

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

---

Workers in the Dawn, Slum Writing and London's "Urban Majority" Districts  
Finch, Jason

*Published in:*  
George Gissing and the Place of Realism

Published: 29/06/2021

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Document License*  
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Finch, J. (2021). *Workers in the Dawn, Slum Writing and London's "Urban Majority" Districts*. In R. Hutcheon (Ed.), *George Gissing and the Place of Realism* (pp. 36-54). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.  
<https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201148447>

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*WORKERS IN THE DAWN*, SLUM WRITING AND LONDON'S 'URBAN MAJORITY' DISTRICTS

JASON FINCH, ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY

The purpose of this essay is to reappraise Gissing's slum writings and Gissing's own status as a slum writer. I apply to his earliest fiction the most recent urban theory, developed to understand and critique developments in cities worldwide since the late twentieth century. This casts new light on Gissing but also calls into question the temporal narratives used in twenty-first century radical urban theory, suggesting alternatives to those.

The geographer AbdouMaliq Simone offers the phrase 'urban majority' to conceptualize changes in post-colonial cities of today's Global South. Districts of cities in Latin America, Africa and Asia, Simone argues, grew in the twentieth century which 'served as interstices between the modern city of cadastres, grids, contractual employment, zoning, and sectorial, demarcated institutions and [...] zones of temporary, makeshift, and largely impoverished residence' (Simone 2018: 126; see also Simone 2013). In Pradeep Sangapala's paraphrase, the concept of urban majority as shaped by Simone 'is not a demographic fact or a political identity but refers to the residents who live in between strictly poor and middle class', people who 'shape the city by occupying and changing its spaces in their everyday practices' (Sangapala 2016). As Maxwell Woods (forthcoming) shows, recent theorizations such as those of Simone, Ananya Roy (2011; 2017), Alexander Vasudevan (2015) and others enable 'new forms of urban subjectivity, agency and citizenship' to emerge in the encounter between different levels, including between elite academic researchers and non-elite 'slum' residents. Such theorizations, Woods argues, enable improved understanding of past as well as present urban formations. Gissing's first novel *Workers in the Dawn* (hereafter *Workers*) represents wealth levels in the city as graded, spanning the range between the very poorest and the prosperous. I argue that the 'majority' districts lauded by Simone find a comparison in the

London portrayed by Gissing, but only if Gissing's London is seen via connections between people of different social classes and wealth levels, not via divisions.

Alongside Simone's recent conceptual work, I use some classic studies of Victorian London by the likes of H.J. Dyos, Raphael Samuel, Gareth Stedman Jones and Jerry White, which alike develop from 'new Left' political positions in late-twentieth-century Britain. These analyses produced between the 1960s and the 1980s develop within a national narrative of British history. Resituated in a supra-national – even planetary – frame, they would gain new explanatory power. Beyond Gissing, the method also involves by dipping into the evidence for London's cultural history across a period that could be labelled a 'long Victorian age', spanning approximately the timespan between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the end of World War Two, evidence provided by various sorts of narratives and documents including literary fiction. Along the way, the chapter alludes to the paradoxical and uncomfortable position of literary realism in 1880s Britain. This was a time when prominent novelists such as George Meredith and Mary Augusta Ward were certain that the novel should be a complex and artistic effort in what we now call realism. That is to say, it should be set in the present day of writers and readers, contain multiple references to objects and places of that present day, and exclude the supernatural and fantastic. But the noun 'realism', often in its French form (*le réalisme*), denoting a specific literary movement originating in 1850s France, was used as virtually a swear word in late Victorian England. It suggested writing on the borderline of what was legally defined in the United Kingdom as obscenity. There is a strong link between this ambivalent position of realism and the concept of the slum, which emerged as a way of identifying 'three-dimensional obscenity' (Dyos 1982: 132). However, unlike in twentieth-century London slum writing by the likes of Ada Chesterton and Marie Paneth, the components of such obscenity, for example incest or proximity to excrement, could only be

stated through allusion, through hints which worldly-wise readers would catch onto but others miss.

### **Gissing the Slum Writer and His ‘Harsh Prose Epic’**

The details of London often seemed mysterious to mid-Victorian novel readers. A sort of glamour or fame (combined with denominational Christian morality) grew up around the parts of the city that had the worst reputations. Acts of naming are key in establishing the myths of a city at times of rapid population expansion, and the names of particular neighbourhoods could become synonymous with urban deprivation, overcrowding, crime and vice (Finch 2013: 90–91; Finch 2016: 81). Such a perspective is apparent in 1850s to 1880s novels about the Anglican clergy by Anthony Trollope and Mary Augusta Ward. Trollope’s Obadiah Slope pursues clerical wealth and power through machinations in a cathedral city but he is described as ‘raked up [...] from the gutters of Marylebone’, a parish peripheral to fashionable portions of London which was notorious for pockets of poverty (Trollope [1857]: 42). In Ward’s influential *Robert Elsmere* (1888), the title character ‘recovers his lost faith’ confronted with the empty churches of London’s East End while the poor suffer outside their doors (Keating 1979: 123). Both novelists position London at a distance, as somewhere hard to comprehend which could be a key to what is happening outside it.

