

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

George Gissing, Greece and the Mediterranean Passion

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Abstract:

Greece is one of the principal countries inspiring the 'Mediterranean Passion' in 19th- and 20th-century English writers and artists. As part of the classical world, it was, together with Italy, a polisemic signifier, the container of a series of meanings and values that contributed to form the collective imaginary of the time. After being associated, in the Romantic period, to freedom and independence, art and beauty, and the perfection of human form and mind, Greece became, in the second half of the 19th century, one of the terms in a series of polarities, among which Arnold's Hebraism / Hellenism. Against this cultural background, George Gissing conceived his short novel *Sleeping Fires* (1895), whose plot unfolds between England and Greece, and whose story can be read as an argument against asceticism and an appeal for clarity. It is my aim to demonstrate how this novel consistently draws upon the writer's Greek experiences as reported in his diary. Both texts show Gissing's love for ancient Greece, with a nostalgia for the past and a dissatisfaction with modernity; a strong attraction to the country's geography, which the author maps with fondness and accuracy; and a caring attention for its inhabitants, whom he approaches with an ethnographer's participant observation. A similar approach is also apparent in Gissing's travel book *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), in which the writer expresses his interest in those regions of contemporary Southern Italy that still preserve the vestiges of *Magna Græcia*.

Keywords: Gissing; Greece; narrative space; landscape; travel writing.

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Introduction

Until a few decades ago, narrative space was assumed to have ‘no other function than to supply a general background setting’ for the situations and events represented (Buchholz and Jahn 2005: 551); space was setting, and setting was ‘the fictionalized environment in which the author unfolds the plot and against which the protagonists are characterized’ (Vermette 1987: 146). But the idea of narrative space as a container, and of setting as the background to action has been gradually abandoned in favour of an approach based on the collaboration between narrative theorists and literary geographers, which has produced a more dynamic concept of space. Sheila Hones has explored some of the ways in which ‘analytical strategies developed within narrative theory might be combined with recent developments in literary geography in the study of setting and narrative space’ (Hones 2011: 685).

Spatial studies grounded in geographical theory have considerably modified the very concept of space, and some scholars have tended to consider it not as a neutral background, an empty *locus* where human actions develop, but rather as a *relational space*, a product of the interaction between people. Doreen Massey is one of them; she proposes an alternative approach to space, and defines it as the dimension of coexisting simultaneity. She writes:

What is needed [...] is to uproot ‘space’ from that constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly so often been embedded (stasis; closure; representation) and to settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity; relationality; coevalness ... liveliness indeed) where it releases a more challenging political landscape. (Massey 2005: 13)

Against the view of space as dead, static, closed, and representationally fixed, Massey champions three clear counter-propositions about the ‘relational’, ‘heterogeneous’ and ‘processual’ nature of space (9-12). Space is thus conceived as a human product, constituted through social relations as well as material and social practices (Lefebvre 1991; Mitchell 2002). Cultural studies on space, post-modern geography, and the sociology of space have demonstrated how *spaces* become *places*: conceptualized as products of social relations, they can be understood as a dimension of human existence, full of power and symbolism (Massey 1994; Cresswell 2004).

Fine distinctions between *space* and *place*, as well as between *environment* and *landscape* have been drawn by critics. Barry Cunliffe, for instance, starting from the assumption that ‘environment is to landscape as space is to place’, opposes the concept of landscape as a construct, ‘enmeshed in a network of beliefs and values’, to environment as a global process that exists outside the particularities of any one culture. So, while environment, like space, exists independently of the observer, landscape, like place, is specific to time and people: it is always the presence of an observer that transforms environment into landscape (Cunliffe 2000: 111).

Peter Brown, on the other hand, points out the differences between what he calls the ‘outside’ approach and the ‘inside’ approach to the relationship between literature

and place: “The “outside” approach is empirical and quasi-antiquarian, dedicated to amassing data and establishing connections between writers and real places. The “inside” approach is more speculative and theoretical in tendency. Its main field of enquiry is the literary work and its economy of meaning, in which the idea of place is more important than the identification of topographical correlatives’ (Brown 2008: 13). In other words, the difference is between the study of ‘literary places’ and that of ‘places in literature’, but Brown also adds that the ‘outside’ method, far from being reductive and naïve, is often adopted by some of its exponents with the awareness ‘of its value in enlarging the understanding of literature, its limitations in doing so, and its position within a larger picture which might include the author’s sense of place, or geographical imagination, and his or her need to bear witness to changes in the landscape made by social and economic pressures’. At this point, he concludes, the ‘literary places’ approach merges with the ‘place in literature’ approach (14).

