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

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Introduction to Gissing’s Poetry

Apart from a slighting reference to Gissing’s verse by Jacob Korg, who dismisses it as “conventional and undistinguished”, and Pamela White’s summary verdict (“Most of Gissing’s poems are slight juvenile compositions not designed for publication.”), very few critics have undertaken a more discriminating evaluation of the nature and achievement of Gissing’s poetry. Not that it would have been easy to perform such a task, as the manuscript notebook containing most of the poems has so far remained unpublished. Now the larger, first section of this book is taken up by the poems preserved by Gissing in this notebook with marbled covers (grey, green, and reddish brown), measuring 6.75 x 8 inches. It has 110 pages, 93 of which are numbered and written. Yet an attempt has been made in the second section, headed “Scattered Verses: Early and Late”, to recover and bring together those poems that until now were only available in separate manuscripts or as published poems in a variety of not easily accessible sources. The Verses notebook contains 33 titles, which

3 George Gissing, Verses by G.R. Gissing: 1869 to 1882, Manuscript Notebook, Yale Gissing collection (Beinecke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts).
together with the additional 24 poems/translations that make up the second section, brings the total number of Gissing’s poems to 57.

It is probable that in the Verses notebook Gissing only preserved the poems that by his own standards he judged to be a success. Thus we may assume that some of the early poems relegated in this volume to the second division, were perhaps never more than finger exercises of an aspiring poet. On the other hand some of the occasional poems included in “Scattered Verses” are as accomplished as the best pieces that Gissing thought worthy of preservation.

To all intents and purposes Gissing’s activities as poet came to an end in 1884 with his occasional poem “The Death of the Children”, after which, apart from the late (1900) translation of a passage from Homer’s Odyssey, only the facetious “The Humble Aspirations of G. G., Novelist” was added to his poetic oeuvre, at a time when Gissing’s achievement as novelist was at last beginning to be recognized by the English novel-reading public.

The primary purpose of this publication is therefore to further and facilitate the study and appreciation of Gissing’s verse by making it available for the first time in its entirety to a wider reading public, thus enabling it to judge for itself the evident technical finesse of the youthful poet’s work and the recurrence in it of certain thematic concerns, which are intriguing not only in themselves, but also for the light they may throw upon one of the most crucial episodes in his life.

The accepted biographical wisdom is that it was the needy circumstances of Gissing’s life during his year in America (October 1876 - September 1877) that made him into the writer of fiction and novelist that we know. In the spring of 1877 hunger drove him into the arms of the editor of the Chicago Tribune, whom he asked for a job. There was no vacancy, but the editor suggested Gissing contribute a short story to the paper. He seized the opportunity with both hands, thus starting his career as a published author. The inauspicious beginning was to be characteristic of his entire, often desperately troubled, writing life.

Yet the manuscript notebook with Gissing’s verse, in which he recorded his earliest literary efforts, is there to hint that at first he did not think of himself as novelist or writer of short stories, but that it may have been his ambition from childhood to be a poet.
The first poem in this collection dates from April 1869, when Gissing was 11 years old and the notebook ends with a poem that he wrote in July 1882, when he had reached the age of 25. Over this period of thirteen years he composed a total of 48 poems (including some of those collected in the second section), but a more detailed examination of the dates of composition shows that all but two of these had been completed by the beginning of 1877. This seems to lend support to the theory that it was the American experience that turned Gissing into a writer of prose, but only after he had decided no longer to pursue a career as poet. Nevertheless he submitted his poetry for publication to the editor of the Cornhill Magazine in September 1878 (almost a year after his return from America), and again as late as September 30, 1883, but neither attempt met with success. In the autumn of 1883 he also approached Swinburne with a request for an evaluation of his poems, and, despite the latter’s words of encouragement, Gissing must have finally decided to dedicate himself entirely and without reservation to the novelist’s art around this time.

Further analysis of the dates of these poems tells us that after the limited but steady production of 32 poems in the years from 1869 to March 1876, there is a sudden, and on the face of it, inexplicable outburst of creativity in 1876: no fewer than 13 poems were added in a few months. It appears they were written in August and September 1876, immediately following on Gissing’s imprisonment for theft in June/July. Until now a conspicuous gap existed in our knowledge of Gissing’s otherwise well-documented biography for these months, without any doubt the most traumatic of his whole life.


