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**LITERARY CURE:
D. H. LAWRENCE IN POST-FASCIST ITALY**

FREDRIK TYDAL

In May 1946, one year after World War II formally ended in Europe, the Italian publishing company Mondadori launched a book series called *I libri della Ricostruzione*. As its title suggests, ‘The Books of Reconstruction’ aimed to help in the post-war restoration of Italy – an impressive ambition, considering that much of the country was still in ruins. The inside of each volume offered a clear statement of intent, shedding light on this curious enterprise:

Questa speciale serie di volumi – che chiamiamo “I libri della Ricostruzione” perché intende concorrere alla ricostruzione economica del Paese nel difficile e fondamentale campo dell’editoria – non vuol essere una Collezione nuova, né presentare nuovi volumi, ma dar modo a tutti, per la modestia del suo prezzo, di potersi accostare, in questi momenti difficili per l’economia italiana, ai più significativi testi della produzione più recente ... scelte con attento criterio di valore artistico e culturale. [This special series of volumes – which we call “The Books of Reconstruction” because it intends to contribute to the economic reconstruction of the country in the hard-pressed and important field of publishing – does not seek to be a new collection nor to present new volumes, but rather gives everyone the chance, at an affordable price, to be able to acquire, in these difficult times for the Italian economy, the most significant texts of recent production ... chosen with attention to criteria of artistic and cultural value.]

In somewhat Keynesian fashion, Mondadori sought to get the economy started again by producing inexpensive and attractive

goods that would stimulate consumption. Indeed, the books in the series are likened to “pietr[e] [per la] riedificazione economica”, that is to building blocks, essentially, in the economic re-edification. But Italy’s post-war plight was not limited to the economic field, as over twenty years of Fascism had also left its mark in terms of both ideology and social relations. Thus, the series also hoped to contribute to a different type of reconstruction. For, as the blurb concludes, there was a second and apparently ulterior objective: “di contribuire all’estensione della cultura che è base di ricostruzione morale e civile” [to contribute to the extension of culture which is the basis of moral and civil reconstruction].

Yet to launch their ambitious project of national rectification, Mondadori chose the work of an author whose name is not normally synonymous with moral plenitude: D. H. Lawrence. Followed by scandal in his lifetime, and yet to be exonerated in the *Lady Chatterley* trial of 1960, Lawrence is certainly not the first author to come to mind as a candidate for inclusion in Mondadori’s idealistic publishing project. Ideologically the decision makes even less sense, for how could they marshal, in support of democracy, a writer who, according to Bertrand Russell, “had developed the whole philosophy of Fascism before the politicians had thought of it”?¹ Other titles in the series, by authors such as Arnold Zweig and John Dos Passos, seem more expected, given their anti-Fascist stance and socially conscious perspective. But as for Lawrence – how could his work help to reconstruct Italy?

The answer, as explored in this article, is to be found in the specific title chosen by Mondadori: *The Virgin and the Gipsy* (1930). Placing the novella within the idealistic framework of *I libri della Ricostruzione*, I argue that its selection has an important function in the larger, reparative work of the book series. While the novella’s theme of release from oppression would have resonated generally in the wake of Fascism, I propose that the sexual dimension of that release is what makes the selection particularly relevant in this context. Specifically, as I show, the selection functions as an antidote to Fascist sexual politics, and by extension as an affirmation of

democracy, through the novella's implied connection between erotic awakening and revolutionary sensibility. In this way, as I conclude, the use of Lawrence's work anticipates subsequent efforts of Italian writers and artists to confront the residual effects of Fascism in the decades following the war.

