Christian hope, and each one knows himself to be recipient of a gift. Potter's book exemplifies these resonant qualities; Pieper's own lucid exposition (as well as embodiment) of the virtues gives fresh light to our reading of Potter and his fundamental disposition: a Centurion in kneeling receptivity and preparation for the Holy Eucharist, even as his Viaticum: “Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter in under my roof; speak but the word and my soul—my child, my spiritual childhood—shall be healed.”

Pieper observes, with characteristic insight and spiritual beauty: “Here a new depth becomes manifest: namely, that purity not only is the fruit of purification but also comprises in itself the readiness to accept God’s purifications, perhaps terrible and deadly, with the brave openness of a trusting heart and so experiences its fertile and transforming power.” Thus was the Blessed Mother disposed in her own spiritual childhood at the Annunciation. Thus was the Centurion disposed who said to our Lord: “Domine, non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum, sed tantum dic verbo et sanabitur puer meus.” In her liturgy of the Mass, the Church has changed puer meus to anima mea, and when the spiritual childhood of a Centurion like Gary Potter receives his God on his knees, he also utters with gratitude the humble words of the Centurion and is fostered thereby in the hope of the martyrs and in a higher chivalry.

Letters from Grub Street

Russell Kirk


The author of The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft and New Grub Street deservedly is honored, nearly seven decades after his death, by the handsome publication of his letters—nine volumes thereof. This third volume covers two years in which he began to obtain recognition as an important novelist—though those were years of poverty and much suffering. To the facade of a Georgian building—a chemist’s shop with living quarters above—in Wakefield, Yorkshire, is affixed a bronze tablet recording that “George Gissing, man of letters” was born here in 1857. Indeed he achieved, despite heavy handicaps, the high distinction of a man endowed with creative imagination, literary probity, and remarkable discernment—a courageous man of letters, truly. His birthplace now belongs to the Gissing Society, which has members in many countries.

This present volume of his correspondence, like the two preceding ones, is a model of what a university press book ought to be: the introduction is full and informative, typeface and binding are commendable, the footnotes very interesting—with much information about such late Victorian worthies, highly diverse, as Sabine Baring-Gould, Annie Besant, John Morley, Frederic Harrison, R. B. Cunninghame-Graham, and various publishers, nearly all of the last somewhat niggardly.

The years 1886, 1887, and 1888 seem to this reviewer the most interesting time of Gissing’s life. His early socialistic sym-
pathies had given way to a high contempt for utopian schemes and a distaste for working-class mobs. He found himself more intensely conservative than the Tory politicians of his time, a lover of old ways and old towns, a champion of the countryside, a man who distrusted innovation and spoke for the permanent things—a cast of mind fully revealed in his book of meditations, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, which would be published in the year of his death. In March 1886 there appeared his first great novel, *Demos*, a calculated assault upon the socialist mentality and a defense of rural England.

*Isabel Clarendon* and *Thyrza* were written during those years, and he began in 1888 the writing of *The Nether World*, his most moving and alarming portrayal of lower-class existence in London. Critics began to call him the greatest realist since George Eliot; Gissing's own literary preferences, however, ran to Walter Scott and Charlotte Brontë.

The power and relative popularity of his grim novels nevertheless left him on the brink of destitution, where so very many of his characters totter precariously. He sold the copyrights of his books, out of necessity, for sums ranging from fifty to a hundred and fifty pounds. Before being so rewarded for intense literary labor, he had found it necessary to subsist on bread and drippings; earlier still, in Chicago, he had subsisted one day on a handful of peanuts merely. Letters to relatives and friends occasionally touch upon such difficulties of diet, even after his name had become tolerably well known to the Common Reader.

