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The wind had grown cooler now, cold and smelling of new wetness. Joseph dug himself down into the warm hay. The lightning slashed lines of fire and the thunder crashed, echoed, and rolled all about him. Then the rain came, big drops slanted by the wind, pounding on the shingles of the granary, gathering into wetness. The many-fingered rain-gods spoke loudly.

In the mountains the mighty miner would hear it, hear it gather in his storm barrel, the fruit of our hope and our waiting. *We shall give thanks,* the people will say. *Our prayers have been answered. The Lord has been good.* But he will go on digging his rock, hauling it out upon the ore mound. He will hear again the loud silence of the fuse wait, and he will bring the broken worthless stone heavenward. He will dig again and again, and not finding it, he will wait for a new day, hearing the lone wind in the piñons. *Yes, the Lord has been good,* they will say. *He has brought the rain. His lands will again grow green.* But Joseph knew now that it was not the Lord whom he had promised. If He had brought the rain, somehow it did not matter, though to his father, even too late, it would matter. It was the rain that they worshipped; it was the rain they would thank for new greenness. The Lord was a rain-god and He would make the lands green.

But it was the Grandfather whom *he* had promised, whom they had promised too, though they did not know it now. It was he, the Greatfather, who had led them when the land was brown, giving them not rain alone but a new covenant: a new act of faith, dug by his spirit out of the unrelenting stone, to be carried in dust down a mountain. It was this faith and not his prayer alone which had bound them. This faith, it seemed to Joseph, gestured as mightily as the mountain.

Though drenched in the now quiet rain, Joseph kneeled in the hay and watched the storm move eastward over the mountain. We believed him, Joseph said aloud. We believed him.

WHO KNOWS GEORGE GISSING?

RUSSELL KIRK

About Wakefield, in West Riding, lies what we might call the Gissing country. Ride the circuit of this interminable chain of mill towns—Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Dewsbury, Wakefield—with their halo of smutty mist, their dismal walls of soiled stone or half-brick, their desolation of slack-jawed streets, and one may reflect that they seem ingeniously designed for the torment of any man who cares for beauty and tradition. Wakefield, which of them all appears most nearly heartless, has a fine parish church (now a cathedral) built six hundred years before George Gissing came into the world; and it has a decent public library, established some years after he died; otherwise, it is one of Cobbett's hell-holes. On a principal street, opposite "Betty's Snack Bar," a la U.S.A., is rather an old brick house of three stories, one of the few buildings in the city that can claim even Georgian venerability. The ground floor is a chemist's shop, a unit in the great chain of Boots, Ltd. In 1857, there was a chemist's shop in the same place—the establishment of a scholarly pharmacist named Gissing. In that year, a brass plate at the door records, was born in the room above the shop George Gissing, "novelist and man of letters." The automobiles honk past the house in the ugly road.

I

Fifty years ago, early in 1900, George Gissing was beginning to die at the age of forty-three; he had left England for the Continent, to spend in France nearly the whole of what remained to him of life. With him was his Gabrielle, whom he could not make his wife, for the fate that spoiled all his loves followed him to the end. When hardly more than a boy, he had half relished the idea of a life like one of Murger's Bohemians; very nearly such a life, or its English counterpart, had been his; and it had been a long curse of poverty and solitude. Few people ever had read his books; now, he feared, these few were commencing to forget him; and it was to supply the means of existence in the shadow of the Pyrenees that he finished the book which was to bring him, dead, the reputation he had coveted in his London garrets and cellars: *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Of this, the novelist wrote that it was "the thing most likely to last when all my other futile work has followed my futile life." The twentieth century was arrived—1900, of which he had said to

his brother two decades before: "That year ought to be fertile in great things." Gissing had altered; and when the year was come indeed, he now told a friend, "The barbarization of the world goes merrily on. No doubt there will be continuous warfare for many a long year. It sickens me to read the newspapers; I turn as much as possible to the old poets." First he had wanted to be the reformer of society, and later to be the servant of art; and he ended as the connoisseur of misery.

