George Gissing at Work

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INTRODUCTION

I

As Percy Lubbock observed long ago in his stimulating enquiry into *The Craft of Fiction*, "to grasp the shadowy and fantasmal form of a book, to hold it fast, to turn it over and survey it at leisure—that is the effort of a critic of books."\(^1\) Whether or not this effort is ultimately successful depends on a variety of factors such as the critic's ability and knowledge of his own craft, the nature and complexity of the novelist's art, and what is known of his views on and methods of story-telling. Admittedly these are highly restrictive provisions, yet the critic's eagerness to overtake the novelist at work and determine how the book was put together may not be quite in vain if some of the tools in the storyteller's workshop have been preserved as well as rough states of the finished product. Writers' notebooks, when suitably edited, are precious data for the critic. They constitute, among other things, an index to artistic intentions, to the mental process which has been instrumental in the realization of the narrative.

Naturally, with the passing of time and the increasing accessibility of the private papers left by Victorian novelists, their art of fiction is being reassessed. Subjective impressions are having to give way to assessments based on studies of manuscripts, proofs, literary notebooks, factual sources, correspondence and the like. In particular, scholarly editions of the notebooks left by Meredith, George Eliot and Hardy have become available and have reinforced the traditional critical approach to their major novels. The revival of interest in Gissing's life and work, which has been going on since the early 1960s, has assumed many aspects, notably increased biographical and critical attention and extensive bibliographical investigations; but his artistic methods have roused little enough curiosity among scholars, partly because it has been thought—erroneously—that there is little material available for such a study. Whatever has been achieved in this field is largely the work of Jacob Korg, who, in his edition of Gissing's *Commonplace Book* (1962), discussed the growth out of this document of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, and who more recently introduced a number of hitherto unpublished letters on the art of fiction (1978). Textual studies based on comparisons, either between manuscript and first edition or between first and revised editions, have been attempted for some works, but the private papers of the novelist remain to this day a largely untapped source.
This situation is likely to evolve spectacularly in the next decade, and, once the private papers have been made available, the status of Gissing as a major novelist who is finally coming into his own will be consolidated. Meanwhile, a comparison between the methods and culture as well as the artistic aims of Hardy and Gissing, two men who were personally acquainted, who discussed together the art of fiction and appreciated each other's works, is likely to speed up the process. That Gissing's private papers are still largely unpublished does not affect our findings. Nor, for that matter, is the fact that the two novelists have left notebooks of about the same bulk of any real significance: it is well-known that Hardy destroyed many of his own notes, and we cannot be sure that all Gissing's surviving commonplace books have reached institutional libraries. But it is relevant to observe some analogies. The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy edited by Richard H. Taylor include Memoranda I and Memoranda II, which had a function not unlike that of some portions of Gissing's diary, published in 1978, and doubtless also a function similar to that of passages in the Gissing memorandum book held by the Huntington Library. Further, it is an interesting coincidence that the "Trumpet-Major Notebook," which is mainly concerned with the historical background of this novel of the Napoleonic period, should have an equivalent in the form of 90 pages of preparatory notes for Gissing's only historical novel, Veranilda, a story of Roman and Goth set in sixth-century Italy. But the parallel that most compellingly invites the critic's attention concerns on the one hand The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy (edited by Lennart A. Björk, Macmillan, 1985) and, on the other hand, a set of two Gissing commonplace books, including Extracts from my Reading, together with an important and largely ignored scrapbook. In all these documents are to be found, at least on the surface, comparable principles of selection, transcription and annotation. Hardy's "Literary Notes I," "Literary Notes II," and "1867 Notebook" (which is not fundamentally different from the other two) are extracts from his reading, and "Literary Notes III" consists of a scrap album, which, like Gissing's own (unbound) scrapbook, contains an informal assemblage of pasted press-cuttings on a variety of subjects, as well as hand-written entries and comments.

Here, it would seem, end the more striking external resemblances between the personal documents which both writers found indispensable to have at hand in the practice of an art that was increasingly thought by its practitioners to require an equipment akin to that of a trade. That the periods covered are unequal—c. 1865-1927 in Hardy's case, 1877-1903 in Gissing's—has at best merely nominal significance, for both men, whom parentage and circumstances deprived of a university education, began to acquire the note-taking and diary-keeping habit in early adulthood, and only death was to put an end to it. The same earnestness, so characteristic of most Victorians, strikes the
Introduction

present-day reader. Gissing, like Hardy, made his début in literary life with a major handicap, poverty, and it would be fair neither to the man nor to the writer to deny that in his notebooks self-education and self-improvement are involved. Still, the resemblance is at once superficial and seriously misleading. In his critical Introduction Björk observes that "Hardy's 'Literary Notes' are very much part of his propaedeutic literary activities," and he quotes Hardy on what he values in fiction, on the rough distinction between, on the one hand, "the accidents and appendages of narrative," among them "trifles of useful knowledge, statistics, queer historical fact," and, on the other hand, those essential literary elements which offer "intellectual and moral profit to active and undulled spirits."6

The first and humbler part of the equipment which Hardy endeavoured to acquire originated partly in his natural curiosity and appetite for factual knowledge, but it has been convincingly established that it owes much to those reviewers who hinted apropos of The Hand of Ethelberta that, though he was a gifted painter of rural life, his capacities were unsuited to the exploration of other, vaster fields. Hardy jibbed at such remarks, which amounted to an exposure of his cultural deficiencies, but he took them seriously enough to embark on a systematic course of study which is abundantly reflected in his notes. Björk gives an excellent example of an entry containing one of those "trifles of useful knowledge," entry 604, which reads: "Link between extinct animals & those present now—The Dodo, last seen in 17th cent." On the face of it, this seems fairly irrelevant to fiction, but Hardy, nursing his complex of cultural inferiority, thought otherwise and gave the dodo an airing as soon as an opportunity offered, in The Return of the Native, in connection with the precariousness of the reddleman's occupation. Diggory Venn was represented as "one of a class rapidly becoming extinct in Wessex, filling at present in the rural world the place which, during the last century, the dodo occupied in the world of animals."7

