson was disposed to trust the public; he rejoiced to concur with the common reader; he had always, according to Boswell, “a great deference for the general opinion.”⁸⁷ But Johnson’s public and Johnson’s common reader were not the same as Gissing’s. Nor were the literary tracts he surveyed. The Reviews, he declared, were “very impartial: I do not know an instance of partiality.”⁸⁸ Gissing, a jaundiced connoisseur of reviewers’ fatuities and lies, could afford to smile at that.⁸⁹

The truth was that the *new* Grub Street was painfully different from the old. The title of Gissing’s most famous book was a signpost pointing towards this gulf. Explaining the title to Eduard Bertz, he quoted Johnson’s definition of Grub Street, and glossed the accompanying classical joke. Johnson had added a Greek quotation with the meaning “Hail, O Ithaca! Amidst joys and bitter pains, I gladly come to thy earth.” Gissing commented: “Is not this delicious? Poor old Sam, rejoicing to have got so far in his Dictionary, and greeting the name “Grub Street” as that of his native land.”⁹⁰

Johnson’s quotation reveals him as feeling, in the literal sense, nostalgic for Grub Street. So was Gissing: but for Johnson’s not his own. The title of his book, he told Bertz, was not “altogether” meant contemptuously. The reason, of course, is that some of the characters still hanker after Johnson’s world. Reardon, says Jasper, “sells a manuscript as if he lived in Sam Johnson’s Grub Street. But our Grub Street of to-day is quite a different place.” Alfred Yule, too, despite all his faults has been goaded by a genuine love of learning to unsleeping literary effort: “Practically, he was living in a past age; his literary ideals were formed on the study of Boswell.” Jasper Milvain, on the other hand, has absorbed Johnson’s praise of application without his authentic relish for thought: “Dr. Johnson’s saying, that a man may write at any time if he will set

himself doggedly to it, was often upon his lips, and had even been of help to him, as no doubt it has to many another man obliged to compose amid distracting circumstances.”⁹² Gissing, too, believed that mechanical toil was necessary in the creation of art; but he did not believe it was sufficient.⁹³

Throughout *New Grub Street* the squalors of the present are contrasted with the relative decencies of the past. In the literary sphere the past is represented, first by the non-commercial grandeur of the classics (Ithaca, as Reardon’s death-scene shows, is no longer, as for Johnson, a metaphor for Grub Street, but a yearningly dreamed alternative to it);⁹⁴ secondly, by Samuel Johnson’s Grub Street – which *was* commercial, but acceptably so.⁹⁵ The ways in which the exploitation of literature has now become unacceptable are what the novel is concerned to expose. Historically, some of Gissing’s assumptions are possibly disputable. Emotionally – as this article hopes to show – they are highly understandable.

Gissing’s annual re-reading of Boswell was not, then, merely a return to Johnson: it was also a return to Old Grub Street. Gissing admired and was inspired by Johnson’s character; he was wistful for Johnson’s literary milieu. “Wistful” appears to be the right word, because Gissing’s tone in alluding to Johnson – affectionate, intimate, sadly smiling (‘Poor old Sam’ etc.) – makes plain that he feels he is looking back to an irrecoverable ideal. It would be wrong, indeed, to conclude by exaggerating the extent to which Gissing identified with Johnson. There were certainly some Johnsonian values to which Gissing had no wish to aspire. The earlier writer was more fixed and insular, both geographically and intellectually. His notorious xenophobia – “his unjust contempt for foreigners was indeed extreme”⁹⁶ – was alien to the cosmopolitan Gissing. He was not, however, a vulgar chauvinist: Gissing liked his famous patriotism *mot*, and embellished it in *The Crown of Life*: “Johnson defined patriotism, you know, as the last refuge of a scoundrel; it looks as if it might

presently be the last refuge of a fool.”⁹⁷ Some of the intellectual differences are accountable for by historical period. Johnson’s entrenched Anglicanism was not possible for a mentally mobile man in the later nineteenth century. Likewise his authoritarianism was underpinned by a line of beliefs (about Providence, judgment and human society) which Gissing’s era had progressively released. Between the two writers there also loomed the European Romantic Movement. In a myriad of ways Gissing’s sensitivity was coloured by post-Romantic responses.⁹⁸ To mention only a single example, his tremulous treatment of the countryside contrasts revealingly with the stolid contempt with which Johnson regarded the pastoral.⁹⁹

Still, Gissing responded to Johnson: across more than a century the points of contact held firm. It was not just the superficial points – the shared enthusiasm for Izaak Walton, for pet cats and foreign languages, for Shakespeare studied instead of performed.¹⁰⁰ It was rather Gissing’s appreciation of all that Johnson meant to him: a man who fought poverty and hardship in London;¹⁰¹ a journeyman writer who was also a craftsman; a sombre recorder of pain and frustration;¹⁰² a conservative sensitive to human suffering;¹⁰³ a proud and dedicated intellectual who valued brains as well as social distinction (“It is amazing,” said Johnson, “what ignorance of certain points one sometimes finds in men of eminence”; Gissing wrote in his *Commonplace Book*: “The amazing ignorance of ‘educated’ people. Never heard of certain greatest writers, and so on”).¹⁰⁴

In his lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* – “a book,” according to Gissing, “to be read many times and pondered over” – Carlyle also celebrated Johnson. His motives were less personal and more tendentious – for him, Johnson was a mighty soul entrammelled in an age of scepticism.

