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Perspectives on Eco-criticism

I. Haag, K. M. Danielsson,
M. Öhman and T. Pöplow

Perspectives on Eco-criticism

Local Beginnings, Global Echoes

Edited by

Ingemar Haag,
Karin Molander Danielsson,
Marie Öhman and Thorsten Pöplow

This volume gathers together papers presented at the conference "Eco-criticism in the Nordic Countries: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow" held in Västerås, Sweden, in 2017, organized by the research group Eco-critical Forum at Mälardalen University. The conference, which was an attempt to survey local eco-critical activities, transcended Nordic boundaries, engaging scholars from Europe and the United States. This expansion from the local to the global mirrors the subject of the conference: eco-criticism, a cross-disciplinary field of research in the intersection of environmental issues and cultural expressions.

The chapters here engage with topical issues such as the Anthropocene, sustainability in education, and civilizational critique, as well as schools of thought such as materialism, dark ecology and animal studies. The contributions discuss several types of cultural expressions, including film and other visual media, university course design and Nordic, and English language novels and poetry. This volume will attract the interest of readers from a number of different backgrounds, both in the Nordic countries and internationally.

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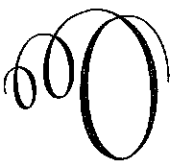
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INTRODUCTION

INGEMAR HAAG,

KARIN MOLANDER DANIELSSON,

MARIE ÖHMAN AND THORSTEN PÄPLOW

This collection of articles and essays originated in the conference “Ecocriticism in the Nordic Countries: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow,” held in Västerås, Sweden, in May 2017. Initially, the conference was an attempt to survey ecocritical activities in the Nordic countries, occasioned by the ten-year anniversary of the foundation of Ecocritical Forum, a research group at Mälardalen University. Ultimately, it turned into something much less limited: a lively exchange of ideas that transcended the Nordic boundaries, involving scholars from other European countries and the United States. It may not be an overstatement to claim that this expansion from the local to the global mirrors the subject of the conference: ecocriticism.

This dynamic is encouraging in the face of rapidly increasing effects of climate change. The distribution of knowledge on a global scale may, after all, be instrumental in our efforts to come to terms with the problems we are facing. This volume is our contribution to an area of research that is multidisciplinary and complex, and we anticipate that it will be relevant for readers from many academic contexts both in the Nordic countries and internationally.

Arising from various subjects and theoretical positions, the chapters in this volume engage in global ecocritical issues, such as the Anthropocene, materialism, dark ecology, animal studies, sustainability in education, and civilizational critique. An international cluster of scholars has contributed chapters on such varied topics as visual media, educational design, and literature from various language areas. Although the essays and articles have been grouped thematically, they inform each other and their voices and insights echo and connect across division boundaries, just like ecocriticism itself.

The first thematic section “The Anthropocene – Visions and Visualizations” brings together two essays discussing discourses on and visual representations

DECONSTRUCTING NATURAL AND POST-
NATURAL BINARIES:
THOMAS HARDY, GEORGE GISSING,
AND THE PLACES OF UNFITNESS
EMANUELA ETTORRE

Immersed in sprawling cities, it is easy for the post-modern, post-natural generation to imagine that somewhere, just out of reach, lies an otherworldly, non-human paradise, whether wilderness or pastoral. This contrast between country and city has been felt and articulated since Roman times, but it acquired its contemporary edge with the advent of industrialisation, which accelerated urban growth, whilst depopulating the countryside. Did the Victorians therefore insist on just the contrast that we feel so acutely today? The truth is rather different, as this essay suggests: those who felt these changes happening around them were often as disenchanted by the illusion of rural idyll as they were thoroughly unconvinced by the supposed freedoms of urbanity.

