ENVIRONMENT AND THE ILLUSION OF THE "OUTSIDE" IN GEORGE GISSING'S SHORT FICTION

EMANUELA ETTORRE
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI CHIETI - PESCARA

Abstract – This paper argues that in a selection of short stories George Gissing constructs a singular topology of entrapment where the traditional dichotomy of country and city dissolves into a continuous spectrum of alienation, forming a cohesive 'nether world' that offers no refuge, only varying degrees of exile. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "the thought of the outside" (Foucault 1998, p. 154), this analysis demonstrates how the protagonists' yearning for an alternative existence beyond their spatial limits drives them towards physical displacement, only to reveal its tragic illusion. Their movements in space – whether from rural to urban or urban to rural – never lead to liberation, but trigger a state of psychological and physiological unfitness, which in turn reflect a cruel kind of environmental determinism. Through a close reading of the stories *Transplanted*, *A Son of the Soil* and *A Freak of Nature* this paper examines how Gissing subverts the pastoral ideal and the ideology of environmental reform, exposing the barbarism inherent in the civilizing impulse itself. The character's incompatibility with any new environment underlines a deep ontological immobility that makes them "irremediably outside the outside". Ultimately, Gissing's naturalist project presents a harsh critique of any philanthropic attempt to transcend one's constitutive milieu, framing such efforts as dangerous experiment that confirm the inescapable power of environment in shaping, confining and finally fracturing the individual.

Keywords: George Gissing; Ecocriticism; Literary Naturalism; Foucault; Environmental Determinism.

In the literary naturalism of George Gissing, place functions not as a passive backdrop, but as a determinant of subjectivity, an ecological and psychological force that shapes, confines and ultimately fractures the individual. This paper examines how, in a selected corpus of Gissing's short stories, the author hypothesizes a singular topology of entrapment, a world where the traditional dichotomy of country and city dissolves into a continuum spectrum of alienation. Governed by this unforgiving spatial logic, the characters who attempt to escape their own environment and experiment with a new life are inevitably doomed to failure. Gissing's narrative is saturated with the gloom of the slums, offering a portrait of a poisoned urban world populated by a struggling and often degenerate working class; however, the author refuses to imagine the countryside as a redemptive alternative, or to romanticize it as a pastoral retreat. Whether in the labyrinthine squalor of London, or in the desolate heaths of the countryside, Gissing's landscapes are uniformly oppressive, creating a cohesive 'nether world' that offers no real refuge, only varying degrees of exile. The rural world often turns into a "drearier country, "[f]lat, woodless, unwatered, save by muddy little becks" (Gissing 1970, p. 204) – a description that evokes not an idyllic haven but a wasteland, as seen in the small village in "The Quarry on the Heath", or the Heath in *A Life's Morning*, where "[t]he land was blighted by the curse of what we name – using a word as ugly as the thing it represents – industrialism" (Gissing 2003, p. 64). In such a pervasive ecology of despair, the environment is less a setting than an ecological (and psychogeographical) constraint, and any kind of geographical change or displacement simply recapitulates a deeper ontological immobility.

It is within this topological framework – where every place is ultimately a site of disillusion – that Gissing's interrogation of the "outside" acquires profound significance. This sense of place is

more than a narrative device; it represents the core of Gissing's philosophical principles, as exemplified in "The Hope of Pessimism", where human existence is depicted as a cycle of unfulfilled desires:

> Our passions rack us with the unspeakable torment of desire, and fruition is but another name for disillusion. Every epoch of existence feeds on the vision of some unattainable joy; from the rising to the going down of the sun we lament for that which we have not, and our nightly dreams mock us with a visioned happiness. (Gissing 1970, pp. 91-92)

In Gissing's world the "outside" exists in parallel with this impossible aspiration, as a spectral and perpetually deferred alternative, a paradoxical non-place that functions only as a projection of desire beyond the grim reality of the characters. Drawing mainly on Michel Foucault's formulation of "the thought of the outside" (Foucault 1998, p. 154) as a longing for what lies beyond the limits of one's own discursive and spatial order, this paper argues that this Foucauldian impulse drives the protagonists towards acts of physical displacement, only to unveil it as a tragic illusion. Their journeys – whether rural to urban or urban to rural – do not lead to liberation, but disclose a state of disabling psychological and physiological unfitness, thereby revealing a cruel kind of environmental determinism: the "outside" is a void, and to be drawn to it is to be condemned to a double exile from both the self and the world one seeks to escape.