Gissing began his literary career presenting himself as an expert on London seen thus, a free-thinking advanced moralist who knew ‘the back streets and alleys of London’ personally (Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 61). An anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator* of 25 September 1880 felt certain that ‘[...] it is the world of poverty and misery, and the dark side of human nature, with which Mr Gissing is best acquainted’ (Ibid.). Reviewing *Demos* in 1886, another anonymous reviewer thought the novel ‘evidently written by a man who has a very intimate knowledge of the working classes (Ibid., 82). Until the 1960s, writers on

Gissing concurred. The likes of Virginia Woolf and George Orwell presented him as a novelist of the London underworld. This contrasts with the view of him developed during the last half century which has instead emphasized the more middle-class and tonally nuanced writings of the 1890s. Critical readings of Gissing's urban or working-class novels of the 1880s, meanwhile, have tended to work with a binary opposition between the rich and the poor. In *The Nether World*, described by one critic as 'Gissing's most sustained study of slum life', Gissing himself encouraged this by dividing Victorian London into two parts, an upper and a lower (Keating 1979: 83). However, his earlier 1880s works aim to write the truth about non-elite London precisely *without* reducing it to an opposition between upper and lower. The Trent sisters of *Thyrza* and the Mutimers of *Demos* are by no means members of the poorest or most degraded classes in 1880s London. As E.M. Forster would put it in 1910, perhaps, they are 'not in the abyss' but are close enough to it to 'see it' and have acquaintances who have 'dropped in, and counted no more' (Forster 1998: 35). Most of the working-class characters of *Thyrza* (with the exception of the idealised heroine) are 'skilfully placed in a social hierarchy' (Keating 1979: 79)

*Workers of the Dawn* represents the most wide-ranging and polycentric compendium of non-wealthy London among all Gissing's works, even though it was his first. Readings of it have often concentrated on the opening chapter, in which a description of a Saturday-night market in a London slum district, Whitecross Street, is followed by a scene of death in a garret recalling Newgate novels of the 1830s such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and W. Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (Dennis 2008: 104–05; Keating 1979: 60). Accounts of the actual Whitecross Street Market show that while Gissing opened the novel with what seemed a showpiece of realist reportage, he equally used 'a topographical misnomer' (Jones 2016: 66). This was to place the street 'very far off in that shocking East End' (Gissing 2010: 57; parenthetical page references hereafter are to this) rather than, as it seemed to an 1870s

observer, particularly ‘bewildering’ on account of its situation ‘almost in the very centre of City life’ (J. Yeames, *Life in London Alleys*, cited in Jones, *ibid.*). The most attentive and comprehensive study of urban space in *Workers* is by Richard Dennis, who carefully pursues the real-life originals of Gissing’s textual slums whilst noting the novel’s artistic distortions of London topography: ‘the more geographically central the location, the more precisely Gissing delineated it’ (Dennis 2010: 6). Matthew McKean is among those critics who have noticed the comparison between 1880s and 1890s London slum writing and accounts of the non-European other in writings from the same period. He compares Gissing’s Whitecross Street to ‘[Joseph] Conrad’s unearthly jungle’ in *Heart of Darkness* (McKean 2011: 35). Conrad’s novella was published nearly twenty years after *Workers*, so perhaps Conrad was deliberately drawing on established notions of urban darkness when he portrayed the interior of Africa. *Workers* may, in the terms of P.J. Keating (1979: 79), be a novel of social and moral ‘extremes’ in comparison to *Thyrza*, written some years later when Gissing had gained more control over his writerly powers. But it is rich in urban variety, and its social range, rather than examples within it of the demonised or exoticized figure of the slum dweller as developmental throwback (see McKean 2011: 37–38) make it a site in which a late Victorian ‘urban majority’ can be sought. The search will need to venture beyond the opening into the more elusive productions of city space found throughout the novel.

Earlier studies focusing on urban atmospheres in Gissing could help. A 1920s account is by Louis Cazamian.

Gissing’s best novels are those in which he has most strictly focused his attention on the classes whose intimate knowledge and haunting horror he preserved in himself; whether the poverty studied is that of the London slums (*Demos*, *The Nether World*), or of starving writers (*New Grub Street*); or whether, crossing the limit between the two worlds, he relates the adventurous career of a son of the people, who through no means but his

ambitious intelligence, wins acceptance for himself among the elect (*Born in Exile*). On one occasion he was attracted by a special problem, the woman question, and treated it from the point of view of the middle classes (*The Odd Women*). With varying concentration and intensity the same heavy atmosphere hangs over those tales; they are, as it were, the several episodes of one harsh prose epic, that of the suffering implied in the social order, or in human nature. (Cazamian, cited Coustillas 2019: 23)

As a French scholar, Casamian no doubt knew the pessimistic city-bound realism of Zola, Maupassant and others. The notion of urban majority brings together the slums with the other of the ‘two worlds’ Cazamian mentions, that of ‘the middle classes’ which includes the subject material of both *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*. The commonality accounts for ‘the same heavy atmosphere’ which Cazamian, astutely, finds as a shared quality (‘the several episodes of one harsh prose epic’) of Gissing’s ‘best’ fictions. Cazamian’s penetrating remarks apparently sparked off the whole career of Gissing’s biographer and the long-time leader of Gissing scholarship, Pierre Coustillas. They end with a subtle expression of a key uncertainty in Gissing studies: ‘the suffering implied in the social order, or in human nature’. Indeed, this phrases expresses a broader uncertainty in understanding the mental world of Victorian urbanity. Is what we see in the ‘abyss’ a result of specific policies, or a measure of human nature as a whole?