Although apt enough, the comparison is nonetheless unexpected and somewhat redolent of the notebook which supplied it. Hardy's novels have in places a quaintness which partly accounts for their appeal and which may derive from the introduction of queer historical facts or an occasional display of out-of-the-way knowledge. Björk has traced over twenty allusions of the dodo type in The Return of the Native, the novel Hardy wrote immediately after his intensive bout of self-improvement. The dodo comparison will not seem artistically better when it is added that Hardy's source for this item of abstruse knowledge was a once popular compilation of mainly unprofitable oddities by one John Timbs, Things not Generally Known, Familiarly Explained: A Book for Old and Young (1856). Similarly, Albertus, Aquinas' contemporary, and the French phrase "coup de Jarnac" ("stab in the back") found their way into The Return of the Native.
The critical editions of Gissing's novels reveal no such use of recondite information, and if any such appears either in his *Commonplace Book* or in his scrapbook, it has generally been recorded there for possible comic exploitation, in which case the novelist leaves it to some appropriate character to retail the oddity. Samuel Barmby, one of the quarter-educated of *In the Year of Jubilee*, is the classic example because he is an essentially comic character, but Jessica Morgan in the same novel, and May Tomalin in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, though presented in a less openly satirical manner, are also great purveyors of those "trifles of useful knowledge" which Hardy had in mind. This is not to suggest that Hardy's use in his novels of miscellaneous unliterary information could in any way be viewed as unwittingly comic. His earnestness as an artist and the general gravity of his tone (his rustics have humorous anecdotes to relate, but this is another matter) rule out such a possibility. The point worth emphasizing is that Hardy and Gissing, who kept notebooks in very much the same way, used their factual contents in ways that are not at all comparable even though a certain pedantic streak in Gissing the man, which, with fine irony and detachment, he turned to account in his Grub Street pedant Alfred Yule, might have been expected occasionally to manifest itself in his fiction.

Nor is the nobler use to which Gissing puts his notebooks, *Extracts from my Reading* in particular, quite the same as Hardy's. With the wisdom of hindsight it might be argued that the difference we notice is largely to be explained by the fact that they belonged to generations which held different views about the insertion of extraneous material into fiction. It is true that Hardy's use of allusion and art of quotation look back to the mid-Victorians, to the practices of, say, Elizabeth Gaskell or George Eliot, with their love of epigraphs on title pages and under chapter headings, and of verse quotations breaking out in paragraphs of solid prose. Gissing was far less fond of epigraphs, although he had some in his early novels, and quoted verse in his narratives far more sparingly and, on the whole, for other reasons, than Hardy did. As we shall see presently, he did not view quotations, from either well-known or obscure authors, as embellishments in a fictional context. And this difference in artistic attitude is fundamentally a difference in the psychological and cultural make-up of the notetakers. Björk has demonstrated that it was at his reviewers' bidding that Hardy undertook that intensification of his own cultural improvement which led to his filling all those notebooks of which only a few have survived. Hardy as it were took the hint even though he was mortified, both as a countryman who had felt a stranger in London and as a man whose social connections were with the lower rather than with the middle and upper classes. Gissing nursed no intellectual inferiority complex. Right from his schooldays in Wakefield he had been regarded by his teachers as an exceptionally gifted child, as there is abundant evidence that he was. His
father, himself an amateur poet who published three collections of verse, encouraged him to write from an early age. At Lindow Grove School, Alderley Edge, and then at Owens College, he had begun to write poems, some of which achieved publication. His culture in his early twenties was already impressive and his keeping such a notebook as *Extracts from my Reading* is basically a tangible manifestation of his enthusiasm for learning, for which his appetite was—and remained—boundless.

While most of the entries Gissing made in these *Extracts* are quotations whose form or content appealed to him, it would be wrong to suppose that he transcribed this or that apothegm with a view to inserting it at some later date into some work of fiction. As the phrase "Extracts from my Reading" implies, he noted with keen intellectual relish passages which struck him as remarkable; he was delighted to find under another pen an opinion he had himself entertained or a statement to which (with a few exceptions) he could subscribe, but it cannot be said that when he later quoted from his notebook he was betraying a lack of self-confidence. The incentive to quotation lay mainly in the pleasure he felt in having chanced upon a statement which had been made possibly hundreds of years before, as often as not in a different country and in a different language, very likely under circumstances different from those he had experienced, but a statement which, in his eyes, contained a truth he had discovered quite independently.

His intellectual and/or emotional involvement in the matter of the "extracts" makes of them a much "warmer" substance than the vast majority of Hardy's entries in his "Literary Notes I" and "Literary Notes II." Hardy, according to Robert Gittings, copied extracts and selected them "as illustrations of some particular point of character." Not so Gissing, who had no such aim in view and used his notes much more sparingly. It would have been alien to his temperament to transcribe, as Hardy did, seventy-five maxims or aphorisms from an article in the *Fortnightly Review* in order to serve up ten of them shortly afterwards in *A Laodicean* and one or two other novels. Had he discussed the point with Hardy on the few occasions when they met, it is doubtful whether Gissing would have viewed with much sympathy his *confrère's* systematic note-taking if, as Gittings reasonably claims, the entries in the notebooks were regarded as "ammunition in Hardy's new campaign to capture the heights of a really great novel." Readers of *Our Friend the Charlatan*, in which the eponymous impostor Dyce Lashmar misappropriates the biosociological theory of a French professor, will know that Gissing's temperament did not incline him to borrow heavily from his fellow-writers, and indeed that he was moved to satirize such an inclination.

