

## The Subversive George Gissing

EVELYN TOYNTON

Toward the end of his life, after prodigious labor and hardship, George Gissing (1857–1903) finally achieved recognition as a major English novelist. If the twenty-three passionately gloomy novels he produced never earned him more than a very modest living, at least he had the satisfaction of seeing his name linked with those of Meredith and Hardy as one of the leading writers of his day. Even the imperious Henry James expressed approval for Gissing's portrayal of refined souls at odds with brutal circumstances.

But the bubble reputation was for Gissing even more fragile than usual. By the 1920s he had been firmly relegated to the status of minor novelist. Nowadays surveys of the English novel may cite him in passing as his country's chief practitioner of naturalistic fiction—a dubious distinction at best—before moving on to Hardy, while college literature courses rarely touch on Gissing at all. The average literate person will know the name but not necessarily the books behind it.

Why this neglect of someone whose importance is proclaimed by such dissimilar writers as Henry James and George Orwell (an avid forager in second-hand bookshops for Gissing's out-of-print works)? The answer may lie partly in the unrelenting pessimism that characterizes Gissing's novels. Hardy is just as doubtful about the prospects for human happiness, but his is a pastoral gloom, more palatable to the average reader—particularly, perhaps, the modern city dweller—than the cramped urban misery that Gissing depicts. Then, too, Hardy's stories and characters are consciously mythic, partaking of spiritual grandeur and the mysteries of fate. Gissing's

novels have very different virtues. Chief among them is the sense that an honest man is speaking to us, that things happen in his books exactly as they do in the world.

In fact, Gissing's talents, like Orwell's, might have been more suited to essays than to fiction. The greatest pleasure to be derived from reading him is an intellectual one—that of watching a fiercely independent mind in the act of reflecting on life. The view of the world presented in his books is never either falsely romantic or programmatically simple. Even Gissing's relationship to the reader seems exceptionally honest. He may bully us at times, backing us into a corner from which it is impossible to resist his view of the world any longer, but he never manipulates us as, say, Dickens does, never sentimentalizes poverty or the poor. Whereas Dickens's blameless chimney sweeps are wholly satisfying to read about but never truly plausible, Gissing's clear-sighted descriptions of how poverty erodes the spirit *are* plausible, and disconcerting precisely because of that. "No one can embrace Orwell's works who hopes for ease," wrote E. M. Forster, and the same could certainly be said of the works of George Gissing.

Sometimes, of course, fidelity to grim truth means sacrificing the more traditional pleasures of fiction. Gissing never makes his characters "larger than life," never uses them to give us glimpses of the ineluctable mysteries at the heart of existence. His prose can be flat-footed and pedestrian at times, so that he seems to be reporting from the trenches rather than creating a fictional world. This leads to the impression that he is writing strict autobiography in the guise of fiction. Virginia Woolf, in an essay full of delicate condescension, called him "one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the

★ EVELYN TOYNTON is a writer and critic living in New York.

author faintly covered by the lives of fictitious people."

It might be more accurate to say that the prevailing themes of Gissing's books are his own obsessive preoccupations, born of a life of grinding poverty and loneliness. A morbidly sensitive man incapable of either promoting his material well-being or coping efficiently with practical necessity, Gissing seems to have lived until middle age in a state of perpetual misery and indignation, finding solace only in his beloved Greek poets. Too ashamed of his poverty to ask any educated woman to share it with him, he entered into two awful marriages with uneducated and seemingly mentally unbalanced working-class women, whom he came to regard more as tormentors than companions. It is no wonder that he is so insistent, in his novels, on how the lack of money affects every aspect of existence, repeatedly portraying the anguish of those who want to do something fine but instead must struggle merely to survive—people of refinement and intellect debarred by poverty and disadvantage from intercourse with their own kind.