The characters' attempts to cross spatial boundaries produce a self-destructive centripetal movement – a movement that, in its very enactment, circles back to and reinforces their fixed and subjugated position within the social and ecological order. Whether entrapped by a suburban labyrinth or enclosed by nature, Gissing's protagonists are magnetically drawn to the "outside"; always attracted by an illusion of alterity, they in fact remain caught within the space that constitutes them. As Michel Foucault observes:

> To be attracted is not to be beckoned by the allure of the exterior, rather, it is to suffer – in emptiness and destitution – the presence of the outside and, tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside […]. The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence – as something inwardly illuminated by the certainty of its own existence – but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible […]. (Foucault 1998, pp. 154-155)

Gissing's characters are living embodiments of this Foucauldian paradox. The spectral promise of an alternative existence can only confirm their irrevocable entrapment because they do not yearn for a tangible place, but for the *idea* of an "outside", which remains perpetually out of reach. Consequently, their physical journeys become tragic demonstrations of their unfitness for any world other than the 'nether world' that has forged them.

This suffering of a Foucauldian absence has a devastating effect not only on the mind, but on the body itself, where the illusion of the "outside" is physiologically shattered. Gissing uses this corporeal crisis to dismantle the increasingly pervasive nineteenth-century ideology of progressive, environmental reform – the naive belief that transplanting an individual from a 'bad' environment to a 'good' one could engineer their moral and social improvement. This belief was a central tenet of the Victorian 'Condition of England' novel, a genre which, in the hands of authors like Elizabeth Gaskell, provided optimistic visions of reconciliation between the classes through compassion, better understanding, and philanthropic acts. Writing later in the century, Gissing subverts this tradition, subjecting its fundamental premise to a merciless naturalist critique. Far from being a noble endeavour, for Gissing the reformist concept is a cruel experiment that simply demonstrates the deterministic fact that a character is irrevocably forged by her or his original milieu. Such a systematic debunking is the main subject of the short story "Transplanted"[1], which exposes the violent result of

[1] Written in 1895, "Transplanted" appeared in Sketch, XII on 25 December 1895 and later collected in *Human Odds and Ends*: *Stories and Sketches*, published in 1911 by Sidgwick & Jackson, London. All subsequent quotations from Gissing's

this fantasy with a disenchanted precision. Here Gissing presents an inversion of the pastoral idea (and a denunciation of related philanthropic projects) through the story of Long Bill, an outcast and idle Londoner, who attracts the sympathy of a wealthy woman by performing a pantomime of starving honesty. Moved by a philanthropic impulse, she offers him a chance at redemption: a job as a labourer at her country estate. Bill, now renamed William Higgs, is "transplanted to quite a new sphere of existence" (Ivi, p. 347), but he is immediately uncomfortable and purposeless, and his body rebels against this wholesome environment with gluttony and illness. Cursing his exile, he is irresistibly drawn back to London, and in a fit of vengeance, he secretly destroys valuable vines and rose-bushes. When summoned by the suspicious gardener, he flees in panic, but is soon found on the roadside, dying from a haemorrhage. His final "transplantation" is to the churchyard, a grim and ironic conclusion to a failed social experiment.

