

Distance and Proximity to Nature in D. H. Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy* (1916): Psychogeography and the Rural Flâneur

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D. H. Lawrence's work around nature and, more specifically for this short position paper, the Alps in *Twilight in Italy*¹, has been studied by, amongst other researchers, Catherine Brown and Stefania Michelucci, as a means of escapism and a spiritual challenge. Stefania Michelucci has stated that it was Lawrence's 'wish to escape from the wasteland of mechanisation and industrialisation', escape 'Europe at the time of World War I, and to find an ideal ... place (remote in space ...) where humankind could establish a harmonious relationship with Nature'.² Similarly, Catherine Brown has stated that nature represented for Lawrence a 'change of view of nature, humanity in relation to nature, and God in relation to both'.³ In my thesis, I will be close reading a number of representative examples in *Twilight in Italy* (1916), considering how Lawrence uses distance and proximity to nature in the Italian Alps to express his political ideas in relation to psychogeography.⁴ My thesis' focus will also include Rebecca West, Nan Shepherd, W. H. Auden and George Orwell, among others.

Guy Debord has described psychogeography as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment,

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1916).

² Stefania Michelucci, 'L'Espace Perdu: D. H. Lawrence's Travel Writings', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 8 (2004), 35-48 (p. 35).

³ Catherine Brown, 'Climbing Down the Alpine Pisgah: Lawrence's Relationships with the Alps', *D. H. Lawrence Review*, 39 (2014), 67-78 (p. 67).

⁴ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Black & Red 1977 (Detroit: Black & Red, 1967)
<<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>>

consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals⁵ while Rebecca Solnit has described it as a 'counterculture'.⁶ The term 'flâneur', as set in the *OED*, is defined as 'a loungee or saunterer'⁷ while Charles Baudelaire defined it as a 'wanderer with no purpose, stroller, and loungee'.⁸ My study demonstrates that psychogeography and flâneuring are very often found in the same passages and that they influence one another. Importantly, Michael Grimshaw has highlighted that the description of the 'landscape is often overlooked in discussions of the flâneur'⁹ and has described the rural flâneur as 'the urban flâneur's antipodean inverse' - an 'antimodern, rural flâneur'.¹⁰ Similarly, in my study, I highlight how the flâneur can also be found in rural environments.

In *Twilight in Italy*, Lawrence describes the moment they 'walked along the military road on the mountain side'.¹¹ Lawrence demonstrates that the act of walking itself is purposeful and, in a politically weighed environment, 'military road', creates fruitful ground for Lawrence's anti-capitalist thoughts. Lawrence describes London as a 'great mass' and the Midlands and north-country as 'black, fuming [and] laborious', 'spreading like a blackness over all the world'.¹² '[L]aborious' England is governed by economic growth which, according to Debord, has the power to free society,¹³ but which, nonetheless, does not allow society to be freed from

⁵ Guy Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', in *Theory of the Dérive, and other situationist writings on the city*, ed. by Andreotti, Libero, Costa, Xavier, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, ACTAR, 1996).

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 267.

⁷ Search, 'flâneur', in Oxford English Dictionary <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/71073?redirectedFrom=flaneur#eid>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life [1863]', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), p. 9-10.

⁹ M. Grimshaw, 'The Antimodern Manifesto of the Rural Flâneur: When D'Arcy and John Go For a Wander', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, NS13 (2012), 144-153 (p. 144).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lawrence, p. 66.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Debord, section 40.

the economic growth itself,¹⁴ thus leading England's 'modern industry' to become a fundamentally imprisoned, spectaclist society.¹⁵ The spectacle, as defined by Debord (1967), occurs in societies in which 'modern conditions of production prevail', and 'all of life [is an] ... accumulation of spectacles'.¹⁶ The Alps, having no industrial development and no economy and production to govern people and their choices, while also displaying a nature of simple existence, free from the continuous development that the spectaclist society prescribes, is, therefore, fundamentally rebellious for Lawrence.

Lawrence says that England was 'conquering the world with her machines and her horrible destruction of natural life',¹⁷ 'cover[ing]', as the overbearing spectacle of Europe, 'the entire surface of the world and bath[ing] endlessly in its own glory'.¹⁸ I wish to point out that the 'destruction of the natural life' demonstrates that the industrial European North, as the Spectacle, is at the heart of the unrealism of the real society. The natural life, which is represented by the Alps, contrasts to the industrial north, as the real and the unreal/ spectacle respectively.

Finally, he imagines 'London, far away below, England, Germany, France' - all of which 'were all so unreal in the night'¹⁹ in the Alps. I am suggesting that the Alps are the borderline of the dichotomy between the mechanical, unreal North and the natural, real South. The socially-set borders between countries, which are responsible for 'the loss of the unity of the world', is refuted by the Alps and become 'unreal', while the Alps

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Debord, section 14.

¹⁶ Debord, section 1.

¹⁷ Lawrence, p. 66.

¹⁸ Debord, section 13.

¹⁹ Lawrence, p. 173.

become a critical outsider to the spectaclist society. These countries' industries, such as England's mechanical North, being representative of 'urbanism', operate as 'capitalism's seizure of the natural and human environment',²⁰ that is, of the naturally free Alps, but which, nevertheless, remain outside the sphere of urban, capitalist dominance.

Lawrence reaches his conclusion through a rhetorical question: 'what could one do but wander about?'.²¹ I am suggesting, therefore, that the action of rural wandering and flâneuring inspired Lawrence to compare the industrial European Northern spectacle to the, naturally free, Alpine mountains. Ultimately, flâneuring and walking in the Alps in *Twilight in Italy*, within the northern European, development-driven, spectaclist society, become the goal desired for its own sake, as Lawrence's rebellious and political act.

²⁰ Debord, section 169.

²¹ Lawrence, p. 173.

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