

# Italy and George Gissing: A Geocritical Approach

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## Abstract:

Victorian novelist George Gissing (1857-1903) was a devotee of ancient Roman culture and visited Italy three times between 1888 and 1897. In spite of this admiration, his relationship with Italy was problematic, largely due to personal mishaps. In light of these conflicting views, my essay considers Gissing's portrayals of mostly Southern Italian locations through his fiction, letters, and travelogues. The focus lies here not so much on the narrator but on the narrated space, with Bertrand Westphal's notion of "geocriticism" at its theoretical core. Far from being a utopian haven, Gissing's Italy emerges as a trans-cultural meeting point where the perception of an "interiorised place" can reshape reality, alter horizons, and redefine established values.

**Keywords:** Geocriticism, Gissing, Place, Spatiotemporality, Westphal

... as I looked my last towards the Ionian Sea, I wished it were mine to wander endlessly amid the silence of the ancient world, to-day and all its sounds forgotten. (Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea*)

## 1. Introduction: Geocriticism and George Gissing

Readers and commentators are often tempted to pry into the works of their revered authors in search of hints that may disclose their intimate lives. George Gissing is no exception, to the point that his personal misfortunes have often overshadowed his undeniable literary talent. As a matter of fact, he produced remarkable works that cast new light on urgent social issues such as the pitfalls of both industrialism and social reforms (*Demos*, 1886), the advent of a literary body corporate that crushes artistic talent (*New Grub Street*, 1891), or the condition of single women painfully aspiring to obtain emancipation (*The Odd Women*, 1893). Still, Gissing's fate as the "spokesman of despair" (Findlater 1904, 733) accompanied him throughout his life and beyond. At times dismissed by

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his contemporaries as “drab and dreary and depressing”<sup>1</sup>, his novels were partly rediscovered half a century later thanks to George Orwell’s short but memorable sketches devoted to the author in 1943 and 1948<sup>2</sup>.

Following these assumptions, the present chapter intends to contrast Gissing the man and novelist with his fictional world. In fact, although autobiography features largely in his narratives, fiction succeeds in taking new directions, almost beyond the author’s own expectations. It even provides an existential added value through the characters’ experiences. In other words, Gissing’s works, even his non-fiction, are far from simple autobiographical *mises-en-scène*. Rather, they evidence how narrative places – especially Italian ones – are much more than paratexts, or sketches taken from real locations. Quite the opposite: the textual depiction of recognisable locations even adds new elements to the appraisal of place itself. To this purpose, the analysis will focus on the representation of Italy as a geocritical entity in both Gissing’s life and writings. First of all, the adjective “geocritical” needs to be clarified.

Westphal coins the term “geocriticism” to explore the multiple connections which texts establish with the physical surroundings they describe, and how the human gaze constantly recreates and reshapes the “real” through texts. Robert T. Tally Jr, the English translator of Westphal’s *La Géocritique*, defines geocriticism as a discipline that “attempts to understand the real and fictional spaces that we inhabit, cross through, imagine, survey, modify, celebrate, disparage, and on and on in an infinite variety” (Tally 2011, x)<sup>3</sup>. The object of geocriticism is then to investigate how even the supposedly referential world, the “real”, is an object of representation: in line with Vattimo’s “pensiero debole”, Westphal affirms that, since the second half of the 1900s, “sembra che si sia accorciata la distanza fra reale e finzione” (ivi, 266). In contrast with the structuralists’ view of a self-contained text, geocriticism aspires to trespass this limitation, starting from the assumption that even the real world around us is often fictionalised, as much as the fictional world is “made real” through symbols, simulacra, intertextuality, and so forth. The consequence of this requalification of the real is that literature is allowed to draw closer to the real itself. Westphal maintains that “[...] il n’est plus dit en pleine ère postmoderne, que le monde de ciment, de béton ou d’acier soit plus ‘vrai’ que le monde de papier” (2007, 13).

Keeping in mind the fluid separation between real and fictional spaces, what kind of connection subtends the literary representation of a place and its “referent” in reality? Westphal identifies three kinds of relationships: a literary space can transpose the real in a sort of “contrat toponymique” (2000, 20); transfig-

<sup>1</sup> Unsigned Review, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 June 1906, 208-209, in Coustillas, Partridge (1995, 505).

<sup>2</sup> Orwell himself is not immune from associating Gissing’s own literary gift with his miserable fate, undermined by poverty. Nevertheless, he sees poverty as a literary *topos*, rather than a simple autobiographical dead end.