In the biographical sketch accompanying *La vergine e lo zingaro* (as the novella is called in Italian translation), Lawrence is described as “[un] grande ammiratore dell’Italia” [a great admirer of Italy], highlighting the author's special relationship to the country as if to assert his relevance for this particular audience. These are of course not merely empty words, since Italy was undoubtedly important to Lawrence for much of his adult life. As he put it in his travelogue *Sea and Sardinia* (1921): “Italy has given me back I know not what of myself, but a very, very great deal. She has found for me so much that was lost: like a restored Osiris” (SS 123). How appropriate, then, that Lawrence's work was used to launch *I libri della Ricostruzione*: he had learned much from Italy, and now Mondadori evidently felt it was time for him to return the favour posthumously through an edition of his work. Yet as a relatively minor work, unpublished in Lawrence's lifetime, *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is not an obvious choice, suggesting that Mondadori had specific reasons for including it.²

The Virgin and the Gipsy is the story of Yvette, one of two sisters growing up in an authoritarian household. When the sisters were young girls, their mother left the family for another man, leaving them in the care of their father. Presumably to fill the void, the father invites his own family to live with them: his sister, brother and, most importantly, his elderly mother, who effectively assumes control of the house. The grandmother – or “The Mater” (VG 6) as she is known in the family – installs a strict system of rule, designed to curb any dormant influences in the sisters of their vivacious and independent mother. Essentially, the house figures as an oppressive regime: the

grandmother controls everyone inside in different ways, and the family members themselves contribute to upholding the order. These power structures are evident in the depictions of daily life inside the house. For example, when Yvette attempts to open a window for fresh air – “It’s stifling! It’s unbearable!”, she exclaims – she is swiftly reprimanded by the grandmother and her father closes the window (VG 13).³ Although the sisters are not physically confined inside the house, they are mentally and ideologically trapped. As a result, they have few hopes or dreams about the future and a feeling of resignation pervades their lives. Their only diversions are the occasional party or outing with friends, but these, too, seem mechanical and hold little joy.

During a car ride, Yvette and her friends come upon a gypsy camp on the outskirts of town. As they stop to have their fortunes told, Yvette is immediately attracted to a young man. The gypsy stirs something in the young woman, which prompts her to return to the camp by herself. The two seem to form a deep connection, albeit not a physical one, as the man brings her into contact with “some hidden part of herself ... which mysteriously and unconfessedly responded to him” (VG 54). This sensual awakening enlivens Yvette in a variety of ways, and she expands her social circle by striking up a friendship with a divorced Jewish woman and her new suitor. But Yvette’s father disapproves of the friendship and, by implication, his daughter’s new-found freedom, threatening to break with her if she remains in contact with the couple. Having no other choice, she complies with her father’s wishes. Then, on a quiet Sunday when only Yvette and the grandmother are in the house, the river dam breaks, and a flood of biblical proportions drowns the matriarch and leaves the house barely standing.

On a general level, it is clear how this story of liberation from tyranny would resonate with Italian readers in the wake of Fascism. More subtly, the novella also seems to say something about the operative mechanisms of a totalitarian order. To a surprising degree, the story evokes the analysis of hegemony that emerged from Antonio Gramsci’s study of Fascist Italy – especially since the family

members are complicit in their own subordination. For example, when the younger sister Lucille at one point stands up to the grandmother, she is fiercely rebuked by Aunt Cissie, who proceeds to physically drag the girl to her room. “Lucille let herself be pushed”, we read (VG 34), reminding us how for Gramsci, the working of hegemony “is characterised by the combination of force and consent”.⁴ Yet it is a paratextual element unique to the present edition that points us in a more specific direction, suggesting Mondadori’s rationale for the novella’s inclusion in the series while also giving us an idea where they wanted readers to focus their attention. For in a brief note on the cover, Lawrence is strikingly described as “[il] grande psicologo del sesso” [the great psychologist of sex].