This fateful episode, unsurprisingly, has remained largely obscure as a result of his unceasing efforts to suppress the unpalatable truth. How far he was prepared to go in this respect, is illustrated by the fact that there is nothing to suggest that he ever told Gabrielle Fleury, the woman with whom he spent the last four, relatively happy, years of his life, about the events in Manchester. Apparently, he never got over the shock and he succeeded in keeping absolutely quiet about it. John Halperin, in the most recent biography of Gissing, writes: “This is a period of Gissing’s life about which, understandably, he was absolutely silent later. Not a single letter written by him during the summer of 1876 is known to exist.”

Now, with the discovery of these 13 poems written shortly after his release from prison and immediately prior to his departure and voyage to America, we may have come into possession of the badly needed material that might enable us to reconstruct and interpret with due caution Gissing’s emotions caused by the unprecedented disturbance of his social and personal equilibrium.

The use of this imaginative material for such an attempt may be warranted by the nature of the relationship between Gissing’s own life and his art. There appears to be general agreement that no writer used the events and experiences of his life more frequently, more fully, and more directly than he did. Halperin takes a quotation from Virginia Woolf as epigraph for his opening chapter:

Gissing is one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the author faintly covered by the lives of fictitious people. With such writers we establish a personal rather than an artistic relationship. We approach them through their lives as much as through their work.

The assumption made by Woolf, like many biographical critics before and after her, is “that the life and personality of the author, down to the last apparently trifling

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2. Gissing's lodgings at Waltham, Mass., in 1877; the house was owned by the Rev. Benton Smith, chairman Waltham High School Committee.

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
3. S.S. Spain (1871), on board of which Gissing made his return voyage in 1877.
National Maritime Museum, London

4. Liverpool Landing Stage ca. 1877.
National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool
5. George Gissing, 7 May 1895.

Photograph by Elliott and Fry.
6. Huntington Memorandum Book [pp. 24–7].
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detail, may provide an essential key to the understanding and thus the appraisal of his poetry.”8 That Halperin too subscribes to this critical approach is neatly summarized by his description of Gissing’s works as “almost without exception parts of a spiritual autobiography, extracts from the story of his own existence.”9

Judging by the contents of the poems written in August and September 1876 Gissing’s state of mind must at times have bordered on suicidal despair. The barely veiled reference to suicide as a possible solution to his agonizing plight in the euphemistically entitled poem “To Sleep” seems the most unequivocal indication of the depth of his horror. It reads as if it has arisen directly out of the feelings of distress, shame and despondency consequent on the catastrophic expulsion from Owens College and the nightmare term of his imprisonment. In the concluding lines of the poem there is the ominous prediction that he may be about to discover the secret of the land of Death.

Yet, these bouts of black depression alternated with more hopeful and confident moods; in the final stanza of “A Farewell” he attempts to console “his love” with the promise that in a little while she will join him in America, once he has established himself there:

In yon’ new world I seek a home
Far, far from England’s shore;
Wait but a while and thou shalt come,
With me to weep no more!

(ll. 21-24)

What emerges from these lines besides their overt meaning, is that despite his ordeal, as he sailed for America, Gissing remained faithful to the girl who had been

9 Halperin 6.
responsible in no small measure for the ruin of his academic career. There is a strong suggestion that they were looking forward to a reunion in America to start a new life together. In a curiously clairvoyant passage from the poem “On Leaving England,” that he wrote as a boy of 14, Gissing seems to have anticipated the voyage that he was about to undertake:

Who would grieve to leave a country
Choked with smoke and swamped with rain?
...........................................
Look upon the glorious ocean,
Forward to the glorious West,
Far away from smoke and trouble,
There is pleasure, there is rest.

(II.9-10, 13-16)

Desire for rest and retreat in the extreme is reflected in the poem that is at once the earliest, the longest and most enigmatic of those written in the summer of 1876: “Narcissus.” Gissing transformed the well-known classical myth into a pastoral elegy largely modelled on Milton’s “Lycidas.” In Gissing, as in many Victorian poets, we may discern “a tendency to be serious, reflective, and melancholic. Their thoughts often turned towards death ....”