These integrated methods will guide me in dealing with the relationship between George Gissing and Greece as it emerges from his diary and his short novel *Sleeping Fires* (1895). I shall refer to the former as a source of information about his travel in that country, and use it in my reading of the novel, as Gissing generously drew upon his Greek experiences when he wrote it; in fact, several descriptions of natural landscapes as well as sociological and anthropological observations contained in the diary were woven into the narrative (Coustillas 1974: vi). In both texts, the writer shows a deep interest in ancient Greece, its art and language, with a nostalgia for the past and a growing dissatisfaction with modernity; but, above all, both the journal and the novel display their author’s strong attraction for the country’s geography, which he mapped out with fondness and accuracy. I will also try to explore the meaning of “Greece” in *Sleeping Fires* as well as the author’s personal idea of that country, situating these imaginative constructions within the cultural background against which Gissing wrote his novel.

Gissing and Greece

George Gissing (1857-1903) entertained a very special relationship with space and place. Although he spent most of his life in London, he lived for significant periods in different parts of the world, either by choice or out of necessity. When he was eighteen, he stayed for a year in Chicago, where he had migrated after his expulsion from Owens College, Manchester, having been caught stealing money in the cloakroom of the College in order to help a young prostitute he had fallen in love with. At the age of forty-one, after meeting Gabrielle Fleury, the translator of his novel *New Grub Street* into French, he established a love relationship with her and moved to the South of France where he died at the age of forty-six. In between these crucial periods of his life, he made various journeys to the Continent, minutely described in his diary: he visited Italy three times, and went to Greece once. On that occasion, he left London on 11 November 1889, reached Athens eight days later, and stayed there for about a month. On his way back to England, he stopped in Naples and left it on 20 February 1890.

Since the beginning of his Greek tour, the writer kept detailed notes of his visits to places of interest, providing topographical data which he sometimes integrated with his

own landscape drawings. The few fine sketches included in the diary function more as personal responses to, than as faithful cartographic representations of, those places; and yet, as with fictional maps, they are ‘a statement of intent, proclaiming that in some sense “place” will be of importance in the narrative concerned’ (Irwin 2008: 25).¹

As it often happens with travel books and journals, Gissing’s diary contains numerous remarks on the weather. On 19 November 1889, for instance, the author reports the moment in which he first came in sight of the Greek coast: ‘The wind was fierce and cold. The sky heavily clouded, but over Attica growing fair. Wonderful glints of the Attic mountains. Presently the hill of Munychia became distinguishable, and then the height of Athens itself. Stood eagerly watching, as the details became clear. Passed Aegina, and came near to Salamis. By this time quite sunny, but very cold’ (Gissing 1978: 175). From these comments of a meteorological kind, it already appears that the traveller is eager to mention the very names of the places he will be visiting, and to provide accurate geographical information about them. Indeed, most of Gissing’s diary entries consist of meticulous depictions of archaeological sites, natural sceneries and the changing skyline, as in the entry of November 24th:

Towards sunset, onto the Acropolis. Magnificent effects of light. From the west streamed brilliant sunlight, whilst all the north and east was covered with huge purple-black clouds. As I stood just inside the Acropolis, the Erechtheion gleamed against that cloud-background, its outlines seeming cut out. Beneath the dark clouds was Pentelicon; its summit hidden, itself darker than the sky, a bluish black.

Later, as the sun set, the eastern clouds became fiery underneath, and Pentelicon, its clefts and flanks, glowed unimaginally; such colour as one sees on imaginary mountains in the fire. One of the grandest scenes I ever witnessed. (Gissing 1978: 179-80)

Gissing was certainly aware of the narrative force of a passage like this, if it inspired him to make similar descriptions in *Sleeping Fires*, and, before it, in *New Grub Street* (1891). When Reardon, one of the main characters of the latter novel, recalls his journey to Greece in a long dialogue with his friend Biffen, the author reproduces the diary entry of December 8th almost *verbatim*. The two passages (from, respectively, the journal and the novel) are so much alike that they are worth being quoted at length:

I turned eastwards, and there to my astonishment was a magnificent rainbow, a perfect semicircle, stretching from the foot of Parnes to that of Hymettus, framing Athens and its hills, which were ever more and more resplendent. Hymettus was of a soft misty warmth, and something tending to purple, its ridges marked by exquisitely soft and indefinite shadows--the rainbow coming right down in front of it. The Acropolis glowed—ablaze. As the sun descended, these colours grew richer, warmer; for a moment all was nearly crimson. Then suddenly the sun passed again into the lower stratum of cloud, and the glory died almost at once,—except that there remained the northern half of the rainbow, which had become

double. In the west, the clouds remained magnificent for a while; there were two shaped like great expanded wings, with edges of refulgence. (Gissing 1978: 187)

I turned eastward, and there to my astonishment was a magnificent rainbow, a perfect semicircle, stretching from the foot of Parnes to that of Hymettus, framing Athens and its hills, which grew brighter—the brightness for which there is no name among colours. Hymettus was of a soft misty warmth, and something tending to purple, its ridges marked by exquisitely soft and indefinite shadows—the rainbow coming right down in front of it. The Acropolis glowed and blazed. As the sun descended all these colours grew richer and warmer; for a moment the landscape was nearly crimson. Then suddenly the sun passed into the lower stratum of cloud, and the splendour died almost at once, except that there remained the northern half of the rainbow, which had become double. In the west, the clouds were still glorious for a time; there were two shaped like great expanded wings, edged with refulgence. (Gissing 1968: 406)

Greece is, together with England, one of the settings of *Sleeping Fires*, whose fourteen chapters are equally distributed between the two countries: the events of the first six chapters and the last one take place in Athens and along the western coast as far as Corfu; those of the central chapters, in England, between London and Somerset. This double setting permeates the whole narrative structure. There is, in fact, an inner connection between place and characters, and the depictions of Greek landscapes are functional in the development of the plot; this is played out mainly in dialogues that contribute significantly to the novel's polyphonic dimension. So, *showing* and *telling* evenly alternate in the text.

***Sleeping Fires*: space and story**

The story can be summarized as the attempt to explore the possibility of finding a former love and overcoming grief and guilt in middle and late life. The novel tells of a man and a woman who meet again sixteen years after they had broken their engagement. As the book opens, Edward Langley, a cultivated, well-to-do, forty-two year-old man, oppressed by a sense of emptiness in his life, is visiting Athens. Here he happens to meet Worboys, an old friend from his college days in Cambridge, now an archeologist, who is acting as the travelling companion of an eighteen year-old boy, Louis Reed, to please the latter's guardian, Lady Revill, née Agnes Forrest. It turns out that Agnes is the woman who had rejected Langley's marriage proposal sixteen years earlier, when he confessed that he had fathered a son out of wedlock at the age of twenty-three. The mother, a working-girl, had taken the child away and married another man; Langley, who did not know of his son's whereabouts, had been living an essentially leisurely and solitary life, while Agnes Forrest, who had married a Tory member of Parliament, is, at the moment of the story, a widow.²

As announced by the title, the main theme of *Sleeping Fires* is Langley's discovery that he is still in love with Agnes, and his attempt to win her back:

[...] the fire that so long had slept within him, hidden beneath the accumulating habits of purposeless, self-indulgent life, denied by his smiling philosophy, thought of as a mere flash amid the ardours of youth--the fire of a life's passion, no longer to be disguised or resisted, burst into consuming flame. He had accustomed himself to believe that his senses were subdued by reason, if not by time; and nature mocked at his security. (Gissing 1974: 184-5)

Not surprisingly, the narrative resorts to the usual literary conventions of Victorian fiction: a recognition (Lady Revill reveals to Langley that Louis, who bears an uncanny resemblance to him, is his son), a *coup de théâtre* (while the two former lovers engage in a sharp dialogue of mutual recrimination, news arrives of Louis's death in Athens), and a happy ending. After an insistent and rather verbose courting, Langley manages to win Agnes's love again with the prospect of marrying her; but before that, the two go through a harsh confrontation, accusing each other of selfishness and mutual acts of omission: Langley did not take care of his child and abandoned him and his mother, Agnes did not reveal to Langley, years before, that Louis was his son.

Other narrative motifs which are recurrent in Gissing's fiction are present in *Sleeping Fires*, as pointed out by Pierre Coustillas (1974: vii): 'the guilty secret', which originated in the author's biographical events, and found its clearest expression in *Born in Exile* (1892); the illustration of the biblical dictum 'the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children', which first appeared in his short stories 'The Sins of the Fathers' (1877) and 'The Quarry of the Heath' (1881), but is here deprived of its religious connotations and situated in a purely temporal, middle-class background; the conquest of love after a long spell of banishment, as it will be in *The Crown of Life*, the novel that Gissing published in 1899.

