

The Fifth International Gissing Conference
University of Bristol, 25-27 July, 2016
George Gissing and Place

A Personal Response

Dr Rebecca Hutcheon
University of Bristol

He was at Bristol soon after eight. [...] Such glimpse as he had caught of the streets did not invite him forth, but neither could he sit unoccupied; as the weather was fair, he rambled for an hour or two. [...] He recalled the first lines of a poem he had once attempted; it was suggested by a reading of Coleridge -- and there, possibly, lay the point of association. Coleridge: then he fell upon literary reminiscences. Where, by the way, was St. Mary Redcliffe? He put the inquiry to a passer-by, and was directed. By dreary thoroughfares he came into view of the church, and stood gazing at the spire, dark against a blotchy sky. Then he mocked at himself for acting as if he had an interest in Chatterton, when in truth the name signified boredom to him. Oh, these English provincial towns! What an atmosphere of deadly dulness hung over them all! And people were born, and lived, and died in Bristol -- merciful powers! (*Denzil Quarrier*, 1892)

Any delegates of the Fifth International Gissing Conference who arrived at Bristol Temple Meads, subsequently wending their way northwards through the city centre, may well have caught a glimpse of St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol's largest church. They may well, too, be in a position to sympathise with Glazzard's disparaging thoughts: the topography of 'dreary thoroughfares' have perhaps not become more cheerful since Gissing's day. At least, however, the sky was far from blotchy. The sun was shining and the weather was fine throughout the conference. The event was held in Clifton Hill House in the Georgian suburb of Clifton, an area replete with literary connections: Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, Maria Edgeworth, Walter Savage Landor and E. H. Young, among others, all lived in the area. Even Glazzard acknowledges that 'Clifton was a place to be seen; on a bright morning like this it would be pleasant to walk over the Downs and have a look at the gorge of the Avon,'ⁱ and, on the final day of the conference, the remaining delegates did just this, finishing up in the Avon Gorge Hotel, with its fantastic view of the Bridge.

The conference aimed to reconsider Gissing as fundamentally a writer of place, alert to the very real geographical or spatial implications of class and gender. Yet it also sought to recognise that there is more to Gissing's places than a mere adherence to the transposition of the commonplace. Frequently, the papers revealed, locations are fraught with irony, with imagery and with imagination. These aspects are, perhaps, most noticeable in what Huguet defines as Gissing's 'semantically-charged' short stories, a form which featured highly in the conference papers.ⁱⁱ Gissing's multitudinous settings were fully explored through papers covering topics as diverse as movement and sexuality, the spatial form of narrative, ecocriticism, street music and, particularly apposite to the Bristol setting, cycling.

The roundtable discussion, held on the second evening, identified what Simon J. James defined as the 'leitmotif' of the conference. Any discussion of Gissing's place, it emerged, is bound up with the question of exile. If movement is recurrently equated with a desire for self-discovery, too often it ends in exile and the futile attempt to find oneself in the old.

The introductory keynote, Professor Richard Dennis (UCL), began the conference by delivering a pertinent and engaging paper posing the question of 'George Gissing: Geographer?' Asking what Gissing's use of real and thoroughly researched places signifies,

Dennis noted Gissing's acute sensitivity to the nuances of place, concluding that the novelist can be understood as a natural rather than a theoretical geographer. In terms of space, and its connotations of activity, Dennis looked at perambulatory characters in *The Unclassed* (1884) and much more concentrated movement in *Thyrza* (1887), arguing that walking becomes an escape from place in which characters attempt to occupy, instead, their internal space.