"Transplanted" details the protagonist's incompatibility with the rural idyll that his benefactress imposes upon him. The "fair young matron", who "regarded him with pained, compassionate look" (Ivi, p. 346) operates within a classic pastoral mindset: for her, nonhuman nature is a curative space, and morally determinative; it can reform the corrupted urban individual. Her proposed solution, as filtered through the narrative voice, responds to a precise ideology of improvement: "Far away from London, […] William […] could learn the rural life, could gain health and strength, could forget the horrors of his early years […] and eat the bread of independence" (Ivi, p. 347). What this idealization of country life assumes is a view of nature onto which anthropocentric illusions have been projected, transforming it from an abhuman space into a benign tool for social engineering and personal improvement. Gissing cynically dismantles this paradigm: through his narrative the natural world is revealed to be, not a therapeutic, but an active, amoral force that exposes the protagonist's inherent "unnaturalness" when placed within its ecology. Significantly, this short story centres on the way in which environments shape human beings: Bill is not just *in* London; he is *of* London and his body is an adaptation to an urban ecology: his "slender limbs" and skill in running long distances are necessary to survive in a vast, paved urbanscape; his "meagre trunk" and ability to "occupy as little room in the world as possible" are traits that enable him to circulate within crowded, confined spaces; his "furtive carriage" and "eager […] eyes of a hungry animal" (Ivi, p. 346) are predatory/prey adaptations to the urban jungle. His is an organism evolved for survival in the city, not for tilling soil in the "very beautiful country". Thus, the change of place can only lead to a violent uprooting that undermines the mental stability of the protagonist. When in the country, Bill violates its rules by eating excessively, and by failing to work; he feels "hopeless" and "purposeless" (Ivi, p. 348), and his body finally rebels against healthy nourishment and clean air, resulting in "alarming disorder", "congestion of the lungs" (Ivi, p. 348), and a further worsening of his own pathology. Bill's constitutional unfitness ultimately causes an excess of anger, a final desperate assertion of his own identity:

> […] a great wrath awoke in him: he cursed the place and the people, and, above all, the well-meaning lady who had sent him into exile. Far-off London called to him with irresistible lure; he longed for the streets, the noises, the smells, for his old companions, for the lurking-places of his homeless nights. Money he had none; as yet his weekly wages only paid for board and lodging. But, with or without money, he would get back to London. (Ivi, pp. 348-349)

This passage marks a climax of his rejection. Bill is spellbound by London and by its familiar sensations; "the noises, the smells" do not suggest simple homesickness but the biological imperative of the environment for which he was shaped. Thus, his vow to return "with or without money" is the logical culmination of a body and psyche violently rejecting the incompatible habitat into which they have been forced. The "beautiful country" is beautiful only for those who belong to its socioeconomic group and ecological network, in a managed, natural-cultural space that is a product of cultivation

short stories are from: George Gissing. 2012, *Collected Short Stories. Volume Two*, edited and introduced by Pierre Coustillas, Grayswood, Surrey. Page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text.

and control. For Bill, it is just another hostile territory, as unforgiving as the London streets. His subsequent acts of vandalism are a symbolic and desperate act of war against the very nature he is supposed to cultivate. He destroys the source of his oppression, the symbol of beauty and order that excludes him. His death on the road is the final, ironic transplantation, into the "yet more quiet locality" (Ivi, p. 349) of the churchyard, completing the cycle of failure with a dismal inevitability that underlines the impossibility of any change. As such, the conclusion of the story frames death as the only real escape from the relentless pressure of environment, both urban and rural; at the same time it denounces the philanthropic projects that seek to change man's nature without first understanding the life he has actually lived. This critique was a conscious artistic choice, not a charitable plea. As Gissing himself writes in a letter to Edith Sichel in 1889:

> […] the philanthropic movements of the days are nothing to me save as artistic material, & I care not in the least whether my books promote or discourage these efforts […] Now it is a mere accident that I choose for my artistic material a sphere of life which just now is so attractive to the philanthropic world; an accident that is to say, in one sense of the world. What attracts me is the striking juxtaposition of barbarism and civilization in our strange time […]. (Gissing 1993, p. 75)

In "Transplanted" Gissing exploits this "juxtaposition": he takes the philanthropic project – the forced transplantation of a human subject – and transforms it into a tragic social experiment, revealing the "barbarism" inherent in the civilizing impulse itself. Through Bill's story Gissing illustrates his argument that the novelist's aim is to dissect the pathologies of all civilizing missions and expose them as (at best) temporary solutions.