But many of his judgments were close to Gissing's. "Johnson's opinions," Carlyle declared, "are fast becoming obsolete: but his style of thinking and of living, we may hope, will never become

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obsolete." "Brave old Samuel!" Carlyle concluded. "Brave Samuel Johnson!" echoed Gissing.¹⁰⁶ For both men, though for divergent reasons, Johnson was the supreme example of "The Hero as Man-of-Letters."

1. *The Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family*, ed. Algernon and Ellen Gissing (Constable, 1927), p. 15 [hereafter referred to as *LMF*]; Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Constable, 1903), pp. 14, 16, 115, 128-30, 159 (hereafter referred to as *Ryecroft*). The place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated. I should like to express my gratitude to Professor Pierre Coustillas for kindly supplying me with a list of references to Johnson in Gissing's fiction.
2. George Gissing's *Commonplace Book*, ed. Jacob Korg (New York: New York Public Library, 1962), p. 40 (hereafter referred to as *CB*).
3. Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 218, 238; cf. p. 429 (hereafter referred to as *Diary*). Gissing was unusual in the nineteenth century in reading Johnson himself as well as Boswell: see James L. Clifford, *Johnsonian Studies, 1887-1950* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), pp. 1-3.
4. *CB*, pp. 33, 38; *Henry Hick's Recollections of George Gissing*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Enitharmon Press, 1973), p. 35.
5. Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, ed. Morchard Bishop (Richards Press, 1958), p. 228 (hereafter referred to as Roberts).
6. *Diary*, p. 212.
7. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953),

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pp. 1016, 957 (hereafter referred to as Boswell); Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (Gresham, 1903), p. 10 (hereafter referred to as *Dickens*); Gissing, *The Whirlpool*, p. 327 (page numbers to Gissing's novels are to the Harvester Press editions, except where otherwise stated).

8. Letter to Algernon, 20 August 1885 (misdated by Algernon, Spring 1885), Berg Collection, New York Public Library; *Workers in the Dawn*, ed. Robert Shafer, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1935), I, 114; *New Grub Street* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 434. Cf. *CB*, p. 41.
9. *LMF*, pp. 15, 129. Gissing read Mrs. Piozzi appreciatively and attentively. In his *Commonplace Book* (p. 33) he remarks that "Johnson's Latin Ode to Mrs. Thrale, written in Sky[e], is a piece of real tenderness." The Ode was published in Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes*. The eponymous hero of

Gissing's short story "Our Mr. Jupp" believes that, "like Samuel Johnson, he was well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity." This phrase (Johnson's seriously meant description of himself) is also from Mrs. Piozzi. See Gissing, *Human Odds and Ends* (A. H. Bullen, 1901), p. 7; Hesther Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. G. B. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), pp. 259, 169 (hereafter referred to as Piozzi).

10. *CB*, p. 33.

11. *Diary*, pp. 335-6.

12. *LMF*, p. 153.

13. Boswell, p. 53.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 962.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 477.

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17. *Ryecroft*, p. 128; Boswell, p. 1074.

18. Boswell, p. 313. Cf. Johnson's praise of Pope's independence: Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), III, 219 (hereafter referred to as *Lives*).

19. Boswell, p. 1316.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 241, 803.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

23. "London," 1. 177; Boswell, p. 94.

24. *CB*, p. 54.

25. Boswell, pp. 437, 446; Piozzi, p. 219.

26. *Lives*, III, 45.

27. *Johnson: Prose and Poetry*, ed. Mona Wilson (Rupert Hart-Davis, 1950), pp. 356-57 (hereafter referred to as *Prose and Poetry*).

28. *Demos*, pp. 383-84.
29. Cf. Boswell, p. 1162.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 437; cf. p. 173.
31. Letter to Algernon, 28 December 1886, Berg Collection.
32. *The Nether World*, p. 51.
33. *Diary*, p. 231.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.
35. *D.N.B.* entry on Walter Harte, 1709-1744. Boswell, p. 119. It could be inferred that Harte was not an aristocrat from Boswell, p. 1126.
36. Boswell, p. 312; *Ryecroft*, p. 14.
37. Boswell, p. 1182 (Johnson actually wrote “and so much misery”); *Ryecroft*, pp. 15-16.
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38. Boswell, pp. 1189-90.
39. See also Boswell, pp. 860, 1185.
40. *Rasselas*, chap. 11. Cf. Boswell, pp. 442, 754, 874-75, 1297; Piozzi, pp. 374-75.
41. Boswell, p. 213. In his last letter to Mrs. Thrale (8 July 1784) Johnson spoke of his as “a life radically wretched”: *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), II, 177.
42. Boswell, p. 196.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 791; *Diary*, p. 545.
44. Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. B. L. McAdam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 81.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 294; *Diary*, p. 293.
46. Cf. especially Boswell, p. 341 and *Diary*, p. 265.
47. See especially Boswell, p. 548-49.
48. John Halperin has even called him a “manic-depressive”: *Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 7.