Gissing's sense of the instinctiveness of internal space was developed by Emanuela Ettorre through her analysis of the 'places of unfitness' in the stories 'A Son of the Soil' and 'Transplanted'. Ettorre explored how, in both texts, the insatiable longing for alterity leads to fatal displacement. Continuing this theme of identity and place, Constance Harsh argued that the presumptive equation of person to place (both geographical and social) can be equally as precarious. Through an illuminating analysis of *Isabel Clarendon* (1886) Harsh explained how, when gender and status are viewed as a type of place, the notion of fixity is challenged. The leitmotif of exile was particularly elucidated in Michele Russo's paper which examined Gissing's early years in America and the writings he composed there – 'A Terrible Mistake' and 'An English Coastal Picture'. Exile, Russo posited, carried with it its own spatial implications: England remained at the centre and America at the peripheries.

Yet proximity to the perceived centre does not always imply closeness, as Bill Greenslade explained in his paper 'Redrawing the Pastoral'. The urban pastoral locates sites of desire at the centre, but nonetheless expresses a desire for or embracing ideas of escape within rather than from the city. Gareth Reeves, however, argued that the rural locations of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1901) – despite the text's surface toponymic realism – betray an innate unreality of place. Also exploring the city-country dichotomy, Reeves read the site of escape as so personal and subjective as to appear an extended interiority, devoid of others and reliant on solitude. For Adrian Tait, this propensity for escape inwards speaks for a less paradoxical connection to the world than it perhaps appears. From an ecocritical point of view, Tait explained, Gissing's botanical alertness is less about forgetting others as it is about forgetting the self and can counterbalance contemporaneous (and contemporary) anxieties of the loss of the natural world.

Luisa Villa's keynote address returned both to the periphery and to the earlier portrayals of the provincial north in her paper 'The Quarries on the Heath: The Imprint of Place and Gissing's Wakefield Stories', offering a shrewd re-reading of the marginal places in *A Life's Morning* (1888), *Born in Exile* (1891), *Denzil Quarrier* (1892) and the shorter fiction. Through her analysis of *A Life's Morning*, Villa expounded the novel's perspective essentially that of the returning native. Her quotation aptly demonstrates this angle:

Dunfield was at that time not perhaps worse off in its supply of marriageable males than other small provincial towns, but, to judge from the extensive assortment which passed through the Cartwrights' house, the lot of Dunfield maidens might beheld pathetic. They were not especially ignorant or vulgar, these budding townsmen, simply imbecile. One could not accuse them of positive faults, for they had no positive qualities, unless it were here and there a leaning to physical fatuity. Their interests were concerned with the pettiest of local occurrences; their favouritisms and animosities were those of overgrown infants. They played practical jokes on each other in the open streets; they read the local newspapers to extract the feeblest of gossip. ⁱⁱⁱ

In the portrayal of the atypical provincial and traditional town, which emphasises the trivial ('petty'), partiality ('favouritisms'), the local – which, as Villa pointed out, is repeated, takes on connotations of narrowness and limitation. Yet, Villa posited, another aspect of the provincial emerges in Gissing's writings – that of the botanist and local scientist – and this facet is rendered spatially in the topographies of the quarries, which comes to take on elements of the geological sublime.

Another less conventional approach was adopted by several papers devoted to travel, mobility and gender. José Diaz Lage identified the bicycle as an emblem of modernity connected with the New Women. Lage offered a distinction between types of mobility: velodrome-atic, and thus linked with exercise and rationality, and exploratory which, associated with independent travel, was much more contentious. Despite being a tool of emancipation, and – in *Our Friend the Charlatan* specifically – contributing to the surprisingly positive image of the New Women, its potential democratisation is simultaneously undermined – a liberating commodity remains a commodity nonetheless. Concentrating on the short story ‘A School-master’s Vision’, Eva Chen explored the notion of the bicycle as an example of the human machine, a part of modernist speed which, unlike trains, offered a more personal participation in the time-space compression. In Gissing’s story, Chen suggested, speed figures as an active pleasure: the rider of the bicycle generates speed and is thus liberated. Both papers considering bicycles in Gissing’s shorter fiction, though offering surprisingly different foci, nonetheless identified the persistently under-appreciated lighter and humorous side of Gissing’s narrative style.