If "Transplanted" analyses a failed attempt at reshaping an individual from the outside, "A Son of the Soil"[2] presents its natural complement: the subject's own desire for escape, which proves equally destructive. The protagonist of this story is Jonas Clay, a young farmer who leads a monotonous life in a village, growing turnips in his fields. Nothing seems to relieve his discontent except the "blurred, gaslight vision of a remote world" (Ivi, p. 396) – the world of London where his friend Bill had moved some months before, in order "to 'better' himself" (Ivi, p. 396). Jonas decides to abandon the dreariness of the country for the attractions of London, only to lose himself in moral degradation, while in theory looking for elevation and adventure. He is swallowed by the city – and here we should underline the biblical allusion suggested by Jonas' name, strongly reminiscent of the prophet swallowed by the whale after disobeying God. In this story, however, Gissing subverts the scriptural implications: whilst Jonas the prophet spends three days and three nights in the belly of a whale, and after repenting is saved and spat out, Gissing's protagonist will never return to the country, perhaps because he does not regret his misbehaviour. Once in "the brilliant city", his life becomes a sequence of transgressive acts: he surrenders to the appeal of "gorgeous public houses", and of "a joyous being in a hat with an immense blue feather" (Ivi, p. 398); he fights, wastes money, nearly starves, and is "provided shelter" in a prison. However, as the narrator maintains: "Nothing would have induced him to return to rural life; the smell of the pavement was very sweet in his nostrils, and he loathed the memory of the fields" (Ivi, p. 398).

In the end, the temptations of the city also seem to grant him an apparent stability, in the form of marriage and the (perhaps far-fetched) happiness of a family; but Gissing's attitude is undeniably caustic, and in the final lines of the story the reader is reminded that no change of place can ever determine an improvement or a growth of the human being. After his debauched years in the city, Jonas's life is deprived of any hope: his children will probably suffer the consequences of his wrong choices, and – as we are given to infer – of the devastating effects of syphilis he contracted amidst "the marvels of London": "[f]ive years of marriage made him the father of three children, miserable,

[2] "A Son of the Soil" appeared in *Sketch*, XIII, 11 March 1896, p. 302, N°19; it was reprinted in the *Commercial Advertiser* (New York) on 26 March 1896, p. 8, and finally collected in *Human Odds and Ends*. 1898, Lawrence and Bullen, London.

puny creatures, burdened with an unutterable curse. But neither on this part of the story is it pleasant to dwell" (Ivi, p. 399).

Thus, movements in space hardly ever coincide with the coming of awareness or remorse on the part of the characters who, despite their dissatisfaction, and their repeated attempts to cross boundaries, are always doomed to experience a sense of exile, alienation and estrangement in relation to place. Jonas wants to leave the country because he feels no sense of belonging, and because he possesses no real sense of place. From this perspective, Gissing's characters lack a "geographical self" (Matless 2016, p. 31), that is, the capacity to create one's own subjectivity through a meaningful engagement with the surrounding world. The absence of an affective relationship with the environment and with non-human nature, the incapacity to be rooted deeply in place and to experience it emotionally, results in restlessness, dissatisfaction and disillusion. This profound sense of alienation explains why in "A Son of the Soil" – and in notable contradistinction to a growing contemporary desire to go "back to the land" – there is no idealization of rural spaces. Even though Jonas lived in the country, he never really noticed the wonders around him:

> He could not name the flowers by the wayside […] He did not know – he did not hear – the bird that sang to him at his work; no one had ever spoken to him of such trifles. He was aware, by consequences, that the sun rose and set; but never had he consciously looked at its setting or its rising; for all that Jonas thought about it, the sky might have lowered in a perpetual leadenness. *He had no conception of geography* – save that somewhere vaguely to the east lay a huge town called London. […] Field and farmyard, hedgerow and highway, were hateful in his eyes, to be described only by a foul epithet". (Ivi, p. 397, italics mine)

As this passage clarifies, Jonas is so crushed by his labour, and so isolated from any cultural, or nature-related discourse, that might otherwise inform his views, that he is rendered emotionally and sensually numb to his surroundings. Here nature is not a place of quietude or wellness, but is instead simply the ground of oppressive, unseeing toil, which testifies to Gissing's decision to overturn the pastoral paradigm and cancel the neat polarity of country/city. For Jonas, by contrast, London does not function as a real place, but as a vague, abstract symbol of "elsewhere" – a deceptive commodity for a man who lacks the tools to understand any place at all.