Perceptive though he is, Cazamian exaggerates the emotional monotony, or topographic monochrome to be found in Gissing. Laughter – if indeed mostly ‘harsh’ – is important in Gissing’s writing (see Finch 2019). Early Gissing, then, needs reappraising in relation to what Seth Koven (without mentioning Gissing) calls the ‘mania for slumming’ of the late 1870s and early 1880s. Such a reappraisal would involve both relating his writings to those of other novelists active at the time (for example Ward, Walter Besant, Henry James, or Margaret Harkness) and to the specifics of London place (East End versus West End ‘slums’), including

the subtleties of districts' magnitudes, shifting names, borders and reputations. In line with the interests of the present collection, the period's debate over the label 'realism' should inform such a reappraisal.

### **Defining the Slum in Literary Urban Studies**

'Slum' is a strongly negative term for urban housing arrangements judged unacceptable. In it, both material and emotional qualities are important. What seems unacceptable in different times and places varies. Understandings of 'slum' as a concept classically found it on the history of the term (Dyos 1982; Gilbert 2007, 699, 707; Mayne 2017). Bearing critiques of Eurocentricism in mind, infrastructure or supply crises and notions of the lowest zones in a city of course did not begin in London then get exported elsewhere. Yet the origin of the word as a breath from the underworld, a sound of otherness, deserves note. Other words ('booze'; 'crib') came from the same cant into the broader language, but they remained slang. Only 'slum' ever became part of legal and parliamentary discourse.

The term 'slum' carries a stronger emotional than do labels like '*schlechten Viertel*' – bad quarters – (Engels [1845], 256) or 'housing evils' (Bartholomew 1917, 95–97). The emotional quality of the word might make it seem a totally subjective concept. Hence, perhaps, the determination of some scholars (Arabindoo 2011; Gilbert 2007; Mayne 2017) to exclude the term 'slum' from analyses of global conditions and formulation of objectives such as that of the United Nations (UN-Habitat 2003). Yet the term retains potency, as easily demonstrated via anecdote. The power of a word to make individual people feel a certain way, to have what they take to be gut responses, its power to connect with them personally, is a rhetorical or even a literary quality. In this particular article, I would like to concentrate on a neglected ambiguity inherent in the concept of the slum. This is its simultaneous link to narratives of urban growth or improvement and to urban decline or decay.



The concept of the slum emerged as a means of criticizing and legitimising the removal of urban modes of living that had previously seemed unremarkable. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London, for instance, urban living was often coterminous with temporary lodgings in places that had poor sanitation, with older buildings repurposed for non-wealthy incomers: (George [1925]; cf. Finch 2016). The concept of the slum emerges in early nineteenth-century London within a notion of urban improvement containing components both material (numbers of people per room; mortality rates) and immaterial, such as an idea of quarters that are devoted to vice or crime (White 2008: 10–35). An ideal of improvement was what drove the notion of the slum forward to prominence in later nineteenth-century London, not the actual pressure of population increase, which had been much greater at a time (the second half of the eighteenth century) when no such idea was current. The notion of the slum emerged alongside a sense of urban pre-eminence, of London as the city marking the direction that other cities would afterwards take, as in Engels's essay on 'The Great Towns', and an understanding that its growth would continue. But the notion of the slum, conversely, is linked with those of decay and decline, often specifically that of the built environment. As a physical environment, the term 'slum' is typically applied to buildings at the end of their natural lives or needing complete rebuilding.

Literary narratives such as Gissing's are rich but in no way unproblematic sources when it comes to assessing the history and experiential qualities of areas labelled 'slums' in nineteenth- and twentieth-century London. Texts such as *Workers* need both to be 'grasped as material objects' and understood 'as reflections on urban materialities' (Ameel *et al.* 2019: 2). They also exemplify a massive over-representation among literary accounts of urban experience of world cities which act as magnets for writers and artists: cities such as London, in which Gissing like many other writers was a migrant. 'Most city dwellers', after all, 'experience their cities as somehow secondary to other, bigger or more famous cities' (Finch

*et al.* 2017: 5). In his own time, conversely, Gissing was noteworthy for narrating in a vivid and convincing fashion aspects of city life that had been beyond the scope of most mid-nineteenth-century London novelists who had never known life in the city's plebeian quarters for themselves. In that regard, he himself worked to contest aspects of underrepresentation of what seemed urban peripheries to early readers such as the 1880 *Spectator* reviewer of *Workers* or the novelist George Meredith (Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 60–65; cf. Ameen *et al.* 2015). Literary urban studies as practiced in the present chapter draws on work in the field since 2010 which has illuminated these topics of materiality, representation and marginality.

### **1880s London, Gissing, and the Urban Majority of Simone: Capable of Being Related?**

Studies in working-class writing and culture by their nature divide the urban environment into strata, emphasizing one on the grounds that it has traditionally been neglected. Manual workers and their families undoubtedly formed a numerical majority in Victorian and post-Victorian London, but this is not the same thing as Simone's concept of urban majority. Seeking 'the perspectives and voices of the working classes' or identifying the way that 'a working-class voice' is concealed in the work of a canonical elite poet such as T.S. Eliot are necessary and valuable literary critical actions (Hubble and Clarke 2018: 3; Seaber 2018: 90). Simone redefines multiple groups of people together as an 'urban majority' for different ends than those of advancing the claims of individuality of groups earlier excluded from a full politics of recognition as critics focused on class, or gender and sexuality (Koven 2004; Ross 2007; Walkowitz 1992). The aim is to question the division of citizens into groups defined on an identitarian basis and, beyond that, the idea of individuality itself.

Sensitive as they are to social inequality and the suffering of many citizens, standard accounts of nineteenth-century London, conceiving the city as a meaningful whole, cleave to traditional liberal models of the city in which 'poverty' or 'crime' or 'housing' are recorded as

social problems therefore classifiable as urban abnormality (Dennis 2000; White 2008).

