

POEMS BY THOMAS W. GISSING

BY ARTHUR C. YOUNG

IN one of his letters to Gabrielle Fleury, written on September 7, 1898, George Gissing told her that when she came to his home for a visit in October she must make the acquaintance of his library, since

To know a man's chosen books, is, in some degree, to know the man himself. You shall examine my shelves, and no doubt you will find many things to interest you. The volumes have been slowly collected—often at the cost of a dinner. Some of the best come to me from my father. He was a very intelligent man, who combined in an unusual way the love of science and of literature. As a botanist he attained some distinction; he made a very complete collection of British plants, which my brother now possesses. His delight in poetry was very great.¹

Thomas Waller Gissing, George's father, did delight enough in poetry to teach his son at four or five years of age to recite verses from Tennyson, and his interest was also strong enough to prompt him to try writing poetry himself. The result, eventually, was a little book of poems, some ninety-two pages in all, which he apparently had privately printed and published under the title, *Margaret and Other Poems by An East Anglian*.² The title page has the imprint of Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., London, 1855. For some reason, no mention of this book has ever appeared, as far as I know, in any of the papers or letters of George Gissing, but he does mention from time to time, two other small books of his father's, one called *The Fern and Fern Allies of Wakefield and its Neighbourhood* (Wakefield, 1862), and the other, *Materials for a Flora of Wakefield and its Neighbourhood* (London, 1867). It is difficult to believe that George did not know of the existence of this book, for he was very close to his father until the latter's death in 1870, and very proud of the small botanical studies that had been printed.

¹ Pierre Coustillas, *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1964), p. 56.

² A xerox copy of the book is now in the Special Collections Department of the Rutgers University Library. The title does not appear in the catalogues of either the Library of Congress or the British Museum. The book was identified for me by Mr. Alfred C. Gissing, T. W.'s grandson, who also generously gave me one of his copies for my collection on July 6, 1955.

With some hesitation, I suggest that George did know of the poems but possibly felt that they were not literarily important. Whatever the case with Gissing's eldest son and his knowledge of the book, one Wakefield friend and contemporary of George did record the existence of it. This man was Dr. Henry Hick, who became George's physician, and who, in his "Abstracts of Notes by Dr. Henry Hick on George Gissing's Life in Wakefield,"³ states that Gissing's father "published two books of Verse and 'The Ferns of Wakefield.'"⁴ *Margaret and Other Poems* supports part of Dr. Hick's remembrance; perhaps another volume of poetry does exist, although so far Hick's comment is the only clue to it.

Thomas W. Gissing was born in 1828, in Suffolk; he was baptized in the parish church in Halesworth on June 27, 1830, two years after his birth.⁵ His education seems to have been acquired on his own; he became a pharmaceutical chemist, setting up a shop in Wakefield in 1856, and pursuing his avocation as a botanist. Long after his death in 1870, his son Algernon always identified his father's profession as botanist rather than as owner of a dispensing chemist's shop, thus hoping to eliminate the stigma of being in trade. Although he was not a learned man in the formal sense, Thomas Gissing had intelligence and belief in his own power of thought; he passed on his social ambitions and his admiration for learning to his son George, and he awakened in the boy an inextinguishable love for literature. Along with these values, Thomas Gissing insisted on a recognition of moral probity, based on his personal beliefs rather than on a supernatural structure.

All of his qualities of character and his personal interests are reflected in these occasional poems of Thomas Gissing. The title poem, "Margaret," is a narrative of fifty-four Spenserian stanzas, telling of the woes of a young girl, a cottager, who was seduced and abandoned by her lover, and then spent her life in caring for her child and in quietly helping others. She calls to mind her American counterpart, Hester Prynne. The point of the poem is to say that Mar-

³ Pierre Coustillas has published this abstract in *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, February 1966, pp. 161-170. He thought that Dr. Hick had simply confused the botanical studies for something else.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

⁵ George Gissing's Diary (New York Public Library, Berg Collection), entry for May 26, 1894.

garet, although fallen, was "More virtuous than those who daily sneer," because her sin was public and open to scorn yet she kept her inner purity. Following the verses, the poet attached one note saying that he believed that happy marriages can exist, and he softens these lines of the poem, "The marriage rite's too oft of life the bane, / The marriage ring but crouching slavery's gilded chain," by explaining that the institution of marriage is not at fault, but "the want of a judicious law of divorce, that causes much wedded misery." The note closes with a plea for the understanding and forgiveness of the woman who errs and wants to reform. A second note quotes large excerpts from two pamphlets concerning the repressive laws governing married women and the need for reform.

Among the miscellaneous poems are five productions labelled "Sonnet," whose subjects range narrowly among flowers and the seasons. Other poems are technically sonnets too. Many of the poems are apostrophes to various kinds of flowers and birds, brief narratives on death, and a birthday poem called "To M—," which I take to be dedicated to Thomas's wife, Margaret Bedford Gissing.

The poems in general clearly show that the writer was absorbed in the study of botany, for frequently he will use the vulgar name of a flower and then in a note carefully give its official Latin title; he uses his poetry occasionally in the service of botany as in the verse called "The Water Lily at Eve," to which is appended the following remark:

Hawthorne in his "Mosses from an old Manse," very gratuitously bestows a most disagreeable odour upon the Yellow Water Lily, certainly the perfume is much more attractive than repulsive; and if the American Water Lily has a disagreeable scent, it must differ from the English species.

Thomas Gissing's real talent lay in botany and perhaps in pharmaceutical chemistry, and his poetry is purely the product of an amateur. That he admired the work of the great English Romantic poets is clear from his subject matter and from his choice of forms, and he obviously felt that the objective of poetry was to teach and to exercise the more mundane emotions. The poems are sentimental and ornate, undistinguished in any literary way; they are excellent examples of mid-Victorian occasional verse with all its faults. However, pedestrian though they are, the poems are not embarrassing to

read; their moral earnestness saves them from repulsive stickiness. They are indeed the experiments of a man, who, as George Gissing said, "combined in an unusual way the love of science and of literature."

On the basis of the identification by Alfred C. Gissing, and the statement by Dr. Harry Hick, as well as the internal evidence of the poems showing the writer's intense botanical concern, I think that the authorship of *Margaret and Other Poems* can safely be ascribed to Thomas Waller Gissing, whose love of literature nourished the creativity and imagination of his son George. The last poem in Thomas's volume is called "A Wish," in which he writes:

That future ages yet in gloom,
Should add fresh greenness to my name:
And laughing children near my tomb
Should lisp my lines between each game.

His name is kept "green" not through his poetry but through his botanical researches (listed in the British Museum Catalogue) and through the novels of George Gissing.