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# D.H. Lawrence's Etruscan Seduction

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**Abstract:** *Sketches of Etruscan Places* is especially important among D.H. Lawrence's later works not only because it is the work that completes the image of a restless, indefatigable traveler looking for a new gospel in old cultures and in faraway countries, but also because it offers stimulating and surprisingly modern reflections on the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures.

For centuries historians, archaeologists, linguists and scholars had tried to penetrate the mystery of the Etruscans in order to explain their origin, interpret their symbols and read their language. Lawrence attempted to give his own interpretation of that ancient mysterious world as he viewed the Etruscans as the symbol of a lost vitality. His interpretation of this lost civilization insists on the "manipulation of cultural heritage," which anticipates ideas expressed by Ronald Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957). As a result, Lawrence undermines traditional views of Etruscan civilization as vassal to Greek and Roman civilization and defends its individuality. Finally, Lawrence anticipates post-colonial ideas by deconstructing the centrality of the Western historical and cultural system of values and reconstructing, although partially, the non-canonical multiplicity of ethnic separateness.

**Keywords:** Rome, Subordinate Cultures, Art, painted tombs, D.H. Lawrence, Etruria, Dominant Cultures, Memory, Facism

## 1 D.H. Lawrence and the idea of a book about the Etruscans

In spite of the weakness caused by his illness, in 1926 and 1927, D. H. Lawrence visited some Etruscan sites with an American friend, the painter Earl Brewster. His interest in the Etruscans had been stimulated by a previous visit to Tuscany in September 1920. Earlier evidence of Lawrence's attraction for the Etruscans is provided by a passage in Jessie Chambers's *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (1935). She writes that Lawrence had been much impressed by Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*, where the hero observes, on an Etruscan vase of finest clay, the nut-

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brown maiden dancing before the God Priapus, to whom she joyously waves her hand.<sup>1</sup> Both a passage in the travel book, *Sea and Sardinia*, about “the strange ‘shrouded gods’ of the Etruscans...,”<sup>2</sup> and the poem “Cypresses” (1920), written as a result of Lawrence’s visit to Tuscany in 1920, poetically express his subsequent interpretation of the Etruscans:

TUSCAN cypresses,  
What is it?

The undeliverable secret,  
Dead with a dead race and a dead speech, and yet  
Darkly monumental in you,  
Etruscan cypresses.<sup>3</sup>

During this last Italian sojourn in Tuscany (1926-1928) Lawrence seriously thought of the Etruscans as a possible subject for a book. In the spring of 1926 he visited Perugia and the National Archaeological Museum, famous for its Etruscan urns<sup>4</sup> and planned to visit a few Etruscan sites for the book he had in mind which had to be “half travel-book, scientific too.”<sup>5</sup> Because of his physical weakness and ill health, Lawrence was unable to visit all the sites he had hoped to see and he wrote only six of the twelve sketches he had originally planned. In April 1927 he visited Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci and Volterra. The book he had in mind was never completed, though the six essays he wrote were collected posthumously as *Etruscan Places* (1932).

Before his journey to Etruria with Earl Brewster, Lawrence had read many authoritative texts on the lost civilization of the Etruscans, including *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria* (1907) by George Dennis,<sup>6</sup> *Etruskische Malerei* (1921) by Fritz Weege, Roland Arthur Lonsdale Fell’s book *Etruria and Rome* (1924), as well as the Italian *Etruria Antica* by Pericle Ducati (1925). Lawrence had also shown a strong interest in emerging studies on ancient civilizations, in anthropological texts such as Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890-1905), Jane Harrison’s

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1 Cf. Chambers 1980, 106–107.

2 Lawrence 2002, 116–117.

3 Lawrence 2002, 249–251.

4 Lawrence 1989, 464: “Etruscan things ... have a great attraction for me: there are lovely things in the Etruscan Museum here...”

