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D. H. LAWRENCE'S *ETRUSCAN PLACES* – A MODERNIST REVALUATION OF TEMPORALITY

Abstract: The article deals with the literary modes of constructing temporality in D. H. Lawrence's *Etruscan Places* (1932), a travel book written in 1927 and published posthumously. Typically for the first decades of the twentieth century, the work reflects the writer's anxieties about war force, scientific discoveries and cultural exhaustion in a series of interrelated essays on the remnants of ancient Etruria and the powerful memory of Etruscan civilization. In this article, *Etruscan Places* is read like a subjective re-creation of a lost civilization; it is interpreted as the writing of an imaginary philosophy attributed to an ancient people and modelled on Lawrence's personal engagement with the renewal of life potentialities. Patterning his book on the past-present opposition, the author recuperates the Etruscan past within the mythical framework of modernist coherence. The repeated movements between the lost Etruscan world and the writer's mostly disappointing contemporary age reveal the possibility of establishing continuities not only on an anthropological plane, but also on a philosophical-aesthetic one. The Etruscans' narrative of death brings to light an art of living; the historical perspective blends with existential and artistic considerations. Lawrence's exploratory technique is based on similitudes and antitheses, being literarily rendered by a cross-cultural discourse that combines the factual with the fictional, and the epic with the lyric. The British author's style puts forward repetition as a modernist rhetorical achievement that indirectly questions the validity of literary tradition. Furthermore, the explicit intertextuality of the book completes the writer's modernist perspective, authenticating the cultural substance of the temporal links that Lawrence seeks to uncover.

Keywords: *travel; time; myth; repetition; modernism.*

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Introduction

The article explores the modernist traits of D. H. Lawrence's treatment of temporality in his posthumously published *Etruscan Places* (1932), a travel book that illustrates the "obsessive thematisation of time" (Tung 12) in the cultural world after the First World War. The first decades of the twentieth century witness complex modernist views that revolve not only around the consequences of military violence, but also around the anxiety about rising technology, and the exhaustion of religious and historical narratives. Lawrence's work mirrors such preoccupations towards the end of a literary career in which travel and the evolution of mankind appear as two interwoven central topics. While Joyce replaces history by literary myth, T. S. Eliot searches for it among ruins, and Virginia Woolf subsumes it under the whims of the stream of consciousness, D. H. Lawrence models a unique philosophy of timelessness on the past-present opposition.

Lawrence's travels took him to such places as Germany, Italy, Mexico, the United States or Australia, and his cosmopolitan fate can be ascribed to a bundle of factors including biographical elements like his wartime persecution, and the repeated ban on the publication of his books. However, Lawrence's spatial and literary restlessness is equally built on the general cultural repudiation, at the beginning of the twentieth century, of elements like militarism, industrialism or commercialism, and on the European-American avowed quest for new aesthetic forms. Lawrence's travel books—*Twilight in Italy* (1916), *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), *Mornings in Mexico* (1927), *Etruscan Places* (1932)—plainly reflect the idea that, for the famous British writer, "the direct inheritor of Romantic prejudices against machines, the rural admonishes the industrial much as the instinctual takes precedence over the intellectual." (Sanders 521) After expounding his conceptions of nature, society and history in parallel to his explorations of Italian and Mexican places, Lawrence engages in a detailed study of the Etruscan world, circumscribing most of his descriptive abilities to modernist views on life and art.

Lawrence's officially expressed preoccupation with the Etruscan world can be traced back at least to the year 1920 when the British author wrote the poem *Cypresses* at Fiesole, in Tuscany. It is the moment when the writer-traveller literarily assumes the "self-imposed task" (Hostettler 240) of "bring[ing] back the rare and orchid-like/Evil-yclept Etruscan" (qtd. in Hostettler 240), even though