An essential difference between Hardy's *Literary Notebooks* and the present *Extracts* lies in the strictly literary and philosophical nature of the
latter. In this particular notebook Gissing was content to transcribe what he considered valuable opinions and thought-provoking sayings. All the quotations come from books. Whatever material he wished to rescue from the press for possible use found its way either into his scrapbook or, from the late 1880s onwards, into his *Commonplace Book*, both of which are in varying degrees of a documentary nature. Careful analysis of the thematic contents of the *Extracts* shows the wide range of Gissing’s interests as well as the solid reading they represent. The subjects which most preoccupy him fall into half a dozen main categories: (i) morals and behaviour, with some thirty-five entries, (ii) philosophy, with another thirty entries, (iii) literature and art, which also appear about thirty times, under such words as "poetry," "art," "author," "criticism," and "work," (iv) religion and death, in some form or other, come next with approximately twenty references, (v) love, which strictly speaking occurs more frequently than any other single concept, and marriage, with fourteen entries, and (vi) political and social matters, with some twelve entries. This is possibly an unexpected distribution. Perhaps few readers would have predicted that "love" would occur more often than any other single concept, although Gissing’s loneliness is obvious enough. However, a mechanical counting of concepts can be misleading. Thus Gissing’s preoccupation with the idea of intellectual aristocracy is not reflected nominally here, although it crops up in several of the contexts in question. Also, his overriding concern with literature disguises the fact that there is very little about aesthetics in this long sequence of quotations. But, on the other hand, the absence of entries on a given subject does not necessarily mean any corresponding lack of interest in it; statements of *his own* views on the aesthetics of the novel, for instance, are not wanting elsewhere.

There is no evidence that Gissing’s motivation when reading the books from which he transcribed passages was a deliberate quest for any particular concept. In so far as it can be safely determined, it was a quest for culture and for wisdom, sought by both the man and the writer. Any reader who is familiar with the many facets of Gissing’s personality will as a rule easily guess the reason or reasons why he keenly responded to this or that verdict or intuition. The maxims may be self-consolatory, self-congratulatory, self-pitying or self-critical. Whatever the subject of the extract as it was defined by Gissing, or as it might be redefined more objectively by his critics, we note in these *Extracts* a predilection for writers—poets and philosophers, essayists and playwrights—who embraced the whole of life. When a novelist is quoted, it is in his or her capacity as a thinker, not as an artist pure and simple. In Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, as in Carlyle, Browning and George Eliot, he found moralists and, in the broadest sense of the word, educators. His early novels, written before he turned for a while to a series of "problems" (about the writer’s life, science and religion,
the social status of the unmarried woman, and so forth) had a markedly moral
dimension which may well, however diffusely, reflect the dominant moral
concerns noticeable in these Extracts. The moralist could on occasion
become a censor, as when we find him unmasking sophistry or denouncing
spiritual imposture. With him art and morality went hand in hand, and, as
Jacob Korg has pointed out, he was therein in full agreement with Shelley
who, in "A Defence of Poetry," had represented art as the real source of
morality. Gissing's artistic courage manifests itself in his denial that
realism can be purely objective: "Every novelist beholds a world of his own,
and the supreme endeavour of his art must be to body forth that world as it
exists for him. . . . A demand for objectivity in fiction is worse than
meaningless, for apart from the personality of the workman no literary work
can exist." That he was a moralist who idolized beauty is another appar­
tent contradiction, but this need not trouble us any more than the many other
conflicting impulses which fertilize his work. His idolization of beauty
sprang from the romantic élans of his nature which were never quite chas­
tened either by experience or by the wise teachings of philosophers. Be­
sides, his motivation in transcribing some of the Extracts was at least
partly aesthetic. Sensitivity to language was a dominant feature of the
man: there is no doubt that he admired Landor's and De Quincey's writings
more for their style than for the originality of their subject-matter. At
Tennyson's death, he commented significantly: "Well, we have lost our one
indisputably great poet; for my own part, I agree with those who think him a
worthy successor of Theocritus and Virgil. He had not much to say, but his
utterance is consummate, the very perfection of language."

II

Just as the artistic significance of Extracts from my Reading is enhanced by
being seen in the light of Gissing's art of fiction, so its documentary
importance will be better apprehended if the material it contains is viewed
from a more technical angle and its use analyzed as systematically as possi­
ble.

Let it first be made clear that this copybook, hereafter to be described
physically, belongs to a collection, now dispersed, of personal documents
which were sold singly, first by Algernon Gissing, the novelist's brother,
and then by Gissing's younger son, Alfred, years after his father's death. It
should be placed alongside (i) an American notebook in the Beinecke
Library at Yale University which contains miscellaneous quotations and
personal notes for 1877, (ii) a notebook held by the Huntington Library
which Gissing began to use in 1895, (iii) a scrapbook of considerable impor­
tance in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library covering a period of about twenty
Introduction

years from the early 1880s onward, (iv) the Commonplace Book (1887-1903) edited by Jacob Korg, and (v) the Diary (1887-1902) edited by Pierre Coutillas. Other material of a similar nature has survived, especially a collection of press-cuttings about a variety of literary figures, mainly English and American, but it can vie in point of interest neither with the four unpublished notebooks nor with the Commonplace Book and the Diary. Further, these documents did not have the same function. If the diary, despite some regrettable gaps, is essentially a factual daily record of literary and other activities, the other copybooks and notebooks are, with one exception, miscellaneous mementoes of personal doings, repositories of quotations, projects, and articles extracted from, or remarks inspired by, the press and the like.

