Heading South in Search of Female Development
D.H.Lawrence's *The Lost Girl*

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In this essay, I examine the ways in which D.H.Lawrence's 1920 novel *The Lost Girl* describes its female protagonist Alvina Houghton's journey to southern Italy. This novel introduces the motif of journey as part of the female Bildungsroman structure. Alvina travels to Pescocalascio, repudiating the patriarchal restrictions in her parochial British hometown of Woodhouse and pursuing development outside home. But the colonial fear and anxiety about what lies outside European civilization inform the narrative view of the untrodden southern Italian town of Pescocalascio. Where European civilization begins to fade out and sinister primitivism opens its jaw, our female protagonist becomes lost. Hence the representation of Italian primitivism in the novel frustrates Alvina's pursuit of development, but the foreign landscape and the presence of the colonial Other within Lawrence's text disrupt the Bildungsroman's self-contained, teleological structure.

> Yesterday Italy was at her best, such brilliant sun and sky…I shall go further south –feel I want to go further and further south – don't know why.
> (Lawrence's letter, 18 November 1919)

In *Maps of Englishness* (1996), Simon Gikandi, noting that the motif of journey appears frequently in European writers' work in the years between the two world wars, relates it to the prevalent sense of crisis. These writers think that to overcome the "state of terminal crisis" in Europe, what is needed is literary pilgrims who travel to "a possible sanctuary for the lost souls of civilization" and use its energy for the purpose of re-vitalizing European civilization (Gikandi, 1996, p. 179). The work of D.H.Lawrence can be understood in a similar way. Through his writing career, Lawrence traveled extensively, to escape from and find an alternative to capitalist industrial modernity paralyzing British society. But "as early as 1918, Lawrence had traveled very little yet, and his experience of the world was still limited to Europe" (Ceramella, 2004, p. 31). It is not surprising, then, that young Lawrence moved "further and further south" within the European continent, imagining that Italy, a country located at the southern end of Europe, would provide a viable remedy by which to ameliorate the ills of northern European society.

Recognizing the importance of Italy in Lawrence's oeuvre, many critics have analyzed the writer's relation to the southern European country.[1] Yet no one has examined in depth Lawrence's Italian novels in connection to the colonial discourse of primitivism. This essay is an attempt to read a Lawrence's literary text set in southern Italy through the lens of primitivism. The word "southern" is important. The development of the tourist industry in the second half of the nineteenth century transformed southern Europe into one of the most popular destinations for British travelers by the beginning of the twentieth century. But where does "southern" Europe refer to, precisely? In her recent analysis of the history of British travel writing, Sharon Ouditt argues that to the British travelers, southern Europe typically ends in northern Italy: "[E.M.] Forster's 'south' is barely beyond Tuscany. Byron's Childe Harold gets no further than Rome, and 'nobody travels south of Rome'" (Ouditt, 2006, p. 123).

When viewed in the analytical light that Ouditt provides, an remarkable fact about Lawrence's 1920 novel is that it describes its female protagonist Alvina Houghton's trip to Pescocalascio, a region south of Naples and located between present day Atina and Picinisco. A few critics have attempted to reclaim this "curious, powerful, and ultimately ambivalent fiction" (Balbert, 1990, p. 381) from its

long neglect,[2] but the novel's representation of "primitive" southern Italy has received insufficient critical attention. My essay is divided in two parts. In the first part, I will define *The Lost Girl* as a female Bilduntsroman text and show that Lawrence introduces the motif of the Italian journey as part of a female Bildungsroman plot. It is important in Lawrence's masterplan for his female Bildungsroman text that his heroine does not grow up according to the pattern of development which designates a youth's social assimilation as the goal of education. In other words, Alvina's journey abroad is instigated by the awareness that women's development requires freedom from the patriarchal status quo. As I will explain in the second half of this essay, however, Lawrence's plan to describe women's development outside Britain comes to a halt, as Alvina encounters in her Italian husband Ciccio's hometown Pescocalascio unrestrained primitivism. Our female protagonist becomes lost amongst the Italian landscape, and Lawrence fails to achieve what he aims to achieve: the description of a successful pattern of female Bildung. Nonethelss, *The Lost Girl* makes an important intervention in the tradition of the early twentieth century British female Bildungsroman: Alvina's inability to return home and thus the absence of the typical ending of the Bildungsroman disrupt the genre's self-contained, teleological structure.

