An Exile's Cunning: Some Private Papers of George Gissing

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This dissertation brings together the three separate Gissing studies that I published under the Edwin Mellen imprint in America over the past five years. The first to appear in 1993 was George Gissing’s American Notebook: Notes - G.R.G. - 1877, which documents the literary and domestic concerns of the budding writer during the fateful year spent in America in 1877. It was followed in 1995 by The Poetry of George Gissing, the first complete edition of Gissing’s poems, written during the early stages of his writing career, when he thought of himself as a poet first and a novelist later. The series was concluded in 1997 with the publication of George Gissing’s Memorandum Book, which covers the final years of his literary activity, from 1895 to 1902, offering fascinating glimpses of “the man who suffers and the mind which creates.”

My discovery of Gissing dates to the summer of 1961 when, during a cycling tour of England, I picked up from a bookseller’s shelf at Windermere a copy of Gissing’s Born in Exile, a neat edition bound in red cloth published by Thomas Nelson in 1910. With the benefit of hindsight I may claim that this little book, bought on impulse long before I decided to embark upon the study of English literature, proved to be the ideal introduction to an author whose rediscovery and reappraisal after a period of relative neglect was about to take off.

In the same year (1961) Arthur Young published his edition of The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 1887-1903, which was not only a monument to the friendship of the correspondents, but also an extraordinary record of the author’s views, literary and personal, and a source of several revealing comments made by Gissing on his own works. The next year saw Jacob Korg’s edition of George Gissing’s Commonplace Book, the first of a series of private papers, documents and notebooks held by private collectors or libraries, which had remained unpublished till then, but would systematically be made available over the next three decades by the new breed of Gissing scholars. The first major revaluation of Gissing’s reputation was soon to follow when in 1963 Korg published his study, George Gissing: A Critical Biography. The two Americans were joined in 1964 by the French scholar, Pierre Coustillas, publishing his “Bibliography of Stories by Gissing,” followed two years later by his bilingual edition of The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (Gissing: Les Carnets d’Henry Ryecroft).

After this concerted early push, from the mid-sixties Gissing studies went from strength to strength: The Gissing Newsletter (renamed The Gissing Journal in 1991) was started in 1965 as a quarterly publication providing a platform for articles and reviews on the works, life and times of George Gissing. With this venture too, Pierre Coustillas was associated from the first, and he has been responsible for a steady stream of books, introductions and articles, particularly characterized by his
impressive and untiring efforts to establish the relevance of the factual circumstances and personal experiences of the author for his fiction. Apart from his editions of Gissing’s letters to Gabrielle Fleury (1964), to Henry Hick (1973), and Edward Clodd (1971), the pinnacle of Coustillas’s early editorial activities was reached in 1978, with the publication of Gissing’s Diary. This truly amazing document, covering the last week of 1887 until the second week of November 1902, allows us to reconstruct in fine and at times disconcerting detail, the life of Gissing, the author, and of Gissing, the man. Until the recent completion of that crowning achievement of Gissing studies in the second half of the twentieth century, the nine volume edition of The Collected Letters of George Gissing (1990–97) by Paul Mattheisen, Arthur Young and Pierre Coustillas, the Diary remained the most frequently consulted book by those seeking to retrieve the biographical and factual circumstances relevant to the conception and creation and our understanding of Gissing’s stories and novels.

Notwithstanding the varying focus and different emphasis of each individual study, there appears to be a general agreement among modern Gissing scholars, viz. that he was one of those writers who did not so much invent the raw material of his novels as recycle, or rather (re)write, the material supplied by the lives of himself and those about him for literary use.

From the publication in 1912 of Morley Roberts’s The Private Life of Henry Maitland, a fictionalized biography of Gissing, to John Halperin’s critical biography, Gissing: A Life in Books (1981) and continuing until the present, there has been steadily growing interest in the biographical details of Gissing’s life, which has been well served by the impressive list of personal documents published over the last 35 years. On the one hand it is the sensational nature of the crucial events of his life that may account for the often one-sided and biassed critical focus on the writer’s life to the detriment of the kind of reading emphasizing the autonomy of the literary work, or, say, an inquiry into the generic parameters of the work. On the other hand, what has emerged from the increasingly known facts of the writer’s life is that they did contribute essentially to the tone and substance of his fiction. What is especially intriguing in this context in view of Gissing’s lifelong suppression of some of the more shameful episodes of his life, is that he preserved the greater part of his Diary, thus documenting a great many of his idiosyncrasies and foibles, in addition to his domestic concerns and a detailed account of his literary efforts. One is tempted to conclude that his reservations about broadcasting—though only after his death—the particulars of his unhappy life, as recorded in the Diary and other personal papers, were not strong enough for him to decide on, or leave instructions for, its timely destruction. If we turn this argument on its head, we might go so far as to claim that Gissing wittingly used his various personal notebooks as repositories or inventories of experiences and observations that might sooner or later be used for the making of
his novels, and as such were both antecedent and complementary to his works.