Lawrence might have been flattered by the epithet, since through his work, as we know, he explicitly sought to overturn sexual mores and bring about what he envisioned as a healthier relationship between the sexes in his own time. “[O]nly through a readjustment between men and women, and a making free and healthy of the sex, will [England] get out of her present atrophy”, he wrote in 1913: “I do write because I want folk – English folk – to alter, and have more sense” (IL 544). *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is representative of this impulse, as the grandmother is essentially a remnant of Victorian family values. In fact, she may even be a stand-in for the Queen herself, since on three occasions in the story, her position in the house is compared to that of inhabiting a throne (VG 6, 7, 16). In this sense, *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is quite clearly a confrontation with lingering Victorian values. As Joseph Allen Boone puts it, the house for Lawrence “represents all that is wrong with the standards of Victorian morality that have persisted into early-twentieth century middle-class life”.⁵

Feminist criticism has identified a discrepancy between theory and practice in Lawrence’s work, and a way to summarise Kate Millett’s argument in *Sexual Politics* (1969) would be to say that the result of his “making free and healthy of the sex” can be construed as sexist (IL 544). Certainly, even a work like *The Virgin and the*

Gipsy, which Millett does not treat, is problematic in terms of gender roles, chiefly in how Yvette simultaneously desires freedom and submission. Even so, I believe that the function Lawrence's work could serve in the post-Fascist Italian context far outweighs any limitations of his own sexual politics. Presented by Mondadori following the dissolution of an anti-feminist regime that actively worked against women's rights, *The Virgin and the Gipsy* may be seen as a timely and prescient antidote to Fascist sexual politics.

In the early 1920s, gender relations became a site of political struggle in Italy. As in other Western countries, advances towards women's rights had begun following World War I, with moves towards suffrage, entry into higher education and divorce laws. For example, in the early days of Fascism Italy was somewhat in step with these developments, with limited female suffrage coming into effect in 1925. But as Mussolini tightened his grip on Italy in the following years these progressive reforms were put on hold and eventually cancelled entirely.

Since Fascist Italy was to a large extent defined by the views of one man, its sexual politics may well be illustrated by Mussolini himself. In a conversation with a female journalist in 1927, he remarked on what he saw as the ideal relationship between men and women:

Women are the tender, gentle influence that represents the pleasant parenthesis in a man's life, the influence that often aids a man to forget his trials and fatigue, but that leaves no lasting trace ... Women are a charming pastime, when a man has time to pass, a means of changing one's train of thought; but they should never be taken seriously, for they themselves are rarely serious ... My wife and family are my dearest possessions, but so greatly do I treasure them that I keep them apart from my day ...⁶

As chauvinistic as the entire passage is the final line stands out for its endorsement of a segregated relationship between men and women. Although Mussolini's view would perhaps not have been an

uncommon opinion among ordinary people at the time, it does run counter to the concurrent developments in many other Western societies.

Between the wars Italian men and women had set out on the road towards equality but were violently pushed back, damaging the relationship between the sexes. What resulted was confusion, and a reversion to old roles and ways of being, which were subsequently cemented under the ideological pressure of Fascism. For what Mussolini endorsed in the above passage, he also enforced on a national scale through a variety of measures and interventions, such as doubling the tuition fees for female university students, and limiting women employees in the public sector to ten percent of the total – all of which were designed to keep women in the domestic sphere, separating them from the “male” workplace, and constraining their role to mothers and procreators. As Mussolini succinctly put it: “Women’s place, in the present as in the past, is in the home”.⁷

To find intellectual justification for these measures Mussolini was aided by Fascist ideologues like Giovanni Gentile; among intellectuals and artists he also found support in Futurism. In its founding manifesto, published in 1909, F. T. Marinetti declared in articles nine and ten that “We will glorify ... scorn for woman” and “fight ... feminism”.⁸ The relationship between Futurism and Fascism is complex, and it may be said that Mussolini only appropriated those ideas that appealed to him – which clearly included the Futurists’ views on the women’s movement. In fact, the ideas about men and women expressed in the excerpt from Mussolini quoted above evoked what had already been articulated by Marinetti in a 1919 polemic, stating that the “mixing of males with females at a very early age ... is the cause of a harmful effeminacy in the male”. Thus, “Male children ... must develop separately from little girls, so that their early games are unequivocally masculine”.⁹