49. Boswell, pp. 912, 1017.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 514.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 464; cf. *Demos*, p. 339.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 544.
53. *Ryecroft*, p. 193; cf. *Demos*, p. 350.
54. Boswell, p. 423.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 630; cf. Piozzi, p. 203.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 750.
58. Thomas Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, ed. A. J. Grieve, 2 vols. (Everyman, 1907),

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- II, 553-54; Boswell, p. 477.
59. Boswell, pp. 66, 271, 323.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 1313.
61. See especially "The Sins of the Fathers," *Workers in the Dawn*, and *The Unclassed*.
62. Boswell, pp. 1375-76.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 394.
64. *Rasselas*, chap. 26; Boswell, p. 473.
65. Boswell, p. 445.
66. *Ryecroft*, p. 115.
67. To Algernon, 6 March 1892, Berg Collection (partly in *LMF*, p. 325); cf. *Diary*, p. 272, Boswell, p. 1101.
68. Boswell, pp. 174, 688.
69. *LMF*, p. 405.
70. Boswell, pp. 622, 495, 1338; cf. pp. 235, 319, 958.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 1176. Cf. *Rambler* articles Nos. 50 and 59.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 1363; cf. p. 1400.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 870.
74. See Boswell, pp. 316, 1007, 1048.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
76. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 219 (hereafter referred to as *Heroes*).
77. Gissing, *The House of Cobwebs* (Constable, 1906), p. 7.
78. *LMF*, p. 81.
79. H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 568.
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80. Boswell, p. 622; cf. p. 719.
81. *Ryecroft*, pp. 17-18 (but cf. Roberts, p. 150).
82. *Ibid.*, p. 187; cf. *New Grub Street*, p. 490.
83. Boswell, p. 1200; cf. Piozzi, p. 315.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 961.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 962.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 980.
87. *Prose and Poetry*, p. 944; Boswell, p. 142. See also J. E. Brown (ed.), *The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), pp. 204-210 ("Popular Judgement").
88. Boswell, p. 740.
89. See especially, *CB*, pp. 55-56.
90. *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz 1887-1903*, ed. Arthur C. Young (Constable, 1961), p. 122.
91. See also Boswell, p. 1210.

92. *New Grub Street*, pp. 39, 123, 337-38; cf. p. 134. Boswell, p. 144.
93. For Gissing's critique of mechanical application, see *CB*, p. 67; *Ryecroft*, pp. 60, 212-16; *Dickens*, p. 226.
94. *New Grub Street*, p. 485. For the antithesis between commerce and the classics, see pp. 89, 108, 155, 158, 172, 403-04, 407.
95. Although Johnson spoke of "the incessant struggle for riches which commerce excites," he also asserted that "there are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money": Boswell, pp. 499, 597.
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96. Boswell, p. 1075.
97. *The Crown of Life* (Methuen, 1899), p. 180.
98. See especially Pierre Coustillas, "Gissing as a Romantic Realist," *Gissing Newsletter*, XVII, 1, (January 1981), pp. 14-26.
99. For Johnson's dislike of pastoral, as a literary convention and a way of life, see *Rasselas*, chap. 19; *Lives*, II, 410 (*Life of Savage*); *The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson*, pp. 182-86 ("Pastoral"). For Gissing's tremulous nature-description, see, among many examples, *The Nether World*, p. 165.
100. Boswell, pp. 627, 1216, 1080, 416; Roberts, p. 228 and *Ryecroft*, p. 85; *LMF*, pp. 405, 200.
101. Of Gissing's response to London, Morley Roberts wrote: "He had something of the same passion for it as Johnson, although the centre of London for him was not Fleet Street but the British Museum and its great library": Roberts, p. 145. Cf. Boswell, p. 326.
102. Gissing commended (ostensibly for its style) an elegiac passage from Johnson in *CB*, p. 33.
103. For Johnson there was no contradiction here. Indeed, he believed that "severity towards the poor was ... an undoubted ... consequence upon whiggism": Piozzi, p. 204.
104. Boswell, p. 415; *CB*, p. 46.
105. *LMF*, p. 105.
106. *Heroes*, pp. 321, 323; *Ryecroft*, p. 115.

The Jamesian Pattern in
George Gissing's *New Grub Street*.

André Guillaume
University of Paris X-Nanterre.

Like Henry James, George Gissing is interested in the minutiae of human relationships, where aspirations and feelings are tied or qualified by a network of conventions and proprieties. The psychological approach in *New Grub Street* (1891) as in *Washington Square* (1881) or *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) for instance focusses the reader's attention not so much on the basic nature of the characters – which does exist however – as on the dynamic relationships between them within the frame of a social pattern of behaviour. Now this pattern of relationships between two sets of characters is strangely analogous in James's *Washington Square* and Gissing's *New Grub Street*.