There is no doubt that Gissing’s declared adherence to the school of strict veracity, of realism, was to a large degree derived from the example of Dickens, whose art he praised for its “wonderful truth in observation,” its “trustworthy veracity” and the “exactitude of observation.” Surely, in praising Dickens for his subtle power to paint accurately the human beings, no less than the social conditions he saw about him, Gissing was simultaneously asserting one of his own fundamental artistic strengths: the accurate portrayal of people, places and practices that he had witnessed and observed in person. There is evidence in abundance that throughout his career he was guided by the principle of verisimilitude in fiction.

Obversely, he was quite prepared to admit that invention was the weakest of his various weak points, which helps to explain his lasting dependence on his notebooks and the multitude of notes, accumulated over all the years of his literary activity. It was the solidly real facts of life, laboriously gleaned during extensive prowls about the East End, his regular attendance at the police courts, from newspaper reports, or in temporary lodgings in the most out-of-the-way corners of London, that he came to rely on as the indispensable building bricks for his books. How greatly he valued those alternative sources of realistic details taken from life, is revealed in a letter to Thomas Hardy, written two months before his death. In it he laments the inadequacy of his final novel, Verania, which he pathetically dismisses as “rubbish—mere effort of the imagination.” One feels that this harsh, and only half-accurate judgment is due to the novel’s lack of verifiable, observed reality, despite the ten years of exhaustive research prior to the actual composition of the book.

It would be a mistake to conclude from Gissing’s recognition of the primacy of the principle of veracity in his art that he underestimated the function and power of the imagination, seemingly content merely to transcribe reality. Persuasive and successful portrayal of life for him ultimately depended on the shaping power of the imagination to mint and fuse the chaotic images and experiences of everyday into an artistic order, capable of evoking the original impulse to create. Neither the completest set of verifiable data, nor the most careful forethought and planning finally determined an author’s success, but that minting and fusing power defined by Coleridge as the primary imagination, dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating, always in order to recreate. Thus, by that definition, any act of creation involves a transformation or recreation of what is familiar, real or given.

The American Notebook (1877) and the Huntington Memorandum Book (1895-1902) stand at the beginning and at the end, respectively, of Gissing’s career as a writer. Both books, in their attractive mix of literary, domestic and topographical information, allow us a glance of a writer’s preoccupations, of the seeds of character, situation, plot and dialogue for future elaboration and use in the finished products of his art.
Conversely, I chose to collect Gissing’s poems—many of which are occasional, i.e., triggered by special occasions—so that they may be read as shedding light upon some crucial periods of his life, in particular his early teens when he began to think of himself as a writer, or rather a poet, and the immediate aftermath of his imprisonment at Manchester and the voyage to and arrival in America in 1876.

The editorial procedure adopted starts with the attempt to transcribe the original texts exactly as they were written, retaining e.g. Gissing’s late Victorian spelling and punctuation and his frequent use of dashes in enumerations and between sentences. Ampersands, though, have consistently been expanded to “and”. His use of initials for the titles of books, newspapers and magazines has been allowed to stand unexpanded, unless it would unduly baffle the educated reader of today. Textual and explanatory notes are provided to assist the reader in recreating the historical, cultural, topographical and personal context of the notebook entries. Special emphasis has been given to matching the various hints and suggestions for literary composition to the passages in Gissing’s novels and stories, in which he turned them to good use. Full bibliographical information is given to expand the compact notation Gissing favoured in making these entries. Cross-references to major Gissing documents, such as the Diary and his collected correspondence and the as yet unpublished Scrapbook, have proved indispensable to the elucidation attempted in these pages. Yet all these editorial principles were never rigidly applied, the first priority always being to maximize the accessibility and comprehension of the original. The recreation of the substance and tone of Gissing’s (literary) world has been my constant endeavour in preparing these editions.

In 1989, David Grylls in a significant article (“George Gissing and Biographical Criticism”) made an important distinction between a critic directly and exclusively encouraging biographical readings, often through a reductive equation of life and art, and his facilitating such readings, by establishing credible parallels between the work of art and the artist’s life, as one of a whole range of critical approaches. In the footsteps of those scholars who effectively put Gissing’s name back on the map of English literature, I should modestly like to offer these editions of the two Gissing notebooks and of his poems in the spirit of such a “facilitating” critic: may they contribute to a responsible and discreet elucidation of Gissing’s texts, with the help of the biographical information preserved in these (private) papers.