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The Many-Sided Comedy of George Gissing's *The Nether World*¹

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Laughter Ignored

The writings of English novelist and critic George Gissing (1857–1903) have a reputation as pessimistic and bleak. Despite the existence since the 1960s of a lively critical industry showing how varied his literary productions actually were, Gissing's most admired writings tend to be his gloomiest. A case in point is *The Nether World* (1889), which critics have frequently used to exemplify Gissing's extreme negativity.² For Adrian Poole this novel evokes “studied, inexorable depression”, “absence or negation” and “monotonous anguish”.³ But a fuller understanding of Gissing and indeed of late-Victorian urban writing more generally would follow from an effort to trace the force and power of laughter in Gissing, particularly in this novel.

This chapter explores some sensory qualities of this literary text within the framework of a criticism aligned with Anthony W. Johnson's approach to “resurfacings” of past “image worlds”.⁴ Such a criticism operates through re-readings of texts which become alert, as far as possible, to their complete *iconosphere* or, to quote Johnson, to “the image world shared by a culture at a particular time”. The image world explored can include “pictures, statues, graffiti,

¹ This chapter originated as a paper given in December 2012 at PREMIS, the seminar series founded at Åbo Akademi University by Ant Johnson which is devoted to the interaction between literary cultures and other cultural forms.

² George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Page references in parentheses are to this edition.

³ Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), 88.

⁴ Anthony W. Johnson, “Humanized Intertexts: An Iconospheric Approach to Ben Jonson's Comedy, *The Case is Altered* (1598)”, in *Humane Readings: Essays on Literary Mediation and Communication in Honour of Roger D. Sell*, ed. Jason Finch *et al.* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009, 31–48, here 39, 32).

music or texts” from which, as available raw materials, writers “have drawn and shaped their texts”.⁵ In Gissing’s case, an enlarged awareness of the range of images available to him expands the overall perspective. We become able to move beyond the specifics of his particular spatial environment, of his documentation of London as he knew it, and of the writing of immediate contemporaries, foci within studies of how Gissing engaged with literary Naturalism as practised in France.⁶ Vital as an image-source for Gissing were the classical and neo-classical texts contained in his iconosphere, and importantly, within those texts, their treatments of laughter, comedy and satire.

Gissing famously wrote on social themes, in particular the lives of the poor in London. Aligning Gissing with literary Naturalism is helpful, especially when Naturalism is itself nuanced,⁷ but doing so only tells part of the story. Gissing’s fiction exists in complex dialogue with the earlier comic, satirical and grotesque masterworks of Dickens, on whom he wrote one of the most important early critical studies. At times, Gissing does indeed seem to be intensifying Dickensian social satire, for example by portraying the lives of the poor in an unflinching, unsentimental way.⁸ The title of the young Gissing’s intellectual outlook during the early 1880s is perhaps best captured by the title of his unpublished essay of 1882, “The Hope of Pessimism”.⁹ The conclusion drawn in this essay, influenced by Schopenhauer, is that “[t]he prospect of happiness on earth is a chimæra” and that, for future people able to cast off their illusions, perhaps “[t]he grave will become a symbol of joy”.¹⁰

⁵ Johnson, “Humanized Intertexts”, 32.

⁶ On Gissing and Naturalism, see P.J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, corrected edition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 136; Sally Ledger, “Naturalism”, in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 68–83; Anna Cottrell, *London Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 42–43. On Gissing and London, see Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), e.g. on *The Nether World* 228–30.

⁷ As by Cottrell (*London Writing of the 1930s*, 42–45, 109–12).

⁸ Cottrell (*London Writing of the 1930s*, 36) describes him as “particularly vicious about London crowds.”

⁹ George Gissing, “The Hope of Pessimism”, transcribed by Roger Milbrandt, *Gissing Journal* 51, 3 (July, 2017), 30–47.

¹⁰ Gissing, “Hope of Pessimism”, 47.

While extreme, Gissing's most negative statements are always made in dialogue with other perspectives on the world. Among these are the intellectual movement known as Positivism and, its "emotional side", the "Religion of Humanity" which Gissing for a while followed, influenced by his mentor Frederic Harrison, plus the theorization of comedy by the novelist George Meredith, who also inspired and advised the young Gissing.¹¹ The interplay of fiction and autobiography in Gissing's writings has been central to the scholarship on him produced since the 1960s.¹² But the many comic aspects of his work remain understudied. Laughter both warm and bitter recurs in Gissing's writings, as does the structure of a joke with a payback or punchline. The non-glamorising treatment of people's appearance and motives to be found throughout Gissing's novels, together with his lack of faith that the world will reward moral strength, conceal the fact that unlike Thomas Hardy, with whose novels and Gissing's there are many points of comparison – the title of Chapter 10 in *The Nether World*, "The Last Combat", brings to mind the world of Hardy's tragedy –¹³ Gissing is not primarily a narrative tragedian.

The tone of Chapter 10 of *The Nether World* is far from light-hearted and yet it is not tragic. The struggle it narrates is not a cathartically satisfying resolution, as tragedy is in Aristotelean theory. Gissing's character Clara Hewett sheds blood, but only in a minor accident when, having suddenly abandoned her job and moved to new lodgings, a worrying development for her parents and her sometime fiancé Sidney Kirkwood, she cuts her hand impatiently shutting

¹¹ For Gissing's efforts to follow the "Religion of Humanity" see a letter of 11 February 1881. George Gissing, *Collected Letters*, ed. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas, 9 vols. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1990–1997), Vol. 2, 14; Roger Milbrandt, "An Introduction to Gissing's 'The Hope of Pessimism'", *Gissing Journal* 50, 3 (July 2017), 1–29.

¹² The pages of the *Gissing Journal*, formerly the *Gissing Newsletter*, provide the best sense of this richness. See also Pierre Coustillas, "Gissing, George Robert (1857-1903)", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/33416>; Pierre Coustillas, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing*, 3 vols. (London and Brookfield, VT: Pickering Chatto 2011–12); Paul Delany, *George Gissing: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008); Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963); P. G. Kropholler, 'Gissing and Henry Ryecroft: Some Parallels and Affinities', *Gissing Newsletter* 25.1 (1989): 1–12; Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹³ A point of comparison is provided by Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), which was originally planned to have a five-book tragic form, and which still has numerous portentous-sounding chapter titles beginning 'The'.

a window. The combat is Clara's with herself, and the finality of it is that she determines to cut her links with Sidney, her parents and their struggle for respectability amid grinding poverty. Clara wishes to break "away from the obligations of a life that could never be other than poor and commonplace" (95). To do so she must jeopardize her own respectability, which she does by taking the plunge and deciding to meet an older man who has accosted her in the bar where she works. And the events of this chapter, far from being a final outcome, fall only a quarter of the way through the text of *The Nether World*. Clara, in fact, is framed by Gissing within a sophisticated and metafictional sort of joking, a kind of gallows humour containing as an important dimension a level of cynicism that verges on cruelty. This relies on an awareness, shared by Gissing and fellow writers such as Hardy and George Meredith, that the English nineteenth-century novel's conventions of decency, marriage and monetary reward were by the 1880s utterly moribund.