he apparently postpones it by a few years. In March and April 1927, Lawrence and his American friend Earl Brewster were visiting the Etruscan vestiges on an Italian tour comprising Rome, Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci and Volterra, thus following the British writer's plan to write "a book, half-travel and half-description of Etruscan things" (Lawrence, Letters 460). Concisely described in 1932 by Aldous Huxley as the "record of his [Lawrence's] journey through modern Italian space and Etruscan time" (271), *Etruscan Places* relies on a rather complex space-time conflation that allows its author to explore various geographical, historical, and cultural areas. Though being a "piece of graveyard literature" (Cavitch 205), the book puts forward the Etruscans' "depiction of death as a further sojourn in the 'living continuum'" as George A. Panichas rightly notices (qtd. in Marcus 236), and outlines a multicultural literary quest that could provide Lawrence with "a form of immortality and afterlife adequate to his imaginative needs" (Clark 397). Primarily displaying an encyclopedic interest of an author who, in 1926, was "reading up the old Etruscans" (Lawrence, Letters 460), the Etruscan experience ends up suggesting to Lawrence a *modus vivendi* and a unique literary pattern: a gradual rediscovery of myth mechanism in the light of numerous philosophical-aesthetic reflections and a highly intertextual, repetitive discourse.

Mythical Outlines and Cross-cultural Connections

The Etruscans, the ancient people whose decline, around the third and the second centuries BCE, was mostly due to the military expansion of the Romans, acquire, in Lawrence's account, the mythical dimension of an eternally valid mode of life and artistic expression. By reviving the Etruscan world as the unifying theme of his topical Italian explorations, the British writer certifies the well-known mythical method as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 167). Yet unlike T. S. Eliot, he apparently does not favour "form over matter, structure over story" (Coupe 33). Despite the permanently invoked past-present contrast, Lawrence also makes use of frequent allusions to the continuity of anthropological material, being interested not only in the cultural response to historical challenges, but also, even more visibly, in a way of living and enduring in time.

In this sense one can think, for instance, of the writer's first Etruscan trip when, at Cerveteri, he deals with the past-present equation in the light of its

mythic significance. The memory of the faun-like men “killed in the war” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 101), the shy young guide who “lost a finger on the railway” (105), “the motor-omnibus [which] reposes all day long” (101), the “barbed-wire fence” (105) around the necropolis are evocative of the writer’s dysfunctional present, creating one element of the temporal opposition on which the Etruscan evocation builds. By introducing the image of a Maremma shepherd described as a faun, Lawrence takes us back to ancient times, and operates the fusion between his contemporary age and “mythic timelessness” (Bell 15). In an Italian time made up of war memories, ruins, apathy, boredom, suspicion and, sometimes, harshness, “the unconscious, ungrimacing faun-face” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 101) “not deadened by morals” (99) puts forward the aesthetic and ethic dimensions of an uncertain, golden temporality, subtly outlining the mythical framework of the author’s entire Etruscan narrative. The intense repetition of the word “faun” adds an incantatory nuance to Lawrencian discourse, thus emphasizing the book’s formal modernism and its twentieth-century travel content manifest as “a more subjective form, more memoir than manual” (Carr 74), more poetry than narrative proper.

The frequent lyrical elements in Lawrencian discourse ostensibly require new reading conventions and can be viewed as part of the author’s “attempt to transform the reader’s consciousness—to reawaken mythopoeic thought in modern man” (Tracy 20). Lawrence often relies on the musicality of language, and his use of repetition should be considered a stylistic strength, not a flaw, as one can notice in the quotation below in which several coordinated alliterative constructions occur quite obsessively:

There is a *queer stillness and a curious peaceful repose* about the Etruscan places I have been to, quite different from the weirdness of Celtic places, the slightly repellent feeling of Rome and the old Campagna, and the rather horrible feeling of the great pyramid places in Mexico, Teotihuacan and Cholula, and Mitla in the south; or the amiably idolatrous Buddha places in Ceylon. There is a *stillness and a softness* in these great grassy mounds with their ancient stone girdles, and down the central walk there lingers still a *kind of homeliness and happiness*. True, it was a still and sunny afternoon in April, and larks rose from the soft grass of the tombs. But there was a *stillness and a soothingness* in all the air, in that sunken place, and a feeling that it was good for one’s soul to be there. (Lawrence,

