NOTES ON GEORGE GISSING'S SHORT STORIES

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As a writer, Gissing was always sincere but rarely engaging. His reputation has suffered from his essentially unpopular temperament that never inspired an infection in the novel-reading public for more of his work, although his power was not lost on contemporary reviewers. Ironically, the only one of his books that has remained available, in numerous editions, is The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, a sequence of elegant but conventional reflections, set down when his writing had lost its sting and his health its resilience after the early privations. But interest in Gissing has been fairly constant, even though slight, since the time of his death, and at present it shows signs of increasing with the reprinting of his best-known novels.

Yet his name does not generally come to mind—as it should, with Meredith, Butler, and Hardy—among the most important novelists writing at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, he has no niche in literary history—something an author needs before posterity can benefit to the full from his legacy. There is, however, much in his writing which may mean more to us than to his own age. Not only is there the historical value of his sociological schema (and Gissing was, lower down the ladder, as comprehensive a commentator on his society as Trollope was on that of mid-Victorian times), but there is also the special pathos excited in us by his outcast intellectuals and self-emancipating women: there, many moderns may feel, but for the grace of half a century go we.

In any revaluation the short stories should be examined for the distillation of Gissing's art which they contain. For, apart from their intrinsic value, they provide a useful approach to Gissing for the modern reader who has not time for the full-length novels. Moreover, it was uncommon for English writers of Gissing's calibre to take this medium at all seriously; so his short stories have a rarity interest in their period. In spite of this, recent critics have given them scant attention. Frank Swinnerton has a brief chapter on them in George Gissing, a Critical
Study; the American, Miss M. C. Donnelly, devotes a mere appendix to them in her George Gissing, Grave Comedian; and in a review of the then newly-edited Stories and Sketches (Scrutiny, June 1938), Mrs. Q. D. Leavis rejects the volume—which was on any reckoning a valuable addition to Gissing's accessible works—and fills her space with an assessment of New Grub Street, on the grounds that this is his only book that matters.

This neglect is the more unfortunate as the short story form was peculiarly well suited to Gissing's talent. The way his mind worked in creation was episodic rather than sustained; he observed bits of humanity without compassing a vision of the whole. He was not rich in the imaginative energy, which he so much admired in Dickens, that can vivify a mass of material and can convey a sense of life as a whole. Frank Swinnerton made the point when he wrote of Gissing: "He could not see an incident without spinning from it—not a story—but a series of reflections. He was an essayist, a writer upon moral themes; and he began to write novels." Another reason why Gissing deserves fuller appreciation as a short story writer is that the medium forced him to concentrate his material, whereas in the novels—even in those he wrote after he had liberated himself from the Victorian three-volume tradition of fiction—he could not always resist the ramifications to which a scholarly mind is prone in a work of their length. In his short stories of the nineties, he shows the discipline of French and Russian models. Indeed, his invention has a finer edge in the short stories than in the novels. True, they have not the same force: they are peripheral to his main preoccupations, but for this very reason they often give evidence of a more objective application of his skill as a creative writer.

Gissing wrote short stories in two main phases of his life. The first was when, after fleeing to America to escape shame and scandal, he was trying to eke out a living in Chicago and New England (1876–77). Two collections have been published of the stories during this temporary exile, Sins of the Fathers and Other Tales (1924) and Brownie (1931). The second phase coincides with Gissing's most fertile years in the last decade of the century. In 1892, Gissing now with the success of Demos and New Grub Street behind him, enjoyed the stimulation of being sought after by magazine editors. Attracted by the prospect of a ready

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1 George Gissing, a Critical Study, P. 36.
market and encouraged by his discovery that the Authors’ Syndicate would now champion an author’s volume rights over his work published in periodicals, Gissing took to the writing of short stories more consistently. Of the collected editions of the English stories one, Human Odds and Ends (1898) was published during Gissing’s lifetime; the other three posthumously. The House of Cobwebs and Other Stories (1906) is enriched by a fifty-page introduction by Thomas Seccombe, which gives the best available brief survey of Gissing’s life and work but includes only about a page on the stories themselves. His younger son, Alfred C. Gissing, wrote prefaces to A Victim of Circumstances (1927) and Stories and Sketches (1938).

Gissing’s short stories carry an unmistakable signature. It was the “gloom of London’s misery” that he most keenly registered with his pained acuity of observation. But whether the setting was London or the provinces, Gissing’s great power was to illumine obscure distress and make it glow like the lamp of man’s destiny in the back streets where the unprivileged lived. The ending of “Fate and the Apothecary”, though exceptionally summary, typifies Gissing’s treatment of many of his characters:

“A leaky pair of boots and a bad east wind found the vulnerable spot of his constitution. After all, there was just enough money left to bury him.”