Features of Gissing's comedy such as his use of harsh laughter have specific analogues. A prize-winning classical scholar in youth, Gissing from childhood onwards keenly appreciated the graphic art of William Hogarth. Antecedents for his jokes and laughter also lie in eighteenth-century English writing. Understood this way, Gissing's writing becomes a curious and unexpected proof of Mikhail Bakhtin's twentieth-century claim that laughter can be "universal and philosophic", the most serious thing in the world.¹⁴ In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin's concerns include the carnival as a social phenomenon, but extend beyond that. His study of the relationship between laughter and seriousness becomes an interpretation of the meaning of the material world. In it, Bakhtin makes his case that laughter and scatology are profound keys to the nature of being human. He does so by exploring hitherto ignored aspects of the sixteenth-century prose fictions of François Rabelais. "Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is

¹⁴ Korg, *Critical Biography*, 9; Coustillas, *Heroic Life*, Vol. 1, 37-38; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Hélène Iswolsky (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984), 133.

the least popular, the least understood and appreciated”, Bakhtin begins.¹⁵ Bakhtin takes an obviously comic writer and shows that his descriptions of feats of gluttony and of the passage of things through the bodies of giants are not trivial but rather represent the upsurge of “folk humour” or, in other words, the real life of people in what was earlier the officially controlled sphere of literature.¹⁶ Gissing is misinterpreted not, like the Rabelais of Bakhtin, as less serious than he truly is, but as less funny than he truly is. Like the comedy of Rabelais, Gissing’s comedy is both shockingly material and derives from an expertise in Greek and Latin literature that was born in the schoolroom and in personal studies. Like *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais’s series of prose fiction works, as read by Bakhtin, *The Nether World* is both carnivalesque (specifically in its concern with festival days on which everyday order is reversed) and filled with “the grotesque image of the body”, in Gissing specifically as shown in physical violence and the consumption of food and drink.¹⁷

A Young London Writer on a Hyperbolic Tram Ride

During the 1880s, aged between 23 and 32, Gissing published seven novels and wrote at least one more that has disappeared forever. The story of his early publishing career is complicated. *The Nether World*, the last and most extreme of his so-called slum novels, is a partial rewrite of his first novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880). Unlike, say, Tolstoy, who rewrote *War and Peace* seven times before giving it to a printer, Gissing was forever in need of money. He would produce material fast, then deliver it to a publisher the morning after he had, in a burst of frantic effort involving much sleep deprivation, completed a manuscript.¹⁸ *Workers in the Dawn*, more

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 1.

¹⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 4.

¹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 303–41. I have not so far tracked down any references to Rabelais in Gissing’s novels, letters, diary or in scholarship on him. For a Bakhtinian reading of Gissing aware of his irony but concerned rather than laughter with polyphony resembling that found by Bakhtin in Dostoevsky, see Rebecca Hutcheon “*Born in Exile*, Bakhtin, and the Double-Voiced Discourse of the Epistolary Form,” *Gissing Journal* 51, 2, 1–26.

¹⁸ Coustillas, *Heroic Life*, Vol. 1, 281; Kathryn B. Feuer, *Tolstoy and the Genesis of “War and Peace”*, eds. Robin Feuer Miller and Donna Tussing Owen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 7–8.

clearly than any of Gissing's subsequent novels, is a *bildungsroman*, telling the story of Arthur Golding, a sensitive young man born in the slums who has artistic talent. Five of Gissing's 1880s novels are concerned with London lowlife: *Workers in the Dawn*, *The Unclassed* (1884), *Demos* (1886), *Thyrza* (1887), then finally *The Nether World*. While the 1830s "Newgate novels" written by William Harrison Ainsworth, Dickens and others had narrated the crimes of an earlier London, Gissing's are novels of modernity. Modern London, as the biggest city in the world and the capital of the biggest territorial empire ever known, becomes in early Gissing a world in itself, which he divides into social ranks and geographical districts with a sort of horrified precision.

A passage from *Thyrza* is chosen by Jeremy Tambling in his 2009 book *Going Astray: Dickens and London* to illustrate a comparison between Dickens and Gissing.¹⁹

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 and dry-rot, the people who walk here appear one and all to be employed in labour that soils body and spirit. Journey on the top of a tram-car from King's Cross to Holloway, and civilization has taught you its ultimate 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 fissure. 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.²⁰

Tambling describes Gissing as more "district-bound" than Dickens, and he links this to "the

¹⁹ Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (Harlow: Longman, 2009), 268.

²⁰ George Gissing, *Thyrza: A Tale* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1974), 319.

increasing size of London”.²¹ Compared with the decades in which Dickens was active (the 1830s to the 1860s), by Gissing’s time London’s rate of growth had slowed.²² The still relatively compact and walkable city of Dickens’s time, meanwhile, was rapidly altering in Gissing’s to one which was far more physically spread out, largely thanks to the growth of inexpensive forms of public transport such as the horse tram and the “workmen’s trains” offered by railway companies. Unbeknownst to him, Gissing wrote at the beginning of a long era of decline in urban death rates and rise in working-class purchasing power.²³ The journey northwards “from King’s Cross” begins at a railway terminus that when built in the 1840s sat on or near the periphery of London. The journey heads outwards from there “on the top of a tram-car [...] to Holloway”, a suburb which in the 1890s would, thanks to George and Weedon Grossmith’s book *The Diary of a Nobody*, become associated with an increasingly comfortable new lower-middle class.

As the passage chosen by Tambling shows, Gissing’s London differs from Dickens’s precisely in this dimension of scale and public transport. Ordinary Londoners in the 1880s covered greater distances in daily life than their parents did and used more modes of transport. But there are also other differences between the urban writing of Dickens and that of Gissing. Firstly, in this passage Gissing seems sickened and horrified by the modern city in a way that Dickens was not. As Roger D. Sell has pointed out, Lionel Trilling reclaimed Dickens for the mid-twentieth century by emphasising the darkest elements of his writing.²⁴ This has long been the favourite route of Peter Ackroyd when dealing with Dickens’s London, and Tambling follows in the same direction.²⁵ The London of Dickens’s fiction, while sometimes (but not as

²¹ Tambling, *Going Astray*, 263.

²² *The London Encyclopaedia*, ed. by Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert (London: Macmillan, 1983), 614 (London here means the area defined as London County in the 1888 Local Government Act); John Shepherd, John Westaway and Trevor Lee, *A Social Atlas of London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 22–25.

²³ David R. Green, “The Metropolitan Economy: Continuity and Change 1800–1939”, in *London: A New Metropolitan Geography*, ed. Keith Hoggart and David R. Green (London: Edward Arnold, 1991), 8–33.

²⁴ Roger D. Sell, *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2001), 266.

²⁵ Peter Ackroyd, “Introduction”, in *Dickens’s London: An Imaginative Vision* (London: Headline, 1987), 7–21;

often as Ackroyd suggests) spooky, is never without charm: voluminousness, quirkiness, the potential to be unexpected. It is a place of nooks and corners, and it is largely a place distinct from its suburbs. Gissing's novels of London record a transition: suburbs within a few miles of the centre stop being a sort of green and spacious anti-London and become instead the normal domestic zones of London itself.

