Some Reflections on the Scholarship of George Gissing
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“He had been born in exile and had made himself an outcast.”

Into these words Morley Roberts has compressed the whole tragedy of the life of George Gissing. If ever a man was born out of his time, Gissing was that man. He was a humanist, a scholar, and a dreamer, deeply immersed in the old world of Greece and Rome as glorified in their literatures; his true milieu was Italy of the Renaissance, when the learning of antiquity entered its second spring and scholarship lit “a sacred fire, forever unquenchable.” But he was born in the heart of industrial England in the Victorian era, and circumstances were so to shape his life that, torn from the shelter of college life, he was to be driven in desperation to adopt a profession to which he was basically unsuited. He became a novelist: he set himself to the task of dissecting the life of the slums in which poverty forced him to live. He, who had been fashioned by nature and by training for a life of tranquillity and meditation among the silent voices of the past, and who, except for a wild caprice of Fortune, would have lived out his life graciously within the seclusion of university walls, was wrestling from the display of squalor, degradation, and despair a bare subsistence. Still, his heart remained faithful to the old gods; with all the fervor of his sensitive nature he despaired the conditions and the people into whose midst Fate had cast him, and he sought escape from the vulgarities of his everyday existence in a retreat to a world of dead poets, dead languages, and dead glory.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, to inquire into the extent of Gissing’s classical knowledge and training; second, to

1 Private Life of Henry Mailland, 103; 1912 ed.
mark the evidences of scholarship in his novels; third, to discuss whether his success or failure as a novelist is due to the acquired taste for scholarship or to the special traits inherent in his character.

Let me first trace briefly Gissing's career up to the time when he abandoned scholarship for novel-writing. His father was responsible for Gissing's first contact with the great literatures. He had many good books which he read to his son and taught him to love. In many ways he must have been an unusual person, and perhaps it was from him that his son inherited that sense of being a stranger in the world. In *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* Gissing has penned a brief but loving tribute to the memory of his father: "Tonight I have taken down the volume, and the voice of so long ago has read to me again—read as no other ever did, that voice which taught me to know poetry, the voice which never spoke to me but of good and noble things."\(^2\)

At the age of eleven he was considered to be a boy of brilliant promise. At twelve he was sufficiently skilled in Latin to attempt the composition of Latin verse, and was at the same time studying Greek, French, and German. At sixteen, when attending the University of Manchester, he had the reputation of being an extraordinary young scholar, for there he was unmatched for classical learning and carried off all the prizes. His teachers and fellow-students predicted a glorious future for him—scholarships to Oxford or Cambridge and a brilliant university career.

Then it happened—the catastrophe which wrecked his hopes and sent him into exile and disgrace. It was the fault as much of his own precociousness and the too-abrupt breaking of his ties with home as of the wretched greed of the girl who "like a destructive wind . . . had torn his heart, scorched his very soul, and destroyed him in the beginning of his life."\(^3\) His secure world slipped away from beneath his faltering feet, and he was cast adrift in a literally new world. He was in America, with little money, few acquaintances, and a small store of resourcefulness on which to draw.

Possibly this is not the place to wander off into a haze of con-

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\(^3\) *Private Life of Henry Mailland*, 60.
jecture about what might have happened had Gissing’s character been made of tougher fiber, if he had had a more stubborn determination to “stick to his last” and achieve the niche that was so clearly meant to be his. But the temptation was too strong to be overcome. After he had passed through sundry more or less painful experiences, Opportunity again knocked tentatively at his door. He was at this time (1877) a teacher of French, German, and English in a high school in Waltham, Massachusetts. For his services he received eight hundred dollars a year—not a munificent salary, it is true, but more than sufficient for his needs. Some years later, in London, he had to eke out an existence for two on much less. Armed with the savings of two or three years of teaching, with his notable record at Manchester and the glowing recommendations that he certainly could have secured from his former teachers, he might have matriculated at Harvard and earned a degree, the “Open, Sesame” to a great career in the university.

There is no evidence that such an idea ever occurred to him. Within the year he had left Waltham and returned to England. The reason for this sudden change of scene is obscure. Was it a dislike for teaching, or a revulsion from the cruder aspects of the American scene? Of neither is there a hint to be found in his letters of this period. He had, in fact, seemed pleased with his position and happy in his surroundings. Perhaps the real cause was the restlessness of his troubled spirit, a nostalgia for the dear, familiar faces and places in England, or even a mistaken feeling of obligation toward the girl for whose degradation he felt himself to be, at least in part, responsible.