Lawrence could not be further removed from these notions of gender segregation, and it is also in his critique of Futurism that we can see, by implication, his main ideological differences with Fascism, given the lineage between the two movements. In a 1914

letter to Arthur McLeod, Lawrence declares his interest in Futurism; however, he is also very much divided by the movement.¹⁰ Specifically, Lawrence takes issue with its anti-feminism. First predicting that the Futurists “will progress down the purely male ... line”, Lawrence goes on to expound on the short-sightedness of such an enterprise:

I think the only re-sourcing of art, re-vivifying it, is to make it more the joint work of man and woman. I think *the* one thing to do, is for men to have courage to draw nearer to women, expose themselves to them, and be altered by them: and for women to accept and admit men. That is the only way for art and civilisation to get a new life, a new start – by bringing themselves together, men and women – revealing themselves each to the other, gaining great blind knowledge and suffering and joy, which it will take a big further lapse of civilisation to exploit and work out. Because the source of all life and knowledge is in man and woman, and the source of all living is in the interchange and the meeting and mingling of these two: man-life and woman-life, man knowledge and woman-knowledge, man-being and woman-being. (2L 181)

Here Lawrence’s reflections on the relationship between men and women are philosophical in nature. Yet for Mussolini, this was also a fundamentally political question. “My notion of woman’s rôle in the State is utterly opposed to feminism”, he asserted: “Of course I do not want women to be slaves, but if here in Italy I proposed to give our women votes, they would laugh me to scorn”.¹¹ “The death of feminism and of the equal rights movement”, Lucia Re writes, was, from the perspective of Fascist ideology, “a fundamental achievement of modernity because it ... restored the sharply defined difference between man and woman, which had become blurred in the years of the development of the women’s movement”.¹²

Why was this difference important to Mussolini? Daniel Woodley suggests an illuminating answer:

The exaggerated masculinity of fascism is based on a fantasy of virility and patriarchal domination in which the suppression of femininity and the corrupting “feminine” effects of egalitarianism, democracy and cosmopolitanism are considered vital for the cultural survival and economic progress of the race-nation.¹³

Democracy thus becomes coded as feminine, while autocracy is coded as masculine. This conception is also found among the Futurists, for whom women were similarly associated with a gentler form of politics and governance, which motivated the movement’s resistance to female suffrage. As Marinetti wrote: “a government composed of women or one supported by women would drag us fatally down the road of pacifism and Tolstoyan cowardice”.¹⁴ Liberal democracy was still a young phenomenon in early twentieth-century Europe, and the Fascists and the Futurists alike seemed to link its rapid growth to the changing role of women. Feminism and its promise of gender equality thus represented a two-pronged threat to Mussolini: both sexual and political.

This is where Lawrence’s novella becomes especially interesting in the Italian context, for, in *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, there is in fact a connection between Yvette’s sexual awakening and the emergence of a democratic sensibility. Experiencing a “revolt in [her] ... soul” (VG 64), Yvette’s contact with the gypsy allows her to imagine a kind of counter-hegemonic activity that will bring down the walls of the oppressive house. First, she is fascinated by his marginalisation and refusal to conform to social conventions: “She liked that mysterious endurance in him, which endures in opposition, without any idea of victory” (VG 64). She then aligns herself with him and his kind, the unprivileged: “Yes, if she belonged to any side, and to any clan, it was to his”, she reflects, entertaining the notion of becoming a “pariah gypsy-woman”. Even though she is “born inside the pale” – that is, inside the petit bourgeois conventions of the house – she realises it is still possible to “chip against the pillars of the temple, from the inside” (VG 65). An apt biblical reference follows,

giving a powerful image of impending release from oppression: “Doubtless many fragments had been whittled away from the pillars of the Philistine, before Samson pulled the temple down”. With the eventual fall of the house, then, Yvette’s revolt of the soul is carried into the realm of the real, suggesting a causal relationship and illustrating the threat of democracy which the Fascists perceived in the figure of woman. On the surface, the situations are not entirely analogous, given that the oppressive order in *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is a matriarchy, while Fascist Italy was of course intensely patriarchal. But what unites the two regimes – fictional and actual – is the element of gendered segregation at the heart of their sexual politics, and the threat that a more equal relationship between men and women would pose to their rule.