The Caledonian Road passage from *Thyrza* also has a hyperbolic quality, which makes it seem deliberately unconvincing. Is *every* shop really “breaking forth with mould and dry-rot”? Or does it only seem that way to this tired, jaundiced tram-rider? Can the experience of travelling on this tram *really* present us with the “ultimate in ignoble hideousness” available within what likes to call itself “civilisation”? Surely there are more hideous things in the world. Readers of Gissing from Virginia Woolf to Pierre Coustillas have viewed him as someone with a delicate sensibility who seeks to make his readers feel as he does. They imply that, in a description such as that of the Caledonian Road tram ride, Gissing is revealing himself in the manner that Woolf found “solitary, self-centred, apart” and perhaps a trifle embarrassing, the manner that Coustillas, over many publications, reclassified as “heroic”.²⁶ But perhaps instead we are looking through the eyes of a persona which is a deliberately distorted version of Gissing the non-fictional individual, a persona whose view of the modern city reveals him to be deranged. Do the pubs of the Caledonian Road *really* “look and reek more intolerably than in other places”? Can you smell them from the top deck of the tram? Do they look shabbier than the ones on the Uxbridge Road or the Southwark Bridge Road? Does anyone really know?

The elevated view from the top deck was still fairly novel in 1887. But moving through London in this way and viewing the things described by the authorial narrator of *Thyrza* would

Tambling, *Going Astray*, 121–24.

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, “George Gissing”, in *The Common Reader, Volume II*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Vintage, 2003), 220–25; Coustillas, *Heroic Life*, Vol. 1, 1. See also Pierre Coustillas, “A Voice that Spoke Straight and Shapely Words”: Gissing in the Works and Papers of Virginia Woolf. *Gissing Newsletter* 23, 3 (July 1987), 1–29.

rapidly become much more normal, more ordinary, for Gissing and his readers than the tone of the passage might lead present-day readers to think. Nor is the passage explained by being the point of view of the character arriving in the Caledonian Road at this point in the novel, the genteel Mrs Ormonde, since she travels there by hansom cab from Kensington, not by tram from King's Cross.²⁷ A passage like this, in fact, could be read as the key to a strategy of concealed joking and reversals of expectation which runs throughout Gissing's writing.

Classicist, Aesthete, Humourist: Gissing's Less Earnest Sides

Academic studies of Gissing flourished from the 1960s onwards. By 2008, D.J Taylor could state that "Gissing studies has been one of the great academic industries of the past 30 years".²⁸ Animating much of this was Coustillas. Over more than half a century, between the 1960s and the 2010s, he would publish multiple editions of Gissing's novels and other writings, an exhaustive three-volume biography, a new bibliography of Gissing's own writings, and make dozens of contributions to the *Gissing Newsletter* (from 1990 the *Gissing Journal*), as well as co-editing a nine-volume edition of Gissing's letters.²⁹ But Gissing still stands slightly outside the mainstream, situated awkwardly on the frontier between Victorian and modern.

Michael Collie was responsible for a bibliography of Gissing's writings "judged wholly inadequate by all Gissing scholars", to quote Stephen Gill.³⁰ But in his 1979 critical study of Gissing, *The Alien Art*, Collie makes some distinctive points. He emphasizes, as subsequent critics coming from an English-studies background often do not, the strength of the influence on Gissing of modern Continental literature: Turgenev, Ibsen, Henri Murger.³¹ Gissing was a

²⁷ Gissing, *Thyrza*, 319.

²⁸ D.J. Taylor, "Enemy Within" (review of Paul Delany, *George Gissing: A Life*), *Guardian*, 16 February 2008, www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/16/featuresreviews.guardianreview6.

²⁹ Issues of the *Newsletter* and *Journal* published from 1965 to 2012 have been digitized: www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/gissing/newsletter-journal/contents.html. Tributes to Coustillas, who died in 2018, were gathered in a special supplement to the *Gissing Journal* for October 2018.

³⁰ Stephen Gill, "Select Bibliography", in George Gissing, *The Nether World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) xxv–xxvii (here xxv).

³¹ Michael Collie, *The Alien Art: A Critical Study of George Gissing's Novels* (Folkestone and Hamden, CT:

trained classicist who continued to pursue the literature of ancient languages after his formal education ended.³² When still struggling as a writer he worked as a private tutor preparing young men for civil service and university entrance exams. As for Wilde, Walter Pater, A.E. Housman and E.M. Forster, for Gissing the literature of ancient Greece and Rome was a profound presence.

Additionally, Collie argues, Gissing was less concerned with society than with portraying himself as an artist along the lines proposed by the Aesthetic Movement, a view backed up more recently by Diana Maltz.³³ Far from being masses of excessively raw content, his 1880s novels are experimental manipulations of literary form. Seen this way, the autobiographical aspects of Gissing's writing are not autobiography pure and simple. Although the young male protagonists in his 1880s novels, educated but impoverished and obscure, in part certainly are presentations of Gissing himself, they also have models in earlier literary orphans and apprentice figures from *Oliver Twist* to Jack Sheppard, and the young Gissing's protagonists are often artistic creators, even if their ambitions are frequently frustrated or mocked. While Osmond Waymark in *The Unclassed* is an aspiring novelist, Arthur Golding and Sidney Kirkwood are active in the pure and applied visual arts. The Aesthetic Movement set itself up in opposition to the respectable norms it saw as characterizing the earlier Victorian decades and, as Collie observes, "[t]he negative of what other people cherished and believed had a fascination for" Gissing.³⁴ The carnival of Bakhtin parallels this by describing formal reversals of everyday order such as the mockery and beating of those who wear "royal robes and pompous

Dawson, 1979), 9.

³² Coustillas, *Heroic Life*, Vol. 1, 5 (and *passim*).

³³ Diana Maltz ("Bohemia's Bo(a)rders: Queer-Friendly Gissing", *Gissing Journal* 37, 4 (October 2001), 7–28, here 9) writes of Gissing's "avid study of the Aesthetic Movement", while he also developed "particular ambivalences" towards the clothes, literary forms and sexual mores associated with it. See also Maltz, "Practical Aesthetics and Decadent Rationale in George Gissing," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28, 1 (Spring 2000), 55-71; and "George Gissing's Hopes and Fears for a Popular British Aestheticism", Chapter 6 in her *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 174–205.

³⁴ Collie, *Alien Art*, 2.

academic gowns” (213). Denizens of modern urban bohemia visibly and deliberately seem to reverse their society’s rules, and Collie recasts Gissing as, precisely, a bohemian.