"Something Better than the Suffrage"

Phillip Herring observes that *The Lost Girl* "begins as the story of the decline and fall of Manchester House, prophesying the destruction of the mercantile class [in England]" but "ends by dramatizing the way in which extraordinary people escape the prison of environment to build, or begin to build, a society of two" (Herring, 1979, p. 11). A succinct summary of the novel as it may be, Herring's statement does not make it sufficiently clear that Alvina Houghton constitutes the focal point of Lawrence's narrative. In its barest outline, *The Lost Girl* describes Alvina's struggle in a small, provincial town called Woodhouse and her search for development. The novel opens by describing Alvina's father James Houghton. A muddle-headed dreamer, James starts a number of businesses which don't cater to the cheap, bigoted taste of the villagers. His enterprises keep failing, and meanwhile, his daughter Alvina finds herself caught between the rigid expectations of re-

spectable middle class women, her father's dwindling economy which makes it impossible to meet those expectations, and her indefatigable desire for a life not circumscribed by patriarchal normalcy. She dates with a number of men in town and tries a couple of careers, but none satisfies her. A turning point in the narrative as well as in Alvina's life is provided when one day, an itinerant theatrical company called the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras visits Woodhouse to perform at James Houghton's theatre. This visit provides our heroine with a chance to meet Ciccio, the Italian member of the theatrical group. She is irresistibly attracted to the enigmatic man from the south of Italy, and always in search of a new life outside home, Alvina marries Ciccio and leaves with him for his Italian hometown.

Making a woman character the protagonist of his novel and focusing on her attempt to escape from patriarchal restrictions, Lawrence responds to the growing feminist effort for women's development and the literary demand of the female Bildungsroman. Some explanation is necessary to make this point clear. The expanding opportunities for education and employment as well as the achievement of women's suffrage in 1928 allowed British women to break free from a domestic life and establish a public identity for the first time in British women's history. And these changes gave rise to the expectation for a genre which represents the formation of female subjectivity. The female Bildungsroman seems to fit the bill, at first glance: since its conception at the end of the eighteenth century, the Bildungsroman has been understood as a genre primarily concerned with the description of an individual's subjectivity formation. Typically, the Bildungsroman portrays the male protagonist's development, but the genre can be appropriated to describe a woman's development.

However, simply replacing a male protagonist with a female protagonist does not warrant the birth of a new genre. The male protagonist is just one symptom of the male orientation which informs the Bildungsroman text in entirety. The female protagonist and her pattern of development, therefore, inevitably collide with the Bildungsroman's male assumptions. The most conspicuous collision concerns the goal of the youth's development. As Franco Moretti explains in his *The Way of the World*, the Bildungsroman narrates the youth's assent to the existing social order. At the beginning of a

Bildungsroman text, the youth's desire for individuality and his society's expectation of normalcy are in conflict with each other, but as the youth internalizes social expectations and accepts them as his own, he reconciles with society and is successfully assimilated into it. The achievement of individual freedom by means of joining larger collectives, or the process of becoming "a subjected subject," to use Louis Althusser's words, (Althusser, 1972, p. 181) marks the completion of the youth's development.[3]

The problem of the female Bildungsroman, then, lies in the contradiction between the Bildungsroman's demand of a disciplined citizenry committed to the reinforcement of the hegemonic status quo and the female protagonist's refusal to accept the status quo. Put differently, the modern woman in pursuit of development *criticizes* the patriarchal imperatives of society and *refuses* to reconcile with them. Attempting to gain freedom from patriarchal society, therefore, the female protagonist of a Bildungsroman text disrupts the internal order and the ideology of the Bildungsroman genre.

When viewed in this light, Lawrence's explanation of what he attempts to portray in *The Lost Girl* deserves our attention. The novel draws upon "Elsa Culverwell," a twenty-page story that Lawrence composed in December 1912, and in the letter that he sent to his friend shortly after finishing the story, Lawrence proclaims a plan to develop the story into a novel. Introducing this plan, he writes, "I shall do my work for women, better than the suffrage" (Lawrence, 1912/2002, p. 490).