From the cultural work they make his novella perform in the post-war Italian context, Mondadori turned Lawrence into nothing less than a posthumous anti-Fascist. Repurposed in this context, *The Virgin and the Gipsy* does indeed serve as a building block in the reconstruction of the country – specifically, as I have shown, in the important field of sexual politics and gender relations. While this external appropriation does not necessarily remove the taint of either Fascism or sexism from the author himself, it does nuance his relationship to both ideologies, reminding us of the contradictory impulses inherent in any literary work. But more importantly, this little curiosity in Lawrence’s bibliography shows how those very same impulses may produce different meanings when translated and transplanted into a different context. Because, ultimately, Mondadori’s appropriation of his work turns Lawrence into a pioneer in the post-war Italian cultural landscape – and that is perhaps also a way to measure its success.

Between 1960 and 1962, Michelangelo Antonioni directed a trilogy of films on what he called the “sick eros”, the problem of sexual and emotional dysfunction in post-war Italy.¹⁵ A decade earlier, Alberto Moravia had published his novel *The Conformist* (1951), which confronted the sexual politics of Fascism, an element brought to the fore in the 1970 film adaptation by Bernardo

Bertolucci. In the same decade, Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1971 film of Boccaccio's *Decamerone* – that cornerstone of Italian cultural identity – emphasised its element of playful and subversive sexuality, as if appealing to an older set of sexual mores which could yet be recovered.

In this light, Mondadori's use of Lawrence to launch their ambitious series thus can thus be seen as the first of several cultural antidotes to a problem with which Italian writers and artists would repeatedly grapple in the decades following the war. In the troubled post-war landscape, well before anyone could creatively engage with the ills wrought, Lawrence's work became the first to interpose in the attempted recovery of what had been lost for Italy during the Fascist period. His inclusion in the series, then, placed Lawrence posthumously at the vanguard of the reconstruction of the country to which he felt beholden – his work reciprocating what he in life could not.

Note on translations: All translations are by the author.

¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (London: Routledge, 1998), 244.

² *The Virgin and the Gipsy* was written in Italy, in Spotorno, between November 1925 and April 1926 (VG xx). However, there is nothing in the novella itself that would reflect its place of composition, thematically or otherwise.

³ For reasons of convenience, all quotations from *The Virgin and the Gipsy* are from the English-language Cambridge edition. However, I have made sure that these are all present and fairly rendered in the *I libri della Ricostruzione* edition, as well as more generally ascertained that the Italian translation is faithful to the original (e.g., nothing excised or censored, etc): D. H. Lawrence, *La vergine e lo zingaro*, trans. Elio Vittorini (Milan: Mondadori, 1946).

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence, 1971), 80, n. 49.

⁵ Joseph Allan Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998), 99.

⁶ Vahdah Jeanne Bordeaux, *Benito Mussolini – The Man* (New York: Doran, 1927), 248.

⁷ Qtd. in Tracy H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy: 1922–1943* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985), 26.

⁸ F. T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, trans. R. W. Flint et al. (London: Tate, 2009), 19–24, 22.

⁹ F. T. Marinetti, 'Against Marriage', in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, 2006), 310–12, 311.

¹⁰ For an extended discussion see Andrew Harrison, *D. H. Lawrence and Italian Futurism* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003).

¹¹ Emil Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (Boston: Little, 1933), 170.

¹² Lucia Re, 'Fascist Theories of "Woman" and the Construction of Gender', in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1995), 76–99, 82.

¹³ Daniel Woodley, *Fascism and Political Theory: Critical Perspectives on Fascist Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2010), 218.

¹⁴ F.T. Marinetti, 'Against Sentimentalized Love and Parliamentarianism', in *Critical Writings*, ed. Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson, 55–8, 57.

¹⁵ Antonioni first explained the concept in a discussion in 1961: see Michelangelo Antonioni, 'A Talk with Michelangelo Antonioni on his Work', in *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, eds Carlo di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), 21–47, 33–4.