Collie, then, hints at aspects of Gissing with which mainstream criticism of him is uncomfortable. These include, in Maltz’s words, acts of “self-salvaging or self-serving” but also Gissing’s humorous side.³⁵ To take an example, Gill’s introduction to a 1992 paperback edition of *The Nether World* describes the novel as an extremely bleak portrayal of reality with nothing funny about it. Gill particularly stresses that, before writing it, Gissing carried out fieldwork in poor districts of central London,³⁶ that the novel enters the low-life territory that had been Dickens’s, and that it confounds readers’ expectations of resolution, giving them the precise opposite of what they are likely to expect from their first glimpses of certain characters. Gill aligns Gissing with other nineteenth-century English writers, and, unlike Collie, is apparently uninterested in looking for further contexts beyond them. He links *The Nether World* not just to “the social-problem novelists” active in the early and mid-Victorian decades, “Disraeli, Gaskell, Kingsley, Dickens and Reade”, but also to non-fictional accounts of London poverty from the 1870s and 1880s,³⁷ so chiming in with a discussion of Gissing and naturalism by Sally Ledger.³⁸

Yet contradicting such readings, the very notion of a social problem is mocked in *The Nether World*. Bob Hewett and Jack Bartley, former love rivals and afterwards partners in crime, renew their acquaintance (and they are a pair of slum-dwelling louts):

Would that it were possible to set down a literal report of the conversation which passed during hours thus spent! Much of it, of course, would be merely revolting, but for the most part it would consist of such wearying, such incredible imbecilities as no human patience could endure through five minutes’ perusal. Realise it, however, and you grasp

³⁵ Maltz, “Bohemia’s Bo(a)rders”, 9.

³⁶ Gill, “Explanatory Notes”, in Gissing, *Nether World*, 393–404 (here, 397–98).

³⁷ Gill, “Introduction”, in Gissing, *Nether World*, vii–xxii (here, x–xii).

³⁸ See fn 6 above.

the conditions of what is called the social problem.³⁹

Is “the social problem” that crude men swear the way Bob and Jack do? No, but maybe it does consist in the gulf in understanding between upper and nether worlds alluded to here. Of course, it would be “possible” in a literal sense “to set down a literal report” of the language used by Bob and Jack, but it would be socially and commercially impossible: their conversation would be filled with words only reproducible in print during Gissing’s lifetime via dashes in the text. Then again, the passage suggests, who would bother? And then, too, Bob and Jack are perhaps to be understood as Nether World equivalents of Wildean dandies or macho West End bloods, as is suggested in the same chapter by the mention of Bob’s “artistic temperament”, powerful feelings and generosity. Gissing’s conception of the Nether World is therefore not just as a “social problem” but also as a carnivalesque reversal of the official or upper world, and as such comparable with any artists’ bohemia. The qualities that would make a young man born in the upper world into a hero and an artist are precisely those that lead Bob to a death recalling that of Dickens’s Bill Sikes, bloody and on the run from the law. Black joke falls upon black joke, and Gill’s approach starts to look too earnest.

But Gill is right about the reversal of expectations. As he says, “In a Dickens plot, gaining and losing money can both establish correct order and promote virtue”.⁴⁰ In *The Nether World*, by contrast, instead of being nice getting you money, getting money makes you nicer. The character of Scawthorne is responsible for seducing one of the novel’s two heroine figures, Clara Hewett, and so parallels Dickens’s Steerforth, even to his name. But when his equally crooked associate Joseph Snowdon claims that “Providence” is at work and lets out a Panglossian cry of “everything’s for the best” at a moment when things happen to be going well for Joseph himself, Scawthorne claims a Dickens-like hero position. “The honest man is always rewarded in the long run”, he says (328) during a chapter entitled “The Heir”, which makes a

³⁹ Gissing, *Nether World*, 215. Further references appear inside brackets in the text.

⁴⁰ Gill, “Introduction”, xxii.

mockery of Victorian fictional conventions. Gissing mocks the wrangles and mysteries surrounding inheritances of mid-Victorian “social-problem” novels like Reade’s *Hard Cash* (1863), just as he subverts Hardy’s efforts to write tragedy in modern fiction.⁴¹ Joseph has become his father Michael’s sole heir by a pure accident: Michael’s death the day before he was due to take a new version of his will to his solicitor. As a result, Joseph inherits everything rather than, as Michael had eventually intended, the money going into a charitable fund to be managed by his granddaughter, Joseph Snowdon’s daughter Jane. After inheriting, Joseph flees with the money, first to Liverpool and then to America, where he loses the lot in a rash speculation before swiftly dying (388), leaving Jane Snowdon with nothing. Scawthorne, however, seems genuinely improved by the hard work or good fortune which leads him towards a position as partner in a law firm. This is another reversal, then, and it indicates how in *The Nether World* rogues such as Scawthorne and Joseph can be dynamic and even likeable characters. Joseph’s “faults and weaknesses” (191), after all, are “distinctly those of the civilised man” and this clashes with the “disastrous alliance” he is compelled to form with “two savages”, his mother-in-law Mrs Peckover and his brutish wife Clem (of whom more later). We sympathize.

Studied Witticisms: the Overly Ironic Narrator of *The Nether World*

Gissing’s critics have rarely focused on the comic aspects of the early novels, but exceptions to the rule exist. Like Gill, George Scott Christian places *The Nether World* squarely within the tradition of the “Condition of England” social problem narrative.⁴² But Christian looks beyond Victorian fiction, back to the eighteenth century and particularly to a line derived from Cervantes by Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and their contemporaries, a “formal” and

⁴¹ Gissing’s *Demos* has its plot much more fully structured around the twists and turns a will introduces into people’s lives than does *The Nether World*, written three years later.

⁴² George Scott Christian, “‘There’s Many a True Word Said in Joke’: Quixoticism in *The Nether World*”, *Gissing Journal*, 38, 2 (April 2002), 4-20.

detached sort of comedy.⁴³ In Christian's account, an important feature of Gissing's early novels reached an extreme in *The Nether World*: the ironised third-person narrator figure. This narrator, Christian rightly says, brings Gissing's novel "much closer to [Thackeray's] *Vanity Fair* than it is to [Zola's] *L'Assommoir*". As in the "ignoble hideousness" and "unconscious degradation" of the Caledonian Road in *Thyrza*, Gissing invites readers to become aware of this narrator's over-the-top sensibilities, and even to be embarrassed by them. This is not a warm wit, as the wit of Austen and Forster can be. In *The Nether World*, irony has a blackly comic effect recalling Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, and anticipating Conrad's *The Secret Agent*.

The excessively ironic narrator for instance describes the coming of winter to the degraded and doomed slum street of Shooter's Gardens. The setting is Clerkenwell, inner-city, crooked and crowded, and some way from the clerks' and shopkeepers' zone of the Caledonian Road, however supremely ugly that may have been. The terminal-stage alcoholic Mrs Candy and her son Stephen have lives that are profoundly reduced and repetitive. In the blackest of ironies, Stephen works sixteen hours a day as a potman in a public house (75), earning a pathetically small amount of money most of which his mother will then spend in another beer house. Their surname suggests a childish sweetness at odds with their lives. Gallows humour indeed. But as well as the Candys, a family living in another room in the same house is also described, their name laden with irony by the sometime author of "The Hope of Pessimism": the Hopes.