Simone's notion of urban majority by contrast takes those who struggle, those who are not advantageously placed, as the norm. Whitecross Street indeed seems repulsive in *Workers*, in the novel's opening chapter, but even more so in Chapter 11, when the protagonist Arthur Golding revisits it as a very young man, apprenticed to the West End radical artisan Samuel Tollady. One potential challenge to an urban majority reading of 1880s London comes from the historian Gareth Stedman Jones (1983) who traced in late-nineteenth-century London the breakdown of an earlier political alliance between lower- and middle-class Londoners in the shape of artisan radicalism. Stedman Jones's reading arises from a 1980s British political context in which opposition to the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher was weak and divided. Reading *Workers* with Stedman Jones, the virtuous artisan Tollady can be seen pointing out the horrors of the lower-lower-class streets and courts around Whitecross Street to Arthur, on one of their regular pedestrian lowlife tours through the metropolis's worst neighbourhoods. Stedman Jones's interest is in the emergence of divisions within working-class and lower-middle-class London, including Labour versus Liberal voting patterns, and right-wing gentile versus left-wing Jew in the East End. Divisions within lower London are comparably apparent in the *Workers* when Tollady, part of plebeian London himself, points out to Arthur the baroque hideousness of the people around them, for instance a dwarfish old woman or a boy smoking a cigar (121–22).

The title of Chapter 11 is 'A Double Life', and the doubleness referred to is the choice between lives: that of the artist and that of the philanthropist, a dichotomy important to any understanding of early Gissing (Maltz 2000). The concept of urban majority could provide a framework for understanding a city in which aestheticism and philanthropy co-exist, rather than seeing their relationship as one versus the other. Arthur's tragedy, culminating in a leap 'into the abyss', to his death off Niagara Falls shouting 'Helen! Helen!' the name of his

beloved, herself both freethinker and slum philanthropist is that he cannot manage the relationship between the two (600). In fact, both Tollady and Helen Norman are engaged in what Simone calls the key task of an urban majority: that of ‘working with and through uncertainty to deliver ways of life that skirt precarity’. Helen may be protected from the abyss by a fortune, but Tollady has known precarious existence, as he reveals in telling the story of his earlier life to Arthur in Chapter 22 of *Workers* (248–61). Having inherited £1,000 on turning 21, Tollady recounts, he left the provincial English town among whose respectable tradespeople he was raised, to travel the world. Returning to England, his money exhausted, he traced his widowed mother to ‘a poor quarter in the East End’ to which she had removed in the hope of earning a living by sewing, faced starvation, then died in the workhouse infirmary (254).

The West End semi-slums of *Workers*, as discussed below, are not given the same graphic street descriptions as the streets to their east are: indeed, they can seem physically repetitive and anonymous rather than squalid. But it is West End slum lives that contain the most casually shocking and unmoralised moments of everyday horror, often told in a bald, undramatic way similar to Tollady’s account of discovering his mother’s death. The maniacal ranting associate of Tollady’s John Pether tells Arthur (who finds himself ‘thrilled [...] with horror’) of earlier days in which Pether’s mother killed ‘a man she lived with – perhaps my father’ (271–73). Another member of the group, Mark Challenger, recalls the fates of his wife and daughter: ‘The one starved to death, and the other—well, well, I mustn’t think of all that’ (347). Carrie Mitchell, the girl of the streets whom Arthur marries, holds a dead child while begging in the snow outside a theatre (333). Pether himself is later found by his neighbours in bed, close to death from starvation (336–37). Such passages underline the fact that to label *Workers* as an ‘urban majority’ novel is not to claim it takes a blandly undifferentiating view of Londoners. Gissing in *Workers* might not seem to valorise what Simone (2018: 124) calls

‘the contributions of an “urban majority”’ to his own modern urbanity in London. Still, the novel depicts the co-existence in the inner city of a considerable range of lifestyles, opinions and wealth levels with what an early reviewer in the *Manchester Examiner and Times* described as an ‘almost overwhelming earnestness’ (Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 57).

Just as accounts of London in the nineteenth century based on hierarchical divisions between social classes or the notion of a nether world as opposed to an upper world conceal the existence of a Simonean urban majority there, so does the apparently formal and transactional nature of housing in the Victorian metropolis. Simone’s account was formulated to describe cities in which large numbers of people live in the informal sector, in self-built housing, often on land to which they have no stable legal right. Surely Victorian London was not like that, whatever squalid conditions its slum dwellers inhabited. London residents of whatever class seem to have lived overwhelmingly in the formal housing sector, even if they rented a room from someone who rented or leased a whole house, themselves paying rent or ground rent to a landlord situated elsewhere. To be sure, there were entities resembling shanty towns on the peripheries of Victorian London. Take the zone around Bangor Street in Kensington, then on the outer western fringes of built-up London, where seasonal workers including gypsies camped and lived in cottages (Samuel 1973; White 2007: 88). There are literary representations of such settlements in more than one of Dickens’s novels, notably Staggs’s Gardens in *Dombey and Son*, directly equivalent to what Simone (2018: 127) calls ‘informal shack settlements’, but also, placed considerably further from central London, the brickfields of *Bleak House*. But the essential nomadism and extreme residential instability of London residents in this period goes beyond such settings. Life in central working-class districts filled with houses let room-by-room which readily became labelled as slums often, throughout the period from the 1830s until the 1950s, involved many moves between lodgings within a small geographical area (Green and Parton 1990; Jasper 1969; White 1986). A move

to the suburbs was in relation to this life a move into comparative stability of tenure and, probably, extended duration of residence in the same place, as is marked out in twentieth-century London slum memoirs and novels by the likes of A.S. Jasper and Simon Blumenfeld.