<sup>3</sup> Westphal originally championed a wide-ranging discipline that could make literary criticism more accessible to the general public (Westphal 2008, 263).

ure it; create an “alien” place that denies any real one. He specifies that the links between texts and places are variable and fluctuating like sandbanks around the islands that form an archipelago. What is more, defining the basis of the geocritical discipline, he points out that “une nouvelle lecture de l’espace devra avoir pour condition l’abandon du singulier; elle orientera le lecteur vers une perception plurielle de l’espace, ou vers la perception d’espaces pluriels” (ivi, 18). He argues that the object of geocriticism is therefore the trinomial “espace-littérature-espace”, in which “l’espace se transforme à son tour en fonction du texte qui, antérieurement, l’avait assimilé” (ivi, 21). In other words, even the referent of place, the “real” object, never stays the same, and is never what we expect it to be. A similar point can be made about the rendering of Italy in Gissing’s works, not only in terms of space covered, but also in terms of time and narrative structure. In many passages of his travelogue, Gissing clearly expects to see real historical sites as a faithful materialisation of their ancient foundation myths. He searches for an identity between imagined and referential spaces which cannot happen. At times, he realises the vanity of his efforts and confesses a sense of unjustified superiority, of “tourist vulgarity” (Gissing 1996, 82). He seems to be unaware that, through his texts, he has contributed to define a new point of reference in reality<sup>4</sup>. In other words, this sets the theoretical foundation for a discussion on the relationship between Italy as a physical, referential place and its fictionalisation in George Gissing.

The notion of “geocriticism” is also centred on the dualism between “space” and “place”, two concepts that emerge substantially both in the writer’s novels set in Italy, or mentioning Italy, and in his non-fiction, including diaries, letters, and his well-known travelogue, *By the Ionian Sea* (1901)<sup>5</sup>. We will consider how variable observation points and the changing definitions of the horizon play a crucial role in the portrayal of place, especially with reference to the most “Italian” of Gissing’s novels, *The Emancipated* (1890).

In the outset of *By the Ionian Sea*, George Gissing clearly expresses his intent of revisiting Southern Italy in the spirit of a classicist, disclosing the marvels of that crossroads of Greek and Roman cultures which was former Magna Grecia. Nothing seems to come in the way of his purpose, which also joins ancient culture with happy youthful memories: “Every man has his intellectual desire; mine is to escape life as I know it and dream myself into that old world which was the imaginative delight of my boyhood” (Gissing 1996, 4-5). Visiting Italy is to give lifeblood to his inextinguishable fascination with the ancients, a feeling not deprived of sorrow and concern. Indeed, Gissing’s biography is heavily

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Gissing features today as one of the “testimonials” of Catanzaro for his contribution to giving literary stature and substance to the city. See Anonymous 2021, 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> The novelist’s earliest biography, written by Gissing’s friend Morley Roberts and entitled *The Private Life of Henry Maitland. A Record Dictated by J. H.* (1912), also offers interesting clues about Gissing’s life and love of Italy. The biography was strongly opposed by Gissing’s family as too revealing and tendentious. Interestingly, some subsequent editions of this book have supplanted fictional names and toponyms with real ones.

marked by this talent for the classics: at sixteen, he obtained a scholarship to Owens College in Manchester, one of the most prominent tertiary institutions in a provincial town. He was aiming to become a well-respected scholar, with the prestige and monetary reward the role was expected to bring. Still, life choices came in the way: at the age of eighteen, young George was compelled to escape to the United States after a permanent expulsion from the academia for immoral behaviour and theft. Gissing's desperate love for a young prostitute, "Nell" Harrison, whom he intended to redeem, and would later marry, lead him to commit a series of thefts in the college. Recalling the episode of Gissing's expulsion without revealing the backstory, H.G. Wells observes how "the penalty came not in a palpable, definable illness, but in an abrupt, incongruous reaction and collapse. He truncated his career at Owens, with his degree incomplete [...] and from that time his is a broken and abnormal career" (1904, 581)<sup>6</sup>.

It is clear from this first instance how the classics represented, to Gissing's mind, not only the perfection and suavity of ancient language and culture, but also the forlorn middle-class peace of mind and serenity of a scholarly role. This is a condition that echoes in the rather uneventful, though reassuring life of the protagonist of his late diary-idyll *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903): a life its author never enjoyed<sup>7</sup>. Clearly, a voyage to Italy and Greece would represent the crowning of a lifelong passion for the classics that did not fade in spite of the adverse circumstances. However, Gissing was suffering an inner conflict fraught with contradictions. In a diary entry dated 17 October 1888, he compared himself with Goethe who, in his *Italienische Reise* (1816), confesses his initial aversion to Italy and antiquity. He writes: "I remark that Goethe had got exactly into my own state with regard to Italy before his visit there; he says he could not bear to read a Latin book, or to look at a picture of Italian scenery" (Gissing 1931, 228). Goethe talks about a horrible, almost physical pain, caused perhaps by a terrifying sense of reverence towards the ancients.