Jonas's alienation is social as well as ecological. The natural environment depicted in the story is a site of exploitative labour ("growing turnips in his fields") from which he feels entitled to steal; at the same time his inability to name flowers or birds exposes his profound disconnection from the nonhuman, natural world around him. His vision of London is a "blurred, gaslight vision", a simulated environment that represents an escape from natural cycles and rhythms into a world of artificial and immediate gratification. His subsequent descent is therefore both physical and environmental: the city, like a toxic ecosystem, poisons him, wrecks his constitution, and bestows upon him the biological curse that will pass on to his children. If the story acts as a quiet but effective ironization of the pastoral idyll, it also darkly inverts the georgic paradigm; this "son of the soil" is not "dwelling in harmony with nature" (Garrard 2012, p. 129); he is not nurtured by the land and his work on it, but stunted by it. Nor does his flight to the city improve his life; it leads only to a literal and figurative pollution of the bloodline, as Jonas becomes a product of a new, urban environment, which is inherently degenerative.

In portraying William Higgs and Jonas Clay, Gissing illustrates how physical deracination may turn desires into deceits and ideals into commodities. Their narratives transcend mere failure to explore a deeper crisis of value. For Frederic Jameson the dialectic of desire in Gissing's works is somehow undermined in its very core, as his protagonists are condemned to frustration and renunciation. Yet, this very mechanism of thwarting is what fuels the narrative: "Gissing faces a situation in which the universal commodification of desire stamps any achieved desire or wish as inauthentic, while an authenticity at best pathetic clings to images of failure" (Jameson 1983, p. 192). This insight clarifies the impasse in which Gissing's characters are caught. For Higgs and Clay, the initial aspiration for a better life is itself a kind of commodity, an illusory product of a myth of social

mobility. Consequently, any achievement of that desire (whether through financial success or social climbing) would be inherently "inauthentic". It is within this paradigm of failure that Jameson identifies a "pathetic" authenticity. The suffering, hardship, and dissolution that Higgs and Clay endure become, perversely, the only genuine experiences available to them. In this way, their downfall serves a double function: it is both the inevitable punishment for daring to desire, and the only possible claim to a truthful existence. In the end, this authenticity gives them no dignity; it is indeed pathetic, as it only mirrors the bleak realization of their absolute defeat.

If the thought of the outside as employed by Gissing is a fall into darkness and a perception of the void, even the short story "A Drug in the Market"[3] is no exception. It focuses on another character who has no sense of place and is therefore driven towards an outside in order to escape his squalid life and his familiar discontent. Mr. Potter – this is the name of the protagonist – "thought constantly of home; yet in the true sense, home he had none" (Ivi, p. 219). In fact he does have a home and a family, but he does not feel comfortable in it; "he lived in subjection of his wife, and had no voice in the ruling of the offspring" (Ivi, p. 219). As a consequence, his dreams of the outside coincide with a desire to escape the limitations of a space which implies the discomfort of domestic tyranny. This configuration powerfully subverts the Victorian domestic ideal, reframing the home as another claustrophobic sphere of entrapment. It is a thought that ultimately makes the protagonist long for the death of his wife as the only way to recover serenity and peace of mind:

> Of late, in the night watches, a vision had possessed him. He was incapable of desiring his wife's death, and yet – suppose his wife were to die? Suppose her annual bronchitis were to carry her off this coming winter? It was possible, and every possibility of his narrow life had a thousand times revolved before him. This one, resisted yet recurrent, threatened to become his nightly familiar. If his wife died, why, then he would at once emerge from insignificance, and enter upon a life of comparative dignity. (Ivi, p. 221)