As Simone writes of ‘majority districts’ which are shared by those with a wide range of wealth levels, ‘the densities of living-with ensure circulations of stories, rumours, and information. There are so many people passing through, staying long, coming in and out, that it is never really clear who is who, what is what’ (Simone 2018: 132). This passage provides an important means for rereading 1880s novels by Gissing and contemporaries such as Besant, James and Harkness. Attaching importance to acts of ‘coming in and out’ it connects to the notion of comers and goers central in Raphael Samuel’s account (1973) of what Henry Mayhew in the 1850s called London’s ‘wandering tribes’ (with Samuel’s attention being given not to the city’s inner districts but to traffic across its outer perimeter). Simone’s account here of ‘circulations of stories’ and uncertainties of identity find striking parallels in the way that people of multiple social levels interact in environments such as the Whitecross Street slum and the West End semi-slums where Arthur lives, ultimately with Tollady, after leaving Whitecross Street as a boy, and in the Lambeth of *Thyrza*. Readings of the urban environments described in these novels can assume that ‘well-to-do Londoners’ like Helen Norman (or Egremont in *Thyrza*, or even Waymark in *The Unclassed*) active as ‘urban explorers’ were outsiders completely alien to the life of the slum (Koven 2004: 1; Walkowitz 1992: 18). Still, slum visitors themselves came from highly varied backgrounds connected only by the fact that ‘they commanded resources entitling them to gawk at or help the poor’ (Koven 2004: 10).

Simone’s description of ‘majority districts’, it is true, builds on specific ‘vertical complexes’ in Jakarta characterised by ‘mostly “silent” contestations among various kinds of residents and lifestyles (Islamic, LGBT, young professionals, nascent (barely) middle class

families, immigrants, sex workers) for control over floors in specific building' (Simone 2018: 132). And yet it describes what is going on in the Lambeth Walk area of *Thyrza* or the Tottenham Court Road and Whitecross Street areas of *Workers in the Dawn*, and it does so *at least as well as* existing accounts of those novels built on notions of social division. Those accounts in a conventional contextualising practice are inclined to build dichotomies in a way that draws on the vocabularies of Gissing's own time and place for explanatory tools. Why not, instead, use explanatory tools that are taken from elsewhere? Without denying that the likes of Waymark or Egremont were to an extent predatory in their acts of slumming or social 'passing', it would be possible to see what Simone calls 'a sense of being-in-concert' in the plebeian environments of Gissing's first two novels plus *Thyrza*. Less so but still to some extent the same kind of class inter-penetration can be detected in *The Nether World*, but it exists hardly at all in *Demos*. I would like to contrast these – so to speak – interpenetratory views of unofficial or non-elite London with a major strand in the period's publications, the effort to identify and potentially treat 'problem' areas. This, for example, was the impetus behind both the surveys of the likes of Beatrice Webb, and the maps of Charles Booth. The latter have in our own times often been taken for what they never were intended to be: a statement of the rich social variety of late-Victorian London.

### **From Whitecross Street to Tottenham Court Road: Baroque to Unremarkable**

While the extreme slum of the novel's first chapter, revisited and viewed differently in Chapter 11 of *Workers*, has continued to attract critical attention (Cubitt 2016: 122; Dennis 2020: 160–64), the range and variety of plebeian London indicated by Gissing in *Workers* is still under-explored, with rare exceptions (Dennis 2010). The range amounts to an artistic survey of London 'majority districts'. It sweeps from Whitecross Street westwards and then northwards, through Seven Dials, once London's most notorious area, to the narrow streets

west of Tottenham Court Road where Tollady and his confederates operate, and then north to Huntley Street, east of Tottenham Court Road, a pretentious and utterly unintellectual corner of Bloomsbury. The London of slums includes the sweep in and out of actual slums: it includes a world in which slums can be entered and exited. So Arthur's father declined to a death in a garret; so Helen and Tollady visit slums with good intentions. The slums stain and discolour the whole city, on this view: sucking people into them; coughing people out who can threaten other regions.<sup>1</sup> Tollady himself has both inherited a fortune and lost a mother to starvation (250–55). This is a world in which such things happen.

The importance of this urban range to a reading of *Workers in the Dawn* is concealed by the fact that Gissing's set-piece descriptions of Whitecross Street and surroundings make that zone live much more vividly and colourfully for the reader than those which lie outside the abyss. Whitecross Street on Christmas Eve has an 'infernal reek' and contains characters who are 'bestially drunk' (Gissing 1990: 65): it has an unpleasant atmosphere but also an aspect of the carnivalesque (cf. Finch 2019). Significantly, in *Thyrza*, Gissing made his cultivated artisan character Gilbert Grail walk through Lambeth Walk market on Christmas Eve too, indicating a link between such sites and the sense that a key might be found somewhere to a hidden London, festive and with ancient popular roots. (Gissing in both *The Unclassed* and *Thyrza* found suggestions of such a key or connection in the sound of children's songs heard on the lowest London streets).