But Gissing was also capable of original reflection on the larger issues of his day and of insight into circumstances very different from his own. And he depicts a much broader range of characters than Virginia Woolf's comment suggests. Gissing's novel *The Odd Women*, for example, is a remarkably sympathetic, complex portrait of the "women's movement" of the late nineteenth century, an accomplishment particularly impressive for a writer who can sometimes appear downright misogynistic. Everything the novel's valiant feminists say about the need to train women for useful work is brought forcefully home through Gissing's portrait of a group of impoverished, genteel sisters who, when they are suddenly orphaned, are totally unprepared to make their way in the world. The youngest and prettiest sister, after a backbreaking stint as a shop assistant, enters into a loveless marriage with a drearily respectable, insanely jealous domestic tyrant. The other sisters, not fetching enough to attract husbands, settle for precarious and humiliating positions as companions and governesses. In between posts they starve meekly in shabby, cramped lodgings in London, where the most sensitive of them seeks consolation in furtive gin drinking. It is

a frightening picture of wasted lives, more powerful because it is hard to see what recourse was open to these "nice" women deprived of the protection of a man.

Interestingly, the male characters in *The Odd Women* are much less sympathetic. Apart from the stiflingly possessive husband, there is a charming dilettante and freethinker who courts the leader of the feminists out of little more than idle curiosity and the desire to see her abandon her cause for him. It is a rare indictment by a male writer of the egotism of his sex.

Not that Gissing is wholly without empathy for these men. In fact, it is a hallmark of his fiction that he never presents us with out-and-out villains, even when dealing with characters who drastically hurt others. In *New Grub Street*, for example, that ultimate depiction of the horrors of the literary life, the main character, the novelist Edwin Reardon, is effectually ruined by the failure of his pretentious, social-climbing wife to accept poverty with him. She hounds him to write more and worse books until his frail talent is destroyed. At the same time, Marion Yule, the most likable female character in the novel, is callously jilted by the ambitious man of letters Jasper Milvain when the small inheritance she was expecting falls through. In the end, Reardon dies and Marion takes a job as a provincial librarian to support her blind father; Amy Reardon and Milvain marry after Amy comes into some money. But neither Amy nor Milvain is presented as a monster. They are merely ordinary, selfish, robust creatures, capable of kindness if not of self-sacrifice. As Milvain himself says, "Poverty and struggle would have made me a detestable creature. As it is, I am not such a bad fellow. . . . Trust me, there's many a man who would like to be generous, but is made despicably mean by necessity." Gissing clearly prefers Reardon, whose passion for the classics and inconvenient integrity so resemble his own, but he does not idealize him, just as he does not exaggerate Milvain's faults. Reardon's prickly sensitivity and pride, his undignified need for reassurance, his paralysis when action is called for—these things make it possible for the reader to understand Amy's impatience with him.

The one really saintly character in *New Grub Street* is Harold Biffen, Reardon's fel-

low novelist and one friend. Immeasurably poorer even than Reardon, Biffen dines on bread and dripping in his cold attic while discoursing rapturously on the strophes of Euripides. Only after Reardon's death do his mute love for his friend's widow and the knowledge that his loneliness can have no end finally prove too much for him:

He could not bear to walk the streets where the faces of beautiful women would encounter him. When he must needs leave the house, he went about in the poor, narrow ways, where only spectacles of coarseness, and want, and toil would be presented to him. Yet even here he was too often reminded that the poverty-stricken of the class to which poverty is natural were not condemned to endure in solitude. Only he who belonged to no class, who was rejected alike by his fellows in privation and by his equals in intellect, must die without having known the touch of a loving woman's hand.

After righting an upside-down book on his shelves and aligning the pen and ink on his desk, Biffen goes out to Primrose Hill to kill himself, in order to spare his landlady the shock of finding his body.

One of the things for which the tough-minded Orwell praised Gissing ("I am ready to maintain that England has produced very few better novelists . . . he does not commit the faults that really matter") was his interest in the "pressure of circumstance on character," which Orwell, of course, shared. There are other similarities between the two. Like Orwell, Gissing refused to embrace any political orthodoxy. He did not believe that because one form of government was flawed its diametrical opposite would necessarily work better. Although he criticized the class system for inflicting so much needless suffering, Gissing could not embrace the socialist movement that proposed to set matters right—perhaps because, even more than injustice, he disliked the utilitarian spirit that saw no use for things like Greek poetry. "To flatter the proletariat," says a character in *Born in Exile*, "is to fight against all the good that still characterizes educated England—against reverence for the beautiful, against enthusiasm of mind, heart, and soul . . . it is the few, the very few, that have always kept alive whatever of effectual good we see in the human race."