<sup>6</sup> It was meant to be the preface to Gissing's incomplete novel *Veranilda*, published posthumously. It was instead rejected by Gissing's family members for its scathing criticism of the author and of his "ill-advised ambition to write a series of novels" (Wells 1904, 581-582); it was published separately in the *Monthly Review* in 1904. Quoted in Swinnerton (1912, 18). Wells' preface betrays a personal rancour, instigated perhaps by Gabrielle Fleury – Gissing's last partner – who even deemed Wells responsible for his death.

<sup>7</sup> Schank Daley briefly delineates some stylistic marks in Gissing's prose that recall Latin and, especially, Greek literature: "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" (1942, 27).

## 2. Italy: Space and Place

Gissing's first journey to Italy occurred from September 1888 to March 1889, mostly thanks to the £150 proceeds the author had gained for the upcoming publication of his novel *The Nether World* (1889)<sup>8</sup>. His personal life was at another major turning point: his first wife Nell died only a few months before his departure for the continent<sup>9</sup>. After his return from Italy, the novelist ended his unrewarding private tutoring job to devote himself to literature, and declared in a letter to Eduard Bertz: "I hope never to spend a winter in England. My real life is beginning" (Gissing 1992, 258)<sup>10</sup>. Even his artistic leanings took a different direction: as Mattheisen, Young, Coustillas point out, after his first Italian trip Gissing "was not again to write a novel of the working class" (Mattheisen, Young, Coustillas in Gissing 1992, xxxiv). A second, short trip to Italy via Greece occurred in February 1890, the same year that saw the publication of *The Emancipated*, "a strange, uncomfortable book" (Gissing 1993, 135)<sup>11</sup>. His third, longer journey began in September 1897, only five days after parting with his second wife Edith – not a properly sanctioned divorce, since she suffered from a severe mental condition, and was hospitalised in a mental asylum in 1902<sup>12</sup>. Gissing's first destination in Italy was Siena, where he attended to the writing of the acclaimed *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898). This third trip marked an unexpected return to his land of election – none of Gissing's letters from 1891 to 1896, and only occasionally his novels, mentioned southern Europe. Significantly, to Mattheisen, Young, Coustillas, Gissing seemed to have become "as attentive to the life of the present as to the vestiges of the past" (Mattheisen, Young, Coustillas in Gissing 1995, xviii). Upon his return to England in April 1898, Gissing found himself homeless and in dire financial conditions – this might have even intensified the contrast with the relatively comfortable life in Calabria and Rome. Not long since, his life faced a new change: the encounter and passionate love for the French translator of *New Grub Street*, Gabrielle Fleury, this time an intellectual middle-class lady with "all sorts of semi-aristocratic relatives"<sup>13</sup> (Gissing, 282). It was a relationship sealed by Gabrielle's trip to Dorking and her commitment to Gissing upon her return to Paris, by 5 August 1898. Gissing was still married with Edith at the time: in a letter to his friend Morley Roberts, he

<sup>8</sup> This new, conspicuous royalty seems to have bolstered Gissing's decision to leave France for Italy: see his letter "To Algernon", 3 October 1888, in Gissing 1992, 254.

<sup>9</sup> In another letter to his brother Algernon, Gissing writes about Nell's death: "No need to pain you by describing the wretched place to which I was summoned; I have seen so much poverty & wretchedness, but never anything that so assailed me. Of course there was no excuse for her being in such a place; she had money enough, but I hear it was all spent the day she received it, week after week", ("To Algernon", 1 March 1888, in *ivi*, 187).

<sup>10</sup> "To Eduard Bertz", 7 October 1888.

<sup>11</sup> "To Ellen", 3 November 1889.

<sup>12</sup> Gissing's son Walter is entrusted to his mother and sisters. The other son, Alfred, lives with his mother in London.

<sup>13</sup> "To Morley Roberts", 3 February 1899.

expressed his concern that a “sham marriage” in France would easily become known in England<sup>14</sup> (*ibidem*). In spite of all difficulties, Gissing moved in with Gabrielle, and ended his days at forty-six in Ispoure, in the South-West of France.

Although published more than three years after his *tour*, *By the Ionian Sea* is a vivid account of a section of this third Italian journey, featuring the five weeks spent in Calabria. The initial pages set the tone of the whole book. In fact, when describing his departure from a Naples that seems to have discoloured, battered as it is by an early-autumn sirocco, Gissing highlights a motive that branches off in unexpected directions, both in his fiction and non-fiction. In fact, when describing the shore of Torre Annunziata from his boat he finds himself looking up to the mountains to avoid facing the “abomination” produced by a “cluster of factory chimneys which rolled black fumes above the many-coloured houses” (Gissing 1996, 5). The observer is not ready to embrace the whole landscape, but only the dream-like image he has produced in his mind. Here, we start to perceive the author’s distinction between “space” and “place”.