5 Lawrence 1989, 412.

6 Dennis’s travel book is very personal and lively, full of vitality and humor. Pallottino (1985) wrote that Dennis was an explorer who approached the remains as evidence of a living people (15–20). Translation by the author.

*Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913), and Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), which he read with great interest and from which he developed a kind of religious yearning.<sup>7</sup> The contact with the past was for Lawrence an important stage in the development of his dream of achieving "wholeness," that is, a total harmony between body, mind and soul.<sup>8</sup>

*Sketches of Etruscan Places* is especially important among Lawrence's later works, not only because it completes the image of a restless, indefatigable traveler looking for a new gospel in old cultures and faraway countries, but also because it offers some stimulating and surprisingly modern reflections on the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures. The aim of this paper is to examine Lawrence's response to Etruscan culture by discussing how he combines a perceptive observation of their remains with an inquiry into the nature of their civilization. Lawrence is not only well aware of the limitations inherent in his reconstruction of their way of life, of his being bound to "invent" it on the basis of what remains of their civilization, since literature can imagine but not restore what has been destroyed by time, but, more importantly, he questions the authority of his own point of view in an attempt to avoid the distortions produced by his own inherited cultural assumptions. In other words, the interaction with another world – remote in time and space – provides another perspective and allows him to consider both that world and his Englishness in a more detached, objective way.

## 2 An ancient yet young civilization

The fact that so little was known about the Etruscans and their civilization stimulated Lawrence's imagination, giving him the opportunity to interpret freely the Etruscan remains in terms of the symbols which best conveyed his own ideas. For centuries historians, archaeologists, linguists and scholars had tried to penetrate the mystery of the Etruscans, to explain their origin, to interpret their symbols, to read their language. Lawrence was tempted to give his own interpretation of that ancient, mysterious, attractive world and saw the Etruscans as the symbol of a lost vitality.

By travelling backwards in time, he tried to recapture the spontaneity and the sense of wonder which he had perceived in the culture of the Native Americans and which he felt had been an important feature also in the life of the Etruscans.

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7 Cf. Kinkead-Weekes 1996.

8 Cf. Lawrence 2004.

He was inspired by a civilization that had lived according to an ideal of life which seemed to correspond to his own: the Etruscan culture represented the old order, the pagan world retaining all the virtues he associated with the pre-Christian world, “when humanity was really young.”<sup>9</sup> For Lawrence the Etruscans were “young” in their vitality, yet they were also the keepers of the old, great secret of life, symbolizing naturalness, spontaneity and simplicity – aspects of a civilization which was antithetical to the mechanical and corrupted contemporary one.

*Sketches of Etruscan Places*– the “half travel-book, scientific too”<sup>10</sup> – has a special place among Lawrence’s travel books; it shows a continuous experimentation with the genre, which in his hands eludes any fixed scheme. The book gives details of the route one has to follow, the means of transportation available, the topography of the area, hotels and eating places, as well as glimpses of Italian suburban life at the end of the ’20s. At this time, Italy was experiencing the turmoil and tension of the social and political situation related to the rise of Mussolini and the Fascist regime (1922-1943). The economic crisis after World War I, in which Italian society was undermined by unemployment, rising inflation, social conflicts, strikes and above all an overwhelming fear by the upper and middle classes of an imminent communist revolution like the Russian October Revolution of 1917, contributed to the regime’s success. This uncertain and unstable political and social situation nourished Mussolini’s ideas among different social classes, and led to an, increasingly totalitarian and utterly suspicious atmosphere that influenced Lawrence’s view of the Etruscans and their relationship with the Romans.

This is, however, only part of Lawrence’s book. It also offers detailed information about the structure of the tombs and the archaeological treasures found in each of them, about museums and their contents, along with some historical notes on the Etruscan world. This part is, therefore, as Lawrence defined it, more scientific, or – better – a creative coming to terms with and questioning of the established scientific authorities on the subject: “I shall just have to start in and go ahead, and be damned to all authorities! There is really next to nothing to be said, *scientifically*, about the Etruscans. Must take the imaginative line.”<sup>11</sup>

No original written sources on the history of the Etruscans have survived, and early writing about them was filtered through the culture of their conquerors, the

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**9** Lawrence 1982, 495.