*Demos*, the most powerful expression of Gissing's skepticism about reformers, is the tale of Richard Mutimer, a working-class socialist who comes into an unexpected fortune and decides to create a Utopian industrial community on the country estate he has inherited. Gissing's reservations about this character and his grandiose plans are eloquently conveyed in his catalogue of Mutimer's library:

. . . a large collection of pamphlets, titled wonderfully and of yet more remarkable contents, the authoritative utterances of contemporary gentlemen—and ladies—who made it the end of their existence to prove . . . that the begetting of children is a most deplorable oversight; that to eat flesh is wholly unworthy of a civilised being; that if every man and woman performed their quota of the world's labour, it would be necessary to work for one hour and thirty-seven minutes daily, no jot longer, and that the author, in each case, is the one person capable of restoring dignity to a down-trodden race and happiness to a blasted universe. Alas, alas! On this food had Richard Mutimer pastured his soul since he grew to manhood, on this and this only. English literature was to him a sealed volume; poetry he scarcely knew by name; of history he was worse than ignorant, having looked at this period and that through distorting media . . . the bent of his mind would have led him to natural science, but opportunities of instruction were lacking, and the chosen directors of his prejudice taught him to regard every fact, every discovery, as *for* or *against* something.

A library of pathetic significance, the individual alone considered. Viewed as representative, not without alarming suggestiveness to those who any longer trouble themselves about the world's future.

When Mutimer's scheme for his laboring community (in which he himself will not toil) calls for polluting the beautiful valley around the manor house with myriad smokestacks, it is obvious that Gissing's sympathies are with Hubert Eldon, the educated aesthete who expected to come into the estate and who is horrified at the destruction of the countryside.

The clash between Mutimer's and Eldon's points of view is played out on the battlefield of Adela, a pure-hearted, refined young woman (a recurring type in Gissing's novels) who loves Eldon but whose grasping mother bullies her into marrying Mutimer. She tries valiantly to believe in her husband's good

intentions, even as he becomes increasingly autocratic and corrupt, and to embrace the socialist cause, which in the abstract she feels must be right. But, after living among the working class, she finds she can no longer agree with the sentiments of the wealthy liberals who like to eulogize them. Instead, she wants to cry out, "It is a mistake! They have not these feelings you attribute to them. Such suffering as you picture them enduring comes only of the poetry-fed soul at issue with fate." This is of course Gissing's own view.

Yet Gissing is also capable of compassion for those whose claims to conscious suffering he seems to refute. Elsewhere in *Demos*, a graveyard for the London poor elicits this elegy:

Here lie those who were born for toil; who, when toil has worn them to the uttermost, have but to yield their useless breath and pass into oblivion. For them no aspiration; for them no hope of memory in the dust; their very children are wearied into forgetfulness. Indistinguishable units in the throng that labours but to support life, the name of each, father, mother, child, is as a dumb cry for the warmth and love of which Fate so stunted them.

If Gissing does not wholeheartedly take up their cause, in *Demos* or elsewhere, it is because he had come to believe that, in any social order, one person's happiness must always be bought at the expense of someone else's misery. While he feels for those who suffer like dumb animals, he is afraid that any system that concerns itself primarily with their well-being will only increase the misery of the "poetry-fed soul(s)" who claim his first allegiance.

By the same token, when Mutimer, having lost his inheritance, is killed by rioting laborers, Gissing expresses not regret but relief: Adela is now freed at last from the torments of their marriage. "Their life of union was a mockery; their married intimacy was an unnatural horror. He was not of her class, not of her world; only by violent wrenching of the laws of nature had they come together." Yet it is the friction between their incompatible sensibilities, as much as any external event, that serves to move the story along. That, too, is typical of Gissing's novels.

The "exogamous" marriage—that is, the union with someone of another class—was a

subject on which Gissing could speak with some authority. At eighteen, while a scholarship student at Owens College in Manchester, he fell in love with Nell Harrison, a young prostitute. Determined to rescue her from the streets, and having conceived a plan of making her a seamstress, he began stealing from the more prosperous students in order to buy her a sewing machine. When the college authorities caught him in the act, he was expelled, prosecuted, and sentenced to one month of hard labor—an experience that, significantly, never appeared in his fiction. Of course, it ended his academic career; the full scholarship he had won to study classical languages at the University of London the following year was also rescinded.