Gissing's topographical labelling of Whitecross Street as 'very far off in that shocking East End' is complex and perhaps deliberately deceptive (Dennis 2010; Jones 2016). This sounds like Gissing mimicking the voice of a West-End-er who does not really know the 'far off' East End (classically the zone east of Aldgate and the Tower of London) at all. Arthur is

---

<sup>1</sup> People, perhaps, like Trollope's Slope, as the heroine of *Barchester Towers* Eleanor Bold partly apprehends: 'In encountering such a man she had encountered what was disagreeable, as she might do in walking the streets. But in such encounters she never thought it necessary to dwell on what disgusted her.' (Trollope [1857]: 228).



transferred from Whitecross Street to what are clearly the semi-slums of the West End. This is an area much more colourless, characterised by repetition and sameness. Mike Rumball's shop on Little St. Andrew Street, Seven Dials, is 'one of the many similar for which the district was noted' (65). Tollady may represent more morally and intellectually elevated company for Arthur but his physical environs are similarly dull: 'The window certainly had no tempting prospect. It looked into a paved back yard, with a cistern in one corner of it, the principal variety in the scene being afforded on those days when the yard was thickly hung with newly-washed linen' (86–87). This conveys non-squalid ordinariness. Tollady's is a 'gloomy neighbourhood' but above all an anonymous one (92). In comparison, Seven Dials had its canaries, bringing a kind of pastoral into the slums that enables Gissing's portrayal of them to be seen in Bakhtinian terms as not only carnivalesque but dialogic (76). There are constant passages across boundaries of what needs to be seen as a city whose parts entirely interpenetrate one another, not one in which the lives of rich and poor are invisible to one another. Significantly, *Workers* is set in the past, with Arthur's childhood unfolding in the 1860s, when 'there were no school-boards' to stop Arthur being set to work as a child beggar by the villainous Bill Blatherwick of Whitecross Street, or an apprentice cat's meat man by Rumball (69). Simone, comparably, formulates his notion of urban majority in relation to what replaces it, the 'new modalities of interconnectivity and recognition' he associates with 'social media and computation' (Simone 2018: 126). Emphasising the walked city, *Workers* exists on the temporal brink of what Gissing would chart in his 1890s fiction, a vastly far-flung city connected above all by suburban rail and street-bound public transport networks (Dennis 2020).

*Workers* contains numerous acts of social boundary-crossing or even 'passing' (Seaber 2018), but the interrelations of classes in it go beyond the efforts at philanthropy of Tollady in Whitecross Street or Helen in a less clearly-defined East End (119–27; 193–208; Dennis

2010: 3–7). Tollady's shop emphasizes the mundanity of city route-finding on foot, in which one street name continually gives way to another and walkers by chance stumble on places they did not previously know. He finds the shop by accident when, a skilled pedestrian, he is cutting through back streets from the Strand towards Portland Place: 'he took a short cut out of Oxford Street by way of Rathbone Place, which brought him to Charlotte Place and past Mr Tollady's shop door' (167). Both he and Arthur himself, earlier (82) find Tollady's shop by chance, while walking in the West End. The premises are physically close to social levels that are radically other to it, and discoverable by pedestrianism. Within the history of mobilities, the railway era is distinguished as one in which 'new ways of moving, socialising, and seeing' came into being (Sheller and Urry 2006: 216), but it could also be seen as one in which certain ways disappeared. Among them, perhaps, was the sort of encounter between groups within the city, some precarious, others protected by money, which is enacted when both Arthur and Gresham discover Tollady's shop. Moreover Tollady is positioned differently in relation to Arthur from his position vis-à-vis Gresham: to the latter, a tradesman, hoping for customers; to the former, a philanthropic mentor as well as an employer. This emphasizes how city identities change relationally rather than being cast in static oppositions such as Gissing would suggest in *The Nether World* (you are of the upper world; you are of the lower).

There are other aspects of multiplicity in the urban space of *Workers in the Dawn* which likewise point to the urban majority status of its cast of characters and the status of the zones they occupy as, on Simone's terms, 'majority districts'. The novel contains a multiplicity of artist figures, themselves occupying different social levels. These range from Arthur himself to Gresham and down to Tuck the pavement artist ('an idle, drunken, good-for-nothing fellow enough, but now and then he had a few ideas somewhat above the level of his surroundings'), with whom Arthur shares the multiply occupied space of Mike Rumball's house in Seven

Dials (77). A further aspect of multiplicity is one that, like the Christmas Eve street market and like the power relations inside the house in multiple occupation, Gissing would rework some years later in *Thyrza*. This is the narrative act of transfer between districts of the city as an effort to escape cruelty or unfairness. The heroine of *Thyrza* does this when she runs from Lambeth her reputation in tatters after having been seen alone with a wealthy male companion, seeking refuge off the Caledonian Road in an equally plebeian district which yet has its own character as a modern inner suburb reached by tram rather than a food-bound world (Gissing 2013: 340–41). Arthur's arrival in the house of Mike Rumball comes through a random encounter with another of its inhabitants, the 'baked-potato man' Ned Quirk (61). The boy, still only eight, has rebelled against his captor Bill Blatherwick, a denizen of the court off Whitecross Street where Golding senior had been found dead. Arthur knocks the violent beggar down into the slush while the latter is near-insensibly drunk and running off with his takings, a bag of coppers, then spending those on warming alcoholic drinks in a lowlife pub and, having become drunk himself, collapsing outside. This happens on the streets somewhere near Saffron Hill (where Dickens had positioned Fagin's den in *Oliver Twist*), Blatherwick preferring 'these backways to the more open thoroughfares' (61–62).