One can further notice that here the Etruscan civilization is mainly described by contrast with other aesthetic indicators, the author's bent toward finding solutions to his dissatisfaction with the present being obvious. One can remark, however, Lawrence's oscillation as to the cultural landmarks that he uses to guide himself, similarity being another principle that he employs in order to define his version of Etruscan past. As one can additionally discover in the chapter *Cerveteri*, in Lawrence's view the Etruscans' gender-based architecture—the phallic stones which are “exactly like the lingam stones in the Shiva caves and the Shiva temples” (109) and the stone house which “suggests the Noah's Ark without the boat part” (110)—achieves an atemporal communion that illustratively blends Etruscan ritual with Hinduism and Christianity. A similar sample of inconsistency can be detected, for instance, in the chapter *Vulci*. Here Lawrence first depicts the ancient remnants by drawing similarities between Etruscan history and Egyptian architectural art, concluding that “this tumulus, with no peripheral tombs, only endless winding passages, must be either a reminiscence of prehistoric days or of Egyptian pyramids.” (195) Still, a few paragraphs later, while referring to the British explorer George Dennis, the author concludes that the mysterious lady buried in the Tomb of Isis “was surely not Egyptian at all. Anything of the archaic east Mediterranean seemed to Dennis Egyptian.” (197) As if in a symbolic attempt to dismantle the solidity of cultural coordinates and the homogeneity of standard interpretations, Lawrence thus often shifts the cultural perspective of his account, changing the travel experience into a perpetual historical-aesthetic meditation.

One should remark, with Lawrence, the idea of a temporal continuum that cross-cultural review can create. Referring to the Etruscan and American Indian practice of painting one's body red, the author establishes a symbolic connection between continents, cultures and historical periods: “When the Italian today goes almost naked on the beach he becomes of a lovely dark ruddy colour, dark as any Indian. And the Etruscans went a good deal naked. The sun painted them with the sacred minium.” (140) Surprisingly, Lawrence recognizes the “chronologically deep commonality among disparate things” (Saint-Amour 297) in the manner of Virginia Woolf as the colours of Etruscan bodies on tomb walls help the traveller recognize the sacredness of the life principle at a universal scale, and to subjectively build imaginary bridges between ages and civilizations.

Also, Etruscan genes are passed down from one generation to another, as the author openly declares: “And I thought again, how much more Etruscan than Roman the Italian of today is: sensitive, diffident, craving really for symbols and mysteries, able to be delighted with true delight over small things, violent in spasms, and altogether without sternness or natural will-to-power.” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 109) Lawrence interprets the anthropological data of the present according to his desire to set up a series of continuities—the antidotes for an age that appears as “remarkably historicist, disposed to apocalyptic, crisis-centred views of history” (Bradbury, McFarlane 20). In this sense, travel itself is a form of continuity; it is a way of reflecting on generations and of establishing cohesion among different spaces and periods. Additionally, the similarities between people, peoples and ages testify to the permanence of living patterns and symbols, as the Etruscan world reveals to Lawrence. In the last chapter of this travel book, for instance, the “out-reaching life” of the “dark old Etruscan heads of the city gate” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 201) at Volterra or “the lover and his lass going along the top of the ramparts, which are now olive-orchards” (202) mirror the Etruscan principle announced in the first chapter, namely that “death, to the Etruscan, was a pleasant continuance of life” (109). It is an idea constantly pursued along the book in the light of modernist authors’ quest for circularity and interrelationship in the first decades of the twentieth century—a period deprived, as we remember, of teleological and cultural confidence.

The idea of a temporal flow can be derived from most of Lawrence’s descriptions of Etruscan vestiges. The author’s verbal translation of a visual world uncovers interesting nuances of Lawrencian treatment of transience, plunging the reader into eternal, mythical time. In this sense, the sections devoted to *The Painted Tombs of Tarquinia* are not an evocation proper; rather, they are interconnected story-descriptions, modulations of the Etruscan theme that call to mind a symphonic piece about an intuited world, not an account of a rediscovered fragment of history. Motifs and symbols come and go, then they repeat themselves, suggesting the recurrent nature of life. Moreover, throughout the entire book the visits to ancient cemeteries are symbolically marked by up and down movements that are minutely reported by such sentences as “We come up the steps into the upper world, the sea-breeze and the sun.” (134) or “We are diving down into another tomb...” (135). The narrative is suggestively rhythmical, the linear chronological criterion being ousted from a world where “gradually the underworld of the Etruscans becomes more real than the above