Through the free indirect discourse, the narrative voice merges with Potter's consciousness, allowing us to experience the cynical utilitarian calculus of his nihilistic fantasy. It is with this malevolent thought that the story ends, a thought that the narrator seems to comprehend and even tolerate. This tolerance is a typical naturalistic device which presents the thought as the logical, although extreme, symptom of a psyche shattered by an environment that denies it any spatial or social escape. The story ends by highlighting the most destructive potential of "the thought of the outside"; when no geographical exit is available, the desperate and impossible search turns to annihilation as the only achievable form of release.

The dysphoric relationship between man and place is further investigated in the short story "A Freak of Nature"[4], where Mr. Brogden endures the obnoxious rhythms of city life, as well as the "inflexible routine" (Ivi, p. 205) of his family and working environment. However, they finally affect his personality and make him suffer the symptoms of an urban malady – a psycho-physical distress that drives him to monomaniac behaviour and hysterical disorders:

> Physically he was not a strong man, and for the last year or two he had been conscious of internal troubles which seemed to menace his mechanic health. A nervous disorder, perhaps; possibly something connected with the stomach. […] Nowadays, when he rose of a morning, he generally had a slight headache, and sometimes his hand shook in an unpleasant way. Fits of mental abstraction began to worry him; he would unaccountably lose hold of a train of thought, or be unaware of remarks addressed to him. (Ivi, p. 206)

[3] "A Drug in the Market" was written on 11 January 1895; it appeared in To-Day, VII, 11 May 1895, pp. 1-2 and was later collected in Stories and Sketches 1938, Michael Joseph, London, pp. 255-259.

[4] "A Freak of Nature" was written on 7 and 8 March 1895; it appeared in *Harmsworth Magazine,* II, February 1899, and later collected in *A Freak of Nature or Mr. Brodgen, City Clerk*, ed. Pierre Coustillas, Tragara Press, Edinburgh, 1990, and *The Day of Silence and Other Stories*, pp. 112-125.

The feeble constitution of the protagonist, together with the discomfort of a prosaic life that compels him to be a good clerk, a good husband, and a responsible father of eight children, disturb his psyche and bring him to the point of a nervous breakdown. Brogden's existence is an example of urban environmental conditioning; his life is a closed system of economic calculation and rigidly scheduled movement between Holloway and the City, a system so fragile that "an uncovenanted tuppence would have thrown the budget into disorder" (Ivi, p. 205). This relentless pressure is not a desire for a specific "outside" but a primal, inarticulate need for absolute liberty from the system itself. Consequently, he abruptly violates the rules of the city and disrupts its codes of civility: seized by an irresistible and mischievous impulse, he goes out at night, walks around the deserted streets, starts ringing doorbells without any inhibitions, and then strides away, hoping not to be seen. 'Imprisoned' in a metropolitan environment, Mr. Brogden manifests the signs of a mental disorder: "[h]is brain seemed to rotate, […] a quivering fell upon his limbs, and his teeth chattered" (Ivi, p. 206); the only remedy for his exhaustion seems to be an escape from the city, a change of place. Naturally, it leads him to the country: "The first sight of open country afforded him vast relief. To see the end of London was like shaking off a burden which had all but crushed him […] Air and movement inspired him with a longing for liberty, absolute independence" (Ivi, p. 208). Gissing tries to demonstrate that the 'freak' is not an aberration of individual character, but a logical product of the dehumanizing conditions of society that created him. Brogden's breakdown is a natural reaction to an unnatural environment; however, his flight to the countryside, intended as a curative return to a simpler world, only worsens his condition because he is not really looking for a new place to belong to, but for an empty space in which to shed his identity entirely. Thus, even this escape culminates in the protagonist's loss of common sense and soundness: once he reaches a village inn where he meets a clergyman and a young lad of sixteen, he behaves like a fraud, lying about his own identity and passing himself off as his rich employer. This act is the climax of his mental breakdown. By impersonating his employer, Mr. Truscott, Brogden performs a desperate pantomime of the power, wealth and autonomy his own life so painfully lacks. The countryside, far from offering a restorative idyll, becomes a stage for pathological fantasies of escape, a projection that, in Brogden's case, is violently dysfunctional. Ensnared by his own lies, he decides to run away furtively from the inn; but being "completely ignorant of his geographical position" (Ivi, p. 214), he finds himself lost in the countryside:

> […] he made off like a burglar surprised. Impossible to seek for paths and gateways. Before him was a low wall, and he surmounted it. Only to find himself deep in the mud of a ditch; but a moment released him, and he sped over a broad field. It must have been half an hour before he could find an issue: everywhere seemed to be impermeable hedges. Moreover, it began to rain […]. (Ivi, pp. 213-214)

This final, frantic escape is the ultimate representation of his failed quest. The natural world is a labyrinthine extension of his urban prison; in fact, in ways no different to Gissing's depiction of the townscape, his representation of the rural environment is characterized by squalor, uncertainty and impurity, as emphasized by "the muddy river which promised an end to his woes" and the "mud of a ditch" in which the protagonist falls. These are rivers that, as William Greenslade notes, "figure the economic and moral descent of 'human refuse', and act as "an index of a pervasive blighted landscape" (Greenslade 2010, pp. 59, 60). Brogden is thus lost in both a literal and psychological sense, a state the requires his eventual rescue and return to his old life thanks to the real Mr. Truscott's benevolence, who offers a rare moment of resolution in Gissing's work. Yet it is a resolution that reinforces the system that provoked his breakdown: Brogden is reintegrated into his urban routine with a slightly increased salary, and his 'freak' episode treated as a temporary illness to be cured by "a month's holiday at his employer's expense" (Ivi, p. 215). The story suggests that the pressures of modern urban life can induce a temporary, curable insanity, but the underlying environmental causes remain untouched. The "outside" offered by the country is simply a space to contain a breakdown before the subject can be returned to his designated place in the urban apparatus.

As all the selected stories have illustrated, Gissing's characters are attracted by the illusion of escape from a life of anonymity, poverty, distress, "broken ideals and peddling ambitions" (Coustillas and Partridge 1972, p. 316), but their fictional trajectories hardly ever allow variations or advancement. Despite their frequent peregrinations around the city or wanderings in the countryside, Gissing's protagonists cannot interiorize space; they lack a psychogeographical centre, and their change of place inevitably becomes a moment of further disorientation rather than gain. From a Darwinian perspective, in such a static disposition we can trace the signs of a social and ecological defeat; as we read in *The Origin of Species*: "if any one species does not become modified and improved in a corresponding degree with its competitors, it will soon be exterminated" (Darwin 1998, p. 84). It is not by accident therefore, that in the short stories discussed here, the protagonists display no development of character and are trapped in a cycle of decay from which there is no real escape.

Gissing's topographical imagination draws the reader into diverse places of disenchantment, places that reinforce the aggressive behaviour of the protagonists and their psychosomatic diseases, forms of malady that testify to an unstable masculinity. If the nineteenth-century conception of insanity was mainly feminine, in the short stories analysed here, the paradigm of illness is strictly masculine and is founded on the inability to cope with the cruelty of life, to adapt to places, and to changes. This dissonance between the individual and society, between the human being and place will be overcome only by Gissing's fictional alter-ego and eponymous subject of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), who, after a life "wasted amidst the senseless noise" of London, and "the imprisonment of boundless streets" (Gissing 1983, pp. 72, 19), moves to a cottage in Devon where he is ready to face death. Here he finally achieves a psycho-physical equilibrium. With an awareness of senescence and a serene acceptance of his own mortality, Ryecroft can change place and step "into a new life", into "a wonderful awakening" (Gissing 1983, 25). Now the protagonist can be immersed in the delights of the natural world and find equanimity in the quietness of the country – a composure that will become more intense and absolute with his so longed-for death: "And Death I would fain to regard as a friend who will but intensify the peace I now relish" (Gissing 1983, p. 112). At the end of his life, the peace of the natural environment seems to anticipate his own ending: its "melodious silence is but the prelude of that deeper stillness which waits to enfold us all" (Gissing 1983, p. 72). Only if the senses are appeased, if the character knows that his existence has completed its cycle can the "thought of the outside" be more than a far-off echo; only then is the human being able to accept the inconsequentiality of the world and to attain, in Schopenhauer's words, "a complete and adequate notion of life […] a full sense of its utter vanity" (Schopenhauer 1901, p. 135).