This is most apparent in the frames Thomas Hardy and George Gissing put around their respective fictional environments in novels such as *The Woodlanders*¹

¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. Phillip Mallett (Chatham: Wordsworth Classics, 2004) All quotations in the text are from this edition, with the indication of the page number preceded by W. *The Woodlanders* was first serialized in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1886 and then published as a volume the following year. The reception of the book was not always enthusiastic, and Hardy was therefore quite defensive when he referred to *The Woodlanders*. As he remarked in a letter to George Gissing, dated 1 July 1886: "I am much afraid that one who has such a keen eye for good work as yourself will be disappointed at my story now running in *Macmillan's*, "The Woodlanders." It would have made a beautiful story if I could have carried out my idea of it" (Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, eds., *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, Vol. 1 1840-1892 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 149). Hardy and Gissing occasionally corresponded and sent to each other copies of their own books; obviously Gissing had read *The Woodlanders*, and on the year of its serialization he expressed his appreciation for Hardy's work: "I have not been the least careful of your readers, & in your books I have constantly found refreshment & onward help" (Paul F. Matthews, Arthur C. Young, Pierre Coustillas,

and *The Nether World*, although I will also touch on other narratives, these two novels provide the main focus of my analysis. What Hardy textualizes in his works is the fictional region of Wessex, a "landscape of memory,"³ and a vanishing rural world in which the inhabitants still follow the rhythms of nature. In the "General Preface to the Novels and Poems" of 1912, Hardy explains the reason for "the geographical limits of his stage" that confine his purview to Wessex. In particular, he claims that, although remote and small in extent, Wessex embodies and reflects the most universal human conflicts: "domestic emotions have throbb'd in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe, and [...] anyhow, there was quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose."⁴ However, Wessex does not offer a nostalgic vision of a rustic way of life, nor promise a "harmonious and unified culture," as J. Hillis Miller puts it, because "such an apparent unity, even in rural cultures, is riven by divisions and disharmonies."⁵ Hardy's Wessex, therefore, seems to subsume what Terry Gifford identifies as the "anti-pastoral," inasmuch as it overturns the paradigms of idealization, nostalgia and escapism that are generally connected with the pastoral mode.⁶

George Gissing appears to offer the antithesis of Hardy's rural topology. In *The Nether World* Gissing represents a metropolitan region as a "putrid soil" (NW, 8) and a poisoned urban world, populated almost exclusively by the working class, and steeped in the gloom of slumland. In particular, he focuses on the urban microcosm of Clerkenwell, a sordid and bleak underworld that mirrors the squalor of a fallen society; this is the slum where

eds., *The Collected Letters of George Gissing: Volume Three 1886–1888* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992), 42).

² George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). All quotations in the text are from this edition, with the indication of the page number preceded by NW. George Gissing began to write *The Nether World* on 19 March 1888 and he completed it in July. The novel was published on 3 April 1889. In a letter to Thomas Hardy, dated 25 July, Gissing wrote: "I have something in hand which I hope to turn to some vigorous purpose, a story that has grown up in recent ramblings about Clerkenwell, — dark, but with evening sunlight to close. For there may occasionally be a triumph of individual strength; a different thing from hope for the masses of men." See Matthiesen et al., *The Collected Letters*, 139.

³ Greg Garrard, *Eco-criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 117.

⁴ Harold Orel, ed., *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990), 45.

⁵ J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 55.

⁶ Terry Gifford, "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment*, ed. Louise Westling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22.

the wind blew "thin clouds of unsavoury dust, mingled with the light refuse of the street," where "the sky—if sky it could be called—gave threatening of sleet, perchance of snow. And on every side was the rumble of traffic, the voiceful evidence of toil and poverty" (NW, 2).

In spite of their manifest topological polarity, however, both Wessex and Clerkenwell exemplify the vision of a post-Darwinian environment as a place of unfitness, characterized by degeneration and decay. Though often associated with a nostalgic textualization of rural England, Hardy's Wessex may be even more devouring than the city, as this description in *The Woodlanders* reveals:

They went noiselessly over mats of starry moss, rustled through interspersed tracts of leaves, skirted trunks with spreading roots whose mossed rinds made them like hands wearing green gloves; elbowed old elms and ashes with great forks, in which stood pools of water that overflowed on rainy days and ran down their stems in green cascades. On older trees still than these huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. *Hère, as everywhere*, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling (W, 44, italics mine).