Back in England and with a profligate wife to be supported, he turned his attention to the problem of earning a living. Manual labor, the crafts, business were alike closed to him; his training made him fit only for writing and teaching. Thenceforth the classics could be to him only a beloved avocation, to be enjoyed at moments stolen from the toil of tutoring and scribbling. As lesser men turn to liquor for consolation, Gissing turned to Homer and Vergil, Gibbon and Shakespeare, Dante and Goethe.

When Gissing left Manchester in 1876, he already possessed considerable equipment for a scholastic career, and this increased
rather than diminished with the passage of years. At eighteen he could boast of reading Latin, French, and German as readily as English; he applied himself to the study of Greek with such success that in 1887 he could say: "I shall very soon have as tolerable a command of Greek as anyone who is not a professed scholar." Roberts says that he could read Aristophanes, "lying on a sofa . . . and rarely rising to consult Liddell and Scott."

Gissing's love for scholarship was personal and appreciative rather than technical. He was annoyed, par exemple, at Wolf's hypothesis concerning Homer; for him the Iliad and the Odyssey were the work of one man who stood tall as the gods. He read widely in the classics: Vergil, Horace, Catullus, Tibullus, Cicero, Livy, Pliny the Younger, Apuleius, Lucian, Petronius, Marcus Aurelius; Homer, the Greek tragedians, Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Theocritus, Moschus, Diogenes Laertius, Athenaeus. Of them all he came back most frequently to Vergil, Catullus, and Horace among the Romans, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides among the Greeks. These were the indispensables.

Roberts speaks of his love for the tragedians: "There was no single play or fragment of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that he did not know almost by heart."

To hear him chant the mighty verse of the great Greeks who were dead, and yet were most alive to him, was always inspiring. . . . He knew a hundred choruses of the Greek tragedies by heart, and declaimed them with his wild hair flung back and his eyes gleaming as if the old tragedians, standing in the glowing sun of the Grecian summer, were there to hear him, an alien yet not an alien, using the tongue that gave its chiefest glories to them forever.

It was Homer above all others whom he worshiped. "He has the world all fresh before him, and no fear of not being original. To read him is like standing in the light of sunrise and seeing the world renewed." In Ryecroft Gissing bewails the barrier of language:

I am wont to think that I can read Homer, and assuredly, if any man enjoys him, it is I; but can I for a moment dream that Homer yields me all his music,

5 Ibid., 297. 7 Ibid., 102. 8 Letters, 181.
that his word is to me as to him who walked by the Hellenic shore when Hellas lived? I know that there reaches me across the vast of time no more than a faint and broken echo. I know that it would be fainter still, but for its blending with those memories of youth which are as a glimmer of the world's primeval glory.9

These passages must convey, far better than any words of mine, the passionate attachment of his heart and mind to the classics. There is little doubt that it sprang from a sensuous love of beauty, that it was emotional even more than intellectual.

Gissing's love for Greek meters was his nearest approach to interest in the technical aspect of scholarship. His absorption in them was so great as to amount to pedantry. Consider this passage in The Private Life of Henry Mailand:

We talked of rhythm and of Arsis or Ictus. Pyrrhics we spoke of, and trochees and spondee were familiar on our lips. Especially did he declare that he had a passion for anapaest, and when it came to the actual meters, Choriambics and Galliambics were an infinite joy to him. He explained to me most seriously the differences between trimeter Iambics when they were catalectic, acatalectic, hypercatalectic. What he knew about comic tetrameter was at my service, and in a short time I knew, as I imagined, almost all that he did about Minor Ionic, Sapphic, and Alcaic verse.10

Roberts tells also of his assumed scorn for those wretches who had never even heard of "the minuter differences between Dochmiacs and Antispasts."11

There is also a passage in New Grub Street that illustrates his attitude perfectly. Reardon is asked by Biffen to scan a certain chorus in the Oedipus Rex. He reads it in choriambics. Whereupon the other bids him "treat them as Ionics a minore with an anacrusis, and see if they don't go better."12 Pure pedantry, of course; it may seem ridiculous to the average reader of novels, but it is typical of Gissing's enthusiasm for the subject.

Such evidence shows learning in prosody remarkable in a layman. The average student of the classics has little more than rudimentary knowledge of Greek meters; Gissing's mastery of one of the most difficult branches of classical scholarship might have aroused the envy of a professional scholar.