Gissing's over-ironic narrator calls the building shared by the Candys and the Hopes "an interesting house" (249), on the grounds that it had "seven rooms, and each room was the home of a family; under the roof slept twenty-five persons, men, women and children; the lowest rent paid by one of these domestic groups was four and sixpence". Disentangling the strands of irony, one could ask what is "interesting" about this overcrowded, decayed house. And to whom

⁴³ Christian, "Many a True Word" 4, 9.

is it “interesting”? The reader who might be an aspiring slum landlord or a prurient middle-class person hoping for thrills from the lowest levels of squalor?⁴⁴ Or the moralistic reformer, like Miss Lant, a prosperous philanthropist character in the novel, who bullies and misunderstands slum-dwellers without having any particularly hypocritical motivation for doing so? Or does the word *interesting* indicate the reverse, that this sort of thing is sickeningly predictable and therefore very far from interesting? Some of the words (“the lowest rent [...] four and sixpence”), moreover, mirror reports by Medical Officers of Health in central London sanitary districts such as St Giles, or the layout of social survey texts produced by reformers. Among the latter, Charles Booth’s first analysis of the geographical spread and detailed daily life of the London poor, *East London*, appeared, like *The Nether World*, in 1889. Booth’s investigators, among them Gissing’s friend and confidante Clara Collet, moved room by room, house by house, street by street, recording living conditions and levels of rent.⁴⁵ There were rooms available in London for a weekly rent little more than half of the four and sixpence paid by the families with the worst rooms in Shooter’s Gardens, but those rooms would not have welcomed whole families of the poorest and least respectable London residents.

Applied to the slum house of Shooter’s Gardens, the word “domestic” is itself laden with irony. The ideal life in Dickens’s novels is that of a hearthside family in a whole house. Gissing the classicist would have linked domesticity to the Latin *domus*, conceived as a free-standing house built around a courtyard ruled by a master (*dominus*) and housing his wife, children and servants. Here in Shooter’s Gardens each single, barely-furnished room is home to a group of parents and children. Things get more extreme still. “You would have enjoyed a peep into the rear chamber on the ground floor”, the over-ironic narrator remarks in mock-jocular tones: “The

⁴⁴ “It must be very interesting examining the holes of London, as long as you don’t catch a fever”, Gissing’s brother William wrote to the 20-year-old future novelist in July 1878 when the latter had been living in London for eight months (Gissing, *Collected Letters*, I.94). See also Richard Dennis, “Mapping Gissing’s *Workers in the Dawn*”, *Gissing Journal* 46, 4 (October 2010), 325–45, esp. 334.

⁴⁵ David Doughan, “Collet, Clara Elizabeth (1860–1948)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/39079>.

father was a cripple; he and his wife occupied themselves in the picking of rags—of course at home—and I can assure you that the atmosphere of their abode was worthy of its aspect” (249). There is irony here in “atmosphere” (the “dirty air” of slum dwellings was proverbial),⁴⁶ “abode” and “aspect” (recalling the jargon of estate agents), and laughter too in the raconteur’s chuckling “I can assure you”. From its identification as a room at the back of the ground floor, readers familiar with the meaner sort of London terraced house could gather that it would have had a single small window, and have looked out onto a tiny yard containing a stinking privy, thus getting an idea of its visual and olfactory ‘aspect’. The Nether World occupied by the Hopes and Candys is in fact an underworld in the classical sense of a hell. It is, equally, a carnivalesque space, in Bakhtin’s terms.

This dual identity calls to mind Bakhtin’s use of journeys to hell in the prose romances of late antiquity to exemplify his notions of the ever-parodying novelistic and dialogic spirit in literature (386–90).⁴⁷ Here is the *pater familias* of the hopeless Hopes:

Mr Hope drank, but not desperately. His forte was the use of language so peculiarly violent that even in Shooter’s Gardens it gained him a proud reputation. On the slightest excuse he would threaten to brain one of his children, to disembowel another, to gouge out the eyes of the third. He showed much ingenuity in varying the forms of menaced punishment. Not a child in the Gardens but was constantly threatened by its parents with a violent death; this was so familiar that it had lost its effect; where the nurse or mother in the upper world cries “I shall scold you!” in the nether the phrase is, “I’ll knock yer ‘ed orff!” To “I shall be very angry with you” in the one sphere, corresponds in the other, “I’ll murder you!” These are conventions—matters of no importance. But Mr Hope was a man of individuality; he could make his family tremble; he could bring lodgers about the door

⁴⁶ George Yeats, “‘Dirty Air’: *Little Dorrit*’s Atmosphere, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 66, 3 (2011) 328–54.

⁴⁷ Cf. Bakhtin, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 41–83 (esp. 51–68).

to listen and admire his resources. (249)

“Matters of no importance”? Hardly that, we can think. The narrator here uses a deadpan comic tone (“drank, but not desperately”). Laughter is induced, but it is hard and painful laughter. It is as though the over-ironic narrator were elbowing us in the ribs instructing us to laugh at Mr Hope’s “individuality”. As if he were some eccentric old gent. And then there is the comic horror of the slum-dwelling bohemian life, with Gissing himself among those “lodgers” who have tried to get on with reading or writing during their neighbours’ terrible rows, or have come out onto the landing to see what is going on.⁴⁸

By indicating eighteenth-century England, Christian helps us towards one of the sources of this sort of laughter. He rightly asserts the “‘seriousness’ of comic theory” as well as one aspect of the joking in *The Nether World*: “Hobbesian ... derision, as base and animalistic schemers attempt to dominate, ridicule, and ultimately destroy their competitors”.⁴⁹ And Gissing’s harshly comic elements actually have a more direct forerunner than either Addison or Cervantes who goes unmentioned by Christian, namely the eighteenth-century London artist repeatedly alluded to in Gissing’s first two novels, *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Unclassed*: William Hogarth. In the tradition established by the seventeenth-century French *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, afterwards extended by culturally conservative writers in English such as Dryden, Swift and Pope, Hogarth resembles a modern on the surface but turns out on closer examination to be an ancient, seeing modernity as decline.⁵⁰ The same is true of Gissing: *The Nether World* brims with examples of a scurrilous and aggressive wit owing much to the English neo-classicists of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth centuries. Unconsidered by

⁴⁸ When Gissing was briefly in lodgings at Kennington Road, London, during March and April 1893, he was kept up one night by what he called a “Bestial row in the house till 1am”. See George Gissing, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978), 300 (1 April 1893). Scenes in which brutal domestic violence are overheard by neighbours are recorded, comparably, in transcripts of trials at the Old Bailey, London’s Central Criminal Court. See for one example *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 13 December 2018), March 1850, trial of ROBERT BOYES (t18500304-624)..

⁴⁹ Christian, “‘Many a True Word’”, 7–8.

⁵⁰ Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth’s Graphic Works* (London: The Print Room, 1989), 1–2.

Christian, too, are earlier English antecedents for Gissing's slum-naturalist Menippean satire. An example from Ben Jonson, the writer to whom Anthony W. Johnson has devoted so much scholarly energy, is "On the Famous Voyage" (1612), a Rabelaisian narrative of a journey up the open sewer of London's Fleet Ditch.⁵¹

Clem Peckover: Celebratory Comedy, *Fabliau*-Style

Critics seem to keep circling around the secretly comic centre of *The Nether World*, but never quite reaching it. A recent example is Susan E. Cook, who has emphasized the performative aspects of the novel. The significance within *The Nether World* of the theatre extends beyond the abortive stage career of Clara after her seduction by Scawthorne, the older man she decided to meet after cutting her hand on the glass of the sash window of her Islington room. Clara and Jane Snowdon, according to Cook, engage with the world by donning gender roles in a fashion anticipating Judith Butler. Arguing that *The Nether World* might be more optimistic than critics have realised, Cook usefully seeks mobility rather than stasis in this novel, so often seen myopically as a portrait of people completely trapped by poverty and therefore immobile.⁵² But what she utterly misses is the vigour, not just horrific, but at times verging on the lovably laughable, of Clem *née* Peckover, later Snowdon.