Once out of jail, Gissing went to America, perhaps because his respectable widowed mother and less brilliant siblings could not bear to have him return in disgrace to the small Yorkshire town where he had grown up. Presumably, too, they hoped that he would make his fortune in the New World. Instead he nearly starved. In Chicago he fended off complete destitution by selling some short stories to a kindly newspaper editor—stories he wrote in the public lounge of his seedy hotel, there being no heat in the bedrooms.

Finally he managed to earn his passage back to England, where he again took up with Nell, who was now an alcoholic as well as a prostitute. In late 1879 they were married, Gissing already having written a strangely prophetic account of a catastrophic marriage between two people closely resembling himself and Nell in his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, a book completed before their marriage but not published until 1880.

Because her husband could not or would not supply her with money for drink, Nell periodically went back on the streets. Returning home, she would shriek abuse and insult the few friends Gissing had, if he was foolish enough to invite them to their lodgings. The closest of these friends was a young German, Eduard Bertz, a fellow lover of the classics and someone with whom Gissing was to correspond throughout his life. The affectionate conversations between Reardon and Biffen in *New Grub Street* about their unfitness for life and the glories of Greek poetry are probably based on memories of evenings with Bertz when the two young men first knew each

other in London. But such peaceful times were rare. When not battling with Nell, Gissing was eking out a miserable living giving Greek and Latin lessons and writing short stories about working-class life.

In 1884, Gissing published a second novel, *The Unclassed*, which is already less sanguine about the possibilities for social change than *Workers in the Dawn*. For the rest of the 1880s Gissing produced one or two three-volume novels a year, despite many blocked periods and various discarded beginnings. Of the novels he finished, only *Demos* (1886), whose publication coincided with the outbreak of Socialist riots in London, sold more than a few hundred copies.

By 1884, Gissing had separated permanently from Nell, though he continued to support her until her death, in 1888, of syphilis, alcoholism, cold, and hunger. In his diary, he made the following entry:

On a door hung a poor miserable dress and a worn out ulster. . . . Linen she had none; the very covering of the bed had gone save one sheet and one blanket. I found a number of pawn tickets, showing that she had pledged these things during last summer—when it was warm, poor creature! All the money she received went in drink. . . . I drew out the drawers. In one I found a little bit of butter and a crust of bread—most pitiful sight my eyes ever looked upon. . . . I found all my letters, away back to the American time. . . . As I stood before that bed, I felt that my life had a firmer purpose. Henceforth I shall never cease to bear testimony against the accursed social order that brings about things of this kind. . . . Poor, poor thing!

By 1890 loneliness and sexual frustration had driven him to desperation. He noted in his diary, "Feel like a madman at times. I know that I shall never do any more good work till I am married." That year he entered into a liaison with Edith Underwood, yet another uneducated working-class woman, whom he married early in 1891, apparently in the belief, as he wrote to Bertz, that she was "peculiarly gentle and pliable, with a certain natural refinement which seems to promise that she might be trained to my kind of life."

If anything, his second marriage was an even greater mistake than the first. Edith, too, proved fond of drink and quarreling, and, once ensconced with her husband in various London suburbs, would throw things at both

Gissing and a succession of maids. The situation was further complicated by the birth of two sons—one in December 1891, the second in 1896. Edith was unable to take care of either the house or the children, and since servants never remained in her employ for long, much of the burden fell on Gissing himself. When not tending to the household, he wrote frantically to support them all. By the time their second son was born, after several trial separations and reconciliations, it was clear the marriage could not last.

In 1897, after sneaking his elder son off to Yorkshire to attend the school his spinster sisters had started, Gissing went into hiding to escape Edith's wrath, having arranged beforehand to get money to her through a third party. He made one clumsy effort to bribe Edith to give up their younger boy, but never tried to see the child again. In 1902, after being evicted from several residences for assaulting her landladies, Edith was committed to the county asylum. The little boy was then placed with a farm family in Cornwall.