Like the streets of Clerkenwell in *The Nether World*, invaded by a starving and degraded crowd, "squalid houses" and a "diseased humanity" (NW 129, 130), the woods and the hearts of *The Woodlanders* often represent places of monstrosity and decadence. In this memorable passage Hardy explicitly refers to the city slum, thereby introducing the image of a corrupted urban life into the woodland, and in so doing, distancing the natural world from any assumption of an idyllic and innocent perspective.⁷ As William Greenslade observes in his reading of the Hardy text, each natural object, "whether ornately decadent or rapaciously efficient, parades

⁷ Most significantly, Timothy Clark points out that in Hardy's work the "social and industrial modernization are read as both producing and undermining forms of simplistic nostalgia" (Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 101). Even Richard Kerridge, in his ecocritical reading of Hardy's narrative, underlines the way in which the relationship between tradition and modernity in his novels "bypasses[] the familiar sequence in which industrialization destroys the culture of habitat that then becomes an object of nostalgic desire" (Richard Kerridge, "Ecological Hardy," in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 138–9).

its degeneracy as an index of struggle for existence in conditions of oppressive and gloomy futility.⁸

What the two authors depict is an anti-Eden: if Gissing's Clerkenwell is in itself a denatured environment, or rather, as Raymond Williams defines it, "an oppressive and utilitarian uniformity"⁹, Hardy's Wessex is not an antidote to the horrors of the urban condition, but a corrupted locus which, behind its apparent air of harmony and exuberance, hides traces of violent struggle and decay, like the "half-dead oak, hollow and disfigured with white tumours, its roots spreading out like claws grasping the ground" (W, 176). Nature seems to have lost its power to regenerate, and with that, its enduring capacity to re-enchant the world.

Thus, and whilst these two late Victorian writers represent different marginal borderlands, the microcosms they depict are both enclosed and isolated: the city slum, with its labyrinths of roads, is a uniform and immovable space, inhabited by individuals who are condemned to the perpetuation of an unchanging everyday life. Likewise, Hardy's Little Hintock in *The Woodlanders* is a "self-contained place," "one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world" (W, 8); it is a place where Mrs. Charmond's House is so immersed in vegetation, "coated with lichen" and "merged in moss" that, any observer would have remarked its "unfitness for modern lives" (W, 53). It is a secluded village characterized by "the concentrated passions and closely knit interdependence of the lives therein" (W, 8), and in which "intermarriages" (W, 23) are very frequent among the inhabitants. Accordingly, both the confined areas of suburban London and the remote rural world of Wessex appear as unvarying spaces, marked by a dramatic immobility. Such slightly varied microcosms immediately evoke the way in which Charles Darwin constructs his ideas on isolation within the context of natural selection:

[...] isolation, by checking immigration and consequently competition, will give time for any new variety to be slowly improved, and this may sometimes be of importance in the production of new species. If [...] an isolated area be very small, either from being surrounded by barriers, or from having very peculiar physical conditions, the total number of the individuals supported on it will necessarily be very small; and fewness of individuals will greatly retard the production of new species through natural selection,

⁸ William Greenstade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 223.

by decreasing the chance of the appearance of favourable variations!¹⁰

If it is true that spatial isolation represents a restriction on the origination of new species and, consequently, on the improvement of the human and social environment, it is also true that both Clerkenwell and Wessex deny to its dwellers the chance of regeneration, whether understood in biological, social, or emotional terms.

From an ecocritical angle, the enclosed space of Wessex invokes the question of dwelling, as Greg Garrard posits it when he writes of "the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work."¹¹ In the heaths and woods of Wessex there is a strong communion between people and place, but this symbiotic relationship does not suggest a pastoral paradigm: in Hardy's novel nature is no *locus amoenus*. Instead, it emphasizes the continuous struggle for adaptation and development that engages both humans and non-humans, and has in store for them the same destiny:

A lingering wind brought to her ear the *creaking sound of two overcrowded branches* [...] which were *rubbing each other into wounds and other vocalised sorrows of the trees*, together with the screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some awkward wood-pigeon ill-balanced on its roosting-bough (W, 14, italics mine).
[...] slimy streams of green moisture, exuding from decayed holes caused by *old amputations*, ran down the bark of the oaks and elms, the rind below being coated with a hickenson wash as green as emerald. They were stout-trunked trees, that never rocked their stems in the fiercest gale, responding to it entirely by *croaking their limbs*. *Wrinkled like an old crone's face*, and anlered with dead branches that rose above the foliage of their summits, they were nevertheless still green—though yellow had invaded the leaves of other trees (W, 164, italics mine).