Morris Townsend in *Washington Square* is a crude fortune-hunter who does not sincerely mean to work and make a career for himself, but merely intends to continue as a parasite: after sponging on his widowed sister, he aims at winning as much of Catherine's and Dr. Sloper's fortunes as he can. His ambition is merely to be a parasite on a grand scale. Jasper Milvain is certainly not such a villain: what he expects from a prospective wife is financial and social help in his literary career in which, on the whole, he will succeed just as much through his own hard work. The parasitic strain in him, in hanging on the maternal gifts of women, first his mother, then, possibly, Marian, and eventually Amy, is neither so obvious nor so unmixed as in Morris Townsend's portrait. Both however follow an analogous pattern, both aim high, both take a bold step by offering marriage to girls who attract them more by their patrimonial expectancies than by

their charm – granting the fact that Jasper is greatly attracted by Marian's beauty, and Morris does not find in Catherine any personal appeal. Both also jilt their fiancées because their fortunes eventually prove insufficient. There is a real similarity in the psychological treatment of the two webs of relationships. Morris Townsend and Jasper Milvain are dignified suitors, they carry out their courtships with gentlemanly respectability, keeping up the appearances of decency and honesty. Both preserve their self-respect when they are checked by their enemy in the citadel, the girl's father. Both win by taking advantage of the young women's need for emancipation from their fathers and craving for the fulfilment of a freer life. Eventually both retreat into hesitancy and are thereby placed in a predicament as regards Victorian proprieties. Jasper's "delicate case" (ch. 36) consists in avoiding jilting Marian openly and having to pass for a blackguard in the eyes of Marian herself, his sister Dora, Marian's friend, and respectable people at large. At this point Gissing appears more Jamesian than James himself, if I may say so. I mean that he depicts Jasper far more subtly than James does Morris. Jasper does not draw back from fulfilling his engagement only for financial reasons. All along he has been divided within himself by Marian's personal attraction for him and the relative insufficiency of her expected inheritance – £5,000 in the early, deceptive estimate, eventually shrinking to a mere £1,500. And he will be ashamed of himself for his withdrawal, which is certainly not Morris's case, the latter being a purely selfish, self-indulgent male. Indeed, Jasper is portrayed as a more sophisticated schemer, who uses his genuine feeling for Marian as a show of sincerity in the form of controlled irritation or brusqueness. He is most scheming when he shows his lack of enthusiasm at the actual idea of marriage,¹ thereby forcing

Marian to take the initiative in breaking with him.² His toying with the girl's love and integrity to

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shake her off may stress his cowardliness, but at the same time it emphasizes his worldly skill in the game of love-making, which has in it something of devilish feminine coquetry.

This similarity in the pattern of relationships between some of the chief protagonists in James's *Washington Square* and Gissing's *New Grub Street* does not necessarily proceed from the former's influence over the latter. As a matter of fact, Gissing may or may not have read *Washington Square* – he probably did ; even if he did not, his interest in the love game of a scheming, fortune-hunting suitor, and his technical treatment of the ambiguities in the progress and collapse of this kind of courtship reveal a significant analogy with his great American contemporary. This analogy may derive from historical developments in the matter and technique of the novel rather than from any resemblance between James and Gissing. Both novelists, each in his own way, applied the technique of the so-called psychological realism largely introduced by George Eliot (cf. *Middlemarch*, 1871- 1872), a Victorian predecessor whom both writers admired and revered.

The revolt of a daughter against an oppressive father follows a similar course in *Washington Square* and in *New Grub Street*. Of course the theme of the romantic emancipation, through her first, virginal love, of a girl from paternal authority is one of the most traditional and common in fiction. But in both James's and Gissing's stories, the way in which the revolt is depicted and independence is achieved show how close were the two writers' sensibilities and ideas. Both Dr. Sloper and Alfred Yule have overwhelming minds. In either man an overbearing intellect is secretly hardened, embittered and also flawed by the sense of failure – Dr. Sloper had been hard hit by the premature death in childbirth of a priceless wife, and the relative inferiority of his daughter filled him with a sense of failure; Alfred Yule had married a low-class girl, which contributed to thwart his literary

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ambition. The symmetry is antithetical: Dr. Sloper shows esteem for his wife and scorn for his daughter; Alfred Yule scorn for his wife and esteem for his daughter. Both fathers are driven to take a callous or harsh view of their daughters' claim to love and marriage mainly by this racking sense of failure. In both novels, the scenes in which mutual incomprehension between father and daughter gives itself free play are masterly renderings of the clashes between sexes and generations: for instance Alfred Yule's perverse refusal to accept or even put up with Marian's choice of a fiancé, and his banishment of her in the event of marriage are conveyed through short pronouncements of icy cruelty. Both Dr. Sloper and Alfred Yule express cruelty to themselves as well as to their daughters with the sharpest steel of language. And the two girls, until recently submissive, retired or even shy, promptly rise to the occasion, standing up against the awesome power of the Victorian head of the family. The incipient rebellion of women against the father's authority – whether the actual head of the family or the social father-image – in a society which clung to paternal values, brilliantly emerges in such fictional instances. Unaware though they may have been of each other's writings, Gissing and James evince a kinship on this point of sensibility: both of them are sympathetic to new, prophetic feminine demands, both echo women's pathetic cry for freedom, and their pen is likewise attuned to these feminine voices heralding momentous changes. Both convey the personal drama of this incipient struggle through an art which combines profound concern for the feminist cause with the refusal of polemical commitment.