Sleeping Fires closes where it had opened, in Athens, where Langley goes to attend the burial arrangements for his son. A spatial circularity to which a linear progression corresponds at a time level: the story, which starts in Spring, ends in Autumn, on an October afternoon.

The narrative function of Greece in this novel manifests itself at two distinct but interrelated levels: space and story. As regards the former, what Peter Brown has written with reference to Balzac and Dickens--'the prevailing realism of nineteenth-century fiction [...] produces a kind of place in literature that is tangible, architectonic and (by and large) mappable' (Brown 2008: 17)--applies to Gissing as well. When he wrote *Sleeping Fires*, he was not new to the practice of literary map-making within narration. This kind of representation of space in fiction was already present in the accurate description of London in his working-class novels, all published in the 1880s: *Workers in the Dawn*, *The Unclassed*, *Demos*, *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*. Michael Irwin notes that the story of *The Nether World*, above all, 'has been mapped out in the author's mind with full awareness of districts, directions, and distances--even of particular churches and houses. The movements of his characters could have been [...] followed by means of a street guide, or for that matter on foot. The map implied by the text would seem to be of documentary exactness' (Irwin 2008: 32). But not only that; the map implied by the

scrupulous naming of streets in Gissing's text involves more than physical location: 'As they go to their lodgings, or about their business his characters are themselves "mapped" in terms of occupation, prospects and class' (34).

This aspect of Gissing's Naturalistic fiction has been widely explored. First, in the late seventies-early eighties, by such influential critics as John Goode and Fredric Jameson; they both have described Gissing's rigid subdivisions of London areas as the urban juxtaposition of different social classes. Goode argues that the writer 'makes fictions out of the spatial order of the city as a totality. [...] It is not London that constitutes the setting of his novels' but the distribution of the various socially defined neighbourhoods, 'so that what characterises the setting is what separates them within the urban universe' (Goode 1979: 98). Jameson, on the other hand, comparing Gissing to Dickens, notes that in the former's fiction 'the Dickensian city is little by little drained of its vitality and reduced to the empty grid of calls of one character to another, visits to oppressive rooms and apartments, and intervals of random strolls through the poorer quarters' (Jameson 1983: 190).

More recently, the human geographer Richard Dennis has convincingly illustrated Gissing's representation of late-Victorian London, especially of those urban areas generally, though erroneously, identified with the East End, but actually corresponding to 'places farther west, either where he had lived--in seedier parts of Islington, Bloomsbury, Chelsea and Marylebone--or where he had visited systematically, in Lambeth and Clerkenwell, or where we can assume he explored on those occasions when [...] his Diary tells us that he was "walking about"' (Dennis 2010: 45-6). Such a habit was not much different from Dickens's, by the way--unsurprisingly, given Gissing's admiration for the great Victorian writer, as his critical work about him shows. Dennis has also drawn a useful map of Gissing's fictional London, which marks the streets, courts and alleys where his working-class novels are set (39). On the same topic, a young Italian scholar, Paola D'Ercole, who has focused on Gissing's 'cartography' of *The Nether World*, has explained the writer's precise mapping of his characters' movements through the city as 'an attempt to map the individual uses and meanings of urban space, thus restoring some little integrity to the dispossessed people of the nether world' (D'Ercole 2010: 57).

In *Sleeping Fires*, the several descriptions of Athens and its surroundings, scattered throughout the text, not only confirm Gissing's attention to place in narrative, but also testify to his belief in the poetry of place. In the novel's opening scene, when Langley looks out of the window of his hotel room, a beautiful view offers itself to his eyes:

Hence, at a southern angle, he saw the Parthenon, honey-coloured against a violet sky, and at the opposite limit of his view the peak of Lycabettus; between and beyond, through the pellucid air which at once reveals and softens its barren ruggedness, Hymettus basking in the light of spring. He could not grow weary of such a scene, which he had watched through changes innumerable of magic gleam and shade since the sunsets of autumn fired it with solemn splendour; but his gaze this morning was directed merely by habit. (Gissing 1974: 8-9).