In terms of the overall map of London, these events unfold on a roundabout westward route between the City and West End, with Whitecross Street a slum area of the former and Seven Dials of the latter. Arthur wakes in an unknown room, in an unknown house and an unknown portion of the inner metropolis, 'on a straw mattress, well covered up with warm clothes, in a little room directly under the rafters of the house' (63). Thus transformations happen in the precarious struggles of majority districts. There is not space in the present chapter to handle Arthur's courtship of Carrie in the colourless surroundings of an urban home that is less materially deprived than those of Charlotte Place, St Giles or Whitecross Street, that of the pretentious and trashy Pettindund family in western Bloomsbury (312–41), itself also part of

‘majority’ London. An aspect of urban space handled masterfully in *Thyrza* is the inside of a house in multiple occupation, with its meeting points, borders and uncertain relations of private and public, and Gissing had earlier constructed versions of the same site in *Workers*. Both the Pettindunds’ house (where Carrie lodges and pushes a note under the door of Arthur’s room) and Tollady’s present urban majority existence in this context of parallel domesticities, thinking of Simone (2018: 132) on Jakarta (325; 249).

### **Conclusion**

The concept of urban majority explains aspects of *Workers* which readers have noticed without finding them easy to explain. From the earliest reviewers of the novel onwards, the fact that it was neither clearly a novel of low-class London nor of high-class London surprised and puzzled commentators, and Gissing has been accused of unable to ‘get really inside’ Londoners of either sort (Keating 1979: 57). Then there is the imaginative geography of the novel. For Dennis,

Gissing’s way of conceptualising the metropolis [...] is a kind of map projection that exaggerates the area between the river and Euston Road, and between the West End and the City, but marginalises everywhere beyond those limits, a nineteenth-century equivalent to the famous London Underground map designed by Harry Beck in 1933, in which east and south-east London hardly exist at all, and the distance between middle-class suburbs (especially to the north-west) and the centre seems no greater than one side of the Circle Line to the other. (Dennis 2010: 7)

Put another way, this is an account of a city before its metro rail network, built to connect the city and its increasingly distant suburbs, became the most widespread graphic image of the city itself as a whole. It represents a magnifying-glass view of the walkable city that would become, in the eyes of later periods, the city centre. This is the site of ‘majority districts’,

where rich and poor can live close by one another, segregated yet forever with the potential to encounter one another on the street. And it is so because, for all its brutal reality, this is a large walkable urban area in which members of different classes constantly encounter one another.

As Keating's account of them indicates, there is a range of perceptions and positions in the 'slum' writings of Gissing which, here, I have placed in Simonean majority districts. The latter urban place label itself illuminates the social variety of both slummers and slum dwellers insisted upon by Koven (2004: 10–11). While *Demos* comes to seem much narrower than some of the other perspectives found in early Gissing, the literary masterpiece of *The Nether World* is not a richer account of the city than some texts that might seem not to be artistic successes at all, notably *Workers*. This chapter has only surveyed a small proportion of the urban scenes in the novel. Notably it has not been able to pay much attention to the division of the novel's plot during the years of Arthur's childhood and youth, in which the 'majority district' London settings analysed here alternate with a plot in something closer to high society. Gissing was offended by early reviewers' claims that he could not accurately render this stratum of English society whereas they constantly (including those who encouraged him like Frederic Harrison and George Meredith) sensed that his portrayal of the lower strata of London life was the result of extended immersion in them (Coustillas and Partridge 1972: 60).

Victorian thinking about the city rested on goals of improvement and progress. One inheritance of such ideas is the view that there is nothing much to mourn about Victorian London. The tendency to see it as monumentally squalid and characterised by beggar children or the crimes of Jack the Ripper while the rich, sinfully and hypocritically, lived it up, has persisted. But perhaps there is something to mourn. What it is emerges from an understanding of *Workers in the Dawn* as a portrait of a threatened London in which different social classes

met one another through pedestrianism and random encounters. While Gissing's own routes through urban space have often been pursued by scholars, meanwhile, there has been little attempt since Keating (1979: 53–92) to document them in any systematic as opposed to impressionistic fashion. Keating's approach itself remains tied to twentieth-century notions of social stratification by seeking to sift out representations of the 'working class', despairing of Gissing for producing so few actually working-class heroes. What happens in late Victorian London, on this view and somewhat modifying the view, again class-based, taken by Stedman Jones, is that in the words of Simone (2018: 128) 'long traditions of mutual accommodation' find themselves 'upended'.

### Works cited

- Ameel, Lieven, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela, eds. 2015. *Literature and the Peripheral City*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ameel, Lieven, Jason Finch, Slija Laine and Richard Dennis. 2020. 'Urban History and the Materialities of/in Literature'. In *The Materiality of Literary Narratives of Urban History*, edited by Lieven Ameel *et al.* New York: Routledge. 1–16.
- Arabindoo, Pushpa. 2011. 'Beyond the Return of the "Slum"'. *City* 15.6: 631–35. doi: 10.1080/13604813.2011.644750.
- Bartholomew, Harland. 1917. *Problems of St. Louis*. St. Louis: St. Louis City Plan Commission. Archive.org. <https://archive.org/details/problemsstlouis01bartgoog>.
- Clarke, Ben and Nick Hubble. 2018. 'Introduction', in *Working-Class Writing*, ed. Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 1–14.
- Coustillas, Hélène. 2019. 'How a French Scholar Set a Young Student on His Own Scholarly Career'. *Gissing Journal* 53.4: 21–26.