Gissing, like James, portrays the ethical integrity of his feminine heroine, Marian. Like Catherine Sloper and Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait a Lady*, Marian is sensitive and passionate; her

love for Jasper Milvain is truly all her life, and without him, life will be worthless, a mere death-in-life. Nevertheless she has too much dignity, wisdom also, to compromise and “hold Jasper to his promise at any cost” when she realizes that he no longer loves her and would only marry her out of pity. “You don’t love me, Jasper, and that’s an end of everything. I should be shamed if I married you....”³ This high sense of the dignity of a love relationship crowned by a sound and happy marriage is not based upon sheer pride, but rather on self-respect and the mature knowledge of a young woman whose home has been made wretched by her parent’s loveless married life. She feels love is something too absolute to be reduced to the puny size of a mean relationship; and she loves Jasper too much to bind him to her against his will. She is superior to Catherine Sloper, who is so embittered by Morris Townsend’s mercantile jilting that she destroys her love for him and turns him out scornfully when he eventually returns to her, a complete failure. And of course Jasper is different from Morris. Marian rises to the higher stature of Isabel Archer, who does not want to mitigate the effects of her mistaken marriage by yielding to her suitor, Goodwood, and refuses to run away with him. I should say that Marian has a touch of sensibility which the puritan Isabel Archer does not possess, as it is not for the sake of common morality that Marian gives up Jasper: she does so because of the high value she sets on love.

In common with many great writers of his time, Gissing in *New Grub Street* as well as in most of his other novels, exemplifies the ethics of failure. James’s most interesting characters in *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, somehow take pride in the heroic failure of their lives. In *Jude the Obscure* a similar uncompromising scorn of the easy road to success in love or in work gives Jude Fawley’s and Susan Bridehead’s failure a

touch of heroic glory. It seems that late nineteenth-century literature gave failure moral value *per se*. As a matter of fact Nietzsche’s philosophy of heroism views failure as an essential in the superman’s ethic: at the beginning of *So Spake Zarathustra* the rope-dancer who kills himself when attempting to perform an impossible feat fails gloriously. Following Nietzsche’s teaching, the young W. B. Yeats enthusiastically seized upon this ethical principle of failure. Gissing’s most honest characters in *New Grub Street*, Edwin Reardon, Alfred Yule, Harold Biffen, and Marian Yule never compromise with the essentials of truthfulness: with straightforward vigour, they follow the dictates of their conscience in their literary work and in their emotional lives. Unlike the selfish characters, Jasper Milvain, Amy Reardon or Fadge, these favourites of the author are steadfast in adversity, though they may be lacking in spirit. But they take no pride in the way they confront failure; they are passive stoics, who can endure boredom passively. There is no literary darwinism about them, as they in no wise exemplify the survival of the fittest, but passively live out the life of the oppressed and the weak. Failure they confront and even court, stoically, not heroically. They are suffering men and women, humbly wearing a crown of thorns, but theirs is an *aimless* sense of martyrdom, since they have no Christian outlook. Their failure grips the reader’s heart because it is conveyed by the author with so much passion and compassion.

1. Penguin edition, 1968, p. 537.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 538-39.

3. *Ibid.*

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Reviews

George Gissing, *The Paying Guest*, ed. Ian Fletcher, Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982.

The Paying Guest shares with *Workers in the Dawn* the unenviable privilege of never having been reprinted in England since it appeared in early January 1896. The reason for this situation is probably to be found in the unpretentiousness of the story – Gissing wrote so many books that were more ambitious, more impressive –, perhaps also in his own modest attitude to this particular work. The story must be viewed partly in the context of the mid-1890s when the three-volume novel was at its last gasp and most publishing houses were launching new “libraries” of very short novels. Gissing received over half a dozen offers to contribute to these new series or libraries, and both *Sleeping Fires* and *The Paying Guest* were written with a view to pleasing the firms of Fisher Unwin and Cassell, and the new readers which they hoped to conquer. Still, he made no major concession: *The Paying Guest* is by no means untypical Gissing, but its light tone has put off a number of readers for whom the author’s books must necessarily make melancholy reading. Not even in the late 1920s when the publication of *Letters to Members of his Family* triggered new editions of quite a few of the novels as well as new collections of short stories was *The Paying Guest* revived by Cassell as was *Sleeping Fires* by Fisher Unwin.

Still, when the story was published it was acclaimed more warmly by the English press than any of his books of the decade. The *Daily News* called Gissing “the English Balzac of middle-class

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suburban life,” praising his truthfulness and humour; the *Publishers’ Circular* said the story was charming and written with great brightness and vivacity; the popular *Weekly Sun* declared that “a more piquant and diverting story we have not read for a long time. It ought to circulate by tens of thousands.” Whether it enjoyed such a large circulation in England cannot be ascertained as no figures are obtainable from Cassell, but the volume is known to have appeared with advertisements dated Aug. 1895, Sept. 1895 and March 1896, which seems to indicate three successive bindings, let alone the edition in stiff wrappers, which is much scarcer than the other “variants.”