Clem seems a far from likeable or ethically admirable figure when she is first seen tormenting poor Jane by forcing her, a poor little Victorian waif, to spend the night in a room containing a corpse, and indeed Clem later plots the murders of both her husband and her own mother. But sometimes she behaves quite differently. There are flashes in her of a life above and beyond the discourse of "degeneration" by which Cook explains her. At these moments Clem amounts to more even than when Gissing describes her as a mighty physical specimen, a beast in the finer

⁵¹ Andrew McRae, "'On the Famous Voyage': Ben Jonson and Civic Space", *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 8 (1998), 1-31, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/04-2/mcraonth.htm>.

⁵² Susan E. Cook, "Envisioning Reform in Gissing's *The Nether World*", *English Literature in Transition* 52, 4 (2009) 458-75, here 460.

sense, “in the prime of her ferocious beauty” (120).⁵³

At times, Clem is explicitly a comic figure.

She, coming forward in the attitude of an enraged fishwife, for a few moments made the room ring with foul abuse, that vituperative vernacular of the nether world, which has never yet been exhibited by typography, and presumably never will be. (158)

And again: “‘He’s a——liar!’ roared Clem, who at the best of times would have brought small understanding to a legal question” (159). Chapter 18 of *The Nether World* is entitled “The Joke Is Completed”, underlining for the reader that in the novel, comic narrative structures are in play. In the chapter title, the comic and the anti-comic coexist. There is a complex interplay between the appalled, straight-faced irony which leads to a recognition of horror or wrong, and a sense that the poor really are stupid, dirty and aggressive, deserving no sympathy from educated people. The tendency in recent criticism such as that on Gissing of Greenslade and Cook has been to read this interplay in historicist fashion as derived from a late nineteenth-century Darwinian discourse on racial decline and the survival of the fittest.⁵⁴ Naturalism, for Ledger, goes back to Darwin’s 1871 *Descent of Man*.⁵⁵ But if Gissing’s opinion of the London poor can in part be explained via this context, that is by no means the whole story. Other contexts could include Bergson’s contemporaneous opinion that in order to laugh at another human being’s misfortune “we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity”.⁵⁶

Today’s historicist readings of 1880s Gissing, then, ignore the comic vigour which is essential to his underclass characters. As in the Caledonian Road passage in *Thyrza*, a

⁵³ Cook, “Envisioning Reform”, 463; cf. William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁴ See also David Bradshaw, “*Howards End*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, ed. David Bradshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 151–72, here 161.

⁵⁵ Ledger, *Naturalism*, 69.

⁵⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, tr. Cloudsley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 4.

characteristic Gissing comic move is when he seems appreciative of what might typically, in respectable Victorian canons, be judged disgusting. His narrator position becomes at times mealy-mouthed but also celebratory: that of the milksop lodger who fancies the scary slum girl. What I mean is present when Clem “for a few moments made the room ring with foul abuse”. The word *ring*: the bells in church? The word *foul*: really good abuse. High quality abuse. And Clem’s utter lack of understanding of a legal question in some way positions her above those who talk pretentiously of a “vituperative vernacular” or things “exhibited by typography”, two pieces of ventriloquism as surely as when Gissing puts on Clem’s voice, exhorting us to imagine her bellowing out abuse. Whatever badness she does, Gissing indicates, one side of the poor *is* gutsy and direct and certainly no worse than the artificialities of the drawing-room or the newspaper. And who said Rabelaisian types were necessarily nice?

Then there is the way that Clem and Joseph find themselves married to one another, which resembles a Chaucerian fabliau and is the “Joke” of Chapter 18’s title. Joseph imagines that he has tricked Clem into marrying him, thinking that he can then laze around, living off the earnings Clem’s mother gets as a Nether-World rentier. Clem meanwhile has heard rumours about an inheritance Joseph will shortly come into and therefore thinks that she is the one playing the trick, because by marrying him she will get her hands on his money. Joseph discovers straight after their hurried registry-office wedding that there is no inheritance (his father plans to give his money to charitable causes), then laughs uproariously as Clem and her mother fume (158). In this particular fabliau-type plot the **scatological element** is reduced to barely perceptible innuendo, the most permissible in late-Victorian respectable publishing, but there are also shades of the seaside postcard beloved by George Orwell, that keen admirer of Gissing.

Warmth, Cruelty, and Hogarthian Visuality

When Joseph suddenly and undeservedly inherits Michael's money instead of poor Jane getting it, he immediately gets drunk and reveals everything to the canny Scawthorne. The structure of the fool or gull tricked by his clever accomplice is classically comic. Joseph then decides to reveal the truth to Clem, so as to "give more piquancy to a pleasant little jest he had in mind" (329). Discordant laughter rings through these scenes.

Laughter in *The Nether World* is not restricted to harsh and sneering jokes, however. There is also a warmer sort of laughter, character-driven, recalling Dickens characters like Captain Cuttle in *Dombey and Son* and Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield*, but actually treacherous, manipulating readers' expectations in the manner indicated by Gill. In Dickens, the laughter comes from the recurrence of the caricatures' entertaining mannerisms, but also involves readers' confidence that these characters, though mirth-inducing, are objects of the author's affection. Gissing, too, developed occasional comic characters along these lines, notably the genial, browbeaten Irish schoolteacher Philip O'Gree in his early *The Unclassed*. In *The Nether World*, though, he presents a pair of characters who are warmly observed, then shows them to be no better than any other nether-world dwellers, driven by base needs and vice. Mr and Mrs Byass, Jane Snowdon's landlord and landlady in Islington for much of the book, ultimately decline, she into avarice, he into drinking and whoring. Before doing so, they seem an island of affection and moderate prosperity. Yet hints that we are in an uncaring, anti-Dickens world have been lurking since the start. At the very first moment the Byasses appear, she merrily chiding Sidney Kirkwood and he facetiously pretending to stab Sidney with the fireside poker, a shockingly deadpan statement is inserted: 'their last lodger, after a fortnight of continuous drunkenness, broke the windows, ripped the paper off the walls, and ended by trying to set fire to the house' (66). Poole, in the course of an account of *The Nether World* as extremely bleak and not at all comic, observantly describes this scene as "a brilliant, dead-pan parody of

Dickensian jollity”.⁵⁷ The Byasses laugh whilst, and perhaps *because*, they are surrounded by the repetitive horrors of the nether world: lethal alcoholism; pointless violence; destitution.

