

He wanted the streets

Sarah Wise admires a penetrating biography of a powerful, miserable writer

George Gissing: a Life

by Paul Delany
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George Gissing believed that the twin purposes of literary biography were to reveal how an author had become a writer of books and to show how each book came into being. Paul Delany has fulfilled these requirements amply in this thorough yet accessible account of one of the most miserable lives in literature.

The time that Gissing spent among urban outcasts during his twenties produced some of the best evidence we have of the lives of the London poor. For his novels *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *Demos* (1886), *Thyrza* (1887) and *The Nether World* (1889), he filled a series of scrapbooks with notes, suspecting that his imagination might not be up to the task. Not for nothing was he Charles Booth's favourite writer. Though few today read Gissing to savour his prose style, his journeys into "the city of the damned" (the East End) have proved invaluable to those interested in the poor of the past.

Delany skilfully untangles the extent to which Gissing's tragedy was the result of his being born into an age he found obscenely philistine, repressed, hypocritical and money-obsessed, and the degree to which he sabotaged his own future – repeating mistakes and then documenting the fallout.

A child prodigy, born in 1857 to a father who had himself been a child prodigy from a humble background, Gissing won a scholarship to Manchester's Owens College in 1872. At the age of 17 he was ranked first in the country for English and Latin in the University of London's examinations. He seemed on course for a life in academia.

Instead, he became obsessed with Nell Harrison, a teenage runaway and alcoholic whom he found selling herself near the banks of the Irwell. Intending to "save" her – and to fashion her into a companion for him in his illustrious life-to-come – he stole from fellow students to support her. He was caught, expelled and imprisoned.

It would have been extremely hard to come back from such a disgrace in the 1870s, but it would not have been impossible. Brilliant young men could be forgiven adolescent lapses. Delany believes Gissing's puritanism, snobbery, perverse idealism and self-indulgent miserabilism played a large part in his subsequent poverty, extreme domestic unhappiness, ill health and death at 46.

Snobbery is an affliction of those insecure in their social status. "Within the British class system, Gissing was like a stateless person," writes Delany; he was a graduate of "the scholarship system [that] had



The nether world: dinner at Marylebone workhouse, 1900

produced a new, uneasy class of social misfits". No one before him had so minutely dissected the English working and lower-middle classes.

Gissing did not like the poor. He pitied their plight and, in early adulthood, aligned himself with the Positivist movement, then flirted with socialism, and later wondered if feminism held any answers. But crude social Darwinism would undermine all these sympathies. What Gissing ultimately believed was that the working classes and almost all females were biologically incapable of "improvement".

In 1893 Gissing turned his gaze on the lower-middle-classes, and found them, too, morally and intellectually defective. Henry James, a friend, noted that Gissing had discovered in the lower-middle-class a literary region "vast and unexplored. The English novel has as a general thing kept so desperately, so nervously clear of it, whisking back compromised skirts and bumping frantically against obstacles to retreat..."

Gissing opposed democracy, preferring the idea that an elite of intellectuals could guide the British out of vulgarity and viciousness; later, even that dream passed, and the pessimism and fatalism of his work offended socialist, Liberal and Tory alike.

However, despite himself, Gissing did prove very "useful". He did the abattoir work on a number of Victorian sacred cows, and proved to be a transformative force in English literature. "My part is with the men and women who are clearing the ground of systems that have had their day and have crumbled into obstructive ruin... the old, worn-out processes".

In subject matter and tone, Gissing was a ground-breaker, but stylistically he was a troglodyte: his prose sometimes reads like a schoolboy translation from the dead languages. The reader all too often senses what hard work it was for him to grind out a book. Even his characters' names have a whiff of long labour about them. Who ever has been baptised Everard Barfoot, Clement Dorricott, Osmund Waymark, Eustace Glazzard, Sidwell Warricombe, Cecil Morphew, Dyce Lashmar?

Exits from Gissing's personal hell offered themselves over the years – a move to Italy; friendly offers of sanctuary from the growing band of well-off admirers of his work – but every time he opted for the shabbier quarters of a metropolis that ground the life out of him. After two years of attempting to live quietly and productively in Exeter, he confessed: "It is obviously in London that my material lies... I want the streets again."