Other passages of the same kind follow in the text, and recall—as already remarked—some of the landscapes the writer minutely depicted, by words and sketches, in his journal. The following quotations from, respectively, the diary entry of 3 December and the fourth chapter of the novel are a good illustration of this:

A fine clear morning, with sharp wind from north-east. Set out early, and started along the Sacred Way. [...] Pursued road along the shore until I got a good view of Thriasian plain, and of Eleusis round the curve of the shore; then turned back. Instead of returning by the mountain pass, kept to the shore, and went all the way round the foot of Aigaleos; a delightful walk. (Gissing 1978: 184)

The window of Langley's bedroom opened on to a balcony, pleasant to him in early morning for the air and the view. [...] His eyes loved to follow a far-winding track, mile after mile, away to the slope of Aigaleos, where the white road vanished in a ravine; for this was the Sacred Way, pursued of old by the procession of the Mysteries from Athens to Eleusis. (Gissing 1974: 55-6)

When Langley goes back to England, the narrator punctiliously charts his route by mentioning the cities, coasts and mountains the character observes while travelling by train from Athens to Corfu and then to Brindisi. The detailed topography and toponymy in this long section of the sixth chapter are the result of Gissing's recourse to his diary entry of 17 December 1889—when he started his journey back—as a source not only of factual data but also of words, idioms and states of mind of a lived experience, that he tries to recapture through fictional writing.

But places, in this novel, mean something more than mere landscapes and archaeological sites. If we agree with Doreen Massey (2005) that space is 'relational' and 'processual', we have to remark the different ways in which Langley relates himself to Greece, and the inner changes he goes through, between Spring and Autumn. While in the first chapter of the novel we see him strolling and loitering through Athens, 'careless of direction [...] indifference leading him' (10-11), in the last one he returns to the country with a purpose: to visit his son's tomb, in 'a little village graveyard shadowed with cypresses—[...] near Colonus, by the banks of the Cephirus' (223-4). Now his face is no longer marked by 'deep lines' (9), but is 'graver, yet not so old; smoother, but more virile' (223), thanks to Agnes's presence in his life and to Louis's in his memory.

Hebraism vs Hellenism

H. G. Wells, in his review of *Sleeping Fires*, defined Gissing's new book as 'totally unlike anything of his we have read before', and concluded: 'We must confess that the possibility of a gospel of Greek delight from this minute and melancholy observer of the lower-middle class fills us with anything but agreeable anticipations' (Wells 1972: 260). This comment seems to echo one of the sentences uttered by the protagonist: 'To be sure, I like the old Greeks. [...] The world never had such need of the Greeks as in our time. Vigour, sanity, and joy—that's their gospel.' (Gissing 1974: 75) So, Wells's appraisal

has the merit of drawing the reader's attention to Greece, whose narrative function is, in my opinion, the most innovative aspect of the novel.

Greece stands, according to Langley, for all that Agnes rejects. When he realizes he still loves her and proposes to her, she refuses him as she does not want to surrender her independence and her will, but above all because she is determined to renounce happiness as a form of atonement for her sins. Langley counters this gesture of self denial with romantic love, with the triumph of 'health and joy' (Gissing 1974: 221): the novel, in fact, 'can be read as a plea against asceticism, as an apology for sanity and clarity' (Coustillas 1974: vii). The double setting is therefore quite appropriate to the confrontation of these views, as Greece and England represent, here, opposite values, in line with a consolidated dichotomy: paganism *vs* puritanism, excess *vs* restraint, a vitalistic approach to life *vs* a sombre, severe and self-punishing one. And it is at these ethical and cultural levels that the meaning of Greece in *Sleeping Fires* becomes clear.

The importance of the classical world in Gissing's life and work has been widely acknowledged by critics. As early as 1923, Frank Swinnerton--one of the first twentieth-century Gissing scholars--devoted one chapter to 'Italy and Greece' in his book on this author (Swinnerton 1966: 154-67). Since his schoolboy years, the would-be writer had developed a real passion for ancient Rome as a consequence of his reading Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788); between the ages of 14 and 18, he received a solid classic education at Owens College, where he became one of the most brilliant students, and where his study of Greek and Latin 'was the source of a passionate lifelong devotion to the civilization and history of antiquity' (Korg 1993: 5). This devotion extended to modern Italy--Southern Italy, in particular, and Naples, above all--as some of his works show: not only his travel book *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), but also the novel *The Emancipated* (1890), which is partly set in Naples. The historical romance *Veranilda* (never completed, it was published posthumously in 1904) is set, instead, in sixth-century Italy.

Gissing's interest in Greece, inferior only to his fascination with Italy, was addressed not only to its beautiful land but also to the great artists and philosophers of the past, Homer, Theocritus, Aristophanes, as shown in his letters and diary as well as in *Sleeping Fires*: an interest which needs to be contextualized in Victorian England's history and culture.