The anthropomorphic life of the woodland reveals deformations and decadence; furthermore, the recurrent personifications and similes not only invest nature with human qualities and emotions, but also highlight the adverse circumstances and the tragic fate that threaten both the human and the non-human.

Thomas Hardy's landscape embodies a non-human nature that, whilst subject to the same evolutionary impulses that give rise to wonderful forms of life, can also produce its monstrous and deformed equivalents. Arguably,

¹⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 86–7.

¹¹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 117.

Hardy makes the same point about his country folk in order to demonstrate the extent to which human nature is not markedly different from a non-human one. The same deterministic processes shape people's existence and their stories: Tess's unfortunate trajectory shows how her life tends towards degeneracy; her demise is not brought about by her personal faults, but by a fated ancestry, because "[d]ecrepit families imply decrepit wills, decrepit conduct."¹² In *Jude the Obscure*, by contrast, Jude and Sue are over-evolved but equally out of place; both represent a kind of anomaly insofar as they are ill sorted (or mal-adjusted) to the place they inhabit. This bleak view of the consequences of human evolution and the disharmonious relationship between humans and the environment is also apparent in Hardy's autobiography, where, in 1889, he recorded: "[a] woeful fact—that the human race is too extremely evolved for its corporeal conditions, the nerves being evolved to an activity abnormal in such an environment. [...] This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences."¹³ Thus, country folk are subject to the same environmental determinism that ensnare the city dwellers whose social context and environs are otherwise so dissimilar; ultimately, both landscapes are a function of the same Darwinian imperatives that shape human nature.

Hardy's novel at least keeps open the possibility of an empathic relationship between humanity and the non-human environment. Gissing, instead, firmly rejects any such idea: in *The Nether World* there is no immersion in place, no profusion of emotions connected to nature. Indeed, in most of Gissing's novels and short stories the neatly polarized paradigm of country/city is simply a mystification. Gissing's topographical imagination allows the reader access only to a place of disenchantment, whether he is depicting the country or the city. In the short story "A Son of the Soil"¹⁴, for example, the rural landscape is hardly ever idealized: the protagonist, Jonas Clay, lives such a monotonous life in the country that he cannot even name the flowers or hear the song of the birds; his long days in the fields are heavy and boring, and he is compelled to suffer the effects of a dismal and crushing labour. He decides to leave the country because he feels no sense of belonging, and, ultimately, because city life might provide more opportunities and a relief from boredom. From this perspective, Gissing's characters lack what David Matless defines as the "geographical

self," that is, the capacity to create one's own subjectivity through landscape.¹⁵ The absence of an emotive relationship with the environment and the non-human, the incapacity to be deeply rooted in place and to experience it emotionally (whether in the city and in the country) results in restlessness, dissatisfaction and disillusion. And when, in his last book, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, written the year before his death, Gissing presents a character who can finally spend the last days of his life in the tranquillity of the countryside, it is evident that the atmosphere of quietude conveyed by country life derives from his disenchanting awareness that his "life is over."¹⁶ Now that he is ready to accept death, he can finally reach a psycho-physical equilibrium, and so enjoy the delights of the natural world.

The Nether World is more than a simple urban narration. From a sociological angle it depicts the effects of a decentred reality. Although the action takes place in a circumscribed city setting, which apparently conveys an atmosphere of spatial cohesion, it clearly textualizes the disintegration of the individual within a space he can no longer control. Therefore, the city represented in the novel is a sequence of streets that branch out and cross over as in a labyrinth—streets crowded with "a nameless populace" that suggest both sympathy and repulsion:

The visit she wished to pay took her home into a disagreeable quarter, a street of *squalid houses*, swarming with yet *more squalid children*. On all the doorsteps sat little girls, themselves only just out of infancy, nursing or neglecting bald, red-eyed, doughy-limbed abortions in every stage of babyhood, hapless spawn of diseased humanity, born to embitter and brutalise yet further the lot of those who unwillingly gave them life. [...] To enter the house at which she paused it was necessary to squeeze through a *conglomerate of dirty little bodies* (NW, 129-30, italics mine).

