

GISSING IN CONTEXT

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Adrian Poole

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Preface

This book is based on the conviction that George Gissing's work occupies a peculiarly central position in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, through its dramatisation of some of the deepest imaginative patterns of the time. Gissing's writing is still often referred either to an excessively specific context (his personal temperament and misfortunes) or to an excessively vague one (a general atmosphere of late-Victorian malaise). I propose to relate his work to that of some of his predecessors and contemporaries with more precision than has usually been attempted.

It will become clear that one of the assumptions behind my argument is the indissolubility of the two terms in the title, Gissing and his 'context'. I should explain the limits and emphasis of the word 'context' here. Gissing's work will be examined from a primarily literary and imaginative perspective, to which the consideration of factors and issues biographical, sociological, ideological and historical will be subordinate. The extent to which Gissing's versions of class conflict or the literary world coincide with and deviate from available historical evidence is certainly not ignored. But such tests of the novels' naïve mimetic accuracy are themselves instruments for defining rather than passing judgement on the deeper imaginative vision. This leads to the more positive emphasis behind the term 'context'. For one of the greatest values of Gissing's work is its ability to encourage us towards the definition of those shared images and forms that go to make up a particular historical consciousness. The preposition 'towards' is carefully chosen, for it is clearly more a question of directing a flow of critical interest than of establishing a triumphant and exhaustive prospect. Several people have suggested to me that the cumulative impression of Gissing conveyed by my argument is that of a writer of considerably greater imaginative energy and literary crafts-

manship than most unprejudiced readers have been able to perceive. This seems to me a reasonable criticism, directed against a liability inherent in my particular approach. In order to guard against misunderstanding, therefore, let me say here that it is not my intention to extol Gissing as *the* novelist most attuned to the central experiences of his age and most successful in articulating them, thereby ignoring his palpable inferiority to Meredith, Hardy and James in terms of creative scope, ingenuity and skill. The 'context' which I hope to establish is offered as *one* possible way of reading and judging Gissing's work, just as Gissing's work is offered as one possible way of reading and judging his context.

Since my argument takes as its scope the elucidation of those elements in Gissing most relevant to a more general analysis of the literature of his time, it has been necessary to select some of the novels for detailed discussion, and to exclude from consideration a large part of his total output. Much of the later work, though eminently efficient and often attractive, was found not to contribute significantly to the furtherance of the argument.

The novels studied are grouped under three headings: the early social novels; the writer and society; desire, autonomy and women. Though this grouping is primarily thematic, it will be noticed that with the minor exception of *Isabel Clarendon*, it also follows a chronological scheme. As with all such categorisation, there is some distortion in this, since *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) and *The Whirlpool* (1897) are as much concerned with the analysis of a general social condition as *Demos* (1886) and *The Nether World* (1889), just as *Demos* and *The Nether World* are as concerned with marriage and identity as the two later novels. Nevertheless, given the need for selection and emphasis, this patterning was felt to do the least violence to the integrity of the individual novels.

This is essentially a work of critical reinterpretation. The only unpublished material that has been used is Gissing's Holograph Diary (1887–1903), in the possession of the Berg Collection, New York Public Library (soon to be published as *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England*). I am grateful to Mr Alfred C. Gissing and to the New York

Public Library for permission to quote from this. In recent years Gissing has benefited from the studies of a number of scholars, among whom the indeflectable Pierre Coustillas is pre-eminent, and I have had no qualms in availing myself of their findings. I acknowledge a general debt to the basic works of biography: Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912); Mabel C. Donnelly, *George Gissing: Grave Comedian* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954); John D. Gordan, *George Gissing 1857–1903: an exhibition from the Berg Collection* (New York, 1954); Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (1965), and the excellent handbook to the National Book League Gissing Exhibition by John Spiers and Pierre Coustillas, *The Rediscovery of George Gissing* (1971). I should also mention Gillian Tindall's *The Born Exile: George Gissing* (1974), which appeared after the writing of this book was more or less completed. I can fairly record here, however, that her approach and aims differ from mine in virtually every respect.

There are two particular critics whose general influence on the shape and scope of this book I would like to acknowledge: Raymond Williams and John Goode. Raymond Williams's comparatively brief discussions of Gissing are to be found in *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958), *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970), and *The Country and the City* (1973). John Goode has made the single most important contribution to a detailed critical reassessment of Gissing, in his essays on *The Nether World*, in *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, by D. Howard, J. Lucas and J. Goode (1966), and on *Demos*, in *Victorian Studies*, xii (Dec 1968).

I am very grateful to Professor Raymond Williams for his advice and encouragement in his capacity as my research supervisor, and to the following for many various helpful criticisms and suggestions: Mr Richard Allen, Mrs Gillian Beer, Professor Bernard Bergonzi, Dr Patrick Parrinder, Mr Leo Salinger, and Mr Graham Storey. Finally, I would like to thank Richard Allen and Graham Odd for reading the proofs.