Greece was one of the principal countries that inspired the 'Mediterranean Passion' in Victorian and Edwardian writers and artists (Pemble 1988: 4). It was not only one of the favourite places on the itinerary of the Grand Tour, but, as part of the classical world, it was, together with Italy, a polysemic signifier, the container of a series of meanings and values that contributed to form the collective imaginary of the time. After being associated, in the Romantic period, to freedom and national independence (Byron), to art and beauty (Keats), and to the perfection of human form and human mind (Shelley),³ Greece became, in the second half of the nineteenth century, one of the terms of an important debate: from John Ruskin's distinction between Gothic and Renaissance architecture, and, more in general, between the North and the South, in "The Nature of Gothic" (one of the chapters of *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2, 1851-53), through the opposition between Hellenism and Hebraism in Matthew Arnold's *Culture*

and *Anarchy* (1869), to the polarity between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* [The Birth of Tragedy] (1872), where Friedrich Nietzsche's vision of the South coincided to a large extent with his vision of ancient Greece.

It was within this set of ideas and theories that Gissing envisaged *his* Greece in *Sleeping Fires*. In particular, Arnold's categories of Hellenism and Hebraism provide a tool which may prove crucial to our reading of the novel. Arnold describes these concepts with the following words:

The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience. [...] The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*. [...] Self-conquest, self-devotion, the following not of our own individual will, but the will of God, *obedience*, is the fundamental idea of this form, also, of the discipline to which we have attached the general name of Hebraism. [...] To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this ideal, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism, is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy; they are full of what we call sweetness and light. (Arnold 1963: 130-4)

Arnold's role in the second half of the nineteenth century is also very relevant to his influence on Walter Pater's aestheticism and, partly, on the Decadent Movement. Giovanni Cianci writes that in Victorian and Edwardian culture, 'the beautiful coincided, according to the idealized and aestheticized *fin de siècle* Hellenism, with the notion of proportion, equilibrium and harmony: the ideal, classical beautiful, had to be solar, harmonic, serene and rational' (Cianci 2006: 249). This notion of the beautiful went back to Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), as well as to a pioneering Hellenist, the archeologist and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and was strengthened by the finding of Phidian marbles in the Parthenon and their acquisition on Lord Elgin's part early in the nineteenth century. Later in the century, such painters as Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema started the vogue for sumptuous classical archaeological scenery inhabited by coyly voluptuous female figures of artistic grace, and 'evoked a kind of Hollywood dream of ancient Greece and Rome: a prim and proper, respectable Victorian dream, of course, or in any way not breaking the expected standard of decorum' (250).

This ornamental vision of the classical world was utterly alien to Gissing. On the contrary, *his* Greece looks to Arnold's definition of Hellenism as 'clearness and radiancy', an expression which resonates, in fact, in such terms as 'vigour, sanity, and joy' that Langley utters in one of his talks with Louis (Gissing 1974: 75).⁴ These are the values that the protagonist of this novel attributes to ancient Greeks and that he proposes to Agnes in opposition to her puritanical vision of life characterized by penitence and sacrifice; and these are the ideals that only at the end of the story he feels he can realize, thanks to the revival of his former relationship with her. In the last chapter of *Sleeping*

Fires, Langley illustrates, in a letter to his beloved, his new idea of Greece, that has deeply changed in the unfolding of the plot owing to the new experiences he has gone through--his son's death included:

This morning I wished that you were here; at evening, as I stood on the Areopagus, I was glad to know that I had to travel to find you--in the world of realities.

As Louis said, this is mere fairyland; to us of the north, an escape for rest amid scenes we hardly believe to be real. The Acropolis, rock and ruins all tawny gold, the work of art inseparable from that of nature, and neither seeming to have bodily existence; the gorgeous purples of Hymettus; that cloud on Pentelikon, with its melting splendours which seemed to veil the abode of gods--what part has all this in our actual life? Who cares to know the modern names of these mountains? Who thinks of the people who dwell among them? Worboys is right; living in the past, he forgets the present altogether. I, whose life is now to begin, must shake off this sorcery of Athens, and remember it only as a delightful dream. Mere fairyland; and our Louis has become part of it--to be remembered by me as calmly, yet as tenderly, as this last sunset. (Gissing 1974: 229-30)