Dead half a century, nearly! To the reader of *Ryecroft* or *The New Grub Street*, this is a curious thought, for in Gissing's pages lives the sense of an evening's conversation, an exchange of opinions with a contemporary, the voice of a conscience speaking to a conscience. Older authors there are from whose books comes the same illusion—Plutarch, for one; but they are not many. And, then, Gissing died young; comrades of his like H. G. Wells were with us only yesterday. Having read something of Gissing's, one feels that he would really have liked to know the man. Perhaps the glow of intellectual fellowship that seems to emanate from Gissing is a reflection of a chief pleasure of Gissing's own, good talk of people and books with men who understood. Certainly he got little pleasure from the sources of satisfaction which generally rank high—fine houses, good food, loving women—dearly though he coveted these, too. One glimpses a genuine manliness in Gissing, a manliness transcending the flaws of character he recognized in himself, a manliness of which many a literary figure of the past seventy years could have used a share.

Yet quite dead, and buried at St. Jean de Luz, and fitly so, this man with whom one would have liked to talk. There is about Gissing's career the fitness which is stamped upon the classical models he reverenced. It was fit that he should labor for a pittance, and fit that he should die abroad, brooding and exhausted, at a time when most men are only beginning to master life. It seems as fit in Gissing as it does in all his better stories, for he was a species of incarnation of protest against the modern temper. Remorselessly true, in his novels, to the candid observation of human nature, this Gissing: the naïve enthusiast is baffled, the rebel wearied or corrupted, the weakling broken. Just so was he uncompromisingly true to his own character. Having commenced as a Quixote, he clung stubbornly, even when the mists of youth had drifted away from his eyes, to an ideal of life and work that he would not abandon. Can we imagine a successful Gissing, writing to please Mr. Mudie's subscribers, holding the admiration of Amy Reardon, aping his own Jasper Milvain? Can we even imagine him tranquil as Ryecroft? He lived and died as it be-

fitted a man of his ideals to endure and perish, and that without a drop of the heavy dose of *poseur* which infected so many writers of his generation—Moore, Wilde, Rimbaud. Thus the story of Gissing is better than any of his novels, all of which were patches ripped from the Nessus' shirt of his existence.

A moving story, Gissing's life, but a story not many know except for rags and tatters of scandal and sentimental commiseration. The public for which Gissing wrote, and the admirers of his talent since his death, always were few. Once, visiting a family of teachers in Bradford, close to the scenes of Gissing's boyhood, I mentioned that I was going to Wakefield to photograph Gissing's house. Who was Gissing? my hosts wanted to know; and, on being told, what sort of thing did he write? These were people of some schooling, of as much schooling as Gissing himself had; but I was not surprised. On the other hand, one afternoon in a prosperous bookshop in San Francisco I came upon old copies of two novels of Gissing's which, like most of his, are hard to find; and presenting these at the cashier's counter, I found myself envied by the clerk, who would have taken them for himself had he known they were in the shop. The scattered confraternity of those who really know Gissing is conspicuous not for size, but for sincerity and persistence of esteem. The man had something in him, thus to find his way obscurely into odd corners of society and stick there.

At intervals a flurry of renewed attention to Gissing's books and character breaks into print. One such commotion followed close upon his death; another, after the publication in 1912 of those two curious, condescending books *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* and *George Gissing, a Critical Study*; a third, at the time of the re-publication of both those volumes, 1923. In this year, even his best-known books, except for *Ryecroft*, are out of print in America and Britain; but presently they will return to booksellers' shelves, for a regular though subtle demand induces new editions.