If Gissing had married only one totally unsuitable working-class woman, the union with Nell might seem like simply an unfortunate mistake, the result of youthful infatuation and a desire to rescue a lost soul. The fact that his two marriages were disastrous in such similar ways looks a little pathological. Shortly before meeting Edith, he had written to Bertz, "Educated English girls will not face poverty in marriage, and to them anything under 400 pounds a year is serious poverty. . . . There is no real hope of my ever marrying anyone of a better kind." But this argument, elaborately presented in several of his novels, is not wholly convincing. Gissing appears to have been not only physically attractive but—by many accounts—charming, and by 1890 he had a certain literary reputation. Surely some "nice" middle-class woman who admired his books (and perhaps had a little money of her own) would have married him.

One is forced to the conclusion that he preferred marrying Edith to trying to find someone more suitable. The reasons for this can only be guessed at. Certainly he was a shy man, and he was probably ashamed of his criminal past, such as it was; then again, he may have felt, along with other Victorian males, that refined women should not have to

suffer the indignities of sex. Or maybe his avoidance of decent middle-class women satisfied a need to make himself miserable. It is notable that he produced his best work during his two wretched marriages: while he was with Edith he wrote *New Grub Street*, *Born in Exile*, *The Odd Woman*, and *The Whirlpool* (a powerful story of a middle-class marriage ruined by the wife's artistic and social ambitions, and Gissing's first real popular success).

A less charitable interpretation is that he was interested only in women he could dominate and despise. Anthony West, the son of H. G. Wells, writes in his biography of his father that Wells, who became friendly with Gissing in the 1890s, found irrefutable proof in Gissing's papers that he had been an inveterate wife beater, driving his poor, meek spouses to drink and insanity. But since Wells tended to distort everything to his own advantage, and since he told this story as part of the dramatic saga of how he had trusted and helped Gissing only to be lied to throughout their friendship (he was peeved that Gissing had never told him of the conviction for theft), it is hard to know how much faith to place in this tale. All one can know for certain is that his wives were no happier with him than he was with them.

By the time his second marriage ended, Gissing's critical reputation seemed assured. Both Meredith and Hardy praised his work and made overtures of friendship, and Henry James, to whom Wells had introduced him, expressed a "persistent taste" for his novels, imperfect though he found them. James described Gissing to a friend as "quite particularly marked out for what is known in my profession and his as an unhappy ending."

But in the late 1890s Gissing believed that a happy ending was at hand. Shortly after he left Edith, Gabrielle Fleury, a young Frenchwoman, wrote to him about translating *New Grub Street*. She came to London to discuss the project with him, and after several meetings agreed to live with him as his wife. (No real marriage was possible while Edith still lived, but they underwent a ceremony in Paris for the sake of Gabrielle's parents.) It seemed that Gissing was about to find peace at last. Certainly Gabrielle was as refined as he could have wished—a little too consciously so, according to the unreliable Wells—and shared all his intellectual interests. From Gissing's

letters to Bertz, it appears that their affection for each other never seriously wavered, despite various practical and pecuniary difficulties.

But, as Gabrielle came to see it, Gissing was congenitally incapable of happiness. And fate, which had dealt him so many blows in the past, now took on a slapstick cast and served him up an interfering mother-in-law. Madame Fleury, who lived with the pair first in Paris and then in St. Jean de Luz in the Pyrenees, seems to have been one of those excessively frugal French housewives whose first priority was keeping up appearances. She was indignant at the idea that the money Gissing gave her for household expenses should go for perishable items like food, and she probably disapproved of heavy English cooking. According to both Gissing and Wells, Gissing nearly starved to death.

A lung ailment that had plagued him for years now became worse. At one point he returned to England, for which he was always homesick, to get fattened up, a service the Wellses obligingly performed for him. He then spent a month at a private sanatorium and afterwards seemed much the better for it. But he was never to regain his strength entirely. In early December of 1903, after months of ill health and depression, Gissing caught a cold that turned into pleuritis and pneumonia. Wells, who had been summoned to his deathbed, argued with Gabrielle over how much Gissing should be fed and whether the windows should be opened. In this atmosphere of quarreling, on December 28, Gissing died in great agony.