The conclusion of *Sleeping Fires* suggests two considerations: the importance of place--with the (not irrelevant) mention of such evocative places as the Areopagus, the Acropolis, Hymettus and Pentelikon--and the message implied by the protagonist's explicit statement, which, in the end, seems to propose not so much 'a gospel of Greek delight' (in Wells's words) as the achievement of a balance between a puritanical view of life and a pagan one. The latter view is represented by Greece as 'mere fairyland', an escape from northern mists and, more in general, from 'the world of realities'; a message, by the way, not very different from the one suggested in Gissing's previous novel *The Emancipated* (1890). But the conclusions of both novels suggest something else: Greece, in *Sleeping Fires*, like Italy in *The Emancipated*, is a source of inner growth and inspiration for the main characters as it was for the author himself. Gissing's 'passion' for Italy, though, manifests itself primarily in *By the Ionian Sea*, which could be defined as his most successful exercise in literary geography. In this travel book, the narrator's aim is to trace the relics of Greek past history in Southern Italy, on the tracks of the vestiges of *Magna Græcia*.

Gissing's *Magna Græcia*

By the Ionian Sea (1901) is a minor classic within the *Grand Tour* narrative genre.⁵ This book, in which the author retraces the steps of part of his third Italian journey--from 15 November to 12 December 1897, as reported in his diary (Gissing 1978: 454-71)--, presents itself with an attractive subtitle: *Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy*. 'Ramble' obviously refers to the act of wandering about, or walking for pleasure, but can also be read as a digressive, erratic form of narration; in this case, both an excursion to those regions (Calabria and Puglia, in particular) and an *excursus* through their signs--human,

historic and geographic. Thus, one might suggest a further subtitle for this text: 'Geographical vagaries and vagaries of the mind'. Although most of its eighteen chapters draw their titles from the towns, villages and various sites visited by the narrator, the book is not only the chronicle of Gissing's actual journey but also a private quest, through the re-discovery of the places he had many a time explored with his imagination. At the outset of his journey, the narrator remarks: 'I shall see the shores where once were Tarentum and Sybaris, Croton and Locri. 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 1921: 13). In this way, he defines his relationship with Southern Italy as mediated by his beloved classics; the passage just quoted is followed by a few lines that testify to the peculiar contact the traveller has established with those regions thanks to the Greek and Latin languages, to the sound of the verses read aloud and to the voice declaiming them:

The *names* of Greece and Italy draw me as no others; they make me young again, and restore the keen impressions of that time when every new *page* of Greek or Latin was a new perception of things beautiful. The world of the Greeks and Romans is my land of romance; a *quotation* in either language thrills me strangely, and there are passages of Greek and Latin *verse* which I cannot *read* without a dimming of the eyes, which I cannot repeat aloud because my *voice* fails me. In Magna Græcia the waters of two fountains mingle and flow together; how exquisite will be the draught! (Gissing 1921: 13) [my italics]

By the Ionian Sea, predictably enough, is dense with descriptions of attractive sights and spots. The narrative voice often lingers on line and volume--the shapes of mountains and coasts, the curves of roads and lanes, the texture of the vegetation⁶--but it is at its best in the rendering of light and colour, as in this breath-taking passage on a sunset in Taranto: 'An exquisite after-glow seemed as if it would never pass away. Above, thin, grey clouds stretching along the horizon a purple flush melted insensibly into the dark blue of the zenith. Eastward the sky was piled with lurid rack, sullen-tinted folds edged with the hue of sulphur. The sea had a strange aspect, curved tracts of pale blue lying motionless upon a dark expanse rippled by the wind' (63). On the other hand, when the steamer leaves Naples for Paola (a little town on the Calabrian coast), the traveller cannot ignore the damages done by industrialization to the environment: 'All through the warm and cloudless afternoon I sat looking at the mountains, trying not to see that cluster of factory chimneys which rolled back fumes above the many-coloured houses'. This latter view reminds him of a similar, more depressing situation: 'the same abomination on a shore more sacred; from the harbour of Piræus one looks to Athens through trails of coal-smoke' (14). The point the narrator is making here is clear: beauty belongs to the 'sacred' shores of ancient Greece and to what still remains of *Magna Græcia* in Southern Italy.