The exception is Extracts from my Reading, which consists exclusively of quotations, 172 in number. Doubtless Gissing was thinking of this copybook when he wrote to his seventeen-year-old sister Margaret on November 27, 1880, that she should keep a commonplace book, as he himself had been doing for a long time, finding it "most useful." In this he was following the example set him by his father, whose own commonplace book, currently in private hands, may certainly be regarded as the model and ancestor of Extracts from my Reading. The elder Gissing was even more methodical than his most academic son was to be: the 112 pages of quotations from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors were preceded by an index which gives some notion of the subjects that appealed most to him as well as of the authors he read. Politics, religion and nature are his main concerns, and if the notebook begins with Cobbett and ends with Washington Irving, it is Dickens, about whom his son was destined to become an authority, who is probably the most frequently quoted author. By a touching coincidence both father and son modestly wrote one entry of their own in their respective commonplace books of quotations. Thomas Gissing filled in the last few pages with a rhapsody on nature, a subject which was to haunt George throughout his life and erupt into an apotheosis in The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft. "What is more wonderful, more awe-inspiring, than Nature?" asked the Wakefield chemist, botanist and amateur poet. "What is it that makes man more aware of his own insignificance, than the contemplation of the mighty Universe? Nature!" And he went on to pour out those romantic views which he had expressed earlier in his three collections of verse.

Gissing's own notebooks, in particular Extracts from my Reading, were to have a more professional function, and his use of them remained very much a secret to the literary world until they began to appear in sale-rooms. A Sotheby catalogue (no. 1438, July 22-26, 1929) contains a brief description of the autograph commonplace book, "signed, 1st April 1880, 58pp 4to, written on both sides, original boards. Very neatly written 'Extracts from my
Introduction

Reading', with quotations from Goethe, Carlyle, George Eliot, Voltaire, Ruskin and others, many of which are used in his works." The British Library copy of this catalogue informs us that this "Fine Gissing Item," as it was called, was knocked down to Walter T. Spencer for £94. Spencer had known Gissing in the 1880s and was so convinced of the importance of the lot that he had ordered his assistant to bid up to £485 for it. After that Extracts from my Reading emerged again at the Anderson Galleries in New York on April 14, 1937 (item 132). The long description of the contents, headed "A George Gissing Manuscript of the Greatest Importance," was this time accompanied by a facsimile of the original page containing the extracts from Landor's "Aesop and Rhodope" and from Spenser's introduction to the Faerie Queene. According to American Book Prices Current, the lot fetched $675 this time. This was the last public appearance of the notebook on record. It was promptly acquired by the Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

On the face of it, the notebook poses no special difficulty to the reader. The long list of quotations is neatly written in a hand which changed appreciably over the years, but, unlike some other private papers, notably the Huntington notebook, betrays no haste. However, the bareness of the document makes it all the more intriguing in that, strictly speaking, no entry is dated, and nothing is said of the copies from which the quotations were transcribed, nor of the use Gissing made of them, nor of the reasons why he found them worth copying. The whole text runs to approximately 10,000 words in six languages—Greek, Latin, English, German, French and Italian. With the exception of the maxim "Character is Fate," the subject of which is self-evident, all the entries were given a title by Gissing, with varying degrees of subjectivity which may render his choice of title as significant as the quotation itself. The 172 quotations correspond to only 166 entries—three of these contain double quotations while another consists of four proverbs. They can be classified according to the language in which they were written; not necessarily the original language, since Plato (three times) and Chamfort (once) are quoted in English, instead of Greek and French respectively as would be expected. 72 quotations are in English, 32 in German, 22 in French, 22 in Latin, 18 in Greek and 6 in Italian, but fewer authors are represented—27 are English or American, 15 French, 12 Greek, 11 Latin, 5 German and 4 Italian, plus one Dutch (Spinoza) and one Arabic (Mahomet). If the two sets of figures are compared for German and French authors, it appears that if German literature is quoted more often than its French counterpart, the French sources are considerably more varied than the German ones, Goethe having pride of place among the latter with 26 out of 32 quotations.
Introduction

Gissing himself supplied the date on which he started his quotation-book on the inside of the front cover, April 1, 1880, the only date he entered. Collation with various other documents has made it possible to date a number of entries. The list of the most solid landmarks given hereafter shows that about three quarters of the entries were made in the years 1880-1885, that is, between the time he was reading the proofs of his first published novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, and the late autumn or early winter of 1885, when after completing *A Life's Morning* he began to write *Demos*, which was to be his first success. After 1885 he copied but few things in *Extracts from my Reading*, which was gradually superseded by the *Commonplace Book* now held by the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, the function of this copybook being more eclectic than that of *Extracts from my Reading*. No more than in the case of the *Commonplace Book* has it been possible to date each entry, but external evidence gives the present enumeration as much solidity as can reasonably be expected:

1  Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*: April 1, 1880.
58  *Conversations of Eckermann with Goethe*: mentioned in a letter to Algernon Gissing of April 24, 1881 (*Letters to Family*, p. 96).
63  Sophocles, *Antigone*: described as part of his current reading every night in a letter to Algernon of June 19, 1881 (*Letters to Family*, p. 99).
68  Landor, "Dying Speech of an Old Philosopher": quoted in a letter to Ellen Gissing of March 14, 1882 (Yale).
69  Mme. de Staël, *Corinne*: recommended to Margaret Gissing in a letter of April 16, 1882 and obviously read quite recently by her brother (*Letters to Family*, p. 112).
70  De Quincey, *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*: mentioned in a letter to Margaret of October 4, 1882 (Berg Coll.).
78  Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, and Propertius, *Elegies*: a letter of October 31, 1882 to Algernon (Yale) refers to his "reading of a little German philosophy and theology with now and then an elegy of Propertius."
93  Landor, "Epicurus, Leontion and Ternissa" and "Aesop and Rhodope": several letters of September 1883 show that he was reading the collected works of Landor.
102  Ruskin, *Modern Painters*: a letter of October 26, 1884 to Algernon establishes that he was then engaged upon this book (misdated in *Letters to Family*, p. 150).
Introduction

107 Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V: letters of the period suggest that he read this Canto about mid-August 1885.