**10** Lawrence 1989, 412.

**11** Lawrence 1989, 473. The quotation is from a letter Lawrence wrote to Millicent Beveridge about Roland Arthur Lonsdale Fell’s book *Etruria and Rome*: “He’s very thorough in washing out once more the few rags of information we have concerning the Etruscans: but not a thing he has to say. It’s really disheartening (473).”

Romans. From the very beginning of his book, Lawrence firmly rejects the view of prestigious nineteenth-century historians such as Theodor Mommsen, who were preoccupied with the celebration of Rome's grandeur and unable to give an unbiased account of the Etruscans. "A great scientific historian like Mommsen hardly allows that the Etruscan existed at all. Their existence was antipathetic to him." [...] The Prussian in him was enthralled by the Prussian in all conquering Romans. So being a scientific historian, he almost denies the very existence of the Etruscan people."<sup>12</sup> For example, in *The History of Rome*, Mommsen makes a number of critical remarks about the Etruscans and their life style, writing that because of "a gloomy fantastic character and delighting in the mystical handling of numbers and in wild and horrible speculations and practices, the Etruscans' religion is equally remote from the clear rationalism of the Romans and the genial image-worship of the Hellenes."<sup>13</sup>

Such accounts had transmitted the image of the Etruscans as a depraved, weak people who deserved to be wiped out by Roman expansion. This consideration helped Lawrence to follow his own "imaginative line".<sup>14</sup> His artistic sensitivity enabled him to treat his subject with a special, lively, intuitive insight never shown before by any Etruscologist, as, Massimo Pallottino, has pointed out:

"The Etruscans have inspired powerful pulsing pages in contemporary literature, especially English Literature, like Lawrence in *Etruscan Places*, as well as Huxley in his novels, *Those Barren Leaves* and *Point Counter Point*, through which the interpretation of Ancient Etruria symbolically turns into a celebration of the lost world, of a humanity which was spontaneously natural, happy, living within and through the body, opposed to the rational and moral order of the Greek and Roman civilization and culture as well as Christian."<sup>15</sup>

"The scholar who will one day write that history of Etruscan art which has not yet been written, will have to take into account Lawrence's observations which ... contain a much more valid critical quality... than the many huge volumes published by well-known archeologists ... The Etruscologist cannot ignore the charm that the object of his studies exerts in

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12 Lawrence 1992, 9.

13 Mommsen 1996, 150.

14 Lawrence seems to follow in the tradition of George Dennis, whose *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria* he had read years before. Like Lawrence's, Dennis's study of the Etruscans is very lively and shows an interest not only in the archaeological remains, but also in the people met in the tour and in the "living" places visited, based on descriptions of the inhabited modern towns. Simonetta de Filippis points out in her Introduction to *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, that compared to *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, Lawrence's book has an additional fundamental quality in his intuitive insight into the lost culture. Cf. de Filippis 1992, xxi-lxxiii.

15 Pallottino 1992, 150–152.

the world of culture so widely... In this respect .... science may once more acknowledge his debt to poetry.”<sup>16</sup>

Lawrence’s unusual, unscholarly approach to the Etruscans was also praised by James Wellard, who considered the book to be quite valuable for its unconventionality. For Wellard, Lawrence is the first writer after George Dennis to treat the Etruscans as a living and not an extinct people.<sup>17</sup>

### 3 *Sketches of Etruscan Places* and the relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures

The contemporary situation in Italy forms the background and also the touchstone of the ideological reflections inspired by Lawrence’s journey to Etruscan sites, a journey which started in the southern part of Etruria, moving northward, following the opposite direction from the traditional *Grand Tour*, the journey from North to South of many intellectuals, writers and artists in earlier centuries. Lawrence’s journey started in Cerveteri with its impressive tumuli and continued northwards towards the amazing painted tombs of Tarquinia, through the desolation of Vulci – once a flourishing city and now a gloomy place haunted by bats – ending up in the isolated town of Volterra, “the most northerly of the great Etruscan cities of the west” (*SEP* 157),<sup>18</sup> whose remains reveal “a curious restlessness, unlike the dancing surety of Southern Etruria: a touch of the Gothic” (*SEP* 167). Volterra was the northernmost Etruscan city known at Lawrence’s time.