The characteristic tone, foreboding and suggestive of blighted possibilities, which sometimes falls on the reader in the longer works, is substantiated in the best of the stories as an aspect of a unitary situation.

The short stories also bring out Gissing’s power of succinct characterisation. When he elaborated his personages in a novel, he tended to project himself as the central character and to configure the other characters according to the pattern of his own unhappy career. The prescriptive limits of the short story form compelled him to externalise, so that the scholarly outsider hopelessly longing for a life of graceful self-fulfilment, Gissing’s favourite self-image in the novels, seldom appears. Relieved of the compulsion to plead his own case against society, Gissing created in these stories a wide and memorable range of

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1 The House of Cobwebs.
observed characters, from the prostitute to the man of property. Their treatment shows his ability to pinpoint character within the scope of the medium. Mr. Donne in "The Schoolmaster's Vision" is established in an opening paragraph of telling penetration:

"He was bareheaded, and his magisterial gown, scarcely stirred by the breath of a calm, bright sky, draped him with the dignity he loved. His hands behind him—shapely hands, white and soft—his head inclined, and his features set in meditative mildness, Mr. Donne presented the ideal of head-mastership."¹

To take another opening paragraph, "Fleet-Footed Hester" begins with this account of the heroine:

"She was born and bred in Hackney—the third child of a burly, thick-witted soldier, who had married without leave. Her mother, a thin but wiry woman, took in washing, and supported the family. At sixteen, Hester had a splendid physique."²

This terse recital of Hester's antecedents and status defines her as a wayward rose blooming in an East End backyard.

Gissing's sombre view of life focused on certain emblems of human misfortune which were evocative of low-life realism. The most recurrent of these in the short stories are poverty, life in lodgings, ill-contracted marriage, and frustrated aspiration.

Poverty became a way of life for Gissing. Indeed, most of his best work was written under extreme financial stress. He derived a literary vigour from living out his protest against the commercial and social system, with which he refused to compromise as an artist. Austin Harrison, writing about the period when Gissing was tutor to him and his brother, makes it apparent in his affectionate article that the novelist's poverty was also an attitude:

"He deliberately regarded himself as a sort of social outlaw, making a virtue of self-indulgence and self-concentration, fostering the hunger

¹ A Victim of Circumstances.
² Ibid.
of querulous self-pity. He gloried in the vanity of self-compassion. In literature he thought of poverty in avoirdupois. He revelled in the gloom of London’s misery.”

The phrase used here, “poverty in avoirdupois”, brings to mind Gissing’s question to test an author’s integrity: “Has he starved?” In Gissing’s division of characters into haves and have-nots their degree of nourishment had a significant part. The contrast between sufficiency and insufficiency is often represented by the mere glass of a shop-window behind which plenty abounds. The wherewithal that brings the good things within reach ineluctably conditions a person’s order of existence. In the story, “Phoebe”, the eponymous heroine debates whether to give her hunger a change of scene from her freezing bed-sitter:

“... another objection was that she would have to pass the pork-butcher’s just by the entrance to the court, whence at this hour steamed forth odours of hot pease-pudding, ‘faggots’, saveloys, and other dainties...”

Typically, when Phoebe discovers some money hoarded on top of a cupboard by a former lodger who died in occupation, and can glut herself on such delicacies, the taste of them disappoints her. Then she is robbed of her new fortune.

What escaped Gissing in his depiction of the London poor was the Cockney’s resource of humour. His fastidious temper prevented him from seeing the comforts of gregariousness, in however sordid a setting. Nor did he want to see them: his attitude to poverty as a writer was rather that of a monk towards one of the rules of his order. But towards the end of his life, after his introduction to literary society and the fringe of the fashionable world, Gissing came to treat poverty with a subtler poignancy. “Christopherson” and “A Poor Gentleman” are both about men who have fallen from well-being to indigence.

Gissing was one of the first writers to centre his fiction on that natural habitat of commercial man, the lodging-house. With his own

1 “George Gissing”, The Nineteenth Century, September 1906.
2 Stories and Sketches.
3 Both in The House of Cobwebs.
long experience of meagre lodgings, he saw such places as a battle-field of opposing privations; and he used this background partly by choice, partly because it was dictated by his rapid, subsistence production from limited materials. Near the end of his life he wrote in his reflections:

"I should like to add to the Litany a new petition: 'For all inhabitants of great towns, and especially for all such as dwell in lodgings, boarding-houses, flats, or any other sordid substitute for Home which need or foolishness may have contrived.'"  