Bertrand Westphal distinguishes the two concepts, only partially synonymous, by referring to Yi-Fu Tuan’s distinction. Space is “[...] une aire de liberté, où la mobilité s’exprime” (Westphal 2007, 15), as opposed to place meaning “[...] un espace clos et humanisé” (*ibidem*). “Pour Tuan”, Westphal explains, “l’espace ne se transforme en lieu lorsqu’il entre dans une définition et prend un sens” (*ibidem*). This is when space becomes “géographie articulée” (*ibidem*)<sup>15</sup>. The interplay of space and place is essential in understanding the role of Italy as the driving force behind the narrative and the value system that it upholds. In fact, one expects that Gissing’s idea of Italy may have shifted from that of a space where the unknown myth of classical beauty materialises to a “[...] centre [...] de valeurs établies” (*ibidem*) as the traveller is made to interact with the “real” surroundings. Instead, his concept of “place” is still frequently contaminated by the amorphous “space” represented by ancient Greek and Latin literature. A close reading of *By the Ionian Sea* highlights how the “invisible” overwhelms, at times, the tangible, as in the case of his visit to the alleged site of Alaric’s tomb. The legend has it that the king of the Goths, who died during his transfer from Rome to Sicily, was buried under the river Busento, with many precious spoils from the sack of Rome (410 AD). A feeling of absence pervades Gissing’s account of the visit at the riverbank:

It is not easy to conjecture what “spoils and trophies” the Goths buried with their king; if they sacrificed masses of precious metal, then perchance there still lies in the river-bed some portion of that golden statue of *Virtus*, which the Romans melted down to eke out the ransom claimed by Alaric. The year 410 A.D. was no unfitting moment to break into bullion the figure personifying Manly Worth. “After that”, says an old historian, “all bravery and honour perished out of Rome”. (1996, 22)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Westphal quotes Tuan (2002, 83).

Gissing, and several of his characters, are particularly fascinated by those fateful final years of the Western Roman empire, where the ancient virtues were trampled upon, and a new “modern era” was looming. No doubt the nostalgic classicist finds similarities between the crumbling Roman empire and his own time, his “destroying age” (ivi, 10). “Space”, therefore, does not morph into “place”.

On a different plane, characters in some of Gissing’s novels that are set in, or are reminiscent of Italy, react in different ways to Italy as “space”. In *The Emancipated*, Italy is initially appraised by all characters as a land of discovery, an unexplored territory, a locus of mobility and unpredictable change. Still, some of the characters are able to appropriate those spaces and perceive them as “places”; others do not succeed, they remain “tourists” who perceive their departure from the South as a return to the “land of civilization” (Gissing 1985, 207). The novel’s setting shifts from Italy and back, following three main storylines. First of all, the love story of Mallard, a rebellious but talented middle-class landscape painter, and the aristocratic, puritanical Mrs Miriam Baske. Their relationship develops through the appreciation of pure Italian art. The second storyline follows the passionate but doomed love affair between two young aristocrats, Cecily Doran and Mrs Baske’s brother, Edgar. In this case their marriage fails for the exact opposite reason the Mallard-Baske liaison succeeds: Cecily and Elgar are unable to appreciate the life-changing influence of Italy. The last main storyline presents the Denyer family, a mother and three daughters, who discover that their substances have vanished, and are forced to leave their luxurious lifestyle in Italy and resettle in a modest house in the outskirts of London. There, the eldest daughter of the family, Madeleine, bed-ridden after a fateful injury and abandoned by her frivolous lover Clifford Marsh, can only recall with bitter nostalgia her long-lost Napoli shores.

The first scene of the novel unfolds in the room of the young widow Miriam Baske. She is sitting at her desk trying to write a letter to her sister-in-law, who is the instant manager of her property in England. Miriam firmly assures her addressee that, although “Naples is beautiful,” it does not interest her (ivi, 5); she even compares her stay to a bitter kind of exile. “A Puritan at Naples” (ivi, 10), comments Mallard, who will become the ideal antagonist and, later, inspirer, of Miriam. In truth, the widow is caught in a tug of war. On the one hand she has to confront the “interminati spazi,” as Leopardi would put them, of the Italian landscape hidden behind “the branches of a pine-tree” which stands “in strong relief against cloudless blue” (ivi, 5). On the other hand, she is surrounded by the drafts and blueprints of a new chapel that she has committed to build in her Dissenters’ community in Bartles. At the parishioners’ request for a larger place of worship, Miriam is ready to knock down her own house to make room for the new construction. Later on in the story, she still embraces the idea that “the chapel project would enhance her importance” (ivi, 204), distracting her from moving forward with her life, and making her look in the only direction that matters, that of Heaven. The widow is under the illusion that she can transform an abstract space into a place by building a “géographie articulée” (Westphal 2007, 15) around it. This emerges, for instance, in the bird-eye view of the

