

GEORGE GISSING'S NARRATIVE AND LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERARY TRENDS.

It is often difficult and unconvincing to identify a writer's work with a particular literary movement. George Gissing is no exception to this. The following pages will indicate the similarities between his work and the main literary trends of the late nineteenth century, without, however, attempting to label it. In order to do this it will be useful to have a brief look at those trends —namely, Aestheticism, the continuation of 'The Great Tradition' and English 'Naturalism'—. In this, the aim of these notes is not to break new ground but deal only with some aspects of the subject already well-known to literary criticism.

Critics have often associated Aestheticism with Pre-Raphaelite tastes, while stressing the differences between them. For them, Pre-Raphaelism was a movement with clearly artistic aims, while the term Aestheticism referred not so much to a movement as to a group of writers who shared similar aesthetic ideals¹. Walter Pater, for instance, in his *Essay on Style*, proposed the search for the exact term, in order to create beauty rather than to achieve greater clarity in the message². That is, he sought to reduce language to its purely 'poetic' function. And Oscar Wilde, as the extreme defender of the concept of 'art for art's sake', was absolutely opposed to the idea that language should be used only to further social or political causes³.

With the death of George Eliot, in 1880, and of Trollope, in 1882, it seemed as if the era of the great Victorian novel had begun to enter a decline. However, because of their prolific activity over such a long period, the Victorians left an indelible mark on English literature and on the very language. The stylistic consequences of this influence are well-known. It is sufficient to note here, first, that they made a great contribution to the development of the English lexicon, which became enriched with many new terms⁴; and secondly, that the Realists

1 George Sampson, *Historia de la literatura inglesa I* (Madrid: Pagaso, 1953), p. 192.

2 Arthur Compton-Rickett, *A History of English Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1945), p. 1275.

3 Monroe C. Beardsley in *Aesthetics* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1966), p. 287, quotes Wilde's words: 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all'.

4 Stuart Robertson, *The Development of Modern English* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 224 and 226.

continued the tradition of caricature, using it both to channel their criticism of the society of their time, as well as to give concrete shape to their vision of it. These writers portrayed society as a whole and, in consequence, their global approach, to a great extent, prevented them from dealing in depth with some subjects that the young writers of the end of the nineteenth century would later pick up and exploit more fully. As regards literary language, one specific consequence of this global view of society is evident in the rendering of dialects. In many cases, the Victorians were concerned less with a faithful reproduction of dialect, than with its function in the work as a whole. In order to ensure an easy identification of it, and to provide the desired touch of local colour, these writers included only certain isolated features and clichés of the chosen dialect, which they placed carefully throughout a narrative otherwise written entirely in a standard variety of English. The so-called 'Naturalist' writers would largely react against this.

Those who advocated Naturalist literary principles — Morrison, Moore and Besant, to mention only a few—, believed that imaginative literature, especially the novel, should be based on an exhaustive knowledge of social reality. For them, the writer should behave like a scientist when dealing with the phenomena around him. And, in order to create convincing characters, he should take into account factors such as heredity and environment⁵. For these authors, London, particularly the East End, was a rich source of inspiration and they were to become accurate recorders of its hardships and conflicts⁶. The 'Naturalists', then, set the action of their novels far from the industrial North of England, which had been the setting for much of the work of some early Victorians such as Mrs. Gaskell, Disraeli and Dickens. This change of background was brought about by the 'Naturalists' desire to be objective and resulted from their exact and intimate knowledge of their physical surroundings. Moreover, although the late nineteenth-century writers shared with their literary predecessors a great interest in the working classes, they accused them of only brushing the surface when dealing with the social problems of their time. Their techniques of description were different; the 'Naturalists' avoided the use of caricature —a device, as shown above, much favoured by the Victorians. Instead, they relied on elaborate documentation to describe the most sordid aspects of contemporary life and to reproduce its reality with great exactitude⁷. In their work, language contributes to the faithful evocation of this reality, a quite different aim from that of the Aestheticists. Similarly, the 'Naturalists' saw dialect not simply as a device to add local colour, but as an integral part of reality. They therefore sought

5 Any discussion of the Naturalist writers requires an accompanying word, however brief, on the development of the sciences in the nineteenth century. The publication, in 1869, of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* contributed, as is well known, to a radical change in the Victorian vision of the nature of man. Biological concepts such as heredity and genetics opened different dimensions and paved the way to new interpretations of the origin and destiny of the human race.