day of the afternoon.” (138) Time involves rhythm and circularity; events are cyclical, the book seems to imply. Illustratively, the painted tombs—a joyful universe populated by masters and slaves, men and women, players and merrymakers—is responded to by the pale image of a festive event at the hotel in *Volterra*, the last chapter of the book. The “*great banquet was to be given this evening to the new podestà*” (199), evoking power imposition and militarism, but nevertheless perpetuating cheerfulness and suggesting temporal continuity.

Etruscan temporality should be thought of in terms of “a symbolic structuring of the world” (Honko 47) on a mythical plane. The past-present continuum defines life as a central concept of *Etruscan Places*, and its nature can be traced back to a pre-historical and pre-cultural entity. Apparently this is the most valued facet of an Etruscan civilization that can be discovered, according to this travel book, only by intuition and imagination. In this sense, personalized, anthropomorphic mythology is seen by Lawrence as “the decadence of a previous cosmic religion” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 165), the author envisaging a reassuring oneness of being as the antithesis of the recorded history of mankind—an evolution based on individualism and power centres. Lawrence considers that the “old idea of the vitality of the universe was evolved long before history begins” (147), the Etruscans’ “religion of life” (146) being the very materialization of this idea. Given that modernist travel “needed to be regenerative” (Burden 240) on an aesthetic, cultural or psychological plane, the Etruscan experience provides Lawrence with plenty of restorative symbols and latent messages. As an illustration, one can remember that the author interestingly describes the painted horses in the Tomb of the Baron as “so far more horse-like, to the soul, than those of Rosa Bonheur or Rubens or even Velazquez, though he comes nearer to these” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 171). In an Etruscan manner, a return to the very essence of things seems to be the key to reliving one’s existence and to reinvigorating exhausted cultural perspectives. The mythological Etruscan time that the writer creates is placed outside cultural sophistication; mythological constructs should be primordial, Lawrence seems to sustain, reflecting collective thought and feeling, and rejecting individuation.

Repetitive and Intertextual Practices

Being fully illustrated by his overall descriptive approach to *The Painted Tombs of Tarquinia*, Lawrence’s taste for repetition is even more interestingly uncovered by the particular lexical rendition of his concern with temporality. In

the first chapter of the book, for instance, the writer-traveller “went out into the sunny April street of this Cerveteri, Cerevetus, the old Caere” (101), visited the tombs and later went “out again into the April sunshine” (109, just next to the Etruscan vestiges where one could reflect on the Etruscan-Roman incongruities, “under the blue heavens where the larks are singing in the hot April sky” (111). The exact moment when the trip takes place is thus repeatedly mentioned throughout the chapter, the “still and sunny afternoon in April” (105) standing for the author’s attempt to symbolically point out the past-present opposition, but also to perform the fusion between contemporary time and the long-lost Etruscan age. Defining the present of the traveller’s Etruscan trips also continues to be one of Lawrence’s main preoccupations in the next chapter, *Tarquinius*, where “the stony little town” (121) becomes yet another opportunity for the author to express his existential and cultural anxieties. The reiteration of such syntagms as “the warm April morning” (121) or “the sunny, green-filled April morning” (124) consistently traces the modernist writer’s obsession with temporality together with his acute interest in a principle of continuity. According to the same recurrence technique, the last section of the book, *Volterra*, plunges us first into “this cold, almost icy, April afternoon” (199), and next into “a bitter cold April morning” (205), thus outlining yet another past-present contrast in the light of Lawrence’s need to showcase a golden Etruscan time. Thus Lawrence’s contemporary metaphorical April acts as both the look-alike and the opposite of idealized Etruscan temporality, and provides a realistic background to historical meditation and mythical evasion.