This scene introduces a nihilistic and pungent depiction of an "outcast London," where the paradigms of disease, degeneration, dehumanization and putrefaction convey the idea of a place that is reduced to a conglomeration of sewage, disgusting food, and nauseating odours: "the slum was like any other slum; filth, rotteness, evil odours, possessed these dens of superfluous mankind and made them gruesome to the peering imagination" (NW, 74). Clerkenwell is overwhelmed by an "air poisoned with the odour of an unclean crowd" (NW, 274), by a selection of food that is often "a savoury mess of sausages and onions" (NW, 31); by a girl, Clem

¹² Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, eds. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gattrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 252.

¹³ Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1984), 227.

¹⁴ George Gissing, "The Son of the Soil," in *George Gissing. Collected Short Stories*, Vol. 2, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Grayswood: Grayswood Press, 2012), 396-9.

¹⁵ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 31.

¹⁶ George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983), 217.

Peckover, who eats like a savage, "conveying pieces of sausage to her mouth by means of her knife alone" (NW, 6). In slumland, writing about food inevitably means writing about class and civilization, about poverty, filth and negated desires; after all, the dysphoric description of food further enhances the nightmarish atmosphere of the novel.

In *The Nether World* Gissing also adopts vegetal and zoomorphic images to describe the degrading conditions of the people who inhabit the slums. Significantly, Clem Peckover is the character who best represents one of the basest products of the urban space: she is a despotic and revengeful creature, with a lust for "sanguinary domination" (NW, 6), and an "unapologetic enjoyment of power,"¹⁷ a girl who "perisprised as profusely as [the horse]" (NW, 359), and who is often equated with "a fierce animal" (NW, 144), a "wild beast" (NW, 160), "a wild-beast tiger" (NW, 63), "a lithe beast" (NW, 144). She is represented as the quintessence of brutality and baseness. Moreover, Gissing highlights how the dangers of modernity and of urban spaces determine a possible retrogression of the humans into a savage state and an almost physical deterioration that verges on putrescence:

Her health was probably less sound than it seemed to be; one would have compared her, not to some piece of exuberant normal vegetation, but rather to a rank, evilly-fostered growth. The putrid soil of that nether world yields other forms beside the obviously blighted and sepiass (NW, 8, italics mine).

On a symbolic plane the rotten vegetation and the contaminated environment become the unifying paradigms of the topographies that Gissing and Hardy envision in their novels. If for Gissing the city-dwellers embody the moral darkness and the blight of the contemporary city, Hardy's description of the woodlands also ends up showing "the common deformation of human and vegetational life in the 'Unfulfilled Intention' of degeneration."¹⁸

Within the urban area, if there is any trace of vegetation, it is invariably condemned to wither or to rot: "in the byways of London [...] the small trees that grew about it shivered in their leaflessness; the rank grass was wan under the failing day" (NW, 2). Even when Gissing introduces a brief topological displacement in the novel, while describing Jane, Sidney and Michael Snowdon on their trip to Danbury Hill, the sense of quietude and delight suggested by a verdant, rural Essex¹⁹ is soon supplanted by the

¹⁷ David Trothen, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 255.

¹⁸ Greenslade, *Degeneration*, 40.

¹⁹ It is merely one of those quiet corners of flat, homely England, where man and beast seem on good terms with each other, where all green things grow in abundance,

awareness that even the country has to struggle to face up to the modern world:

Here, as elsewhere, the evil of the times was pressing upon men, and disheartening them from labour. Farms lying barren, ill-will between proprietor and tenant, between tenant and hind, departure of the tillers of the soil to rot in towns that have no need of them—of such things did honest Pannenter speak, with many a sturdy malediction of landlords and land-laws, wherewith Sidney smiled, not unsympathetic (NW, 165, italics mine).

Despite the spatial isolation, change and modernity have somehow intruded upon the country: even an organic rural community is affected by a sense of mobility, cosmopolitanism, by the multifaceted effects of progress; it cannot remain impervious to the new forms of modernity, and to "the attritions of lives," as Thomas Hardy calls the process in "The Dorsetshire Labourer."²⁰ However, it is almost impossible for the inhabitants of both Clerkwell and Wessex to relocate, despite their restlessness and their frequent attempts to move from one place to another.