In this statement, Lawrence reveals his awareness of the limitations of women's pursuit of development within patriarchal society, on the one hand, and the contradictions of the female Bildungsroman, on the other. It escapes the scope of this essay to discuss in full the political and cultural significance as well as the limits of the women's suffrage campaigns. True, the achievement of women's right to vote helps to build "a new woman-centered political culture and agenda" (Purvis and Holton, 2000, pp. 6-7). Yet Lawrence seems to suggest that women's enfranchisement indicates women's *participation* in existing society and as such, is not ultimately conducive to their development. The following passages from *The Lost Girl* demonstrate this point. When Alvina is desperate to find something better the suffrage, the driving engine of her quest is her "extraordinariness."

But we protest that Alvina is not ordinary. Ordinary people, ordinary fates. But extraordinary people, extraordinary fates. Or else no fate at all. The all-to-one-pattern modern system is too much for most extraordinary individuals. It just kills them off or throws them disused aside.

…There was no hope for Alvina in the ordinary. If help came, it would have to come from the extraordinary. Hence the extreme peril of her case. Hence the bitter fear and humiliation she felt as she drudged shabbily on in Manchester House, hiding herself as much as possible from public view. Men can suck the heady juice of exalted self-importance from the bitter weed of failure – failures are usually the most conceited of men: even as was James Houghton. But to a woman, failure is another matter. For her it means failure to live, failure to establish her own life on the face of the earth. And this is humiliating, the ultimate humiliation. (Lawrence, 1920 / 1968, p. 98)

When the narrative stresses Alvina's extraordinariness, its meaning is made clearer when we note that the passage above is preceded by Alvina's declaration of a refusal to work. In the face of her father's ever-decreasing income, she meditates for a moment the prospect of work, only to find the idea "hideous" (95):

She rebelled with all her backbone against the word job. Even the substitutes, *employment* or *work*, were detestable, unbearable. Emphatically, she did not want to work for a wage. It was too humiliating. Could anything be more *infra dig* than the performing of a set of special actions day in day out, for a life-time, in order to receive some shillings every seventh day. Shameful! A condition of shame. (Lawrence, 1920 / 1968, p. 96)

Lawrence makes no direct reference to women's suffrage in the novel, but he makes his thought on the issue clear by describing his extraordinary heroine's refusal to work. It helps us at this point to briefly study Virginia Woolf's argument on women's work as expressed in *Three Guineas* (1938). In this essay, Woolf argues that the franchise, the political cause for which the daughters of educated

men have struggled for the past 150 years, is "in itself by no means negligible" (Woolf, 1938/2006, p. 19), but it doesn't gain its full significance until the right to vote is "mysteriously connected with another right of such immense value to the daughters of educated men" (Woolf, 1938/2006, p. 19). Here Woolf is referring to women's right to earn their living, made possible or facilitated by the Sex Disqualification Act of 1919. According to Woolf, the truly important stepping stone for women's development is provided, when women enter the workplace: with "the sacred sixpence that she had earned with her own hands herself," a working woman is enabled to "issue from the shadow of the private house, and stand on the bridge which lies between the old world and the new world" (Woolf, 1938/2006, p. 20).

However, Lawrence seems to think that women's work raises the same question as women's enfranchisement, insofar as both indicate women's participation in the male-oriented social order. By means of unhesitatingly defining job, work and employment as "a condition of shame," our heroine declares that she does not accept extension of male privileges to women – women's rights to work and to vote – as a method of female development. For Alvina's development, something radically different is needed.