115 Ampère, *La Grèce, Rome et Dante*: his copy is dated in his hand 1885.

117 Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*: entry 118 is quoted in a letter of October 7, 1885, written while he was reading this newly published novel.

127 Coleridge, *Literary Remains* and *Biographia Literaria*: he may have read these about the time he was reading *Table-Talk* and *Lectures on Literature*, as mentioned in a letter to Ellen of May 31, 1887 (Berg Coll.).

136 Theocritus, *Idylls*: he had just finished a complete reading of Theocritus, he told Algernon on July 24, 1887 (*Letters to Family*, p. 197).

143 Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*: mentioned in the diary entry for June 17, 1888.

146 Voltaire, *Candide*: the diary records the purchase of the book in Paris on October 12, 1888.

152 Landor, "Romilly and Wilberforce": he reread some Landor on December 1, 1890, and quoted this very entry almost immediately at the end of *New Grub Street*.

157 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*: the diary for March 20-24, 1892, records his reading of Lucretius.

164 Martial, *Epigrammaton*: the diary entry for September 8, 1895, shows him reading some Martial, two days after buying F. St. John Thackeray's *Anthologia Latina*.

Research in another direction, as to what tangible (as opposed to subjective, unidentifiable) use Gissing put *Extracts from my Reading* to, has led to a discovery whose significance is likely to remain unclear. If many remarks in the *Commonplace Book* were the starting-point of essays in *Henry Ryecroft*, the quotations in *Extracts from my Reading* were ultimately reserved for another purpose—insertion, with what can now be deemed splendid aptness, in his fiction. But, as we saw, he applied this method with commendable restraint. Only 22 out of the 172 quotations found their way into his books. Here again a conspectus of our findings may be helpful:

45 Spinoza (in English): *Henry Ryecroft*.

50 Goethe: epigraph to "Summer" in the unpublished version of "An Author at Grass."

57 Petrarch: *The Unclassed* (first edition) and epigraph to "Winter" in the unpublished version of "An Author at Grass."
From the distribution of these quotations in Gissing's works from The Unclassed (1884) to Henry Ryecroft (1903)—a pretty even distribution over some twenty years, although certain stories absorbed more quotations than others, notably The Emancipated (four), Born in Exile (five) and Henry Ryecroft (four)—we can infer that even after he ceased entering favourite quotations in Extracts from my Reading he did not let it gather dust on his shelves. Doubtless he knew most of the shorter quotations by heart, but he certainly checked the exact wording when he inserted them in his writings; he was as a rule remarkably faithful to the original. The last two entries that find an echo in the works (158 and 162), however, raise a different point, for he entered these quotations from Boccaccio and Sir Thomas Browne after using them in The Emancipated (1890) and Born in Exile (1892). The reconstructed date of the first entry on Lucretius (157), namely March 1892, makes this absolutely certain. Perhaps happening to reread Boccaccio and Sir Thomas Browne and coming across these passages, he entered them as reminders that he had already used them. In the case of Boccaccio he may have done so when revising The Emancipated for the one-volume edition (December 11, 1892) or when reading the proofs (August 1893); but this is entirely conjectural.

Another difficulty, altogether different in nature, results from Gissing's habit of ticking entries after using them in his works. That he was not quite consistent and sometimes forgot his own system cannot be doubted.
Introduction

Entries 45, 50, 57, 67, 76, 79, 97, 120, 135, 144, 146 and 156—that is, twelve in twenty-two—were not ticked as they should have been. But this does not invalidate our editorial findings; it only shows that he was far less systematic after *The Nether World* and seems to have discarded his system altogether when he wrote the first draft of "An Author at Grass." More disturbing is the existence of entries either ticked (98) or marked with a cross (63, 95 and 100), no echo of which has been traced in the works. But these entries may have been used in stories which have been extensively rewritten, like *Isabel Clarendon*, or lost and probably destroyed, like "Mrs. Grundy's Enemies," "Clement Dorricott" and "Among the Prophets." They may also have been introduced in the published works in an oblique way which is very difficult to trace.

The last of our technical aspects concerns the special link between *Extracts from my Reading* and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. In the preface to the essays by his imaginary recluse, the editor describes the source of the volume as "three manuscript books which at first glance seemed to be a diary." Gissing's own diary consisted of three such manuscript books, but the coincidence, though fraught with erroneous potentialities, is irrelevant; actually, when in June 1901 he thought of revising the original version of "An Author at Grass," he wrote to Gabrielle Fleury asking her to send him three *cahiers* which he said were indispensable. The first of these is unquestionably the *Commonplace Book*. The second, which, on account of its size, would have been more accurately described as a *carnet* than as a *cahier*, seems to be the memorandum book held by the Huntington Library. It is the kind of notebook which Gissing said he always carried in his pocket and which he certainly did carry about him in April 1900 when he visited England and first conceived the project that was to develop into the Ryecroft Papers. Some anecdotes or subjects for meditation later expanded in the book occur in this memorandum book, part of which was, on Gissing's return to France, transcribed into his *Commonplace Book*. The third *cahier*, hitherto unidentified, is undoubtedly *Extracts from my Reading*, and any new critical edition of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* should take this fact into account. If little enough material from the *Extracts* was used in a straightforward and recognizable manner, it should be borne in mind that at the time he requested the three *cahiers* Gissing could not know to what extent he would draw on them. By far the most serviceable was to be the *Commonplace Book*.

