

You're so Milvain

"I always feel it rather humiliating", remarks the more successful man of letters to one who is less so, "that I have gone through no very serious hardships. It must be so gratifying to say to young fellows who are just beginning: 'Ah, I remember when I was within an ace of starving to death', and then come out with Grub Street reminiscences of the most appalling kind. Unfortunately, I have always had enough to eat."

The familiar speaker here is, of course, Jasper Milvain, the anti-hero of George Gissing's immortal tale of the literary life, *New Grub Street* (1891). Jasper's interlocutor is Mr Whelpdale ("a clever fellow, but he can't hit a practical line [of work]"), who certainly "looked starvation in the face" when he sailed for Chicago, hoping to make a living by the pen, and was reduced to a diet of peanuts.

Gissing's admirers will know that Whelpdale's experiences in America are, to some degree, the author's own. He went to Chicago in March 1877 and retreated to London six months later. A few years on, he told his brother that he had written a story "every week for the leading daily paper" in Chicago. This information has sent Gissing's editors on a goose chase - a wild one, some would say - trying

to unearth this body of early work from the inscrutable archives. Seven anonymously published stories from the *Chicago Tribune* were attributed to him and republished in 1932, for example, almost three decades after his death; another, "A Test of Honor", was unearthed by Pierre Coustillas and Robert L. Selig, and republished in the *TLS* in 1980. Twenty-three stories from this brief American period have been identified as Gissing's, out of a grand total of 115.

The latest information on these abstruse matters comes from a slim volume with the ominous title *George Gissing's American Stories: How many of them are actually his? - A literary investigation*. Here Markus Neacey, editor of the *Gissing Journal*, shows that at least ten of those American stories, and maybe thirteen of them, must be struck off the list. The reasoning seems sound (certain stories were published elsewhere, earlier, sometimes under the name of a known author), even if the tone can be melodramatic - "these discoveries are a 'direct hit', a 'painful blow', and 'Gissing studies will be left bleeding'". Those who wish to gawp at the gory details should drop a line to Mr Neacey via thegissingjournal@outlook.com. Others may wish merely to reflect on the likelihood of the Milvains of



this world having better record-keeping systems in place than the Whelpdales, among whatever other material advantages they still, undoubtedly, so happily enjoy.

We suspect that current events may be coaxing many people into examining their mental maps of the world and finding them wanting. Some of them, no doubt, bear a resemblance to Mariele Neudecker's "Never Eat Shredded Wheat (Memory Maps), Drawn by 32-year-old Italian Female" (1996). As reproduced above, this alternative to Mercator (from a series of recollected alternatives) bloats Europe, shrinks Africa and stretches

South America - among other tricks of memory, as negotiated by the artist's hand. Perhaps certain world leaders carry around distortions of their own in those terrible heads of theirs, and refuse to let them go.

With more innocent purposes in mind, we may recommend the making of maps from memory - of a "childhood room, house or garden", if not the whole globe - as just one of many harmless distractions suggested in *Everyday Play* (Redstone, £19.95). This "campaign against boredom" in the form of a single colourful volume is Julian Rothenstein's compendium of anti-banalities. Options include taking life advice from Anton Chekhov ("real happiness is impossible without idleness"); inadvertently becoming a collector of something or other, like Tacita Dean ("On finding the second [postcard of a] frozen water fountain, I found I had begun a collection"); sketching portraits of imagined people in the manner of Ivan Turgenev, "whose characters he and his friends would then describe"; and, with Sylvia Libedinsky, assigning your own meanings to foreign words, going by their sound ("ANGST: an ancient city in the Arctic ... POLTERGEIST: a heavy raincoat").

Artists seem to be good sources of everyday silliness. Harry Smith picked up paper planes from the streets of Manhattan over a period of twenty years; among the folded pages were receipts, homework, an anti-war rally flyer and a menu from Max's Kansas City. Nina Katchadourian, meanwhile, has a continuing project, begun in 1993, of sifting through her books to find miniature stories, as told by their spines. One photographed example in *Everyday Play* begins with *A Day at the Beach* (by Robert Grenier), and ends - via volumes entitled *The Bathers*, *Shark 1*, *Shark 2*, *Shark 3* and *Sudden Violence* - with *Silence* (by John Cage). May we recommend such pursuits over "fortified" chess, inspired by Raymond Chandler? "Identical to conventional chess except for the fact that shot glasses are used as pieces. When a player loses a piece, he or she has to drink the contents."

Some scholarly memoirs, it must be said, do not immediately spark great interest. Jonathan Bate's *Mad About Shakespeare* (William Collins, £25), to be published next month and reviewed in the *TLS* in due course, strikes a little spark on its second page. (We intend to read further.) Professor Bate here discloses that *Much Ado About Nothing* "has never been my favourite Shakespearean comedy". Cue an aside: is it anyone's?

This is not a rhetorical question but the beginning, surely, of yet another of our rigorous inquiries into an irrefutably essential matter. *Much Ado* is popular enough that, in plague-free summers past, you could have thrown a stone in any big park and hit an open-air Don Pedro. Throw it in Stratford-upon-Avon, and Beatrice will throw it back. Yet now we find ourselves wondering if the people in the know love the play at all.

We asked this urgent question of ours at *TLS* HQ; replies were various, but not so different from Bate's confession that "my personal number-one comedy spot has flipped between *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Twelfth Night*". We were offered *The Taming of the Shrew* because "it led to the film *10 Things I Hate About You*". "May I choose a city comedy?" was another response. Never mind Shakespeare. A new question arises: is *The Roaring Girl* still your personal number one?

M. C.

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