Another strain of comedy in *The Nether World* is cruel and even sado-masochistic. This involves finding laughter in things that should only evoke horror. Wit and humour sustain people in bad situations, and an amusing clown can be darkly pessimistic. A comic, indeed, can be seen as someone fundamentally destructive, who views the world merely as a source of material. This masochistic strain can be seen in Gissing’s treatment of his protagonist Sidney Kirkwood. While disappointed that he has abandoned his schooling in his mid-teens and become an artisan rather than training to be an artist, Sidney starts the novel clear-headed, hard-working and independent. He ends mired in a family life which, as with the Hopes in their ‘rear chamber’ at Shooter’s Gardens, is shaken by the casual deployment of threats of hideous violence. “‘If I was him,’ said Amy, in a low voice of passion, ‘I’d tie you to something and beat you till you lost your senses’” (365). Sidney ends up occupying a pretentious, cramped and flimsy house at Crouch End, a new-built suburb well away from central London. There he supports his senile father-in-law, his disfigured and depressive wife, and her three appalling younger siblings, including the Amy just mentioned.

The sado-masochistic strain exemplified by Gissing’s treatment of Sidney is perhaps explained via the quasi-autobiographical personas adopted by comedians on stage and screen. Sidney in Crouch End anticipates the grimmest sort of television sitcom: *Steptoe and Son*, *The Royle Family*. Perhaps it seems far-fetched to connect nineteenth-century literary accounts of urban struggle with twentieth-century screen comedy. If so, consider the slapstick Marshall Berman finds in a prose poem by Baudelaire which he says anticipates “the metaphysical pratfalls of Chaplin and Keaton”.⁵⁸ To go further, screen comics (Tony Hancock, Woody Allen and Phil Silvers, for example) very often play versions of themselves. Sometimes this is

⁵⁷ Poole, *Gissing in Context*, 94.

⁵⁸ Marshall Berman, *All that Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 157.

someone with the same name as the comic, sometimes not. This pseudo-autobiographical character displays characteristics which are exaggerations of those associated with the off-screen man or woman portraying the onscreen fictional personage. Sidney Kirkwood is not a portrait of George Gissing, but his artistic talent, his uprightness, and his detachment from his squalid surroundings all make him resemble other Gissing heroes, inviting readers to see him as such a portrait.

Cook argues that *The Nether World* should be read using a specifically photographic notion of realism, but arguably more important than photography for Gissing were visual images derived from painting and drawing. As Cook points out, the camera is never mentioned in the novel.⁵⁹ A view such as Clara Hewett's from her Farringdon Road window is of the grimy City and Newgate Prison, "seen under a low, blurred, dripping sky" (280). It recalls John O'Connor's "From Pentonville Road Looking West: Evening", a chocolate-box urban landscape of 1884 which, like the scene from *Thyrza*, depicts a tram near King's Cross.⁶⁰ Sidney at Crouch End, meanwhile, occupies a Hogarthian tableau, something that could be by a graphic artist (see e.g. 374–75). The realism of his situation is claimed in the naming of the district, for instance, but the behaviour of the Hewett children has a quality of nightmarish exaggeration.

Gissing's complex relationship with Hogarth merits further investigation.⁶¹ Hogarth's *Marriage A-la-Mode* had its name used for a chapter of *Workers in the Dawn* describing a high-society match linking a cynical young woman and a debauched older man.⁶² In the last plate of the Hogarth set, the merchant's daughter married off at the beginning of the sequence to a dissolute earl has poisoned herself and is losing consciousness in her father's house in the City.

⁵⁹ Cook, "Envisioning Reform", 458, 461.

⁶⁰ John O'Connor, "From Pentonville Road Looking West: Evening", Museum of London Collections Online, <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/102154.html>.

⁶¹ See John Sloan, "Gissing and Hogarth", in *A Garland for Gissing*, ed. Bouwe Postmus (Amsterdam and New York: Brill, 2001), 249–59.

⁶² William Hogarth, "Marriage A-la-Mode", in Paulson, *Hogarth's Graphic Works*, 341–46. Gissing's chapter is entitled "Marriage à-la-Mode" (George Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn*, ed. Debbie Harrison (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2010), 220–32).

A tableau of figures is presented in a precisely detailed and specifically located yet grotesque London setting: the dying woman, her diseased child, a withered servant woman and an idiot male servant, the woman's smooth and callous-looking father, a fat and disapproving apothecary. London Bridge is visible out of the window, and the paintings on the walls are in what Ronald Paulson calls "the low Dutch style".⁶³ It is a moral cityscape as well as a literal one.

Gissing created many such Hogarthian tableaux in his 1880s novels, and even turned them into an ekphrastic object of discussion. In *Workers in the Dawn*, the saintly printer Samuel Tollady takes the artist protagonist Arthur to the Whitecross Street slum due north of the City of London. Tollady points out the grotesque yet pitiable people to be seen thereabouts, hoping Arthur will be inspired to paint realist or naturalist paintings that will improve society (rather than the paintings of beautiful people and things that Arthur actually wants to paint). "Paint a picture of this crowd we have watched", Tollady says, "be a successor of Hogarth, and give us the true image of *our* social dregs, as he did those of his own age".⁶⁴ To claim, as a recent reader of the passage does, that Gissing is viewing London slum dwellers here with the eyes of an imperialist blind to their humanity is, following the pattern in post-1960s Gissing criticism, to miss Gissing's vein of humour, often black and tongue-in-cheek.⁶⁵ In *The Unclassed*, for instance, a slum landlord is discovered with a volume of Hogarth prints, "amusing himself with the realism which so greatly appealed to his taste in art".⁶⁶ Differences between Hogarth and Gissing should also be noted, however. For one thing, *Marriage A-la-Mode* ends as a formal tragedy, with the deaths of both its protagonists. For another, where Hogarth depicts the vices of social superiors such as aristocrats and members of the wealthiest mercantile class for his

⁶³ Paulson, *Hogarth's Graphic Works*, 123.

⁶⁴ Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn*, 123.

⁶⁵ Matthew K. McKean, "Rethinking Late Victorian Slum Fiction: The Crowd and Imperialism at Home", *English Literature in Transition* 54 (2011), 28-55.

⁶⁶ George Gissing, *The Unclassed* (Teddington: Echo Library, 2006), 98.

audience of London small-masters and journeymen,⁶⁷ Gissing depicts people low down on the social scale for an audience essentially made up of the literary cognoscenti. A further difference is that in Hogarth, as in Dickens, people get what they deserve. The ending of *The Nether World*, by contrast, anticipates Brecht and Beckett: life, reduced, goes on in some form until one day it stops, and whether you are nice or nasty the world does what it will to you.