6 Peter Keating, ed., *Into Unknown England* (Fontana: 1976), p. 262.

7 Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 16 and 30.

to achieve a faithful and balanced synthesis of the linguistic varieties incorporated in their works. In order to do so, they developed and perfected accurate methods of gathering material and emphasized the importance of a direct and detailed study of dialect.

This is then, broadly speaking, the literary background to George Gissing's work which, it should be repeated, defies any labelling. However, it is clear that, while he shares many of the characteristics of the 'Naturalists' writers, Gissing also has a great deal in common with the Victorians and even with the Aestheticists⁸.

Gissing is usually considered a transitional figure between the Victorian tradition and the new forms that characterised the Realism of the end of the century. This new turn in the prevailing literary trends of the time was due largely to the influence of writers such as Zola⁹. Although there is no written evidence to support the supposition that Gissing actually read any of the French author's work, there are many similarities between the two writers, and Gissing came to be known as the outstanding representative of English 'Naturalism'¹⁰. Both Zola and he shared the need to go into great detail to produce minute almost photographic descriptions. Gissing thought, however, that the writer should identify himself with his work, not limit himself to being a cold, impartial witness of the world around him. In some of his novels, he used the same techniques as Zola and the French Naturalists to express both individual and collective experience. He found in daily misery and hardship, as they did, much of the subject matter for his narrative. However, Gissing had his own ideas about what 'the faithful representation of reality' actually meant. In his essay «The Place of Realism in Fiction», he argues that realism is no more than artistic sincerity in the reproduction of everyday events, and asserts that 'there is no science of fiction'¹¹.

Reality, for Gissing, was his own room in a slum district of London and the close contact with its inhabitants that allowed him to have first-hand knowledge of the lower strata of society. This familiarity gained him the reputation of being the best qualified historian and spokesman of the working classes at the end of the nineteenth century¹². His vision of society, however, was wider, never limited to this

8 A. C. Ward, *Gissing* (London: Longman, Green and Co. Ltd., 1959), p. 21.

9 'The late Lieut. W.T. Young shows Gissing as the novelist of a transition period, halting between Victorian sentiment and romance and the newer fashion of realism. He notes with precision the resemblances between the English novelist and the various types of French realist, Zola and the Brothers Goncourt'. See May Yates, *George Gissing. An Appreciation* (Manchester: The University Press, 1922), pp. 4-5.

10 'In the case of Gissing... present-day reviewers and critics regard him as the father of what may be vaguely termed 'English Naturalism', as opposed to that older type of realism of which in their respective times Fielding and George Eliot are exemplars': Quoted from Stanley Alden, «George Gissing Humanist», in *Collected Essays*, Pierre Coustillas ed. (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd. 1968), p. 15.

11 George Gissing, «The Place of Realism in Fiction», in *Humanitarian*, VII (1895), p. 15.

12 H.G. Well, «The Novels of Mr. George Gissing», in *The Contemporary Review*, LXXII (August 1897), pp. 200-1.

one field, yet, as stated above, he at one time stressed social problems and showed an honest concern for those who suffered from them. His preoccupation with these topics places him in the tradition of which Mrs. Gaskell and Dickens are two representatives; but, unlike them, Gissing did not believe that man was able to improve society by rising above the difficulties presented by his social surroundings. Rather, he maintained that the combination of environment and heredity conditions mankind to a fate without choice¹³. The radical leanings that Gissing showed earlier in his career, when he even wrote political pamphlets, turned into a more conservative stance later on. The change of attitude towards society was accompanied by a growing preoccupation with the psychological complexity of man. He incorporated this new concern in his later works, thus anticipating the new turn that the novel would take at the beginning of the twentieth century.