plan for a new worship site. In her mind, the chapel is meant to become a meaningful, humanised, God-blessed place.. However, as in Dante's *Inferno*, which Miriam starts reading eagerly, human nature, the humanised space, hinders the path upwards. With its horizontal places populated by human beings of the past and present, instead, Italy leads Mrs Baske to consider other perspectives. The focus of attention becomes then the world outside herself: firstly, the mirror in her room, showing Miriam's reflection as a self-discovery; secondly, a reproduction of the *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia* by Raphael, where the distance between divine inspiration and worldly matters is narrowed. Miriam gradually learns to "[...] think of the world beyond her horizon" (Gissing 1985, 202) and removes the plans of the chapel from her sight (ivi, 204). She finally goes through a process of familiarisation with Italy by replacing the glum, austere English mental landscape, still reflected in her grey attire "[...] of subdued mourning [...]", a colour which "[...] would well have harmonized with an English sky in this month of November [...]" but "[...] looked alien in the southern sunlight" (ivi, 3). She gradually comes to grips with the seductive Italian scenery. The narrator reveals how

The name of Italy signified perilous enticement, and she was beginning to feel it. [...] Yes, she was beginning to feel the allurements of Italy. Instead of sitting turned away from her windows when musing, she often passed an hour with her eyes on the picture they framed, content to be idle, satisfied with form and colour, not thinking at all. (Ivi, 204-205)

What intimidates her about the Italian landscape is its gratuitous beauty, deprived of that sense of virtuous usefulness that, to her stern religious upbringing, gives meaning to beauty itself. In the light of her beliefs, Miriam opposes this process of re-placement – for instance, when she refuses to visit the "Blue Grotto", while a cheerful English family seems to have entirely embraced the new place. Finally, though, by a process of free choice, contrary to the stern logic of predestination that her religious faith has superimposed on her since childhood, and under the spiritual and sensuous direction of Mallard, the outsider artist who builds his art on hard labour, Miriam elects Italy as the "place" par excellence. In brief, Miriam's perception of place shifts from a vertical perspective, dictated by religious constraints and personal pride, to a horizontal one, susceptible to change and in constant dialogue between texts and the "real".

To other characters, like the unfortunate couple Elgar and Cecily, Italy remains a space, an amorphous land where values have been suspended and subverted – Italy offers the background for the two lover's elopement, and in some way, facilitates it. Yet, Italy never becomes for them a "place", a "calm centre of established values" (Tuan 2002, 54), but, rather, a pure intellectual oddity.

### 3. Space-Time in *The Emancipated*

How, and where, do space and place intersect? Discussing the significance of context as the missing link between space and place, Westphal recalls Jauss' no-



tions of *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt*: “Si l’*Umwelt* relève du constat, la *Mitwelt* suppose une action, ou plus exactement une interaction, qui donne son sens à l’existence de l’individu” (2007, 16). In Miriam’s eyes Italy morphs into a *Mitwelt*, a place in which to play an active role, whereas to Cecily and Elgar it remains an *Umwelt*, confined in their romantic reverie. The idea of place as an interactive *Mitwelt* is closely related to the concept of time, of a “variabilité spatio-temporelle”, as Westphal defines it. He observes how “l’expression du temps qui passe prend souvent un tour spatial” (ivi, 19), implying, especially during the age of positivism, that time was a movement forward, towards progress and improvement. Space used to be a simple backdrop in the evolution of time; this has changed, he observes, in the aftermath of WWII, when time could not be conceived as a linear progression, and humanity had to acknowledge that “[l]a ligne droite avait vécu” (ivi, 24). If we transfer the concept of spatiotemporality to Gissing’s fiction, we would expect the “straight line” to be the only option adopted by a realistic writer who, in his early years, had even used the positivist calendar. Yet, Gissing takes a bitterly critical approach to the optimistic Victorian age and its faith in the “straight line”. The progression of time in *The Emancipated*, for instance, follows two directions: the first one is the advancement of time, which only leads to failure – for example, Cecily’s disastrous marriage, or Madeline Denyer’s deteriorating health. The second direction, instead, is represented by the suspended time, embraced by those characters who still linger in Italy. Significantly, the two places continue along two distinct timelines – the Italian place of indulging time, and England, the inexorable place of consuming time. *The Emancipated* confronts the reader with a rediscovery of space, not seen as a background to the regular course of events, but as a lived present. Thus, to Miriam or Mrs Travis, the fugitive wife who later re-joins her husband, space-time takes the form of unpleasant memories. For example, the puritanical house setting where Miriam and Elgar spent their childhood, or the upper-class household Mrs Travis forced herself to share with her unfaithful husband for the sake of social decorum. Any other space for them is either a-historical or transcendental, like the idea of the chapel to Miriam, which turns out to be a bi-dimensional place: a blueprint. It is only when Miriam begins to contextualise her present through the sensuous experience of a lived place, that the latter acquires its real importance.