9 "Summer xxvii"; Modern Library ed.
10 Mailand, 84. 11 Ibid., 79. 12 P. 149; 1927 ed.
Dearest to Gissing of all pursuits was the study of ancient history. He was well read in historians of every language: "I shall go through all the standard works on general history: e.g., Thirlwall's *Greece*, Arnold's and Niebuhr's *Rome*, Hallam, Guizot, Buckle, Gibbon." The last named he had venerated from his youth. "I would recommend Gibbon. The period he treats of is at the root of our modern civilisation. By looking back into the old world, and forward into the new, it embraces a most significant extent of time, and is rife with lessons." The passage in *New Grub Street* where Reardon tells of making three round trips of several miles each in order to buy and carry home a six-volume set of Gibbon on sale for six and six was taken directly from his own life. Gissing gladly walked those miles and cheerfully attenuated his thin purse to possess such treasure.

To Gissing the study of history was not the study of cold facts. He was, as we know, a lover of books, but "how much more he loved the past and the remains of Greece and old, old Italy, 'Magna Graecia' proves to us almost with tears," says Roberts, referring to *By the Ionian Sea*. This was his great gift: a vivid sense of the past that made ancient history live for him, the mute stones of temples murmur the prayers of long-dead suppliants, the ruined theaters ring with the shouts of the factious mob.

I cannot get him [his brother, Algernon] to realise the gloriousness of seeing Italy, Sicily, and Greece, Rome, Athens, the Ionian Islands—countries where every spot of ground gives off as it were an absolute perfume of reminiscences and associations. Think of standing in the Forum, and saying to oneself: "Here on this very spot have Scipio and Sulla, Cicero and Caesar, Virgil and Horace, stood and talked; these very blocks of stone and marble have echoed to the noises of a Roman crowd and beheld the grandest scenes of all history."

This, I truly believe, was his mission: to make the dim past live for us as it did for him. What a privilege to have explored with him the treasure-house of history and to have seen through his eyes "the glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome"—the glory and grandeur that still exist for those who have the gift and the will to see. When I think of those excellent, well-meaning but

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13 *Letters*, 41.  
16 *Letters*, 111 ff.
unimaginative scholars who have made the classical languages synonymous with pedantry and boredom, I could almost weep at the loss to the classics, to all who love them and to all who might have loved them.

Out of all this wealth of mind and heart, we have a few passages from his novels, a few letters, a historical romance—written with fast-fading powers in the last few months of his life—and one magical volume, *By the Ionian Sea*, which is more truly Gissing than any other book he wrote or any book that has been written about him. From a few months in *Magna Graecia*, from his joys and sufferings there, from actual contact with the land and civilization in which he had his spiritual home, he wrought a work of love and art. Nowhere else did he display his natural genius so clearly; at no other time did words flow with such readiness from his pen.

Traces of his classical knowledge can be remarked in his novels. His style is formal, scholarly, and ornate: the sentences are balanced and constructed with painstaking care; he seldom uses an Anglo-Saxon word when a longer, Latin derivative is available; he will often employ words transliterated from Latin and Greek to express fine shades of meaning; he loves strange compounds and words of his own coining. He uses classical references in simile and metaphor for the most unlikely subjects; it adds strength and color to the impression for the reader who understands the reference. An old hat is a *petasus*, shouting girls are “*maenads,*” the “slaves of industrialism don the *pileus.*”

His style is cold, clear, even pellucid, but it never sparkles; wit, humor, and dramatic force are lacking. It has a subdued rhythm, the result of much Latin and more Greek, a rhythm that is slow and almost sad. Such elements as rhythmic prose, classical phrases and derivatives, etc. were not an accretion, not an artificial lacquer on his writings, but an essential part of a style that was completely his own. In other words, they were natural to him.

Not so easily traceable is the influence of scholarship in the spirit of his novels, but it is emphatically present.

I refer to his attitude toward modern society in general, and the lower classes in particular. He hated the world of industrialism and the extremes of wealth and poverty it had spawned.
cally he despised the world in which he lived and of which he wrote: the London slums—dark mean streets of wet cobblestones, litter and refuse lying in the gutters, ugly brick tenements giving forth the distinctive odor of poverty and decay—a drab, cheerless blot threatened by a gray and lowering sky. From within it, like a horrid cacophony to ears attuned to the music of the ancients, rose the railing of angry harridans, the curses of weary men, the shouts of children playing in dirty, sunless courts, the wailing of sick babies.

All of it—the gaunt, bitter faces, the lean, toiling bodies, the filth, the crime, the injustice and sheer brutality of life—he saw, and makes us see. He looked at life and saw it shrouded in the gray fog of his own pessimism. For such as these there was no hope; they were the slaves of the modern world, with no chance of release and no active desire for it. They were the quarter-educated, the worse than ignorant.