*Sketches of Etruscan Places* is the result of Lawrence’s “quick” idiosyncratic and empathic response to the civilization of the Etruscans, whose flame of passion and intense living (their “elan vital” in Bergsonian terms) still somehow survive in their remains. About the Tomb of the Baccanti in Tarquinia he writes:

The colours have almost gone. But still we see, on the end wall, a strange, wondering dancer out of the mists of time carrying his zither, and beyond him, beyond the little tree, a man of the dim ancient world, a man with a short beard, strong and mysteriously male, is reaching for a wild archaic maiden who throws up her hands and turns back to him her excited, subtle

<sup>16</sup> Pallottino 1985, 24–25. Translation by the author.

<sup>17</sup> Wellard 1973, 89–90.

<sup>18</sup> Hereafter textual references to *Sketches of Etruscan Places* will be abbreviated *SEP*.

face. It is wonderful, the strength and mystery of old life that comes out of these faded figures. The Etruscans are still here, upon the wall" (*SEP* 52).

As Massimo Pallottino points out, Lawrence's work must not be confused with that of the archaeologists, nor with the contemporary "Etruscan Romance", the fascination with the mystery of a lost world and civilization. It is the intense and vivid account of the emotions aroused in the writer by the Etruscan remains, an account imbued with "a love for things," a desired effort to "feel" the Etruscans more than study them through a magnifying glass, which helps the reader achieve a deeper understanding of the nature of the people, "a contact" with the individuality of their works of art, avoiding the need to either tediously catalogue them or mechanically to apply a theoretical framework.<sup>19</sup> As Lawrence writes at the end of "Volterra," the final essay in the book, "The Etruscans are not a theory or a thesis. If they are anything, they are an *experience*" (*SEP* 171).

Lawrence's travel book achieves this level of empathy, through his refusal to employ *any* dogmatic approach to *any* culture. He argues just as there is a plurality in nature, there is also a multiplicity of ethnic identities, all of which have not only the right to develop and live independently, but also to interact peacefully with one another. Although he is aware that he has no evidence to offer for his insights – which necessarily reflect the point of view of a modern observer – he insists that the fragments of paintings surviving in the tombs are the expression of a joyful acceptance of life in all its manifestations, involving a harmonious and respectful relationship between sexes and classes. For example, with regard to slaves depicted in the paintings Lawrence writes, "There is a certain dance and glamour in all the movements, even in those of the naked slave-men. They are by no means downtrodden menials; let later Romans say what they will. The slaves in the tombs are surging with full life" (*SEP* 46).

Thus for Lawrence the paintings in the tombs convey a moral message, but one that can easily pass unnoticed ("if one starts looking, there is much to see. But if one glances merely, there is nothing but a pathetic little room with unimposing, half-obliterated, scratchy little paintings in tempera") (*SEP* 49): a kind of total acceptance of the present which involves a refusal of any concern over the future and thus the absence of any "dream" or abstract ideal in their approach to life. This, according to Lawrence, is the only explanation for the almost "incomprehensible" serenity which emanates from the Etruscan paintings, and also for the tolerant, peaceful kind of relationship the Etruscans tended to establish with their fellow beings. Although belonging to a variety of groups, each of them with

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19 Pallottino 1957, 5–22, reprinted in Pallottino 1985.

distinct customs and probably with different idioms, “loosely linked together by a common religion or more or less common interest” (*SEP* 47), Etruscans lived, according to Lawrence, their own lives in mutual respect. No hierarchy is implied, or suggested in these paintings, where although related to death, to the passage to the other world, they portray scenes of real life, of a gay, joyful acceptance and enjoyment of life, involving all arts, singing, dancing, playing, and “banqueting”, where the women as well as the men, the boys and the slaves, even the animals seem to share the same experience in a lively and natural manner; the deer, the lion, the dolphin, the goat, often facing each other and reflecting the balanced and vital duality of the universe.