The trajectory of Gissing's protagonists ultimately delineates a pitiless environmental determinism, mapping a world where the self is inextricably bound to its original *milieu*. Their journeys – whether driven by external imposition or internal yearning – invariably culminate in a deeper entrenchment with the very structures they seek to escape. This persistent cycle of failure represents Gissing's subversion of the Victorian narratives of progress, self-improvement and philanthropic salvation, which only result in dangerous illusions. It is precisely this impasse that makes Henry Ryecroft a telling exception. Ryecroft's pastoral tranquillity is achieved only by financial security, retirement, and, most importantly, a conscious movement towards death. At the same time, his peace is not attained through integration into a new environment, but through a contemplative withdrawal from the social sphere altogether. In this sense Ryecroft does not annul the grim logic of the short stories I have discussed here, but rather transcends it by exiting the competitive struggle entirely, and his "wonderful awakening" becomes the definitive reconciliation with the absolute "outside": mortality itself.

Bionote: Emanuela Ettorre is Associate Professor of English Language, Translation and Linguistics at "G. d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara. She has published extensively on Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, Anthony Trollope, Mary Kingsely, Charles Darwin, animal studies, women travel writing and the relationship between science and literature. She has translated three volumes of

Victorian short stories and edited the works of Hubert Crackanthorpe with William Greenslade (MHRA, 2020). She has coedited the volume *Different Voices. Gender and Posthumanism* (V&R, 2022), and *Travellers in the Mediterranean: Linguistic and Cultural Encounters* (Peter Lang, 2024). She has translated George Gissing's *La storia di Denzil Quarrier* (Marsilio, 2025), and is currently working on an ecolinguistic approach to Victorian voices of resistance

Author's contact: emanuela.ettorre@unich.it

References

Coustillas P. and Partridge C. (eds.) 1972, *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London/Boston.

Darwin C. 1998, *The Origin of Species*, ed. by Gillian Beer, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Foucault M. 1998, "The Thought of the Outside", in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Vol. 2, ed. by James Faubion, Penguin, London.

Garrard G. 2012, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London/New York.

Gissing G. 1911, *Human Odds and Ends*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London.

Gissing G. 1938, *Stories and Sketches*, Michael Joseph, London.

Gissing G. 1970, "The Hope of Pessimism", in Coustillas P. (ed.), *George Gissing: Essays & Fiction*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore/London.

Gissing G. 1970, "The Quarry on the Heath", in Coustillas P. (ed.), *George Gissing: Essays & Fiction*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore/London.

Gissing G. 1983, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, The Harvester Press, Brighton.

Gissing G. 1993, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing: Volume Four 1889-1891*, ed. By Paul Mattheisen Arthur C. Young, Pierre Coustillas, Ohio University Press, Ohio.

Gissing G. 2003, *A Life's Morning*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas, The Gissing Trust, Wakefield.

Gissing G. 2012, *Collected Short Stories. Volume Two*, ed. by Coustillas P., Grayswood, Surrey.

Greenslade W. 2010, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Jameson F. 1983, "Authentic *Ressentiment*: Generic Discontinuities and Ideologemes in the "Experimental" Novels of George Gissing, in *The Political Unconscious*, Routledge, London/ New York.

Matless D. 2016, *Landscape and Englishness*, Reaktion Books, London, Second expanded edition.

Schopenhauer A. 1902, *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer. Counsels and Maxims*, translated by T. Bayley Saunders, Willey Book Company, New York.