Almost all the works Gissing produced in his last years—among them a critical monograph on Dickens—were enthusiastically received by the critics, and several of the novels of this period were popular successes as well. *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the ruminations on life and art of a novelist who, after long struggle, inherits some money and retires to Devon, now seems merely flabby and tiresome. But the posthumously published *Will Warburton*, the tale of a well-bred young gentleman who loses all of his own and his widowed mother's money and is forced to become a grocer in a dreary London suburb, is still highly readable. Where many of Gissing's later books deal with the more rarified prob-

lems of moneyed people, here all his old preoccupations reappear: the degradations of poverty, the impossibility of winning the love of a well-brought-up young woman if one has neither money nor social position, the hypocrisy of the middle and upper middle classes, the vulgarization of art, the suffering of the sensitive man faced with the ordinary horrors of life in a commercial society.

Gissing's pessimism encompassed the future as well as his own age. The remarkable thing is that so many of his dour prophecies have proven accurate. In *New Grub Street*, he predicts a great success for a paper that will "address itself to the quarter-educated . . . the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. . . . What they want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chat information—bits of stories, bits of description, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery." It sounds uncannily like *People* magazine.

In *Demos*, Hubert Eldon predicts that "grass and corn will be produced by chemical processes. There will not be one inch left to nature," and goes on to ask, "Do you imagine the twentieth century will leave one green spot upon the earth's surface?" And in *The Whirlpool*, we find this somber prognostication: "Mankind won't stand it much longer, this encroachment of the humane spirit. . . . We may reasonably hope, old man, to see our boys blown into small bits by the explosive that hasn't got its name yet." (In fact, Gissing's elder son was killed at the Battle of the Somme.)

But in the end the most powerful thing about Gissing's work is not its prophetic passages, nor even his emotional renderings of sensitive men and women struggling with harsh realities. What makes him a more important writer than has yet been acknowledged is that to read him is to have our reading of other nineteenth-century novelists subverted in some irrevocable way. Gissing takes the country house scenes, the London drawing rooms, the "colorful" life of Dickens's streets, the whole smooth and stately machinery of Victorian society, and makes one unnervingly aware of what it was like to be outside it: how it felt to be poor, desperate, frightened, exiled from cottage parlors and elegant sitting rooms alike. Reading Gissing's work, one suddenly realizes that not every-

body had a place in the grand order of things; there were those who could neither ride with the hounds nor gossip about the neighbors nor even sit in the pub with their fellows. To discover Gissing is to become harrowingly aware of the gulf between what we know of Victorian England from our novel reading and the strangling reality of life in that time. The happy endings are exposed as falsehood; the satisfying convention by which redemption, resolution, the restoration of the moral order are achieved by the last page seems like mere evasion.

Gissing forces us to wonder, almost against our will, what life was like for the servants and laborers sprinkled throughout the novels of Trollope and James and Thackeray and Jane Austen. One begins to reconsider them, to think of them as rounded human beings rather than caricatures or mere shadows, and then perhaps to dislike their creators a little for failing to do so. All the bland assumptions about women, the workers, the poor that the reader accepts as a given in Victorian novelists, as though they can't be expected to have questioned such ideas, come up for a different kind of scrutiny after one has read Gissing.

It can be argued, of course, that Gissing's sense of social injustice would have disappeared if society had let him in—if instead of having been "born in exile," he had been accepted into those circles of grace he yearned for, with pretty women playing the piano for him. But, as he well knew, that was impossible. For if the aristocratic ideals he defended were to endure, society had to close its doors on this prickly ex-classics scholar who had been convicted of theft and sentenced to a month's hard labor, this man who had married a prostitute and then wanted to discuss Greek strophes with his own kind.

Despite his peculiar situation, Gissing cannot have been unique: there were other outsiders, others we would now call "alienated" from society, before alienation became the fashionable and vocal cliché it is today. What Gissing gives a reader is a sense of loneliness so vast that one can never again think of the Victorian Age as the coherent, harmonious society of our collective nostalgia. That may not sound like a purely literary achievement, but only in literature of a fairly high order can the voice of one man resound so powerfully as to subvert our sense of an entire age.