But if, viewed from this narrow angle, that is, as a source of the Ryecroft Papers, *Extracts from my Reading* is only a document of minor importance, it compares quite favourably with the *Commonplace Book* when the novels are considered. Whereas very few quotations from the *Commonplace Book* seem to have been turned to account in any of the novels, the entries in *Extracts*
from my Reading that refer to passages in the novels and short stories are far more numerous, and, as we noted previously, they take in the whole of his fiction after Workers in the Dawn. *Extracts from my Reading* very nicely fills the gap that Jacob Korg deplored in his introduction to the *Commonplace Book*: "The notes for his novels to which his letters and diary refer," he wrote twenty-five years ago, "were made elsewhere, and if they survive, have not yet appeared among the manuscripts in the possession of American libraries." The answer to his implicit question is supplied by *Extracts from my Reading*, by the scrapbook, and by the notes in preparation for *Veranilda* in the Pforzheimer Library.

Besides, the discovery of the present document can claim to be a contribution to a subject which has not yet been tackled by biographers and critics, in other words, the extent of Gissing's literary culture, or, more technically, the extent of his reading, the assessment of which presupposes a patient sifting of all the material relating to him—letters, personal papers, reminiscences of his relatives and friends, books, etc. Gissing's library has been widely scattered over the years: only two collections of some importance have been identified, that which used to be in his younger son's home in Switzerland and the lot which remained the property of Gabrielle Fleury until her death, then passed into the hands of her cousin Denise Le Mallier, and is now in the possession of Pierre Coustillas. Only a small part of all these books has been relevant to the editing of *Extracts from my Reading*, though they would all be to the bibliographical reconstruction of Gissing's library and, more generally, of the impressive list of books he is known to have read. He had a habit of annotating the volumes on his shelves; this has been found of special interest, as we can sometimes follow a quotation from his own marked copy through the transcription in *Extracts from my Reading* to its emergence in a fictional context. Conversely, it is to be regretted that some copies of books that used to be Gissing's property have—temporarily, one hopes—disappeared and therefore failed to yield information which might have added interest to the comment on a given entry. A case in point—Goethe's *Gedichte*, bought at Waltham in 1877—is quoted in the commentary on entries 1 to 3. An equally interesting example is offered by an old cutting from an unidentified bookseller's catalogue of the interwar period which used to be in Gabrielle Fleury's papers. It reads:

Gissing.- Three of George Gissing's School Books
Goethe's *Faust* (in German) 1868, 16mo, cloth
Grimm's *Fairy Tales* (in German) 1850, sq 12 mo, cloth
Sophocles' *Traxiniaie*, with notes by T. Mitchell (in Greek) 1844, 8vo, cloth boards respectively inscribed on titles "George Gissing, 1880",

14
Introduction

"G.R. Gissing, Oct/79", "George Gissing, 1887"

Three undoubted genuine autographs. The books being purchased from the novelist's sister.

Similarly a copy of Theocritus, Bion et Moschus, Graece et Latine (2 vols., 1829), sold at Sotheby's on July 7, 1931, might have offered valuable particulars, perhaps even a marginal note on the quotation which served as an epigraph to Thyrza. However, if we combine, as the commentary which follows each quotation attempts to do, all or virtually all the information available about any of Gissing's sources and his use of them, as well as the significance they had for him, we obviously penetrate some distance into his mental world.

It is as essential to realise the limitations of Extracts from my Reading as it is to appreciate its importance. Of the seventy-seven ancient and modern authors quoted, many, such as Theocritus among the Greeks and Dante among the Italians, one would expect to be present, while some others, Abélard and Chamfort for instance, are wholly unexpected and indeed appear nowhere else in Gissing's correspondence and papers. The moment of occurrence may or may not be significant; it certainly is for the entry from Meredith, whose acquaintance he had recently made when he transcribed a short passage from The Egoist, but not for Boccaccio, whose Decameron he had first read years before he entered a quotation from it. He was fond of returning to his favourite books and was sometimes tempted, not always with satisfactory results, to test the validity of old impressions. "Do other people re-read books to the same extent as I do?" he asked in a diary entry for June 8, 1888. It would be wrong to assume that the first entry devoted to a particular author coincided with Gissing's first reading of that author; the commentary that follows the quotations establishes this as clearly as possible. When he began to record his favourite quotations in Extracts from my Reading, he had been, though only twenty-two years of age at the time, a voracious reader for years. His transcription of a sequence of entries from his old American Notebook sometime in 1880 should be a warning against hasty conclusions. It is also essential to bear in mind that if he readily thought of the present manuscript book whenever he came across some quotable statement during the years 1880-1885, his eagerness to do so decreased rapidly in the next two years, and he only wrote in it at long intervals until 1895. In other words, he was most assiduous about making entries during his apprenticeship, before the greater self-confidence that came with relative success. The fact is that except for a spell of about half a dozen years relatively little of Gissing's extensive reading is recorded here. It can safely be asserted that he read thousands of books during the forty years when he was mentally able to do so. Compared to this the works
Introduction

represented here may not be much more than one or two per cent of those which passed through his hands from his early school-days in Wakefield to the late autumn of 1903 when Mgr. L. Duchesne's Christian Worship proved to be the last book he read.27