But the natural scenery is not, in spite of its literary effectiveness, the only component of the Mediterranean landscapes in *By the Ionian Sea*; other elements are involved: 'The environment we inhabit is inseparable from human culture. Our

landscapes, our cities, our seas are shaped, traversed, harvested in accordance with the needs, practices, and desires of particular societies' (Flint and Morphy 2000: 1). Gissing, as a traveller, was interested not only in ancient ruins and 'picturesque' places, but also in the inhabitants of those lands; he observed the men and women's exterior as well as inner features with deep sympathy, and sometimes his interest in the natives sprang from their physical resemblance to the original populations. This is the case with a group of Calabrian peasants with a striking appearance, whom someone calls, in fact, "*Greci*", as they come from a mountain village where the dialect of the people 'is still a corrupt Greek'. The narrator fantasises about their origin dating back to the early Hellenic days, and offers possible historical explanations for this: 'These villages may be a relic of the Byzantine conquest in the sixth century when Southern Italy was, to a great extent, re-peopled from the Eastern Empire, though another theory suggests that they were formed by immigrants from Greece at the time of the Turkish invasion' (140). So, 'landscape', in *By the Ionian Sea*, should be read not only in the literal sense of the word but also as 'ethnoscape'—a term which refers to the migration of people across cultures and borders, presenting the world and its many communities as fluid and mobile instead of static (Appadurai 1996).

In *By the Ionian Sea*, the author adopts those rhetorical strategies that are the traveller-narrator's own, that is, 'the task of finding the forms of language to translate the topography into discourse. [...] Travel writings usually acknowledge, too, that travel entails the construction of particular myths, visions and fantasies, and the voicing of particular desires, demands and aspirations' (Chard 1999: 9). Some of Gissing's desires found expression in the construction of such myths / visions / fantasies as Italy and Greece, that embodied his inner world. His interest in the interrelations between space and place, environment and landscape, is evident throughout his whole literary production, as his narrative practice in such diverse genres as novel, diary and travel book shows.

At this point, we should return to the issue of the 'processual' nature of space (Massey 2005), and consider how much Gissing's "Greece" had changed over the years: from Reardon's idealized vision in *New Grub Street* (1891)—'The best moments of life are those when we contemplate beauty in the purely artistic spirit—objectively. I have had such moments in Greece and Italy' (Gissing 1968: 405)—, through Langley's realization, at the end of *Sleeping Fires* (1895), that Greece had to be remembered 'only as a delightful dream. Mere fairyland' (Gissing 1974: 230), to the writer's sad remark, in *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), on the contemporary defacement of Greek landscape, as he recalls it from his previous journey: 'from the harbour of Piraeus one looks to Athens through trails of coal-smoke' (Gissing 1921: 14).

To conclude, I suggest that Gissing's 'Mediterranean passion' was inherited by a great twentieth-century writer, E. M. Forster, who in his Italian novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908), plays out the confrontation between two opposite visions represented by England and Italy, while in some of his short stories he evokes the classical world through ancient myths and Dionysian figures. If this is true, we might even presume that *Sleeping Fires* somehow prefigures the relationships between Modernism and the Mediterranean. According to a recent study, in fact, the

Mediterranean of the Modernists is not the one ‘submitted to being recreated in the image of British longings and aversions, hopes and fears’, as argued by John Pemble (274), ‘but a source of debate, ideas and forms; [...] a culture addressed in its bewildering diversity and linguistic wealth; not a promised land nor a necropolis, but a laboratory and a workshop’ (Patey 2006: 12). One might wonder whether Gissing attempted, and managed, to do so in his little novel. Indeed, one can see this being played out in Langley’s rambling through Athens: by his thinking and walking in solitude, or talking and walking with Worboys and Louis, Greece becomes a source of fantasies, recollections and projects, a true laboratory and a workshop.

Notes

¹ Irwin mentions, here, Franco Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, in which the Italian critic introduces the subject of ‘literary geography’ by distinguishing between ‘*space in literature*’ and ‘*literature in space*’ (Moretti 1998: 3). Irwin remarks that the maps he is concerned with are in the former category, ‘relating to an author’s conscious endeavour to situate the action of a given narrative in an imaginable topographical area’ (Irwin 2008: 26).

² Another line of the plot tells of Louis, who has been sent on a tour of the South of Europe by his warden in the attempt to ‘save’ him from the influence of Mrs Tresilian, an emancipated, older woman with liberal views about social equality. Since the boy cannot put up with Lady Revill’s interference with this friendship, Langley decides to go back to London and discuss the matter with his former fiancée.

³ On Greece in English Romantic poetry, see Canani (2014: 151-239).

⁴ As regards Arnold’s influence on Gissing, see Korg (1968: 73), Alden (1968: 22) and Goode (1978: 16).

⁵ This section of the present article reproduces, in slightly different form, some paragraphs of my ‘“Other scenes and other ages”: Gissing’s Reading of Southern Italy in *By the Ionian Sea*’ (Chialant 2010).

⁶ On the centrality of these natural elements in landscape literature, see Simon Schama (1995), who divides his volume into chapters that are named after the words *wood*, *water* and *rock*.

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