Unsurprisingly, both the country and the city convey dysphoric implications that encompass the rural and the urban in a uniform "nether world." Thus, all changes and displacements are paradoxically emblematic of the characters' immobility and of their inability to come to terms with a hostile environment. The two writers often describe places from which the characters try to escape—but their efforts are eventually negated by a self-destructive centripetal movement. The woodlanders that inhabit rural Wessex, like Gissing's anti-heroes secluded in the suburban labyrinth, are often attracted by the "outside," by the illusion of escape from a life of anonymity and distress, even as they are forcibly clustered and ensnared in the space where they are doomed to reside. As Michel Foucault observes in "The Thought of the Outside":

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,

where from of old tith and pasture-land are humbly observant of seasons and alternations, where the brown roads are familiar only with the tread of the labourer, with the light wheel of the farmer's gig, or the rumbling of the solid wain. By the roadside you pass occasionally a manfied pool, where perchance ducks or geese are enjoying themselves; and at times there is a pleasant glimpse of farm-yard, with stacks and barns and stables. All things as simple as could be, but beautiful on this summer afternoon, and priceless when one has come forth from the streets of Clerkwell" (NW, 164–5).

²⁰ Orel, *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, 180.

ted to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside [...] The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence [...] but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible.²¹

There is no escape from city to countryside, or from country to city; that is why thoughts of the outside remain abstracted thoughts, unobtainable dreams of an idyll, just out of reach.

To conclude, the topological imagination of the two Victorian writers clearly exposes the way in which, in Timothy Morton's words, "place has been ruthlessly corroded by space."²² In most of their narratives we can really hear "the cry of place!" which is gradually and irreversibly consumed by the effects of modernity.²³ However, even though "we would be unable to cope with modernity unless we had a few pockets of place in which to store our hope," as Timothy Morton further observes, it is evident that the two writers cannot hypothesize any such hope: theirs is a world governed by the unrelenting laws of biological determinism and socio-spatial contamination.²⁴

As a corrective to the naive idealisation of the country and the city, the work of both Hardy and Gissing stands pre-eminent. The ecocritical interest of these two novelists lies in their blurring of the over-simplistic equation that aligns modernity with the miserably alienated city, whilst assuming that in the past there was a life of environmental balance and harmony which coincided with the pastoral idyll of country living. In fact, what the two Victorian authors suggest is that in both the country and the city darkness walks within us: modern life and urbanization have simply concentrated unfitness and debasement; they have done nothing more than sharpen it, and accelerate its darkest consequences. As Hills Miller puts it when referring to Thomas Hardy: "anything present, visible, out in the sunlight is only another sign for a permanent absence."²⁵

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²¹ Michel Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Vol. 2, ed. James Faubion (London: Penguin, 1998), 154–5.

²² Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 10.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Miller, *Topographies*, 55.

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A LIVING HOME:
TOWARDS AN ECOCRITICAL UNDERSTANDING
OF THE CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY IN SWEDISH
FICTION AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

ANDREAS HEDBERG

An Ecocritical Tradition Discovered

The perspective on ecocriticism that I am advocating in this essay is intimately connected to literary history; I treat it as a theoretical tool which can be used to better our understanding of nature-oriented fiction from different periods of time.¹ It all started with my doctoral thesis, a study of the critique of modernity in the late work of the Swedish author Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895). One of three chapters in that study is a narratological analysis of Rydberg's very last novel, *Vapensmeden* ("The Armourer"), published in 1891.² This novel is an example of 19th-century historical fiction, very much influenced by Rydberg's adolescent reading of novels by such authors as Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870) and Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873). *Vapensmeden* is set in the 16th century, which was the time of the Lutheran Reformation, during which the king and founder of modern Sweden, Gustavus I (reigned 1523–1560) took control of the church and its wealth by enforcing the religious ideas of Martin Luther, a process that consolidated the power of the court but also sparked protests among the people.

¹ This essay is partly published in Swedish (cf. Andreas Hedberg, "På hembygdens fasta grundval. Platsens betydelse i tre modernistiska författarskap," in *En annan riktning framåt. Modernistisk kritik i Sverige under det långa 1800-talet*, eds. Joel Halldorf & Andreas Hedberg (Skellefteå: Norma, 2017), 77–120).

² Andreas Hedberg, *En strid för det som borde vara. Viktor Rydberg som moderniseringskritiker 1891–1895*, Skriften utgivna vid Avdelningen för litteratursociologi i Uppsala, 62 (PhD diss., University of Uppsala: Möklinta: Gidlunds, 2012), 69–146.