The first thing that stands out is the extent of his admiration for Goethe, whom he saw through Carlyle's eyes as the exemplary sage and man in calm control of life. He valued both men for their wisdom, which is what he felt he needed at this stage of his existence. Judging by the twenty-six quotations from his works contained in these Extracts, Goethe would seem to have been no less than Gissing's favourite author. His only serious challenger was Shakespeare, whose name, for reasons to be examined shortly, does not appear here. "Goethe will of course always be one of my gods," he wrote to Eduard Bertz on August 3, 1896; "most undoubtedly he had a considerable part in my later education."28 The full meaning of "later" can be gathered from the unusually wide distribution of the Goethe entries in the Extracts (1 to 149, with a pretty even distribution up to 89 and a sudden gap between 1883 and 1889 or thereabouts). Goethe is followed by Carlyle, from whose works there are twelve consecutive early quotations. Short of admiring Carlyle to the end—there is evidence that he did not—he knew his works well and quoted him from memory or mentioned him even in novels such as Isabel Clarendon, New Grub Street and In the Year of Jubilee, which were written after his enthusiasm had cooled down. Otherwise the next most frequently quoted writers are Coleridge and Landor (six entries each), Ruskin and Pater (five each), Homer, Plato, Horace and Dante (four each) and Sophocles, Voltaire and Browning (three each). There is no major surprise in this list, and even our genuine surprise at seeing Goethe swamp the English, French, Greek and Latin authors who were known to rank among his favourites must perhaps be tempered by the eminently quotable nature of Goethe's works and by Gissing's greater propensity to record his admiration or approval in the days of his literary apprenticeship. Still, this argument has no overwhelming weight. Quite unexpected is the complete absence of Heine and Schopenhauer, who are equally quotable and are well known to have been read with both delight and profit by the young Gissing. Witty and aphoristic, Schopenhauer wrote brilliantly on all the subjects closest to Gissing's heart; indeed "Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit" seems the best possible description of the passages collected in Extracts from my Reading. It is, however, in the novelist's works—Workers in the Dawn, the essay on "The Hope of Pessimism," and The Unclassed—that one must look for Schopenhauer, and not in Gissing's various manuscript books. And it is in his correspondence that one must seek evidence of his interest in Heine, who appears but once in the works (Born in Exile, Part VII, Ch. I). The absence of these names notwithstanding, the Extracts testify to his predilection for German literature in his early career. A letter to his younger brother written from Boston
Introduction

reports that he had "been reading a great deal of German lately," and he taught German among other languages at Waltham High School. Until he met Eduard Bertz in early 1879 he had hankered in vain after German books, and the period when German literature took precedence over other modern literatures in his hours of study coincides with Bertz’s London days. Another letter to his younger brother dated December 21, 1879, speaks for itself: "I am studying German literature pretty closely at present. I think I may perhaps make it a specialty some day. It is not too much studied in England."

But this absorbing interest was to decline gradually during the 1880s. If the absence of any German entry after he read Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* should not be regarded as too significant, a diary entry for February 21, 1892, nonetheless points to a change which cannot be overlooked: "Reading 'Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre',—the first German for a long time. I have very little taste left for German literature, that’s the truth."

Among the other writers whose presence would have been expected are Milton, Johnson, Keats, Lamb and Tennyson; Balzac and Daudet; Tacitus, Catullus and Livy; Aristophanes and Thucydides. Clearly he transcribed his favourite quotations somewhat erratically, even before 1887, for the commonplace book he began to keep in that year offers no satisfactory compensation. But this conclusion should be placed alongside the realization that there were authors he knew so well that it did not occur to him to transcribe whole passages from their works in any manuscript book. Shakespeare and Milton are two of these. As early as his Owens College days he had read the whole of Shakespeare, the sonnets as well as the plays; he won the Shakespeare Scholarship in 1875. He knew many passages by heart. If we leave aside the Bible, which is something of a special case since so many Biblical sayings have become common property, then Shakespeare, as P. F. Kropholler tells us after investigating the whole of Gissing’s works, is the most frequently quoted source. The textual notes to the Harvester critical editions of the novels establish this with certainty. "The third place," Kropholler further observes, "goes to Tennyson... Apart from Shakespeare there is no English poet of whom Gissing wrote with such enthusiasm. Browning is well behind and so are Wordsworth, Keats and other romantic poets." Again, this could not be inferred from the *Extracts.*

Two patterns are clearly revealed. The early quotations are mainly from Goethe and Carlyle, and are predominantly concerned with literary topics, while the last pages consist for the most part of quotations from classical authors, essentially reflecting features of Gissing’s private life. It is appropriate that the collection ends with two bitter entries on the curse of poverty, expressed via Euripides and Juvenal. Equally telling statements on this subject by Samuel Johnson, as reported by Boswell, found their way into
the *Commonplace Book*, but as by the time he wrote the final entry he had himself become an authority on poverty and its evil consequences, the reader may by the smoothest of transitions pass from Gissing's sources to his own work.

Aside from the information it supplies on Gissing's reading, his intellectual tastes and—indirectly—his motivation for transcribing such quotations, *Extracts from my Reading* derives its importance from three main considerations. Together with the *Commonplace Book*, it throws light on the author at work and on the process of composition, and at the same time complements whatever preparatory notes, manuscripts and proofs have been preserved. To a limited extent it compensates for the loss or temporary disappearance of Gissing's own copies of the books from which he extracted these passages, or at least informs us as to his reading at the British Museum when he could not afford to purchase the volumes concerned. The *Extracts* may also be regarded as a worthy testimony to his distinction as a linguist. For most of the period during which he transcribed these quotations he was familiar with no less than five languages in addition to his mother tongue, and he was to add a sixth, Spanish, shortly before his death. Few were the authors of any standing whom he could not read in the original and, when such was the case, he would often read them in a translation other than English, for instance Dostoievsky and Jacobsen in German and Tolstoy in French. The hundred-odd entries in foreign languages contained in *Extracts from my Reading* are among other things a sign of his intellectual curiosity as well as of the colossal work involved in the acquisition of these languages. Lastly, here stands once more revealed Gissing the humanist, an aspect of him to which most post-war critics have been altogether blind. As Samuel Vogt Gapp aptly put it in his thoughtful study of Gissing as classicist: "In his relation to the classics, [he] is a Renaissance humanist born in another time. It is not for nothing that he had no interest in the Renaissance; he was too much like the men of that period; he went back to the classic himself for release from the mental bondage of his own time; he sought release from conventional Victorianism, as they did from scholasticism." Release, relief, exile—the same terms always occur to one, and it is characteristic of the man that, when he succeeded in achieving his aims, it was through intellectual endeavour, for release from material care he was only granted when he enjoyed what he called in the title of the Lucan entry the "happiness of death."
Notes


5. A diary kept by Gissing in his thirteenth year for a few days (September 10-17, 1870) has been preserved. It was published in The Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family, ed. Algernon and Ellen Gissing (London: Constable, 1927), pp. 4-7. The original is in private hands.