Simon J James also picked up on a less-discussed element of Gissing’s narrative in his examination of the ironic distance between voice, agency and plot. Looking at sympathy and division of sympathy in the critical response to *The Whirlpool* (1897), James argued that Gissing’s use of free indirect speech has had a profound effect, with critics siding with masculinity rather than femininity. Through an examination, also, of *The Unclassed* and its revisions, James demonstrated that the narrative form (or diegetic spatiality) of Gissing’s work separates characters’ viewpoints from ironic distance of the implied author of the text.

The following papers followed James’ lead in returning the focus to Gissing’s London locations: starting with a reappraisal of suburbia in Rebecca Hutcheon’s response to the uncanny domestic in *The Odd Women* (1893) and Claudia Martin’s account of the comic novella *The Paying Guest* (1895). Martin explored the influence of Eliot of Gissing’s portrayal of the outer suburb of Sutton as a purgatorial site of self-discovery and personal growth. Francesa Mackenney and Daniel Karlin shifted further inwards to the central metropolis. Focussing on *New Grub Street* (1891) and *Ryecroft*, Mackenney explored the conflict between newness and originality, recognising in the former a recurrent parody of the new sitting uncomfortably beside a post-Darwinian anxiety of lack of originality which manifests itself, in part, in the intense ambivalence of the latter. Professor Karlin’s long paper ‘Orpheus in the Nether World’ examined the various soundscapes of *The Nether World* (1889) in relation to the wider context of aural urban environments. Conventional realism, Karlin concluded, is treated with such irony in Gissing, that the redemptive quality of music is at best momentary and at worst savagely inverted. In his discussion of *Thyrza*, Karlin touched on the paradoxical element that is often understood as central to Gissing. Citing the organ passage from the novel, Karlin explained how the panacea of music is self-ironising, an impossible fantasy that the narrative voice yearns for.

Jeremy Tambling’s resounding closing plenary offered a monumental account of the double spanning Gissing’s literary career from *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Unclassed*, via *New Grub Street* and *By the Ionian Sea*, and ending with *Ryecroft*. The infinite splitting of the self, prevalent in the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, is also a persistent and enduring theme in Gissing’s works. Gissing’s artist characters – Golding, Waymark, Reardon – in their search for the desire for beauty –undergo a Schopenhauerean division and subsequent weakening of the will which leads to a rejection of the possibility of social improvement. Tambling identified a passage in *Ryecroft* to explicate Gissing’s divergence from the Ruskinian emphasis on the social importance of art:

One obvious reason for the long neglect of Turner lies in the fact that his genius does not seem to be truly English. Turner's landscape, even when it presents familiar scenes, does not show them in the familiar light. Neither the artist nor the intelligent layman is satisfied. He gives us glorious visions; we admit the glory – but we miss something which we deem essential. I doubt whether Turner tasted rural England; I doubt whether the spirit of English poetry was in him; I doubt whether the essential significance of the common things which we call beautiful was revealed to his soul. Such doubt does not affect his greatness as a poet in colour and in form, but I suspect that it has always been the cause why England could not love him.^{iv}

Ryecroft notes a strangeness in Turner's sense of place, as compared to Constable's – something that is not quite English and for this reason Turner's art cannot satisfy nation lovers. Perhaps this sense of strangeness can be said, too of Gissing's places. At times, and particularly from exile, England or home is celebrated and coveted for its homogeneity and stability and yet, elsewhere, it is ironised and such constancy is, fundamentally, unachievable.

ⁱ George Gissing, *Denzil Quarrier* (Hassocks : Harvester Press ,1979), p. 249.

ⁱⁱ Christine Huguét, 'Introduction' to *Spellbound*, ed. by Christine Huguét (Harem: Equilibris, 2008), p. 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Gissing, *A Life's Morning* (1888; repr. Home & van Thal, 1947), pp. 108-09.

^{iv} George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (London: Constable, 1929), p. 164.