In this space-place dichotomy, Italy emerges at the same time as fiction and factual reality to both Gissing the author and the narrator. To the former, Italy is the reward for literary “success” in the form of royalties for his published novels – a rather short-lived income. At the same time, though, Italy evokes a sense of dismay for an unaccomplished academic career. In the narrator’s eyes, Italy is an antidote to puritanism – as in the case of Miriam’s disavowal of the Dissenter faith. It is also a place of challenge for artistic ambitions – Marsh and Elgar succumb to their lack of talent and determination to achieve their goals. Ironically, only purely talented, bohemian artists like Mallard, whose artistic value is unknown even to himself, are meant to find in Italy their place of elevation. Moreover, still in Gissing’s own view, Italy becomes the ideal setting for a peaceful life, made even more idyllic in comparison with the “dreary harass-

ment” (1996, 146) of life back in England. A point of friction, then, between reality and textuality is expressed by the imaginative use of classical antiquity, the world of past heroes, which, to one of Gissing’s characters from the novel *The Unclassed* (1884), is “[...] a glow of poetical colour which found little appreciation [...]” (1968, 30) in the audience. It is a heroic philosophy of life at odds with contemporary society.

As explained earlier, the fictional aspect of Italy in a novel like *The Emancipated* affects the characters’ behaviour in two distinct ways: on the one hand, those who stay in Italy, and on the other those who decide to leave it. Some of them depart abruptly – the Denyers, who have lost the financial stability that helped them to keep up their appearances as well-to-do socialites. Likewise, Clifford Marsh is called to task by his stepfather who wants him to settle down as a middle-class businessman – a choice that makes his decision to marry Madeline Denyer impracticable. In addition, Elgar and Cecily escape from Capri to Sorrento on a boat, heading to Paris and civilised modernity in order to get married against their guardians’ will. During their escape, Capri does not appear as a lived, interiorised place, but as a space shrouded in myth:

Against the flushed sky, those limestone heights of Capri caught the golden radiance [of the sunrise] and shone wondrously. The green water, gently swelling but unbroken, was like some rarer element, too limpid for this world’s shores. [...] And the gods sent a fair breeze from the west [...] and on they sped over the back of the barren sea. (Gissing 1985, 221)

As if under a spell from the gods, the joy of the newly wedded couple vanishes as soon as they touch the northern shores.

#### 4. Horizons

Italy, as any other places, can be portrayed from different vantage points: we might think of visualising an Italian landscape from above, from below, or from ground level. Westphal discusses these different variables of place representation when emphasising the physical and metaphorical significance of the horizon in Dante. The horizon represents the passage from the finished to the unfinished: to the ancient Greeks and Romans, the horizon is a limit not to be trespassed. The observer’s eye is essential in defining the horizon: distance from it is the result of the formula  $3,57 \cdot \sqrt{h}$ , where  $h$  is the height of the observer’s eyes above the ground level (Westphal 2011b, 3). Therefore, the higher is the vantage point of the onlooker, the farthest becomes the horizon. This has a metaphorical repercussion: the higher the human gaze can aspire, the greater its power to imagine what is beyond the line. Dante would like to ascend the hill to be able to discern the surrounding landscape, but he is impeded by the three wild beasts – partly symbols of his own moral weaknesses.

Referring to *The Emancipated*, the point of observation chosen by the narrator to describe landscapes in various episodes of the novel is quite significant of the characters’ own attitude to life. Cecily and Elgar have a clear view of the

horizon, nothing precludes their sight, but they dwell on the same level with the sea. The same happens with the second unsuccessful couple in the novel, Madeline Denyer and Clifford Marsh. They can enjoy all the clarity of the “[...] moonlit glory of the bay before them”, but they are already elsewhere: “It will be long before we see it again”, is Madeline’s desolate remark (Gissing 1985, 233).

Miriam’s perspective is more nuanced. In the abovementioned scene of the letter writing, she can contemplate the landscape unfolding below her, but she chooses, initially, to let the obstacles – the tree – obstruct her view; once again, a curious similarity with Leopardi’s “sieve” that precludes a full view of the place beyond. Later, she draws closer to the window of her room and manages to enclose the landscape within the window frame, in an attempt to somehow “control” the horizon. Quite different is her later encounter with the Sistine Chapel and the Loggia of Raphael through the eyes of Mallard. Miriam is attracted by a face depicted in the *Last Judgment* section of the Chapel: the scene strikes her as profoundly artistic, even in its grotesque ugliness. She seems to accept Mallard’s comment that a “great work of art may be painful at all times, and sometimes unendurable” (ivi, 318). Instead, she replies that the apocalyptic scene comes across to her as “a reality” (ivi, 319) and, as such, deprived of artistic value. Mallard then invites her to observe Raphael’s frescos in the Loggia, in particular those panels recalling the Old Testament. If art is to Miriam only an imitation of reality, and a reality of punishment, how can she reconcile her views with those frescos where the Old Testament is deprived of that sense of grief and guilt that has been instilled in her since childhood? She slowly seems to embrace the possibility of an outer world, and the option of immersing herself into place, rather than being simply overwhelmed by it, becomes a life-changing experience. Finally, another scene in the novel highlights how the observer’s gaze not only explores a further horizon, but even interiorises it, makes it its own. Mallard wanders away from the unearthed streets of Pompeii, until he reaches the ruins of the amphitheatre:

[...] [He] stood looking down into the dark hollow so often thronged with citizens of Latin speech. [...] it needed but to stand for a few minutes in the dead stillness, and the air grew alive with mysterious presences, murmurous with awful whisperings. Mallard enjoyed it for a while, but at length turned away abruptly, feeling as if a cold hand had touched him. (Ivi, 105)

Darkness conceals the horizon, but murmurs and whispers floating in the air create an all-enveloping, menacing tridimensional, ever-present place. Mallard’s horizon is typical of the modern painter: it is wide-reaching and exhorts the viewer to look farther. Still, it ultimately blurs the contours of the background making the visual effect “[...] significant enough for the few who see with the imagination” (ivi, 274). Mallard’s acute perception of light in the landscape manifests itself in his ability to depict the point of flight as impenetrable, in the style of Leonardo’s aerial perspective. Therefore, a point of flight represents, in Westphal’s own words, a “[...] ligne proliférante [...]” that “tend à être ramenée à une série de points qui ne demandent qu’à fuir” (2007, 31, 32). The line of flight

“aboutira à une déterritorialisation” (ivi, 89), they transform clearly defined lines into a constellation of points. The point of flight is an appropriation of place – we follow the horizon until we become part of it – but it is, at the same time, a point of escape, a new beginning: we become “un altro” (Westphal 2011b, 10)<sup>16</sup>. This “deterritorialization” materialises into a narrative motive. Three years after his first arrival in Italy, Mallard returns to the same places where he had grieved for the unrequited love of Cecily, not only for his attraction for Southern Italy, but also to prove to himself that these places no longer remind him of the past but are actually in tune with his regained freedom from the fear that “Italy was for ever closed against him” (Gissing 1985, 308).

In brief, these passages from *The Emancipated* highlight how Gissing’s narrative evolves not only for the sake of the storyline, but by virtue of the conception and inner experience of a fluid horizon.

Some of the fictional characters live their life surrounded by the past, but they are not erased by it. The past is to them not simply an antiquarian pleasure, but a way to reflect on their present and future decisions. To Gissing, instead, most of his beloved spaces in Southern Italy are part of an “abstraktnomu chuzhomu miru”, that somehow reminds of the immutable rhythm of the ancient Greek romance of “avantyrnovo vremeni” (Bakhtin 2012, 364)<sup>17</sup>, as Bakhtin’s defines it – eventful, but still static, immobile narratives. In Rebecca Hutcheon’s words, these are “spaces of exile [...] places that are defined in terms of absence” (2021, 28). Clearly, Italy is Gissing’s emotional “space of exile” because it represents a forlorn, idyllic past, a missed chance to become a Latin scholar. It is also a space of cultural exile: in his journey to Calabria, Gissing visits predominantly those monuments of Roman glory that have been mostly devastated and ransacked by the Barbarians, the Ottomans or, even a few centuries later, by the so-called civilised Italians. He particularly blames the modern urbanists who have, in his time and age, initiated the *sventramento* of the city of Naples, with the destruction of large portions of its picturesque neighbourhoods and the dismantling of historical monuments for the sake of a new road or railway.

Conversely, some of Gissing’s characters reject the logic of the “space of exile”: they move in newly recreated, newly interiorised places. Protagonists like Miriam and Mallard live in what Bakhtin refers to as a “rablezyanski khronotop” (2012, 418-455)<sup>18</sup>, perhaps less folkloric in spirit and more in line with a Victo-

<sup>16</sup> Citing the novel *La media distancia* by the Spanish writer Alejandro Gándara, Westphal provides a tentative definition of “punto di fuga”: “‘Laggiù c’è, lontano, un punto al di là del quale tu non puoi continuare. La terra continua, la pianura, anche gli alberi, ma né tu né io li vediamo’. Quando Charro gli chiede perché quel punto si chiama un ‘punto di fuga’, Vidal risponde: ‘Perché se io potessi sorpassarlo, allora non sarebbe quello che vedo ciò che mi importerebbe, ma quello che si trova più lontano. Fuggirei da qui, partirei, diventerei un altro’”. Quoted in Westphal 2011b, 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> “abstract-alien world”, “adventure-time” (Bakhtin 1981, 108, trans. by Emerson, Holquist).