6. Björk, pp. XV and XXII.


Notes

15. Algernon Gissing, co-executor (with Clara E. Collet) of the novelist's will, began to sell his brother's manuscripts to Frank Redway, the Wimbledon dealer, about 1911. Walter T. Spencer also purchased a number of manuscripts from the family. See his Forty Years in my Bookshop (London: Constable, 1923), pp. 217-22.


17. Unpublished letter in the Berg Collection. When Gissing wrote "I have long done this," he doubtless had in mind not only Extracts from my Reading, but his American Notebook and a commonplace book which he and his father used to keep. Again he definitely thought of Extracts from my Reading when he wrote in The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (Spring XX): "Formerly, when in reading I came upon anything that impressed or delighted me, down it went in my note-book, for 'use.' I could not read a striking verse, or sentence of prose, without thinking of it as an apt quotation in something I might write—one of the evil results of a literary life." Ryecroft's testimony cannot be regarded as an objective description of Gissing's case. He is a world-weary retired veteran of letters, prone to run down his own achievements. Gissing, with the exception of the first few months after the opening entry, wrote in quotations rather infrequently and rarely used them in his works. Had he indulged in note-taking with the frequency suggested by Ryecroft, he would have filled not one but many copybooks. Another relevant reference is to be found in a letter of May 22, 1878 to Algernon (Letters to Members of His Family, p. 31, Berg. Coll.) in which he asks: "Do you keep a journal of your reading? It is very interesting to do so and make slight critical notes."

18. This notebook, signed "TWG" and written entirely in his hand, was sold at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in about 1968.

19. The facsimile of a page of the Commonplace Book in Jacob Korg's edition gives an example of his idiosyncratic manner of ticking. In his scrapbook he used the same system except for press-cuttings, across which he drew a line.


21. See the introduction to Pierre Coustillas's bilingual edition of The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (Paris: Aubier, 1966), pp. 61-62. Since the Huntington Library memorandum book is obviously the least acceptable of the three manuscript books when described as a cahier, an alterna-
tive theory is worth expounding. The missing cahier may have been a manuscript book which Gabrielle Fleury chose to destroy, after Gissing's death, once she had transcribed part of the contents under the title "Some Remarks of G.G." at the end of the Commonplace Book. These remarks were obviously copied from a written document—not memories of remarks made orally—and all efforts to trace their source to other surviving papers held by collectors and institutional libraries or mentioned in auction-sale catalogues and antiquarian bookdealers' catalogues have been in vain. It is therefore by no means impossible that Gabrielle Fleury tampered with one of Gissing's manuscript books, as she is known to have done with Gissing's letters to her. She may have disliked some of the jottings—some anti-French passages in the first (unpublished) version of "An Author at Grass" make this assumption plausible. At all events, Gissing would certainly have needed the cahier in question for the revision of his manuscript since at least thirteen entries of "Some Remarks of G.G."—conjecturally the portions which Gabrielle allowed to survive—served as starting-points for nearly as many sections in The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft.

22. Gissing discarded the epigraphs to the four Seasons of "An Author at Grass" when he revised his manuscript in the autumn of 1901. The revision was so extensive that the structure and contents of the book, not to speak of the general effect produced by the semi-fictional reminiscences, are quite different from those of the original version. When Gissing asked Gabrielle to send him the three cahiers, his intentions regarding his manuscript were still uncertain. A month later, at the Nayland Sanatorium, he had practically decided to reconsider it thoroughly: "I walk about the fields and lanes, renewing my friendship with the flowers, and thinking about 'An Author at Grass,' which is taking new form in my mind" (letter of July 5, 1901, Letters to Gabrielle Fleury, p. 142).

23. The following have been identified—the speech by Dolabella in Anthony and Cleopatra (p. 32), which Edwin Reardon repeats mechanically in Ch. XXV of New Grub Street; the motto of the liberals of the late Renaissance (p. 58), which Peak adopts as a principle in Born in Exile; the Horatian epistle (p. 32) quoted by Bruno Chilvers, Aelius Donatus's remark on those who anticipate our thoughts (p. 58) and Peak's Virgilian lament on the years gone by (unpublished entry), all three again in Born in Exile; the extract from Guizot's English Revolution (p. 48) in Ch. III of Denzil Quarrier and in "An Author at Grass" (MS pp.54-55); the quotation from Tre-lawny's Adventures of a Younger Son (p. 42) in Will Warburton (Ch. VII); and the two advertisements, on p. 45, which found their way into Our Friend the Charlatan (Ch. XXI).
24. Pp. 10-11. Jacob Korg had in mind passages like the following in a letter to Bertz of March 5, 1891: "Yesterday I was looking all through my bundles of 'notes.' Heavens! I have material for all the rest of my life."


26. The third item is in the Coustillas collection.

27. His copy, in which Gabrielle Fleury wrote on the front endpaper "Last book read by George Gissing. Dec. 1903," is in the Coustillas collection.


33. In 1898 he read Tolstoy's *What is Art?* in the French translation of Halpérine-Kaminski. The latter's presentation copy is in the Coustillas collection.