The edition reprinted by the Harvester Press is, as it should be, the edition published by Cassell and not the American edition which appeared under the imprint of Dodd, Mead & Co. The *Diary* throws some light on the reasons why the two editions show textual differences. The entry for 3 October 1895 records that Gissing sent his story to be typed for the American publisher while the entry for 21 October reads in part: “Pemberton writes with satisfaction about ‘The Paying Guest,’ and says Dodd, Mead & Co. have bought American rights for £25 down and 10% royalty.” He sat to Mendelssohn on 5 November for the portrait which Cassells needed for their catalogue and read proof of the English edition on 10 November. But there is no record then or later that he corrected proofs for Dodd, Mead, only that he received his £25 on 11 January 1896. It would therefore seem that the last state of the text for the American edition that he saw was the typescript. Some misprints in the American edition can possibly be blamed on the Guarantee Press, whose imprint appears at the bottom of the copyright page, but it is by no means impossible that Gissing’s typist misread some words in his manuscript and that he himself failed to correct such misreadings. The

manuscript might supply an answer to this question if it were available, but, like those of *The Unclassed*, *The Odd Women* and *Sleeping Fires*, its whereabouts are unknown. Anyway, Gissing's own copy of the American edition contains three corrections in his hand – all in chapter VIII – and in each case the mistake seems to have resulted from a faulty transcription of the author's writing (*fire* for *fix*; *might* for *weight*; and *gamuts* – people familiar with Gissing's writing will recall that he sometimes crossed his final t's in such a way that the loop at the end might be taken for an s – for *gamut*). No such mistakes occur in the English edition. In addition to these points, the English and the American editions contain many minor differences, concerning punctuation in particular, which can only be accounted for by changes that Gissing made on the proofs of the English edition, but these are not known to have survived. One example will suffice. No fewer than six discrepancies occur in the first twenty lines of the story: unlike the American edition, the English edition has no comma after "advertisement," "extrav" instead of "extra," no "darling" between commas after "now and then," a comma instead of a full stop after "day," a semi-colon instead of a colon after "heavy," and a hyphen between "season" and "ticket."

Professor Ian Fletcher does not consider textual details of this kind in his critical edition. After the Bibliographical Note, which relates briefly the publishing history of the book, he sets out to offer a critical appraisal of the book (pp. ix-xxxii) and concludes the critical apparatus with the few notes that are called for and a bibliography whose inevitable brevity reflects the little attention which the story has received in some eighty-five years. His assessment of this

undeservedly neglected *novella* is at once sensible and sensitive: he brilliantly analyses the social theme and the writer's subtle irony, giving the while his due to his predecessor, C. J. Francis, who published a valuable article on *The Paying Guest* in this journal (July 1977). He also draws our attention to the hitherto unnoticed symbols. Of Louise's lover, Cobb, he writes: "It is plain that the fire is both a correlative of his desire: has he not 'glared' and been 'inflamed' before the lamp is knocked over? and his premarital catharsis of that desire. That it should be knocked over just at the point when Louise is trying to make up the quarrel is one of the several hints within the text that Louise's tempers and disasters result from a reciprocal attraction to Cobb. Indeed, the meetings of the two take place in elemental contexts of rain and fire as though the pathetic fallacy were working overtime for them".

In this "most Austenian of all Gissing's novels," Ian Fletcher finds names which, as we know, were carefully chosen by the novelist. He scrutinizes the connotations of Clarence and Emmeline, of their surname Mumford, of Cobb and Derrick. And he concludes as follows: "The themes of *The Paying Guest* are beautifully summed up in its last lines where the arrow through her maiden name says everything about her achievement of a new social status; her abandonment of her ambitions for a middle-class marriage; the engaging vulgarity of her taste; her irrepressible sexual vitality."

It is to be hoped this attractively got up new edition will win some more readers to Gissing. Those readers who fight shy of his darker fiction should start with *The Paying Guest* and *The Town*

Traveller, go on with *Will Warburton* and *The Crown of Life* and probably finish with *The Nether World*. But now that even *Sleeping Fires* has gone into paperback, the private buyer should be given

a better chance of starting with Gissing's lightest-hearted story – and the Harvester Press should consider a reissue in stiff pictorial wrappers. – Pierre Coustillas.

George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. John Goode, Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982.

Of all Gissing's novels of the 1880s *The Nether World* is that which has most benefited the rediscovery of his social novels in the 1970s after several decades when he was thought to be the author of one book that deserved to live, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. There have been various editions in print in the last ten years and it is cheering to see the Harvester edition reprinted in two formats, a hardback in bright red cloth with a black panel on the spine and a grey and red paperback very reasonably priced at £2.95.

In no other book did Gissing get nearer to naturalism, except perhaps in some passages of *Workers*, and this makes the book something of a freak even in the predominantly sentimental approach to social realities of the 1880s. Yet it is also a very English novel and this may have helped to secure the story a more favourable reception than those novels of George Moore's, like *A Mummer's Wife*, which seemed too openly imitative of Zola. Although Gissing may have been vastly misunderstood in his lifetime – it is particularly distressing that the hostile tribe of reviewers

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who accused him of having no sense of humour were incapable of understanding his irony – it is comforting to see, on rereading some old reviews published in 1889, that the story earned for itself respectful comments on account of its very earnestness. "Mr. George Gissing," wrote the *Manchester Examiner and Times* on 27 April 1889, "has never written a more powerful book than *The Nether World*, and neither he nor any other novelist of our generation has written a book more unrelievedly painful and depressing." It is perhaps no accident that it was the first of his books to find admittance to a colonial library, that of Messrs. Petherick, who thought it good to have the novel preceded by an introductory note:

"The writer who could take up the exposition of low-type industry, who could interest us in real working men and women and the idlers, and worse than idlers, who hang on to the skirts of the industrious poor, and are the real causes of the main parts of the squalor and vice that we see around us; the writer who could eliminate the inherent pathos, the poetry and the humour that lie latent in ... 'horrible London,' and who could show us the true humanities – as Carlyle would understand it – underneath dirt, rags, and repulsive looks, must needs be a strong and clear-visioned and sympathetic soul himself." In *The Nether World*, continued the unidentified P. R. who wrote the introductory note, "we have unmistakable evidence of a prose Dante of the contemporary poor." This was at once percipient and fair to Gissing, who had been diligently reading *La Divina Commedia* some time before in an old edition printed in Avignon.

The passing of time has given the book dimensions which its earliest readers could not see

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as clearly as we do, and it is mainly on this that John Goode concentrates in his introduction to the present edition. *The Nether World*, he observes, is built around themes which preoccupied the social anxieties of the 1880s, that is essentially housing, employment, and philanthropy. To us the story also makes sense as a late nineteenth-century example of that literature of roguery discussed by Frank W. Chandler in his two-volume study of the subject; as an index to Gissing's personal despair after Nell's death; also as an impressive vision of lower-class London which inspired lesser writers

such as Arthur Morrison and Richard Whiteing, who took care not to pay homage to their predecessor. (Incidentally, Morrison's novels and short stories are currently being reprinted by Boydell and Brewer, of Woodbridge, Suffolk).

Much work remains to be done on *The Nether World*, notably an enquiry into Gissing's sources and the imagery offered by the story. Meanwhile we can watch with pleasure the rise of Gissing's last novel of lower-class life to the status of a classic. – Pierre Coustillas.

Harry R. Sullivan, *Frederic Harrison*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.

It is probably a coincidence that the volumes devoted to Gissing and to Frederic Harrison in Twayne's English Authors Series should have appeared almost simultaneously. The contacts between the two were doubtless of greater consequence in Gissing's life than in Harrison's, still one

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feels that Gissing deserved a little more space in the present book than a passing mention in the last but one paragraph, accompanied by a five-line footnote – the last in the volume – in which neither *Workers in the Dawn* nor *Veranilda* is alluded to. This gives one the (possibly mistaken) impression that Gissing was remembered at the very last minute, or indeed possibly after, and that he was allowed to put in the briefest possible appearance where he was least likely to prove bothersome. One should have thought that in Ch. VI, which is entitled "Appraisal of Modern Literature" (pp. 146-181), Gissing could have been granted a short paragraph in the section devoted to "Victorian Poets and Novelists." Harrison's opinions of *Workers*, *The Unclassed*, and *Demos* are too well-known to be repeated here, as is his much criticized but well-meant preface to the unfinished story of Roman and Goth, but in this study of Harrison's manifold activities a few careful words on Harrison's reactions to Gissing's realistic novels and to his historical romance would have helped to define the tastes of the writer concerned. As Harrison lived until 1923 he had opportunities to read other Victorian novelists than Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope and George Eliot. Introducing Gissing, and Zola in his train, would have helped to define the limits of Harrison's liberalism, and a word on *Veranilda*, which Harrison reviewed in the *Positivist Review*, would have come naturally when *Theophano* and *Nicephorus* were discussed (pp. 223-31).

If readers of Gissing turn to Mr. Sullivan's volume – as they should, despite these negative considerations of very limited significance – they will find in it a fair picture of the leading English

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positivist in the nineteenth century, of the man who was for a time the patron and employer of the novelist, but whose personality was so different from his own that disagreements were bound to arise between them. The book is divided into three parts. Ch. I is a biographical survey which shows Harrison essentially as a public figure and this chapter relies exclusively on the published sources, that is, mainly the *Autobiographic Memoirs* (2 vols., 1911) and Austin Harrison's valuable book-length essay on his father (1926). Ch. II to IV discuss Comte's philosophy and its applications in Harrison's works, while the last two chapters are devoted to Harrison's literary criticism and his own incursions into the field of historical fiction. Throughout Mr. Sullivan is informative and invariably clear. Anyone who wishes to know more about the intellectual and philosophical make-up of Gissing's patron will turn with profit to these five non-biographical chapters. They offer a guided tour in a world of ideas and of course they are as informative about Auguste Comte as about Harrison himself.

But here as elsewhere Mr. Sullivan ignores Harrison's correspondence as he ignores anything that is available in manuscript form, and indeed his selected bibliography leaves out much recent material, including some by the leading specialist, Martha Salmon Vogeler, whose critical edition of *Order and Progress* has apparently escaped Mr. Sullivan's notice.

