Gissing's Notebook

Martha S. Vogeler

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 32, Number 1, 1989, pp. 88-90 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/373145/summary
which they appear. Inexplicably the page numbers are omitted for the listing of the first lines of the untitled poems in two sections.

The publication of this book is doubly notable, not only for making Gray's poetry available to the general reader, but as the first volume published in the new 1880-1920 British Authors Series being issued by ELT Press, "to fill a need . . . for book-length studies on turn-of-the-century British writers." Other books included in the series are *George Gissing at Work: A Study of His Notebook 'Extracts from My Reading'* by Pierre Coustillas and Patrick Bridgwater; as well as the forthcoming *Herbert Horne: Poet, Architect, Typographer, Art Historian* by Dr. Fletcher; and *J. M. Barrie: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography of Writings About Him* by Carl Markgraf.

Judging by the first volume in the series, it will be an important contribution to English studies of some interesting but neglected authors, and will add new dimensions to modern literary history.

Edwin Gilcher

Cherry Plain, New York

GISSING'S NOTEBOOK


Appropriately, this new evidence of George Gissing's scholarly interests is a notebook owned by an American college (Dartmouth) and co-edited by a Professor of English literature at a French university and a Professor of German at an English university. Gissing, after all, discovered his talent for fiction while in the United States, later discussed his literary ambitions most openly with a German, Eduard Bertz, and after attaining success gained a measure of happiness with a Frenchwoman in France.

We have long known of Gissing's prodigious and scholarly reading and rereading. It is evident in the *Commonplace Book*, edited by Jacob Korg in 1962; in his diary for 1887 to 1902, edited by Pierre Coustillas in 1978; and in his letters, many published in collections according to the recipients—his family, Bertz, Wells, W. H. Hudson, and so on. But none of these sources dwells exclusively on his reading, as does this notebook of 167 extracts copied out in his neat handwriting. Each bears his heading: for example, "Wisdom," "Epitaph," "Enthusiasm," and "Symbolization of Nature" for passages by Sophocles, Landor,
Mme. de Staël, and De Quincey respectively on the page reproduced for a frontispiece.

Explaining their own prodigious labors, Coustillas and Bridgwater declare that, suitably edited, such a notebook provides the literary critic with "precious data," including "an index to artistic intentions, to the mental process which has been instrumental in the realization of the narrative" (1). They point to the attention that critics are giving to the notebooks of George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and George Eliot. Concentrating on Hardy, they observe that his notebooks record reading undertaken in a conscious attempt to add an intellectual dimension to his fiction in response to criticism, whereas Gissing's excerpts reflect a more disinterested "enthusiasm for learning, for which his appetite was—and remained—boundless" (5).

The entries in the notebook bear out the editors' analysis of them as showing Gissing's "predilection" for authors who "embraced the whole of life"—that is, philosophical writers. To some this may suggest that Gissing was not wholly committed to fiction as the best means of presenting human experience, for, as the editors note, even when he quotes a novelist it is in his or her "capacity as a thinker" (6). The notebook offers more than a hint that he still longed for the academic career he had lost through a youthful indiscretion. We might speculate about his psychological motivation in transcribing passages from works so unlike the kind of literature he was writing. Perhaps he felt some guilt about devoting time to his mental cultivation instead of getting on with his career as a novelist. If so, the mere act of transcribing the excerpts he had isolated as worthy of later consideration might seem to validate his self-indulgence. And by selecting and titling the entries he may have been unconsciously seeking to give some order to the intellectual life he was trying to sustain in difficult personal circumstances. In any case, he kept the notebook mostly during his literary apprenticeship, a five-year period beginning in 1880, about the time he was reading proofs of his first published novel, until late 1885, when he began Demos, his first novel to be widely noticed. After that, he usually turned to his Commonplace Book when he wished to make a note of his reading. That this happened less frequently than his recourse to the "Excerpts" the editors attribute to the "greater self-confidence that came with relative success," a statement that hints at a psychological basis for the excerpts (15).

The catholicity of Gissing's reading, and his linguistic abilities, both long known to scholars, are documented by the editors' statistics: there are 166 entries quoting texts by 77 ancient and modern authors. (One entry, consisting of four proverbs, has no known source.) The excerpts appear in five languages apart from English—French, German, Italian,
Latin, and Greek. Translations are supplied by the editors. Even granting their estimate that the books cited may not be more than one or two percent of all those Gissing was acquainted with during his lifetime, the breakdown of authors given is interesting. Goethe is the most frequently quoted (26 entries), followed by Carlyle (12 entries), Coleridge and Landor (6 entries each), Ruskin and Pater (5 each), Homer, Plato, Horace, Dante (4 each), and Sophocles, Voltaire, and Browning (3 each). The absence of certain favorites of Gissing—Heine and Schopenhauer; Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, Keats, Lamb, and Tennyson; Balzac and Daudet; Tacitus, Catullus and Livy; Aristophanes and Thucydides—is understandable, the editors suggest, if we remember that he transcribed erratically and knew by heart many passages that might otherwise appear (16-17).

Besides defining themes for future scholars to consider, the annotations are offered to provide, in the words of their authors, "all or virtually all the information available" about the books cited. We learn the edition Gissing used or might have used, and sometimes information about the copy itself, whether it came from his father's library, for example, or his own, and in what collection it is today, if that is known. The annotations sometimes suggest a date for an entry (a table summarizes the evidence), discuss the appeal of the excerpt for Gissing, and identify references to the work or author in Gissing's letters, diary, Commonplace Book, and other such documents. There is both a name and subject index.

Of greatest interest to literary critics will be the part of each annotation that identifies where in Gissing's fiction an excerpt in the notebook is quoted or in some way seems to have left its mark. Even the reader who thinks he knows Gissing may be surprised to discover the many ties established between his reading and his writing. Some are only hypothetical, but the intimate knowledge of Gissing's life and canon displayed elsewhere by the editors lends authority to such commentary. We remember, too, that Professor Bridgwater has published Gissing and Germany and three other books relating German thought to British literature; and that Professor Coustillas is the world's authority on Gissing. Together they have produced a study altogether worthy of ELT Press's recently launched 1880-1920 British Author Series.

Martha S. Vogeler
California State University, Fullerton

90