- Coustillas, Pierre, and Colin Partridge, eds. 1972. *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cubitt, Eliza. 2016. 'Arthur Morrison, the Jago, and the Realist Representation of Place'. PhD thesis, UCL (University College London). <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1493459/>.
- Dennis, Richard. 2000. "'Would you Adam-and-Eve-it?'" Geography, Materiality, and Authenticity in Novels of Victorian and Edwardian London'. In *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History*, ed. Ameel, Lieven, et al. New York: Routledge. 158–76.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. 'Mapping Gissing's Workers in the Dawn'. *Gissing Journal* 46.4: 1–20.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2020. "'Would You Adam-and-Eve-it?": Geography, Materiality, and Authenticity in Novels of Victorian and Edwardian London. In *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History*, ed. Lieven Ameel et al. New York: Routledge. 158–76.
- Dyos, H. J. 1982. 'The Slums of Victorian London', in *Exploring the Past: Essays in Urban History by H.J. Dyos*, ed. by David Cannadine and David Reeder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 129–53.
- Engels, Friedrich [1845]. 1972. 'Die großen Städte'. *Seitenzahlen verweisen auf: Karl Marx - Friedrich Engels - Werke*. Berlin (DDR): Dietz Verlag. Vol. 2, 225–506.  
[http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me02/me02\\_256.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me02/me02_256.htm).
- Finch, Jason. 2013. 'How Cultural? How Material? Rereading the Slums of London, 1820–1850'. In *Imagining Spaces and Places*, ed. Saija Isomaa et al. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013. 85–106. 85–106.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2016. 'Literary Excavations in London's St Giles. Writing the Rookery, Past and Present'. *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu-lehti / The Finnish Journal of Urban Studies* 54.2: 74–93.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2019. 'The Many-Sided Comedy of George Gissing's *The Nether World*'. In *Renaissance Man: Essays on Literature and Culture for Anthony W. Johnson*, ed. Tommi Alho, Jason Finch and Roger D. Sell. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 173–96.
- Finch, Jason, Lieven Ameel and Markku Salmela. 2017. 'The Second City in Literary Urban Studies: Methods, Approaches, Key Thematics'. In *Literary Second Cities*, ed. Jason Finch *et al.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 3–20.
- Forster, E.M. [1910]. 1998. *Howards End*. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: Norton.
- George, M. Dorothy [1925]. 1976. *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gilbert, Alan, 2007. 'The Return of the Slum: Does Language Matter?' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31.4: 697–713.
- Gissing, George [1887]. 2013. *Thyrza*. Pierre Coustillas, ed. Brighton: Victorian Secrets.
- \_\_\_\_\_. [1880]. 2010. *Workers in the Dawn*. Debbie Harrison, ed. Brighton: Victorian Secrets.
- Green, David R. and Alan G. Parton. 1990. 'Slums and Slum Life in Victorian England: London and Birmingham at Mid-Century'. In *Slums*, ed. S. Martin Gaskell. Leicester: Leicester University Press. 17–91.
- Jasper, A.S. 1969. *A Hoxton Childhood*. London: Barrie and Rockliff.
- Jones, Peter T.A. 2016. 'Redressing Reform Narratives: Victorian London's Street Markets and the Informal Supply Lines of Urban Modernity'. *London Journal* 41.1: 60–81.
- Keating, P.J. [1971]. 1979. *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Koven, Seth. 2004. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Maltz, Diana. 2000. 'Practical Aesthetics and Decadent Rationale in George Gissing'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1: 55–71.



- Mayne, Alan. 2017. *Slums: The History of a Global Injustice*. London: Reaktion.
- McKean, Matthew. 2011. 'Rethinking Late-Victorian Slum Fiction: The Crowd and Imperialism at Home'. *English Literature in Transition* 54.1: 28–55.
- Ross, Ellen. 2007. *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860–1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roy, Ananya. 2011. 'Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35.2: 223–38.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2017. 'Dis/possessive Collectivism: Property and Personhood at City's End'. *Geoforum* 80 (2017): A1–A11.
- Samuel, Raphael. 1973. 'Comers and Goers'. In *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H.J. Dyos, and Michael Wolff. Two volumes. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. I.123–60.
- Sangapala, Pradeep. 'Simone on Jakarta, Between Near and Far' (review of AbdouMaliq Simone, *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near*). 'Space and Culture' (website). <https://www.spaceandculture.com/2016/11/28/book-review/>
- Seaber, Luke. 2018. 'Kings in Disguise and "Pure Ellen Kellond": Literary Social Passing in the Early Twentieth Century'. In *Working-Class Writing*, ed. Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble. 81–98.
- Sheller, Mimi and John Urry. 2006. 'The New Mobilities Paradigm'. *Environment and Planning A* 38: 207–26.
- Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2013. 'Cities of Uncertainty: Jakarta, the Urban Majority, and Inventive Urban Technologies'. *Theory, Culture and Society* 30.7–8: 243–63.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2018. 'Designing Space for the Majority: Urban Displacements of the Human'. *Cubic Journal* 1.1: 124–35. doi:10.31182/cubic.2018.1.007.
- Stedman Jones, Gareth. 1983. 'Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class'. In his *Languages of Class:*

- Studies in English Working-Class History 1832–1932*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trollope, Anthony [1857]. 2014. *Barchester Towers*. Edited by John Bowen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- UN-Habitat. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. 2003. *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*. London: UN-Habitat / Earthscan.
- Vasudevan, Alexander. 2015. 'The Makeshift City: Towards a Global Geography of Squatting'. *Progress in Human Geography* 39.3: 338–59.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. 1992. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- White, Jerry. 1986. *The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Road, Islington, Between the Wars*. London: RKP.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *London in the Nineteenth Century: A Human Awful Wonder of God*. London: Vintage.
- Woods, Maxwell. Forthcoming (2020). 'Can the Slumdweller Speak?: James Joyce and Mediating Dublin Slum Discourse'. *City*. Special feature on 'Mediating and Representing the Slum', edited by Jason Finch and Maxwell Woods.