Another strand is the Saturnalian or carnivalesque best exemplified in Chapter XII, “‘To Saturnalia!’”, in which Bob and his pathetic bride Pennyloaf go to the Crystal Palace on a bank holiday on their wedding day and the scene ends in drunken violence.⁶⁸ This chapter, discussed by Christian,⁶⁹ is a far more straightforward instance of classically influenced ambivalent festive comedy than most of the rest of the book and, as such, another reminder of the multiple strands of laughter in *The Nether World*. Once again, we must remember the classical education Gissing shared with many of his earlier readers. Bakhtin calls the Saturnalia an “antique scholarly tradition” and he observes the discussion of it in Seneca, but he also emphasizes that his hero Rabelais, in describing festive acts of overeating and physical overturning, not only drew on authors ancient and modern but also on “the living popular-festive tradition of his own time” (198). The same is true of Gissing, who travelled to the Crystal Palace on Bank Holiday Monday, 2 April 1888, and according to his diary “brought back a lot of good notes”.⁷⁰

Finally, there is the meta-comedy of the book. This can perhaps be appreciated by thinking oneself into the position of a late-Victorian novel reader who had read literally hundreds of Victorian novels and therefore knew all the indications of good and bad in characters, and all

⁶⁷ Ronald Paulson, “Introduction”, in *Hogarth’s Graphic Works*, 1–36, esp. 10, 18–19. Hogarth’s background as an artisan copper engraver aligns him with Sidney Kirkwood and Bob Hewett in *The Nether World*, both skilled and artistic craftsmen. Paulson reproduces a pricelist of Hogarth’s prints as sold at his Leicester Fields shop in the 1750s which shows *Marriage A-la-Mode* the most expensive item at £1 1s. 6d. To a tradesman earning say £50 a year this would have been expensive but not out of reach.

⁶⁸ In 1893 the editor of the *Illustrated English Magazine*, Clement Jones Shorter, wrote to Gissing asking if he could deliver a short story matching the atmosphere of this precise scene (Gissing, *Diary*, 300, 30 March 1893).

⁶⁹ Christian, “‘Many a True Word’”, 8–10. See also Christine DeVine, “‘A Hell Constructed by Man’: Depictions of the Poor in *The Nether World*”, *Gissing Journal*, 37, 1 (January 2001), 1–17, esp. 10–11.

⁷⁰ Gill, “Explanatory Notes”, 400.

the intimations of what will happen to a character. How could you any longer take seriously a Victorian-novel sort of plot or the assumptions about society that go with it? A good example of such a sophisticated audience-member of Gissing's might be Meredith, avant-garde novelist himself and author of an 1877 essay on "Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit" which praises Rabelais.⁷¹ It was Meredith, acting as a publisher's reader, who encouraged Gissing in the early 1880s, urging him not to stray from a territory which, Meredith claimed, Gissing could make his own: London lowlife.⁷² The world of *The Nether World*, in the title of the novel and in its plotting and characters, is thus a territory which Gissing is claiming as his own property.

Conclusion: The Laughing Realist

The depth and complexity of laughter in *The Nether World* should not obscure Gissing's powerful transmission in it of the slum as experiential environment.⁷³ As Poole observes, *The Nether World* is distinguished by "its articulation of the *quality* of human desire and suffering beneath the differences of class and individual personality".⁷⁴ Yet this dimension of the novel, too, contains a remnant of the comic spirit unrecognised by Poole. The kind of thing I have in mind here is Gissing's richly environmental rendering of what it is like to wake up in a place like Shooter's Gardens, to hear the thump of heavy boots on the stairs long before dawn, to sleep, to stumble out with a rag in your hand to a pump in the yard. I am thinking, too, of Stephen Candy, "a very tolerable human being, had he had fair play" (340), skeletal and diseased yet with a "beast-of-burden" nobility about him. And yet Stephen's life is treated by Gissing as a source of laughter as much as of despair. The painfully comic complexity of *The*

⁷¹ George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, ed. by Lane Cooper (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956).

⁷² Coustillas, *Heroic Life*, Vol. 1, 262.

⁷³ In 1880, responding to connections being drawn between his writing and that of Zola, Gissing wrote to Frederic Harrison that his influences were personal and environmental: "Rather than to any literary influence, I think I must trace the story to my own strongly excitable temperament, operated upon by hideous experiences of low life" (*Collected Letters*, Vol. 1., 293, 23 July 1880). Views of Gissing as a literary naturalist have overlooked this self-interpretation.

⁷⁴ Poole, *Gissing in Context*, 84.

Nether World is never far away. In the 1920s, Woolf denied Gissing the status of a great novelist, but perhaps a fuller appreciation of his comedy could cause him to be viewed differently.⁷⁵

Laughter, in fact, is a structuring principle in Gissing's writings more generally, extending far beyond the pages of this one novel seen as the bleakest, though in fact the clearest case of black comedy. With qualified exceptions such as Christian, however, critics have neglected Gissing's many comic dimensions. This is true even of the recent effort to see Gissing as more than narrowly pessimistic, by scholars such as Coustillas and Simon J. James. According to James, reviewing Coustillas's monumental biography, Gissing's novels display a "habitual lack of sentiment, consolation, or even, with a few exceptions, humour".⁷⁶ But Gissing's multiple uses of humour, both strategic and tactical, merit interpretation in Bakhtinian terms as serio-comic and Rabelaisian, and also in relation to various different literary and artistic antecedents. Important among these antecedents are writers and artists who filtered classical Greek and Roman culture through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, the likes of Jonson, Swift, Pope and Hogarth. A reappraisal of Gissing's career that takes fuller account of his comic sides will learn from diverse earlier criticism by commentators such as Collie and Maltz, both of whom see a disruptive and bohemian strand in Gissing's writing, which can be jokey, pleasure-giving and confidently cosmopolitan in a way that confounds his image as earnestly, depressingly, even foggily, English.

If pursued, this reading could rework the whole of Gissing's career, eventually rereading his late work of "autobiografiction", *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Max Saunders takes the word autobiografiction from the title of a 1906 essay by Stephen Reynolds and highlights the connections between that piece and Gissing's character of Ryecroft.⁷⁷ Read as ironic

⁷⁵ Woolf, "George Gissing", 222.

⁷⁶ Simon J. James, review of *The Heroic Life of George Gissing* by Pierre Coustillas, *Victorian Studies* 56, 3 (Spring 2014), 559–61, here 559.

⁷⁷ See fn. 13 above.

autobiografiction, *Ryecroft* the book becomes an elaborate joke on the hearty, middle-class reader. Such a reading could concentrate on the absurdities inherent in its title character's love of roast beef and old England, his contempt for the poor and hatred of democracy, as well as on *Ryecroft* more generally.⁷⁸ He would become yet another masochistic self-parody, in descent from Arthur Golding and Sidney Kirkwood, and with Gissing once more shoving a figure for himself centre stage and inviting both pity and mockery for it. It would probably be going too far to consider Gissing's entire career as a sophisticated practical joke, its victims ranging from his haplessly earnest brother Algernon to, in our own times, his exhaustively encyclopaedic scholarly pursuer Coustillas. But playing with this idea would be fun. The whole reading I have offered here, indeed, has itself been semi-serious and against the grain. It is offered to Ant Johnson, whose scholarship has always appreciated literary and cultural pleasures, in a spirit of serious fun. This chapter has advanced not quite a fair reading, and indeed even something of a misreading, but, I hope, a worthwhile misreading. Gissing's conception of the lower urban world is based on profound contradictions: it's a real joke, living in hell.

⁷⁸ For a development of such a reading, see Jason Finch, "Pedestrianism, Money and Time: Mobilities of Hurry in George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*", in *Architectures of Hurry: Mobilities, Cities and Modernity*, edited by Phillip Gordon Mackintosh, Richard Dennis and Deryck W. Holdsworth (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), XX-XXX.