In 1879 he had married a prostitute, Neill Harrison, meaning to save her. But she was a ruinous drunkard who nearly ruined Gissing's life. They had parted finally in 1882, although to the end Gissing had sent her a weekly allowance. She died alone late in February, 1888. Gissing's description of his last sight of her (from his diary, not from these letters) is sufficiently chilling. Her face was unrecognizable to him:

*Linen she had none; the very covering of the bed had gone save one sheet and one blanket. I found a number of pawn tickets, showing that she had pledged these things during the summer—when it was warm, poor creature! All the money she received went in drink. . . . I drew out the drawers. In one I found a little bit of butter and a crust of bread.—most pitiful sight my eyes ever looked upon. There was no other food anywhere. The drawers contained a disorderly lot of papers; there I found all my letters, away back to the American time.*

Neill died of drink and syphilis, compounded by cold and hunger: Gissing knew well the poverty of which he wrote. The hundred and fifty pounds Gissing received (in advance) for *The Nether World* made possible his first trip to Mediterranean lands, an escape from the dreariness of his London. To his brother Algernon he wrote from Naples at the end of October 1888:

*Just established, and splendidly! No words could possibly describe those places. There are palm-trees, olive-trees, cacti everywhere. It is a little too warm; sunshine is dazzling, and one can look at the streets only for a short time. Vesuvius throws up a pink cloud. The Bay of Naples—but no, no! It is foolish to try and depict it. —Write, both of you! Just imagine! Monks always about the street, real monks.*

His intimacy with classical literature made a penniless aristocrat of Gissing. And his intoxication with classical lands produced his charming book of travel *afoot*, *By the Ionian Sea*, and his final work of fiction (unfinished), an historical romance of Roman collapse, *Verania*. His month of delight in Rome, described at some length in the concluding thirty-five pages of this third volume, is a cheerful conclusion to a correspondence in which sorrow and disappointment predominate.
From Gissing's pages a conscience speaks to a conscience. Some of us feel a stronger sympathy with the personality of George Gissing than with almost any other writer of the past century; so it is heartening when one finds him happy. Most of his books are difficult to obtain nowadays. Some publisher, and some good editor, ought to bring out a complete new edition of all Gissing's books, from *Workers in the Dawn* to *Veranilda*.

The social and intellectual afflictions of a century ago, so mordantly described in Gissing's novels and short stories, are with us still. The Trafalgar Square riots that followed the publication of *Demos* and preceded the writing of *The Nether World* were, in effect, proletarian risings comparable to the devastation of American cities in recent years—and recent riots in English cities, too. Gissing wrote to Algeron, on October 19, 1887, concerning the Trafalgar riots: "Things begin to look very serious: the police are now made special object of attack. It is amusing to see how little attention is paid to the matter by the newspapers; in all probability they will wake up before long." The papers have waked up now to the peril of a slum population in great cities from which the sense of community has evaporated.

And in schooling, on either side of the Atlantic, decay has proceeded as Gissing, more than a century past, foresaw. In *Demos*, the strong clergyman Wyvern expresses Gissing's own convictions about universal education:

I used to have a very bleeding of the heart for the half-clothed and quarter-fed hang- ers-on to civilization; I think far less of them now than of another class in appearance much better off. It is a class created by the mania of education, and it consists of those unhappy men or women whom unspeakable cruelty endows with intellectual needs while refusing them the sustenance they are taught to crave. Another generation, and this class will be terribly extended, its existence blighting the whole social state. Every one of those poor creatures has a right to curse the work of those who clamour progress, and pose as benefactors of their race.

Those "poor creatures," schooled beyond their expectations in life (yet badly schooled) and indeed beyond their intellectual and moral capacities, now are very numerous; this "new class" now dominates the great majority of American universities and colleges, with their ideological dogmata of multiculturalism and political correctitude; and the end is not yet.

In the twentieth century the warmest admirer and most talented emulator of Gissing has been George Orwell. It is interesting to note the strong similarities of opinion and expression between Gissing's letters and those of Orwell (published in 1968). Like Dante's Farinata, both had great scorn of Hell.

**The Chair of Lies**

*(notes for a proposal)*

To pursue truth  
With the least  
Amount of flack

And paper panels  
Of notices,  
Bulletin boards

Shadowing cloudy  
Ideas, outlines  
And scholarly schemes,

Around the old  
Campus, gray halls,  
Green hills, above

The quadrilateral  
Where students  
Ignore the statues.

— Lawrence Dugan