In such instances, discourse appears suggestively as an exhausted medium, marking a crisis of historical and cultural reference points. The memory of “the Latin-Roman mechanism and suppression” (126) and the sterility of the rising fascist doctrine loom over the writer’s thoughts on the durability of Etruscan toponyms, religion or architecture. Comparably, in his 1920 novel *Women in Love* D. H. Lawrence lays stress on the image of “the old, old Imperial road” (qtd. in Sherry 145) of the Roman Empire, linking it to the decadence of history and of the romantic plot itself as Vincent Sherry suggests (145-146). In *Etruscan Places* the movement backwards towards the Etruscan world connotes reaching a primordial moment where one can “keep life fluid and changing” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 122) instead of “try[ing] to hold it fast down in heavy moments” (122). As posed by Etruscan culture, the consciousness of changeability acquires, Lawrence seems to sustain, the mythical dimensions of

“the deep structures of permanent human experience” (Pinkney 130). The Etruscans’ unostentatious building style and their natural acceptance of the life-death duality are perceived by the British writer as reassuring answers to his philosophical-aesthetic quest, confirming, against the background of modernism, “a fetishization of certain earlier periods” (Armstrong 5).

A comparable repetitive approach can be detected in the chapter *Vulci* where the author uses the leitmotif of malaria in order to achieve a past-present connection and to suggest the idea of life continuity. A disease of the past symbolically marks the lives of contemporary people as one can infer from Lawrence’s obsessive reference to the locals’ health condition. First the author subtly inserts the malaria element into the concise historical account that he provides at the beginning of the chapter: “The Etruscan city fell into decay in the decline of the Roman Empire, and either lapsed *owing to the malaria* which came to fill this region with death, or else was finally wiped out, as Ducati says, by Saracens.” (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 178 italics mine) Then the inhabitants of the respective region are repeatedly described in connection with this disease, betraying the author’s interest in establishing a temporal axis across history, and, at the same time, his derisive attitude towards orderly, laconic travel accounts: the café waiter in Montalto di Castro “Probably ... had malaria” and he spoke “in the slow, laconic malarial fashion” (179); the people in Montalto are seen as “slow and silent” as it “must be the malaria every time” (181); Luigi, the *carretto* driver, “also [suffered from] malaria” (180), presumably spent “the long, hot, malarial days” (184) as a herdsman, and “admitted he had had a touch [of malaria] now and then” (191); ironically, the narrator concludes that “Cattle do not take malaria.” (184) and that “It would be a good life ... to live here... except for the malaria!” (196). By means of repetition, Lawrence’s discourse renders, once again, the circularity of history, and revalues the past as a facet of the present. Thanks to such passages Lawrencian discourse becomes a modernist chant, a form of using recurrence as a literary technique, not as a rhetorical defect. It is a way of providing a signifier to the invisible connecting threads that pervade, as suggested by Lawrence, all the stages of human history. Symbolically, the “black bats’ eyes” (193) of one of the narrator’s trip companions at Vulci seem to evoke the presence of terrifying “clusters of pale brown furry bats” (193) in the old tombs, marking yet another imaginary way of building a bridge across ages, and, by extension, across the species of the earth.

Similarly, in the chapter *Tarquinius* Lawrence reconstructs the history of the Etruscans—their growth and fall in the shadow of Roman historical evolution—by relying on the obsessive repetition of the adverb “probably”, and yet another time by reconsidering the global cultural context. Factual information coexists with mythical and literary elements, pinpointing, for instance, such moments when “ships did come—even before Ulysses” (115) and when the Etruscans first arrived in “the days even before Homer” (115). Interestingly, Lawrence endows his Etruscan narrative with an obvious intertextual quality, all the more so as he insists on defining Etruscan temporality on the basis of biblical landmarks: “Ships came along this low, inconspicuous sea, coming up from the Near East, we should imagine, even in the days of Solomon – even, maybe, in the days of Abraham.” (117) Moreover, the Etruscan funerary world helps the author revise and deconstruct his national literature when he establishes, for instance, a contrast between the Keatsian classical ideal of beauty—those elegant ‘still-unravished brides of quietness’” (129)—and “the rebellion of life against convention” (129), an existential mode metonymically located in Etruscan pottery. Lawrence’s present is mostly inhabited by demythologized figures that can be exemplified by Albertino, the zealous teenage hotel manager whose basic traits Dickens “would not have seen” (122), and by Michelangelo who “becomes at last a lump and a burden and a bore.” (123) Through Etruscan lenses, Lawrence here rereads the traditional significances of time and value, exposing the futility of socially constructed power and proposing a quasi-Rousseauian return to a natural Eden: “But for the green grass, no empire would rise, no man would eat bread: for grain is grass; and Hercules or Napoleon or Henry Ford would alike be denied existence.” (126) The British writer’s contention that “before Buddha or Jesus spoke the nightingale sang” (126) visibly testifies to the modernist need to demolish certified narratives of world culture or to adapt them to personal philosophical-aesthetic creeds.