It is remarkable how many of Gissing’s short stories are about people under a temporary roof. It was the unestablished, the rootless, who especially nourished his invention. They languish in a desire for true domesticity, for the dignity of household independence, while their landlady frequently preys on them and displays those qualities which Serena is busily acquiring in "The Tout of Yarmouth Bridge"—

"... a girl only twelve years old, but rich in the peculiar gifts which go to make a good landlady."  

Later in the same story we are told what these gifts are, and although Serena is learning her profession at a seaside town, the rudiments of it would be valid for the urban backstreet lodgings that Gissing knew so well:

"At other times Serena assisted her aunt in keeping the house dirty, in pilfering the lodgers’ groceries, and spoiling food given to be cooked."

A treacherous exception to this general slatternliness is the landlady in "The Prize Lodger," who so much impresses Islington’s most eligible lodger by her neatness and efficiency that he marries her, only to find that the tables are turned on him and that he, who had happily tyrannised his various landladies in the past, is now in the grips of a houseproud

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1 The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, Spring, Ch. II.
2 Human Odds and Ends.
3 Ibid.
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As a man who contracted two eminently unsuitable marriages which ground down his vitality, Gissing realised to the full the misery of a bad match. In “A Lodger in Maze Pond” Shergold, whose mischosen shop-girl wife is now dead and who has before him the prospect of cultured leisure—the Gissing idyll—after inheriting a fortune, expounds:

“Not one man in a thousand, when he thinks of marriage, waits for the ideal wife—for the woman who makes capture of his soul or even of his senses. Men marry without passion. Most of us have a very small circle for choice: the hazard of everyday life throws us into contact with this girl or that, and presently we begin to feel either that we have compromised ourselves, or that we might as well save trouble and settle down as soon as possible, and the girl at hand will do as well as another. More often than not it is the girl who decides for us.”

It is Gissing himself speaking, and the self-justifying tone is interesting. Like many men whose vulnerability to women is greater than their discernment, Shergold relishes this philosophising about matrimony. And Gissing makes him follow his own course and make a second unhappy marriage, this time to a sluttish servant.

Gissing’s view of women was as ambivalent as one might expect in a man whose life was fraught with a longing for feminine grace and beauty, and who had behind him the harsh experience of his youthful marriage to an irredeemable Manchester prostitute. He tended to divide women into two classes—snares and paragons. Woman the snare has frequent appearances; she is particularly well exemplified in one of his less skilful stories, in which Gissing nevertheless put a lot of his own idealising, “The Fate of Humphrey Snell,” where the pathetic hero, after finding a way of life as a herb-collector that is in keeping with his gentle nature and love of the country, becomes infatuated with a slut of a housemaid. When she accepts his rash proposal of marriage, she writes him a letter at the end of which

“There followed a row of crosses, which Humphrey found it easy to interpret. A cross is frequently set upon a grave; but he did not

1 *The House of Cobwebs.*
think of that.”1 Woman the paragon in Gissing’s stories is often the devoted wife who stands by her husband in his profligacy or penury, as in “The Light on the Tower”2 and “Out of the Fashon.”3 The latter concludes wistfully:

“Wife, housewife, mother—shaken by the harsh years, but strong and peaceful in her perfect womanhood. An old-fashioned figure, out of harmony with the day that rules, and to our modern eyes perhaps the oddest of the whole series of human odds and ends.”

Gissing sees this lady’s qualities as vestiges of a better age. One of the factors which make him so modern an author is this romantic feeling for the past, his anger with the present, and glum pessimism about the future.

In his short stories Gissing treated marriage as one of the trapdoors of calamity; he used the background of contented wedlock more often than not to pick out the incidental limitations. But there are exceptions to this generally discouraging picture. One is “The Honeymoon”4, technically one of his most competent stories, where the incipient battle of wills between the newly married, and at first devoted, couple culminates in the wife’s submission to her husband’s greater mental powers. This wishful if positive conclusion to the tale, which was published in 1893, is an interesting piece of compensating for the author’s disillusionment in his second marriage, to Edith Underwood, which took place in 1891.

These three conditions—poverty, living in lodgings, and misalliance—supplied much of the stuff of Gissing’s stories. But there are other varieties of frustration which he rendered in his morosely compassionate view of the human lot. Thwarted ambition, social or spiritual, the stultified hankering after a larger life—these are the key-notes to several of the short stories. In “A Daughter of the Lodge”5 Mary