What manner of man remembers Gissing? Frank Swinnerton, whose chief, but convincing, tribute to Gissing is imitation, would have us think that "ill-educated egoists," and such only, are Gissing's devotees. Now, it is quite true that many of the quarter-educated at whom Gissing himself so often scoffed are drawn to that literary naturalism which in part descends from Gissing; but these people—many of them young and only commencing a general acquaintance with literature—do not today seek out Gissing. Indeed, they have not heard of him at all; they sport about the feet of Wolfe and Farrell and Dreiser or some other idol, writers for them more attractive precisely

because, whatever their merits, the Wolfes and Dreisers and Farrells of our time have themselves been ill-educated and egoistic. Gissing, on the contrary, was educated all too thoroughly, if such a thing be possible, supported throughout life by the classical discipline; and if egoism means self-conceit, he had hardly any of it. A realistic novelist who does not blame circumstance or environment or heredity for his failures hardly seems conceivable, here in the middle of the twentieth century. But Gissing did not. He blamed his own character.

I am inclined to think that most people who still read Gissing, far from being ill-educated egoists, are generous, contemplative, conservative, liberal (for the latter two terms need not exclude one another). Most of them had their attention first drawn to him by being told of *Henry Ryecroft*, and having passed beyond that noble little book into the somber depths of the novels, never managed to forget him. I may be in error concerning Gissing-readers, not having interviewed a truly random sample, to employ a phrase repugnant to the Gissing tradition; for although I have talked with some hundreds of people who read books, I have met with very few who know George Gissing.

One reason why so few make his acquaintance lies in the fitting circumstance that Gissing, unfortunate in his choice of occupations and women, seems often to have been no more fortunate in his choice of friends. The principal accounts of his private life come from two literary men who were close to Gissing while he lived, but who dealt with him chiefly in superior pity once he was dead: Morley Roberts and H. G. Wells. Compare Gissing's treatment of Wells in *Ryecroft* ("G. H. Rivers," you may remember) with Wells' treatment of Gissing in *Experiment in Autobiography*, and you shiver at the thought of what can be done to you once you are fled from this vile world. Another reason is that Mrs. Grundy, whom Gissing more than once defied by name and defeated (in Pyrrhic style), exults over him now that he is dead, and fear of what that woman might say has induced people who loved him to lock up letters and choose their phrases. Gissing ought to be indemnified for both injuries.

II

Known to fewer than he ought to be, George Gissing; but known, still. What has saved him from the abyss into which slipped the welter of late-Victorian and Edwardian novelists? Not the mere distinction of having been the first man to write accurately of the nether world. His soul saved him; and his expression of modern pessimism; besides his modern version of the consolations of Epicurus; and certain rare merits as a literary artist. These properties have kept him afloat on the literary sea and may suffice to buoy him up even after certain reputations of his generation still prominent have gone under.

He has kept afloat; he has continued to interest critics of high talents; but somehow his admirers always write of him half apologetically, as if it were necessary to dampen their own praise. This trait begins with Gissing's obituary in the London *Times* in 1903: "The result was a series of books which, if they cannot justly be called great, were at least the work of a very able and conscientious artist, whose purity and solidity may win him a better chance of being read a hundred years hence than many writers of greater grace and more deliberately sought charm." Paul Elmer More, in 1918: "Gissing has his devotees, of whom, to a certain extent, I count myself one. But none of us, I think, would place him quite on a level with Thackeray and Trollope." Granville Hicks, in 1939: "Gissing's achievement . . . though it was repeatedly marred by defects of an uncommon grossness, was substantial."

The confirmed Gissing-reader knows what these critics mean. Gissing, compelled to pay homage to the publishers' three-volume novel, often was prolix; sometimes he was oddly stiff in his beginning chapter; now and then, the strong effect he achieves near the middle of his story trickles away before *finis*. One feels these things sorrowfully. But then, perhaps, a reaction commences in the judgment of the Gissing-reader, who proceeds to ask himself just why he experienced this dissatisfaction. Could it have been because Gissing came so near to creating the illusion of reality that his failure to accomplish the whole of the sorcery told the more painfully? We do not expect from most important English novelists a complete reproduction of life—certainly not from Hardy or Meredith, Gissing's contemporaries. We do expect it from Gissing, because it is the goal he set himself. Prolix, stiff, uneven he is, on occasion. But is not Trollope more digressive? Hardy sometimes more formal? Dickens less balanced? The Gissing-reader is tempted to remark to himself, "Gissing may not be in the first rank of novelists. But who is?"