For Lawrence, the Etruscans achieved a kind of happiness, which was the outcome of a harmonious relationship among human beings, man versus woman, human beings versus nature and versus the surrounding cosmos with all forms of life, based on the idea of a divine flame connecting the entire cosmos and on a social cultural order rooted in the natural world. Their paintings overflow with energy and life, with artistic creativity, with powerful sexual images, as if death would be just the premise of another rebirth and human life were entirely rooted in nature and in its vital seasonal circle of birth, death and rebirth. “Death [...] was neither an ecstasy of bliss, a heaven. Death was not a purgatory of torment. It was just a natural continuance of the fullness of life.” (*SEP* 19) [...]. “The underworld of the Etruscans was a gay place [...] for the life on earth was so good, the life below could but be a continuance of it” (*SEP* 46).

Etruscan dancers, often represented in convivial scenes while cheerfully sharing food and wine, express the joyful Etruscan attitude to life, bursting with health and happiness, involving an unquestioning acceptance of the present and the refusal of any preoccupation for the future, of any teleological projection or abstract ideals which, for Lawrence, are the source of the illness and unhappiness of modern man. For him this idea of time reset to zero, this living only and always in the present moment, can account for the extraordinary peaceful happiness emanating from these paintings. Although the Etruscans were divided into different tribes, probably with different costumes, traditions and languages, they were able to accept otherness and difference. As Lawrence saw it, dance was for them both a form of communication, involving different groups, social classes, male, female and animals (as in his painting *Dance Sketch*), overcoming linguistic barriers and differences and, besides that, a religious way of expressing their joyful acceptance of life, of thanking Nature and all its richness. Even the gods are almost non-existent because the whole universe is magic and religious; life itself is the expression of a sacred cosmic flux. In the Etruscans’ dance Lawrence sees the expression of a happiness, completely unknown to later Western man, issuing from the idea of a flame warming up and embracing the entire universe, a flame



excluding nothing and nobody. Death is accepted without fear; it is nothing but a serene, joyful continuation of earthly existence, something human beings can peacefully reach through a dancing step.<sup>20</sup>

It is noteworthy that under a surface of a country imbued with Fascist rhetoric, boasting its Roman inheritance, Lawrence tries to throw light on the mystery of the Etruscans, the people wiped out by the Romans, “in order to make room for Rome with a big R” (*SEP* 9), and whose remains are hidden underground – in the city of the dead – neglected and almost forgotten by contemporary Italians. The owner of the hotel in Civitavecchia suggests a visit to the local museum full of “Roman stuff” (*SEP* 30), echoing the propaganda of the new rising regime and Mussolini's utopian goal of emulating the glories of the Roman Empire. Like most of the people Lawrence meets, the hotel owner does not know anything about Etruscan tombs and their location. In other words, the living world of central Italy, is hardly aware that a powerful, ancient civilization had developed there centuries ago and that the art as well the treasures of their ancestors are still there. Although aware that “the present regime considers itself purely ancient Roman” (*SEP* 30) and in spite of his idea that “Italy today is far more Etruscan in its pulse than Roman” (*SEP* 36), Lawrence is saluted “in the Fascist manner, alla Romana” (*SEP* 34), both in Tarquinia by some officials and in Volterra by some girls, a “sheer effrontery” (*SEP* 158) to which he contemptuously reacts by not returning the salute: “in an Etruscan city which held out so long against Rome I consider the Roman salute unbecoming and the Roman *imperium* unmentionable” (*SEP* 158).