If it were, therefore, quite natural for the Victorian poet to try his hand at elegy, the genre must have been particularly suited to Gissing under the circumstances. However, it may seem slightly problematic to relate the story of Narcissus plausibly to Gissing’s experiences during that fateful summer. Yet, if one assumes that he must have been beset by feelings of confusion between illusion and reality, a sense of profound isolation, a disturbing lack of self-knowledge and finally, an intense and growing fear of annihilation, it is no longer hard to understand why he should have

10 Korg 27.
been drawn to the figure of Narcissus, as the natural embodiment of his own worst fears and weaknesses, as well as his dearest yearnings, and as a symbol of the creative artist, who cannot but act in accordance with the guiding awareness of his unique sensibility and power.

The Narcissus that we encounter in Gissing's poem may be regarded as a very early instance of that typical Gissing protagonist: the exile. The usually self-imposed exile is strongly ambivalent in that it is both welcome and abhorrent. It is a condition necessary to the health of the character who suffers from it and it is to be avoided or overcome on account of its alienating anti-social consequences. Perhaps the saddest feature of Narcissus's life, once he has become enamoured of his own reflection, is that he becomes so completely self-absorbed that his consciousness fails to register any external stimuli from either the natural, or the human environment to which he belongs. This inability to establish a vital connection with the world out there, might account for the self-preoccupation, to the point of destructive self-obsession, so typical of many of the characters in his novels. Whether such a disposition was merely confirmed in Gissing by the incidents of that summer or whether it was the direct outcome of these events, remains a mystery. What we can say, is that the self-sought isolation of Narcissus, who has grown utterly forgetful of his friends and flock alike, for the reader is intensified by the contrast with the unavailing efforts of his fellow-shepherds to persuade him to resume his daily responsibilities. His "heedlessness" is complete and his lack of responsibility seems to be incurable. But at the end of the poem Narcissus, who has for so long been contemplating his own reflection in the fountain of mutable beauty and love in this world, is miraculously transposed to the heavenly abode of the "deathless gods" and allowed to "lave his delighted senses / In the eternal spring of beauty and of love." Despite a semblance of a positive ending, it is impossible to ignore the saddening implication that fulfilment and satisfaction appear forever out of reach in this world.
However, a distinct change of tone may be noticed in some of the poems dating back to his early months in America. Morley Roberts has given us an account of how Gissing’s principal friend in Boston, the abolitionist and poet William Lloyd Garrison, one morning in the very early hours invited him to pass judgment on a sonnet he had taken three whole months to write, thus presumably bowing to Gissing’s superior poetic genius. Although the latter was not impressed by Garrison’s sonnet, he must have expressed his literary opinion discreetly and with sufficient tact to be invited to join a little club in Boston, whose members were expected to make regular contributions in the form of poems to be read and discussed during the club meetings. The remarkably light-hearted set of verses, “The Candy Store,” that we know for certain to have been produced at Waltham, near Boston, in January 1877, must have been those shown to Roberts, who qualifies them as “amusing, but of no great importance.” Yet it is in this very poem that Gissing, under the semblance of facetious gaiety, comes closest to providing an explanation for the shocking and shameful incidents of the previous spring. The seductive shopgirl in the candy store is at once “beauteous” and “hateful”, and so fatally beguiling that the young man, in his irrepressible desire for an infinite supply of her sweets, grows deaf and blind to all other (moral) considerations and admits that

From that day began my sorrow,-
I was there upon the morrow,
Every day that I could borrow
Beg or steal a little cash;

It is hard not to hear in the final line—O how could I be so rash!—of this seemingly jaunty stanza, Gissing’s agonizing recognition (late, but accurate) of Nell’s fatal attraction. Was it not he himself who “thought not of expenses”, and “had no heed of consequences?” Towards the end of the poem he comes to apply the revealing

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adjective “infernal” to the candy store, that sweet place of bliss. The bitter sweet consequences of his entanglement with Nell Harrison can never have been far from his mind when he created this sweet-shop idyll. Despite its humorous surface, its sprightly rhythm and its Byronic rhymes (“frost on” / “Boston”, “fix, I” / “apoplexy”), “The Candy Store” is more deserving of our critical attention than Roberts suspected, on account of its highly revealing autobiographical dimension. For once, Roberts’ judgment was perceptive and accurate when he predicted that Gissing’s verse, “if he did not destroy it, might now be of no small interest to men of letters”.

It is from that shared conviction—80 years after Roberts first expressed it—that I have undertaken to present these poems to those readers who for too long have thought of George Gissing exclusively as a novelist and to those who come to his work for the first time.