A Gissing-reader often has difficulty in determining whether he is attracted by Gissing's books or by Gissing's soul. In the Christian sense, Gissing—metempsychosed Epicurean that he was—hardly would have acknowledged the possession of a soul; but, tormented, it bobs up before us. The interesting characteristic of this soul is its defiance of circumstance. Plunged among the poorest of the poor, he rises to scoff at equality and social revolution; subjected to repeated injuries at

the hands of women, he idealizes Woman; engulfed by industrialism, he finds his home in Greece and Rome; reared in materialism, he becomes a partisan of morality. Whatever his misadventures, the man who possessed this soul was either strong or perverse.

His was a soul aching with the pessimism of our time. In the dreariness of modern life, in the melancholy expression of alarm at the death of old ways, in the wail of the inhabitants of the metropolitan nether world, in the self-probing inspection of the vanity of human wishes, in the preoccupation with amorous passion and with the problems of marriage that are so much with us now—in these themes of Gissing's is contained an analysis of our miseries no writer since has surpassed. The artist of misery can never be popular; but, having genius, neither can he be forgotten.

III

Unlike many another realistic novelist, Gissing was a true artist. He began as a pamphleteer; but soon abandoning the crusade for social reform, he made artistic beauty his life's aim—the beauty of truth barren, perhaps, yet always dignified by literary style of a high order. His Harold Biffen stalks after a butcher and his girl, alert to record their every phrase; but such was not really Gissing's own method. The fascination with trivia, the gloating over physiological detail, the sobersided imitation of sociology that have come to be identified with realism are not found in Gissing; Stephen Crane is a cataloguer beside him, Frank Norris a dust-sifter. Reality he was determined to reproduce, but reality chiefly of human character, delineated against a sketchy background of the commonplace details of life. To accomplish his purpose he possessed a tool denied his twentieth-century inheritors: the discipline of classical thought and letters. Few other Englishmen have been so much in love with the books and traditions of Greece and Rome as was this poverty-spurred young man from industrial Yorkshire; what few pounds he could save during his literary slaving were spent to take him to Italy and Athens. With the classical tradition he combined a minute knowledge of English authors, so that the models for his style were Scott and Thackeray and Dickens, not Turgenev and Dostoevski and Balzac, admirer of the Continental realists though he became; he presents no parallel with George Moore's imitation of Zola. His school of literary realism was of his own foundation, a growth out of his early miseries in the depths of London.

Accordingly, in these remorseless tales of his is a literary beauty—a union that has come to be thought anomalous in naturalistic fiction.

Take a single passage of description from *Thyrza* (chosen not because it is markedly striking, but because it is a good sample of Gissing's pace)—realism unadulterated, but the realism of a man with taste and discrimination:

> Caledonian Road is a great channel of traffic running directly north from King's Cross to Holloway. It is doubtful whether London can show any thoroughfare of importance more offensive to eye and ear and nostril. You stand at the entrance to it, and gaze into a region of supreme ugliness; every house front is marked with meanness and inveterate grime; every shop seems breaking forth with mould or dry-rot; the people who walk here appear one and all to be employed in labour that soils body and mind. Journey on the top of a tram-car from King's Cross to Holloway, and civilization has taught you its ultimate achievement in ignoble hideousness. You look off into narrow side-channels where unconscious degradation has made its inexpugnable home, and sits veiled with refuse. You pass above lines of railway, which cleave the region with black-breathing fissures. You see the pavements half occupied with the paltriest and most sordid wares; the sign of the pawnbroker is on every hand; the public-houses look and reek more intolerably than in other places. The population is dense, the poverty is undisguised. All this northward-bearing tract, between Camden Town on the one hand and Islington on the other, is the valley of the shadow of the vilest servitude. Its public monument is a cyclopean prison; save for the desert ground around the Great Northern Goods Depot, its only open ground is a malodorous cattle-market. In comparison, Lambeth is picturesque and venerable, St. Giles is romantic, Hoxton is clean and suggestive of domesticity, Whitechapel is full of poetry, Limehouse is sweet with sea-breathings.