At the opening pages of the novel, it is not yet clear what Lawrence envisions as better than the suffrage and how he is going to represent it. Instead, Lawrence's narrative repeatedly emphasizes and celebrates Alvina's unconventionality. For example, when she plays the piano at her father's theatre and flirts with her father's business partner Mr. May, Miss Pinnegar thinks that her protégée tarnishes her reputation irreparably. In the narrator's words, our heroine becomes "déclassée: she had lost her class altogether" (135). But Alvina cannot care less about what ordinary people call "a disgrace' (116). Instead, "she rather liked it. She liked being déclassée. She liked feeling an outsider" (135). Alvina is convinced and the narrative convinces the readers that stepping outside the grids of the given order constitutes the first step toward "stand[ing] on her own ground" (135). In this process, Lawrence affirms the idea that he insinuates in the letter – that is, the woman protagonist of the female Bildungsroman attempts to change the exiting social order, instead of conforming to it, to make room for her development.

Upon the arrival of the Natcha-Kee-Tawaras in Woodhouse, the novel focuses on the troupe's most exotic member Ciccio. The Italian man and the motif of journey that he mobilizes seem to answer Alvina's call for an extraordinary help.

Towards Italy, which "Savagely and Triumphantly Refuses Our Living Culture"

Stressing the impossibility of Alvina's development within the domestic sphere, Lawrence turns his gaze abroad. This turning of the gaze makes the writer engage one of the principal codes of the Bildungsroman, or the motif of journey. In *Season of Youth* (1974), Jerome Buckley abstracts "the broad outlines of a typical Bildungsroman plot": "a child of some sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination….He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city (in the English novels, usually London). There his real "education" begins, not only his preparation for a career but also – and often more importantly – his direct experience of urban life" (Buckeley, 1974, p. 17). The educational aspect of journey is observed in a similar practice in reality. As James Buzard explains his book *The Beaten Track* (1993), from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, the Grand Tour constituted the dominant form of trips to the European continent. Typically, young unmarried men from privileged backgrounds went to the continent "in the fraternal company of tutors and friends" (Buzard, 1993, p. 130) for the purpose of enhancing their classical minds and getting them to be familiar with "the sources of civilization" (Buzard, 1993, p. 110). The young travelers understood the Grand Tour as "a finishing stage in the process of education and maturation, undertaken before they thought of marrying and filling the niches assigned to them in their society" (Buzard, 1993, p. 130).

When Alvina travels to Ciccio's hometown in Italy, her journey to European south appears to reverberate the notion of educational travel as discussed by the two critics. But her travel is significantly differentiated from the usual pattern of travel as described in the Bildungsroman: the youth of the Bildungsroman returns home, once his education outside home is complete. The youth's

return to the fold at the conclusion of the Bildungsroman is close-ly related to his subjectivity formation. Because he grows to be a subject interpellated by and subject to the Subject, the youth, once aberrant, must return to the centered whole structured and or-chestrated by higher authorities. The Bildungsroman's self-con-tained teleological structure becomes complete when the young man is relocated into a proper place vis-à-vis the center. Howev-er, the conclusion of *The Lost Girl* betrays the expectation of the Bildungsroman's circular structure. Lawrence's woman character gets lost amongst the foreign landscape of Italy and is unable to return home.

Lawrence's novel begins to anticipate the denouement of the narrative as soon as Alvina establishes a rapport with Ciccio. In her first meeting of the Italian man, she feels as if "a great instinctive good-naturedness came out of him" (157), but she also finds him threatening, unintelligible, and enigmatic:

> He smiled into her eyes as if she understood. She was a trifle nervous as he smiled at her from out of the stable, so yellow-eyed and half-mysterious, derisive. Her impulse was to turn and go away from the stable. But a deeper impulse made her smile into his face, as she said to him:
> "They like you to touch them."
> "Who?" His eyes kept hers. Curious how *dark* they seemed, with only a yellow ring of pupil. He was looking right into her, beyond her usual self, impersonal.
> "The horses," she said. She was afraid of his long, cat-like look. Yet she felt convinced of his ultimate good-na-ture. He seemed to her to be the only passionately good-natured man she had ever seen. She watched him vaguely, with strange vague trust, implicit belief in him. In him – in what? (Lawrence, 1920/1968, p.159-60)

Alvina's response to Ciccio demonstrates an uncomfortable admix-ture of hope to find in him a source of her development and dread of his animalistic behaviour. And over the course of the narrative, Cic-cio's threat to Alvina intensifies, particularly after James Houghton's death. Upon the learning of the unfortunate news, Ciccio "gives [to Alvina] the faintest gesture with his head, as of summons towards

him" (197), and this gesture kills the Englishwoman bereft of fatherly protection:

> Her soul started, and died in her. And again he gave the slightest, almost imperceptible jerk of the head, backwards and sideways, as if summoning her towards him. His face too was closed and expressionless. But in his eyes, which kept hers, there was a dark flicker of ascendancy. He was going to triumph over her. She knew it. And her soul sank as if it sank out of her body. It sank away out of her body, left her there powerless, soulless….
>
> Her eyes were wide and neutral and submissive, with a new, awful submission as if she had lost her soul. She looked up at him, like a victim. (Lawrence, 1920/1968, p. 197)

Commenting about the passage above, Peter Balbert raises a question. First, he notes that an emphasis on an organic vision and a cosmic consciousness which transcends barriers between individuals informs Lawrence's oeuvre. But there is, Balbert maintains, something in Alvina's response to Ciccio's first kiss that goes "beyond the requirements of Lawrence's organic vision" (Balbert, 1990, p. 393): "there is something predatory and silently conniving in Ciccio, something that does take advantage of the limitations of others – in short, something that is not justified by a reference to Alvina's long-awaited, necessary wedding in the darkness. Here and throughout the novel Ciccio remains too unknown, brooding, and inarticulate to fully convince us of the value of his transforming murder of Alvina. For Alvina's assassination appears to negate not only her will but also her energy" (Balbert, 1990, p. 394).

To Balbert, Ciccio's enigmatic charm remains an unresolved mystery. But I think that we can resolve the question that Balbert leaves unresolved by means of focusing on the southern Italian setting of the novel and also on early twentieth century northern Europeans' understanding of the south of Italy. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, despite the increasing popularity of travel to the European south, Italy south of Rome remained an unexplored territory. If so, southern Italy marks the end of European civilization and is dangerously close to the world of non-European barbarity.

To support my claim on the meaning of southern Italy as a portal to a non-European world, I'd like to briefly discuss Thomas Mann's 1921 novella *Death in Venice*. Mann's view of Venice illuminates and is illuminated by Lawrence's view of southern Italy. The protagonist of Mann's text Gustave Aschenbach, "too occupied with the tasks set for him by his own ego and the European spirit he represented" (Mann, 1921/1995, p. 4), travels to Venice, to relax and to recuperate. In this itinerary toward south, the choice of Venice is a result of compromise: Aschenbach wants to visit a region antithetical to the rigid asceticism prevailing in northern Europe, but he also wants to avoid going "all the way to the tigers" (Mann, 1921/1995, p. 5). But the tigers that Aschenbach wants to avoid ultimately overtake him in the form of a cholera, which originates in India and sweeps Venice during the time of Aschenbach's visit to the city. Recently, postcolonial scholars have shown that the narrative trajectory of Mann's text points to the moment when the fear of the colonial Other's assault of Europe reinforces the danger of Italy as a space of European liminality. For example, Edward Said convincingly argues in *Culture and Imperialism* that *Death in Venice* reveals Mann's awareness that "Europe, its art, mind, monuments, is no longer invulnerable" (Said, 1994, p. 188). Then, one of the places in which the colonial Other's impingement on the European metropolitan consciousness begins is Venice, "a southern city but not quite a truly Oriental one, a European but most definitely not a really exotic locale" (Said, 1999, p. 50).

I suggest that we understand the character Ciccio and Alvina's trip to southern Italy by situating them in the contexts established by Said's postcolonial reading of *Death in Venice*. Indeed, Ciccio is characterized with reference to the primitive figure residing at the colonial peripheries. His origin in a colonial backwater and his movement to the European center first and later back to his point of origin establish a ground for a post colonial reading of the novel. Observing that the narrative concern with Alvina's attempt to overcome patriarchal restrictions at the beginning is gradually replaced by the descriptions of the sinister forces of the Italian man Ciccio and his country, critics, such as Philip Herring, have considered *The Lost Girl* as a failed or immature work by Lawrence. In the novel, however, the two elements are closely related – that is, the extraordinary woman's search for an extraordinary venue for develop-

ment invites and becomes conjoined with the colonial discourse of primitivism. If Woodhouse has nothing helpful for Alvina's development, she should locate a source of development outside the home boundaries. And, in the colonial mapping of the world marked by a descending order of place from the European civilization to the non-European primitivism, "extraordinary" may be a euphemism for all that lies outside the European center: non-European, pre-modern, barbaric and primitive.