What he thought of the masses is vividly illustrated in the chapter of *The Nether World* entitled "Io Saturnalia": vulgar, boisterous in their joys, loving whatever is tawdry and cheap, totally lacking in intellectual interests—an uncompromising picture, complete in every detail and entirely innocent of understanding. He judged the class by its externals; he never tried to discover, behind the ugly facade of poverty, the spirit of sacrifice, love, and kindness that beats in the heart of the poorest man. Their aims were not his, there was no basis for mutual understanding; in the midst of the untutored millions who lived on the banks of the muddy Thames he longed for a single friend who might dream with him of the wine-dark sea that Homer knew.

He could feel sympathy only for those who shared his ideals and who desired, however vainly, to rise above their poverty. From these he drew the main characters of his novels—men who are "well educated, fairly bred, but without money." That description fits George Gissing; his heroes are largely himself. Poverty keeps them in its inexorable grasp as it did him; it defeats their efforts to rise, it crushes their hopes for love and happiness, it keeps them toiling until work becomes torture. They never really

17 *Private Life of Henry Maitland*, 314.
expect to succeed; Life is against them. The reader must sit back and regard them with tears of pity in his eyes, but with impatience and angry despair in his heart. Gissing and his heroes were misfits in a competitive world; they made no effort to adjust themselves but retreated into an ivory tower made of books. "Keep apart, keep apart and preserve one's soul alive—that is the teaching for the day. It is ill to have been born in these times, but one can make a world within the world."18

The above remarks must not be construed as an indictment of Gissing's novels. Many of them are good, so critics have agreed; that some are great is little short of miraculous, when we consider that he should never have written fiction at all. He lacked the facility of the born story-teller. He "made" himself a novelist by dint of hard, heart-breaking work; writing, destroying, beginning a new novel, destroying that, reverting to the first, etc.—that was how he wrote. He believed that fiction was his metier; his letters leave no doubt of that: "If ever literature was a man's vocation, it is certainly mine. I feel that no amount of discouragement will make me cease writing."19 "I know very well that this alone is my true work, and it shall not be sacrificed to whatever exigencies."20 Such declarations are impressive; literature was certainly his vocation, but fiction was not his proper medium. His best work was done under the stimulus of strong passion: Born in Exile and one or two more came forth as a terrible cry of anger and protest against modern civilization; but By the Ionian Sea and Ryecroft were the products of a deep and abiding love of books and the past. Gissing's merits as a novelist—originality of subject matter, lucid style, acute observation, and relentless reproduction of detail—outweigh his demerits of gloomy outlook and want of sympathy toward his characters; but the defects are there, and they must not be forgotten.

Just how much of Gissing's character as a novelist is the effect of scholarly training and how much the natural result of his native disposition is a moot question, and one that can never be answered. Probably the true solution is that it was his nature, but his nature bearing the imprint of his later classical studies. From his father

18 Letters, 169. 19 Ibid., 57. 20 Ibid., 87.
he had inherited a love of literature in general, and this love was fostered by early home training. His classical studies made Gissing more like himself. On many boys of different character the classics have made little or no impression; only a sensitive, retiring, book-loving nature could be as thoroughly impregnated with the passion for literature as was George Gissing.

No doubt scholarship is responsible in great measure for his technical equipment as a writer, and here its influence is for the best. But it likewise made writing difficult for him: it refined his critical faculty, and the attainment of perfection became a passion with him. To it are due in some degree his social ideas—his hatred of the lower classes, his belief in class distinction, his ideal of bookish leisure and retreat from the everyday world. Gissing intellectually was an aristocrat and a strong individualist; classical literature was written for the aristocracy, for men of leisure by men of leisure.

Far more, however, can this point of view be traced to Gissing's character. I cannot believe that Gissing could have lived without literature, no matter what were the circumstances of his life; reading was as natural to him as breathing, books were more necessary than food. At the end of his life, he wrote the following words:

Who, more than I, has taken to heart that sentence of the Imitatio—In omnibus requiem quaevisi, et nusquam inveni nisi in angulo cum libro? I had in me the making of a scholar. With leisure and tranquillity of mind, I should have amassed learning. Within the walls of a college I should have lived so happily, so harmlessly, my imagination ever busy with the old world. . . . J'ai passé à côté du monde et j'ai pris l'histoire pour la vie. That, as I can see now, was my true ideal; through all my battlings and miseries I have always lived more in the past than in the present.\[21\]

21 Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, Spring xvii; Modern Library ed.