To sum up, this is a book which is only half-satisfactory. It will be useful in many ways to people who know little or nothing about Harrison's life and works, but not a few Victorianists of the present generation will find much in it to carp with. We began, as was natural in this journal, by regretting the almost total absence of Gissing in the book, but we could compile a fairly long list of

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writers whose interesting contacts with Harrison are not even alluded to. Thomas Hardy is the first example that comes to mind. Also, although the book reads well and is well printed, some errors and inconsistencies are to be deplored. Thus Harrison's wife, Ethel, appears as Jane in the chronology, Sidney Webb's Christian name is misspelt in the bibliography and in the index, the author of *Robert Elsmere* is mistakenly called Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Cotter Morison's name is spelt with a double r.

The relative importance of Mr. Sullivan's book will be easier to assess when the full-length study of Frederic Harrison's life and works soon to be published is available. Meanwhile we have a volume which cannot be ignored, though it leaves much to be desired. — Pierre Coustillas.

Notes and News

Considering the increasing number of Gissing novels available in paperback, it may be useful to recapitulate what is currently in print:

The Unclassed (Harvester and Methuen U.S.A.)

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Demos (Harvester)

Thyrza (Harvester)

The Nether World (Harvester and Methuen U.S.A., also Dent).

New Grub Street (Penguin)

Born in Exile (Harvester)

The Odd Women (Virago, also Norton and New American Library)

In the Year of Jubilee (Dover)

Eve's Ransom (Dover)

Sleeping Fires (University of Nebraska Press)

The Whirlpool (Harvester)

The Town Traveller (Harvester)

Henry Ryecroft (Harvester and Methuen U.S.A.)

An announcement of *The Odd Women*, with an introduction by Elaine Showalter (New American Library, 1633 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019) appeared in the November number of *PMLA*, p. 1181. The book is published at \$3.25. An announcement for *Sleeping Fires* (\$4.95) by the

University of Nebraska Press (901 N. 17th., Lincoln 6588) can be found in the same number of *PMLA*, p. 1281.

Wakefield Historical Publications (Seckar House, Seckar Lane, Woolley, Wakefield, West Yorkshire), a body comprising Wakefield Historical Society and the City of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, have just republished *Walks about Wakefield* by W. S. Banks,

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illustrated with contemporary photographs. This book of 608 pages was first published in 1871. The author was a Wakefield lawyer and a friend of T. W. Gissing, whom John Goodchild mentions in his introduction. This new edition differs from that of 1871 in that it includes 59 contemporary photographs taken about 1870 by G. & J. Hall, the Wakefield photographers. The frontispiece consists of a portrait of William Stott Banks.

After reading a quotation in translation from his review of John Halperin's *Gissing: A Life in Books* (July 1983 *Newsletter*, p. 32), Shigeru Koike wrote to say that the obscure statement that "Halperin's manner of delivery is perhaps called 'debate'" should be understood as meaning that "Halperin's method (or principle) may invite controversy."

Mrs. Ernesta Spencer Mills has sent a press-cutting from the *Daily Telegraph* of 15 August 1983 on publishers' readers. The author of the article, Alan Wykes, humorously observes: "Nothing is what it was, including publishers' reading. The Holy Men among the readers of the past – the likes of George Meredith, Edward Garnett, John Buchan, Frank Swinnerton, who discovered and launched such writers as Gissing, Galsworthy, Conrad, H. E. Bates – were salaried employees poring over the manuscripts that drifted tranquilly into Bloomsbury offices. Today their equivalents are whizzkid publishing directors who deal mainly with offerings filtered through the literary agents." Mrs. Mills also communicates a cutting from the same newspaper (5 November 1983) consisting of a letter she wrote to the editor about the Elgin Marbles and the effect of pollution on them. She quotes Gissing writing at the Hôtel de la Couronne on 29 November 1889.

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Daedalus Press, which has printed a number of titles in the Enitharmon Gissing Series, has published a bibliography of the books it has printed since its foundation, *Exordium: Daedalus Press 1968-1983*, by Juliet Standing (Wymondham, 1983). The book is an oblong octavo, 54 pages long with illustrations. Only 150 copies signed by Caspar and Juliet Standing and Trevor Hickman of Brewhouse Press have been printed. The book is priced at £35.

Recent Publications

Volume

George Gissing, *The Town Traveller*, edited with an introduction and notes by Pierre Coustillas, Brighton: The Harvester Press. This title, originally published in early 1982 and dated 1981, is now available in a blue and grey paperback at £5.95.

The two paperback editions of *Thyrza* and *The Whirlpool* announced by the Harvester Press in several catalogues have not yet been received. But copies of *The Emancipated*, *Denzil Quarrier* and *The Crown of Life* in new bindings have reached the editor. The paperback edition of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Harvester, 1982) was reprinted in 1983.

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Articles, Reviews, etc.

Ernestine Wilhelmina Robinson, "Literature, English," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Vol. 42, no. 8, February, 1982, p. 3613-A. Abstract of "Gissing's Odd Women: A Study of Marriage and Feminism in the middle-class novels of George Gissing" (Ball State University, 1981, 173 pp.).

Vivian Gornick, "Against Marriage," *Village Voice*, 15 November, 1983, pp. 11-14. Contains substantial passages on the *The Odd Women*.

Charles J. Burkhart, "The State of the Art in Gissing Studies," *English Literature in Transition*, Vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 216-17. Review of *Gissing: A Life in Books*. Notices of *Gissing and Germany* and *Gissing and Turgenev* appear under "Briefer Mention," p. 218.