The book’s repetitive rhetoric is skillfully completed by its links with other texts and languages. In many respects *Etruscan Places* is, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “a work of allusive and encyclopaedic interconnectedness” (Butler 4), its cultural and linguistic variety playing an essential role in outlining the cosmopolitan character of Lawrence’s aesthetic-philosophical outlook. The intertextuality of the book does not refer only to other authors and books as the British author also frequently employs words and expressions belonging to such languages as Italian, French, German, and Latin: *basta*, *fattorie*, *carretto*, *finocchio*, *guardiano*,

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dispensa, podestà; rapport, gamin, raison d'être, pièce de resistance; nicht viel wert; absit omen, arx, anima, mundum, sigilla Tyrrhena, duodecim populi Etruriae. He even offers us a sample of Etruscan—"Avle – Tarchnas – Larthal – Clan" (Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* 107)—, thus further emphasizing the connection between the ancient and the contemporary worlds and the possibility of their coexistence. Moreover, Lawrence employs whole sentences as realistic means of depicting individual or collective characters: "Quand le maître parle, tout le monde se tait." (98), "Fai presto!" (121) "Morte a Lenin!" (200), "Mussolini ha sempre ragione!" (200). Additionally, one can notice the frequent use of non-translation, a specifically modernist trait that confirms a linguistic, but also a historical-cultural crisis that poses "the text as a site of confrontation, not just of tongues but of interpretative dilemmas" (Harding, Nash 2). Humanity's past and present give rise to, Lawrence seems to contend, a series of tensions and dissimilarities, but one can easily ensure coherence and temporal interconnectedness by the juxtapositions and similarities of cultural constructs. In the light of the book's "textual Modernism" (Levenson 247), the fluidity of travel—be it spatial or cultural—and the revaluation of ancient civilizations are the key-concepts that come to confirm Lawrence's philosophy of continuity.

Conclusions

Lawrence's Etruscan world acquires mythical dimensions thanks to reshaping the chronological temporal axis into the awareness of recurrence and durability. In parallel to creating a legendary aura around the long-lost Etruscan population, the British writer outlines a both synchronic and diachronic cross-cultural perspective on the ancient people's historical evolution. Lawrence combines the documentary with the imaginary, propounding a reappraisal of the Etruscans' history in light of his modernist anxieties about the violent nature of the human kind and the exhaustion of narrative. The author projects the image of a lost civilization that fosters the self-sufficiency of human beings within themselves and within communities. According to Lawrence's travel book, rediscovering the Etruscans brings forth a new valuation of communion, and opens the way to the authenticity of sensation and instinct.

Etruscan Places is constructed upon the past-present opposition, and expounds the writer's diligent quest for continuities between ages, histories, cultures. Illustratively, the author succeeds in achieving modernist "reconciliations between fragment and flow" (Stevenson 141) thanks to his

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discovery of a complex web of historical, cultural and anthropological connections. Thus, Lawrence's physical travel is also an intellectual travel, and his Etruscan search can be termed philosophical-aesthetic. Against an Etruscan background, the author proposes a way of life, and blends it with artistic considerations. Additionally, his experiments with repetition techniques and explicit intertextuality are implicit reflections on the nature of discourse. Lawrence's obsessive repetition of the same word, his challenging references, his use of foreign lexemes and of non translation show us a rebellious writer who signals and defies the limitations of literary devices.

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