This is only a species of aside in a tale of the slums; to find Gissing at his stylistic best, one reads *Ryecroft* or the books on Dickens, work that came easily to him. Yet it is not in description or narration that his chief talent lay, but in the gradual revelation of the minds and hearts of his characters. He is not fertile in his invention of men and women—and, indeed, while he has a powerful intellect, he has small creative imagination. His best depictions are of a few types of humanity, reproduced with variations in most of his novels: the young man in solitude (Waymark in *The Unclassed*, Peak in *Born in Exile*); the woman fiercely weak (Emma in *A Lodger in Maze Pond*, Carrie in *Workers in the Dawn*); the grim old man (Alfred Yule in *The New Grub Street*, Lord in *In the Year of Jubilee*); the unworldly lover of books (Christopherson in the story of that name, Grail in *Thyrza*); and a dozen others, each of which, perhaps, had his prototype in Gissing's personal history. The girl of noble sincerity, the intellectual charlatan, the domineering woman of position, the discontented workingman, the predestined spinster, the meditative clergyman, the naïve reformer—these nearly complete his roster. The

better ones stick in your memory. Deliberately abandoning the depiction of eccentricity (which Dickens so loved) because Gissing believed eccentricity to be dying under modern standardization, confining himself to scenes and incidents common enough, he succeeds all the same in putting living beings into our imagination. An attentive reader of *The New Grub Street* probably will retain a permanent impression of five characters—Reardon, Biffen, Amy, Alfred Yule, Jasper Milvain. There are not many writers who can do as much with the images of substantially normal people.

What makes Gissing's power of fastening upon our memory more remarkable, it is accomplished without true plot. In the novels he wrote at the height of his abilities, very little happens—little, that is, which the reader was not sure would happen after he had got through the second chapter. Violence is rare, there is no exaggeration of the picturesque, events move relentlessly toward that baffling of hopes which we know from the first to be inevitable. Much of the ruddy color of Morrison's stories of the East End is avoided deliberately. What Gissing does, he achieves by the power of the word and the appeal to universal experience. The half-chapter which describes the interview at a coffee-stand between sour old Alfred Yule and the beggar, once a surgeon, who tells him that he is doomed to blindness—this is perhaps the best instance, in *The New Grub Street* or elsewhere, of Gissing's faculty for transmuting the ingredients of realism into something unexcelled in its kind. The conversation is done; Yule gives the pauper a five-shilling fee and walks home; it is the end for the two of them. This grim restraint, this "minor key" as Gissing calls it, requires a disciplined style. Style Gissing has.

IV

A tormented soul, a pessimistic view, a memorable style—these only would not suffice to keep the grass green on Gissing's grave. But conjoined to them is the fact that Gissing was a moralist. His literary course was a search for moral purpose. If the aim of literature be to prove that there is purpose in nothing, it follows that there can be little purpose in books. Such a dilemma most pessimistic realists confront; but Gissing escapes by his belief in a Good. It is not the good of Christianity, nor yet the good of the materialistic reformer, but a pagan good—the good of Epicurus. Gissing refers only once to that philosopher, and then in a diary-entry remarking that a bust of Epicurus, in Rome, has a long nose. True Epicureanism permeated Gissing, all the same—the real Epicurean spirit of quiet resignation,

retirement from ambition, the simple pleasure of contemplation, a gentleman's morality of peace and moderation, a pervading determination to live with dignity. It is easy to forget that Epicurus was a lofty moralist. But there were Right and Wrong for the Greek; and they were as real for Gissing. No divine justice rules Gissing's world; virtue has no certain desert, vice no sure penalty; but there lies behind Gissing's books the premise that one follows the good because it is beautiful and wise. This moral element won for Gissing in America the praise of Paul Elmer More and other humanists.