<sup>18</sup> “Rabelaisian chronotope” (Bakhtin 1981, 206-224, trans. by Emerson, Holquist).

rian sensibility but characterised by a “vremya produktivnovo rosta” (ivi, 456)<sup>19</sup>, “gluboko prostranstvenno i konkretno” (*ibidem*)<sup>20</sup>, based on an almost physical fruition of place that somehow alters its attributes. It is an attitude aiming to the future rather than to the past.

## 5. Conclusions

In consideration of the profound impact of Italy on Gissing’s sensitivity and aesthetic attitude, we are led to a final question: how does Italy as an interiorised place manifest or influence the novelist’s conception of art? We saw how Gissing the estimator of antiquity has a very dismissive opinion of modern artforms and their presumed lack of creativity. He recoils when he realises, for example, that what appears to be one of the most prominent public buildings in Reggio Calabria is nothing but an imposing porticoed “slaughter-house of tasteful architecture” (1996, 144), invoking the question of the purpose of art in contemporary society. When referring to writing as a creative, artistic process, Gissing’s fiction highlights the consequentiality existing between personal suffering and art. For instance, in *The Unclassed*, another novel that, to a lesser degree, appeals to Italy, Waymark, the aspiring novelist, summarises the role of art in a quite poignant reflection:

[...] the artist *ought* to be able to make material of his own sufferings, even while the suffering is at its height. To what other end does he suffer? In very deed, he is the only man whose misery finds justification in apparent result. (Gissing 1968, 212)

This philosophy finds its epitome in Mallard, the tormented painter of *The Emancipated*, himself a struggling and sympathetic artist, as opposed to the egocentric ever aspiring writer Elgar. But, life’s hardships do not always sharpen creativity. In fact, the other protagonist of *The Unclassed*, Julian Casti, has Italian blood, but represents a kind of renegade, since his father, an adventurer and opera singer, abandons his son to a maternal uncle and disappears. Julian’s admiration for Italy is nourished by Plutarch’s histories and the myth of the Roman empire and its final days, as described so powerfully by Edward Gibbon. Italy represents the imagined place where Julian’s intellectual aspirations can find their way of expression in epic poetry. Yet, his disastrous marriage with Harriet, arranged to keep a promise Julian had made to his late uncle, not only alienates him from Italy as his place of election, but also from his literary ambitions as a “classic” poet. Unlike his father, who made a living through his musical talent, Julian never succeeds in living from his art – the only recognition, in his eyes – and Gissing’s – of a true artist’s worth. The identity of life and art becomes so close-knit that Casti’s thwarted ambitions and induced aversion to

<sup>19</sup> “time of productive growth” (trans. ivi, 207).

<sup>20</sup> “profoundly spatial and concrete” (trans. ivi, 208).

poetry – somewhat remindful of Goethe’s pain at the sight of Italian art – lead the protagonist to a slow death.

To Gissing the artist, Italy is a land of contrasts. The beauty of the scenery and the centuries of artistic treasures that accumulate in the landscape offer an even more striking contrast to the existential qualms and afflictions of humanity described in its core essence. In *By the Ionian Sea*, he witnesses a heated argument between the owner of a hotel in Cotrone and a servant – he calls her a “domestic serf” (Gissing 1996, 77). The servant, perhaps for the first time in her life, stands up for herself against her employer. The scene leads Gissing to observe “[h]ow interesting, and how sordidly picturesque” (*ibidem*) that woman’s life must be. He is fascinated by the contrast between the maid’s hopeless existence and the “romantic landscape”, the “scenic history” all around (*ibidem*). Here Gissing seems to be delighted by the dissonance between the “modern”, lacklustre perception of Italy and its glorious past, as if humans contributed to amplify the beauty of their surrounding by dint of their own shabby presence. It is what some improvised tourists like the Bradshaws in *The Emancipated* think of Italy – a land where every labourer is in for begging and, possibly, deceiving foreigners for some pocket money. Indeed, at a later stage in his journey, Gissing appears to have become more alert to the indivisible link between people and place, even the historical and the picturesque. Only “place” allows a deeper insight into the individual confronted with a hostile environment. It may look like a typical naturalistic view of place as the hotbed of a character’s fate. Rather, there is a more complex, underlying principle: place and the environment do not determine behaviour, but they highlight, or even better, expose this behaviour. In his travelogue and letters, Gissing gradually acknowledges that it is the full picture of Italy he is seeking to grasp, not its most refined details. He finally reconciles with the idea of Italy as a meaningful, approachable “place” rather than a boundless, idealised “space” anchored in the past. The writer concludes his musings on the episode of the rebellious servant with a self-reproach: “Why had I come hither, if it was not that I loved land and people? And had I not richly known the recompense of my love?” (ivi, 82).

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