Lawrence's narrative shows that Alvina's choice to locate a source of development outside Woodhouse turns out an unwise one. She daringly travels to Pescocalascio, but it is an European heart of darkness, or to use the narrator's words, one of the "negative centres, [or] localities which savagely and triumphantly refuse our living culture" (350). The following passage poignantly describes Italian primitivism's threat to annihilate our English girl as well as her sense of entrapment in the negative center. Looking at some flowers in Pescocalascio, Alvina thinks:

> And yet their red-purple silkiness had something pre-world about it, at last. The more she wandered, the more the shadow of the by-gone pagan world seemed to come over her. Sometimes she felt she would shriek and go mad, so strong was the influence on her, something pre-world, and it seemed to her now, vindictive. She seemed to feel in the air strange Furies, Lemures, things that had haunted her with their tomb-frenzied vindictiveness since she was a child and had pored over the illustrated Classical Dictionary. Black and cruel presences were in the under-air. They were furtive and slinking. They bewitched you with loveliness, and lurked with fangs to hurt you afterwards. (Lawrence, 1920/1968, p. 372)

All she can do in the face of the "dark repulsiveness" that her new town creates is to "avoid the inside of this part of the world" (371). But this is an exhausting, and the narrative implies, losing battle. Alvina's initial struggle for development is reduced to a battle for mere survival by the end of the novel, and Lawrence's ambitious goal to describe a successful pattern of female development is not accomplished. Not surprisingly, the novel ends abruptly. The out-

break of World War I enlists Ciccio and leaves Alvina, pregnant with a child, alone in the middle of the sinister Italian landscape. She begs her husband to promise to her that he will come back at the end of the war. He does promise, but our female protagonist is not assured. The novel concludes by describing Ciccio's departure, and the future of Alvina hangs in the air.

In this essay, I have tried to show that the travel motif in Lawrence's novel is introduced as part of the writer's attempt to produce a female Bildungsroman text that does not signify women's participation in patriarchal society. The girl who pursues development via "something better than suffrage" fails to develop, however, despite her fearless journey to southern Italy. Nonetheless, it is not my intention in this essay to dismiss *The Lost Girl* for its lack of female Bildung. I'd like to conclude this essay, by emphasizing instead that Lawrence's novel makes an important intervention in the form of the Bildungsroman. I have argued earlier that the youth's education to be a subjected subject is essential for the Bildungsroman's self-enclosed, teleological structure. To the contrary, Lawrence, by describing Alvina's failure to return to the fold, fractures the Bildungsroman's closed structure. Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* perishes in Venice, but Alvina survives the contact with non-European primitivism. Yet the Bildungsroman structure used to describe her search for development seems to receive a more serious blow. When the colonial Other enters the horizon of the Bildungsroman narrative, the representative European genre of education is unable to maintain its form intact. As an open-ended female Bildungsroman text, *The Lost Girl* anticipates the writing of the postcolonial female Bildungsroman by later generations.

Notes

1 See, for instance, George Donaldson and Mara Kalnins, *D.H.Lawrence in Italy and England* (1999, St. Martin's Press: New York); Jeffrey Meyers, *D.H.Lawrence and the Experience of Italy*. (1982, University of Philadelphia Press: Philadelphia).

2 Examples include Peter Balbert and Julian Moynahan. See Moynahan's discussion of *The Lost Girl* in his *The Deed of Life: The Novels and Tales of D.H.Lawrence* (1963, Princeton University Press: Princeton).

3 For the dual meaning of the subject and its implication for the Bildungsroman, see Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: the World Novel, Narra-*

tive Form, and International Law (2007, Fordham University Press: New York), and Fredric Jameson's essay "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World: The Case of the Testimonio" from *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse in Lain America* (1996, Duke University Press: Durham).

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