From half the hints one receives concerning Gissing, the reader approaching this realist for the first time might think him hardly a fit teacher of morals. Mutterings about "morbid theories of sex," ominous phrases concerning a wasted life, rest in actuality upon only two little dark spots in a career of hardship. When young and enthusiastic, Gissing filched some coins to assist a girl of the streets, and paid for it with a prison sentence; and when a lonely man nearing his end, he committed adultery by going off to France with a woman not his wife—an offense much mitigated, perhaps, by the fact that Edith Gissing had for years been in a madhouse. Otherwise, his was a remarkably conscientious life, full of diligence, affection, and fidelity to principle—a life not unworthy some philosopher out of Diogenes Laertius.

In Gissing's books is no assurance that virtue has its material reward; indeed, it often encounters disaster; but neither is there any suggestion that a man should live otherwise than honorably. Godwin Peak, tired of life that meant loneliness, ends miserably somewhere in Italy, and Bruno Chilvers has a fashionable parish; but who would be Chilvers? Here is that brave defiance of adversity, that manliness, already remarked in Gissing. On the other hand, neither is roguery triumphant: Glazzard, his jealous revenge done, knows to what he has shrivelled in the process; Dyce Lashmar, the charlatan, disastrously overreaches himself. Ecclesiastes, from which Gissing liked to quote, was branded upon his heart.

To break with the modern world, to live as a man of gentle instincts and sound sense should, in such retirement as he can seek out—this is the only hope and consolation Gissing offers those who read him: this, and life lighted by truth. But then, Epicurus himself could do no more, and Epicurus left us no book like *Ryecroft*.

> Life is done—and what matter? Whether it has been, in sum, painful or enjoyable, even now I cannot say—a fact which in itself should prevent me from taking the loss too seriously. What does it matter? Destiny with the hidden face decreed that I should come into being, play my little part, and pass

again into silence; is it mine either to approve or to rebel? Let me be grateful that I have suffered no intolerable wrong, no terrible woe of flesh and spirit, such as others—alas! alas!—have found in their lot. Is it not much to have accomplished so large a part of the mortal journey with so much ease? If I find myself astonished at its brevity and small significance, why, that is my own fault; the voices of those gone before had sufficiently warned me. Better to see the truth now, and accept it, than to fall into dread surprise on some day of weakness, and foolishly to cry against fate. I will be glad rather than sorry, and think of the thing no more.

Thus *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. "I am inclined to think he died of congestion," writes Noman Douglas, in *Siren Land*, "for there was that within him—some macrocosmic utterance—which vainly endeavoured to pierce the gathering mists of introspection: the Ryecroft litany, beloved of weaker brethren, marks the parabola into the unfolding gloom. The old, old story: inefficient equipment, not of intellectuality but of outlook and attitude, and likewise of *bête humaine*; of that tough, cheerful attitude which, sanely regarded, is but sanity itself."

The measure of justice in this judgment on Gissing, like so many other criticisms from men he influenced somehow against their will, needs review. But whatever his flaws, fifty years have not effaced him; he is current. And a man who knows George Gissing has come a good way toward knowing the spirit of our age.

VIENNA, 1947

Suspicion rocks inside the cavity
Through which the image passes to a point:
Vienna ranges there with enmity;
Her minions whine her will, appoint
Her decadence with soot and slime, anoint
Her culture, in a Hapsburg citadel,
With phlegm, and listen to the counterpoint
Of whispers in the streets that range and swell,
Reverberating like a strident yell in hell.

Clinton F. Larson