His ideological evolution ran parallel to a continual perfecting of his style. It is well known that Gissing constantly revised and amended his own work, as his manuscripts show. The corrections proved that, quite often, he was more concerned with the language than with the content of his novels. These, especially the later works, reflect his long quest for an aesthetic ideal of beauty, much in line with that of the Aestheticists.

These similarities are best seen, however briefly, in the particular manifestations of those literary movements in his work. At the beginning of his career, as already mentioned, Gissing interested himself in social questions and began from 1880 to write novels featuring working-class life—this being the date of publication of *Workers in the Dawn*, his first novel. Later, between August 1885 and September 1888, he wrote *Demos*, *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*. The first two give evidence of the ideological and stylistic evolution which brought him closer to Naturalist literary principles. The culmination of this trend came with *The Nether World*, in which all the characters belong to the working classes. In it, Gissing recorded the dreadful conditions in which they lived and detailed, in a precise and detached prose, the reasons underlying this human misery¹⁴. During these early years, he also ventured into a different field. With *Isabel Clarendon*, (1886), and *A Life's Morning*, (1888), he showed signs of moving away from the novels about working-class life, to write about the middle classes.

From 1890 onwards, after having travelled in France and Italy, Gissing lost interest in the social topics that had drawn him so strongly in the preceding decade. He returned to novels about the way of life of the middle classes, adopting at the same time a more conservative attitude to the social problem. During this decade, in novels such as *The Emancipated*, (1890), *The Odd Women*, (1893), *In the Year of the Jubilee*, (1894), and *The Whirlpool*, (1897), he introduced some of the burning

13 Allan Singewood, *The Novel and Revolution* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1975), p. 124.

14 L.A.V. Chapman, *Documentary and Imaginative Literature 1880-1920* (London: Blandford Press, 1977), p. 79.

questions of the day such as the problems of married life and women's liberation¹⁵. The most evident linguistic consequence of this change in subject matter is the gradual abandonment of dialect in his works. Only in *Born in Exile*, (1892), and *The Town Traveller*, (1898); did he include a substantial amount of Cockney. In the former, his manifest aim is to disparage Cockney speakers, for he ridicules them, contrasting them with those characters who express themselves in elegant and educated English. In the latter novel, his purpose is more Dickensian in that he introduces a note of humour.

In an earlier work, *New Grub Street*, (1891), Gissing employed the Victorian form of the three-decker novel to describe the literary world in England at the end of the nineteenth century. Still following the Victorian pattern, he resorted to the use of the multi-plot and a large number of characters.

In July 1894, a month before Pater died at the peak of his popularity, Gissing wrote that he was finishing *Eve's Ransom*. In this novel, which critics have usually dismissed as being of little interest or quality, Gissing tried to give life to his own 'Mona Lisa'¹⁶. The plot deals with the life of a man subject to the mysterious attraction of a female face, seen for the first time in a photograph. This idea of veneration for beauty was not a new one in his work, however, for most of Gissing's female characters stand out for their physical beauty. This search for beauty and the attempt to create a highly poetic language are still present in his last novel, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, (1903).

There is no doubt that Gissing's insistence upon the grubby side of life and his interest in a faithful rendering of dialect set him alongside the naturalist writers. However, his earnest concern with social problems and his use of a multi-plot structure place him in the tradition of the Victorian novelists. Finally, it is equally true that the continual re-working of his prose in pursuit of an ideal of beauty draws him close to the artistic postulates of the Aestheticists. Rather than being a representative of any one literary movement, Gissing drew on the main trends of his age. While it is true that at different periods in his literary career he favoured differing fashions, yet, taken as a whole, his work is a succession of Naturalism, the Victorian tradition and Aestheticism.

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15. K.B. Lineham, «*The Odd Women: Gissing's Imaginative Approach to Feminism*», in *Modern Language Quarterly*, XI (1979), p. 358.

16. Adeline R. Tintner, «*Eve Madaley: George Gissing's Mona Lisa*», in *PMLA*, LXX (1955), pp. 325-6.