1 A Victim of Circumstances.
2 Ibid.
3 Human Odds and Ends.
4 A Victim of Circumstances.
5 The House of Cobwebs.
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Rockett has shot up by education above the lodge-keeping station of her family; but when she comes home for a holiday and tries to flaunt her advantages, she is humiliated by the womenfolk of the big house. She is worth noting too as an instance of Gissing's understanding of the kind of woman who strove for emancipation. In "Snapshill's Youngest" a dealer in second-hand furniture is mortified when his plan of marrying his third daughter to a real gentleman is frustrated—the elder two having married in their own class in spite of his expensive efforts to elevate them—, because the girl falls in love with a rich grocer's son. The fact that the suitor is blessed with an income of £1,500 a year does not make up for Snapshill's disappointment. (Gissing had an accurate sense of social gradations, a matter in which he inherited a sensibility from his lower middle class parentage. The novel, Born in Exile, which is autobiographical in spirit where not in fact, is about the attempts of the lowly-born but highly intelligent Godwin Peak to marry into the class which will supply the sophistication he longs for.) Gissing's stories are instinct with the hopeless longing of the unprivileged city-dweller for a more abundant life, with what he called in the novel, Thyrza, "the hunger of an unshaped desire."

The obvious technical criticism of the short stories is that they lack dramatic force. Frank Swinnerton in his excellent study of Gissing puts it thus:

"When we find the incidents in Gissing's short stories humdrum, or mild, we recognise that we had expected to be stirred in some way, or to be given some precisely poignant moment, whether of suspense or sympathy."

It is true that Gissing's stories seldom satisfy the reader with what Mr. Sean O'Faolain has called "the point of illumination." Yet the technique in most of the stories is skilful, and the standard of literary workmanship is high. What Gissing communicates is not so much an expectancy as to people's actions, as a curiosity about the way they live.

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1 Stories and Sketches.
2 Thyrza, p. 111.
3 George Gissing, a Critical Study, p. 123.
4 "Are You Writing a Short Story", The Listener, Feb. 13th, 1938.
Probing his characters, he diagnosed the private dream of self-fulfilment round which their lives revolved. His forte was in annotation rather than in narrative.

Gissing was an assiduous stylist. His earlier manner was often profuse, but this was at the time when his pen was driven by necessity. By the time he wrote his stories of the nineties, he had achieved a finer economy, as can be seen by comparing the stories of this period with the earlier ones, with "Phoebe" for instance. This begins with the words, "Poor Phoebe . . .", an example of the narrator’s comment which seeks to coerce the reader’s sympathy. In this respect, it is interesting to compare Gissing’s revised edition, published in 1895, of his novel, The Unclassed, which was first brought out in 1884. His amendments correspond with the development of his short story style over the same period: there is a similar tendency to compression and directness.²

I have said above that the short story medium suited Gissing’s genius: in his analysis of the vast chemical reaction between the elements of contemporary society, he could better record the chemicals than the solution that precipitated them. As a recorder he was assisted by the vigour of his descriptive writing. In his obituary on Gissing, Arthur Waugh paid tribute to his power of detailed observation and the assiduity on which it was founded.³ A paragraph from “The Day of Silence” will illustrate the vividness and penetration of his scene-setting:

“Where the sun fell the pavement burned like an oven floor. An evil smell hung about the butchers’ and the fish shops. A public house poisoned a whole street with alcoholic fumes; from sewer-grates rose a miasma that caught the breath. People who bought butter from the little dealers had to carry it away in a saucer, covered with a piece of paper, which in a few moments turned oily dark. Rotting fruit, flung out by costermongers, offered a dire regale to little ragamuffins prowling like cats and dogs. Babies’ bottles were

¹ Stories and Sketches.
² See “Gissing’s Revision of The Unclassed” by J. J. Woolf, Nineteenth Century Fiction, June 1953.
choked with thick-curdling milk, and sweets melted in grimy little hands.”1

Gissing builds up the atmosphere of a heat-wave in Southwark round this scene of decomposition. The effect is forceful and misanthropic, but then he confessed in *Henry Ryecroft*, “I am no friend of the people.”2 It was indeed often from his disgust with the herd that he derived the strength of his writing. In “The Tout of Yarmouth Bridge” he describes the return of the holiday-makers from their jollification

“... after a morning on the dry sands (trampled and befouled for a month past by an innumerable multitude), amid the yells of ruffian pedlars, the roaring of blackguard vocalists, the boisterous mirth of an East-End mob transported to the sea-shore. . .”3

The short stories are an essential part of the Gissing corpus. The fact that they will not be read today as exemple of technique should not be thought to detract from their value. Certainly, from the point of view of social documentation, they cover a wide register of late Victorian types and attitudes; and they will always attract a few readers on this account. An edition of the best of them in one volume is long overdue, if only for this fine period flavour they yield. But what is most memorable about Gissing’s short stories is their mood—the bitter compassion of a writer who was at once sympathetic and disdainful towards commercial man in his subjection to the material laws of subsistence.

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1 Human Odds and Ends.
2 The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, Spring, Ch. XVI.
3 Human Odds and Ends.