In the essay “Tarquinia” the attempt to achieve a deeper understanding of the Etruscans develops into a warning on the dangers of the present Italian political situation, in which “the Fascists, who consider themselves in all things Roman [...] heirs of Empire and world power” (*SEP* 31), identify Italy with the glorious Roman past, in order to justify their imperialistic and potentially destructive will to power. The oppressive atmosphere which Lawrence as a foreigner breathes in Italy is vividly evoked in the description of the imperious behavior of the local authorities in Civitavecchia, who, as soon as Lawrence gets out of the railway station, treat him like a spy or a criminal by arrogantly asking for his passport, thus betraying the xenophobic attitude typical of nationalistic and totalitarian regimes.

Lawrence's unromantic attitude towards Italy emerges clearly in the first few pages of “Cerveteri,” the opening essay in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, in which he presents a country destroyed by the war, where food is tasteless and wine is “the

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<sup>20</sup> Michelucci 2013, 310.

black wine of Calabria, wetted by a good proportion of water” (SEP 11), and where the most interesting people, “the faun-faced men with their pure outlines and their strange non-moral calm” (SEP 12), have become rarer and rarer. He describes Italy not as an idealized country (*Das Land wo die Zitronen blühen*, in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*) but one where an old civilization is being contaminated both by progress and the new Fascist regime.

Lawrence’s visit to the Etruscan sites thus turns into an opportunity to reveal the dichotomy between two worlds: the world above, a prey to decay and degradation, imbued with Fascist propaganda, moving towards a totalitarian regime which was to lead Italy into one of its darkest ages and to its utter devastation from World War II, and the world below, which safeguards a lost culture and civilization, whose life was based on a harmonious relationship between the self and one’s fellow beings and the cosmos. The composition of *Sketches of Etruscan Places* goes hand in hand with that of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; the message, conveyed by the two books as well as by Lawrence’s paintings, is essentially the same and is based on the idea of the rebirth of the body and through the body, on the acceptance and respect of the Self and of otherness (which, for him, is always linked to the star equilibrium, to his idea of blood-consciousness).

*Sketches of Etruscan Places* becomes therefore a sort of hymn and celebration of life, paradoxically linked to the world of the dead, a celebration of *carpe diem*, of *hic and nunc* which acquires in a time of great crisis (for Lawrence himself, totally consumed by his illness, and for Europe, being taken over by the totalitarian regimes which would ultimately lead to World War II) the meaning of a real prophecy, the promise of a redemption.

## 4 The Romans and the Etruscans: The manipulation of culture

Roman imperialism, according to Lawrence, completely annihilated the civilization of the Etruscans, not only by erasing an entire community and its culture, but also by manipulating their memory, handing down to the following generations the image of a “vicious” people. By associating the Etruscans with evil, the Romans justified their destruction, wrote them out of history, and even made the discovery of any truth about them almost impossible. And this fate was shared by other peoples living in central Italy, entire communities who were destroyed by the expansionist power of the Romans. Lawrence’s negative view of the Romans, as well as his dream of an Etruscan form of life, might appear questionable and anachronistic to the modern reader, but his essays are

nevertheless extremely important for what they say about the relationship between dominant and subordinated cultures, between colonizer and colonized people.

Lawrence's "manipulation of cultural heritage", which anticipates the ideas expressed by Ronald Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957), leads him to undermine the institutionalised interpretations of Etruscan civilization as "vassal" to Greek and Roman civilization and to defend its individuality.<sup>21</sup> In the "Volterra" essay, for example, he insists that the Greek motifs and legends in the urns were elaborately recreated by Etruscan artists "just [...] as the Elizabethans used Greek stories for their poems" (*SEP* 168), and he comments derisively on the claim of an archaeologist that they had been made "by a Greek colony planted there in Volterra after the Roman conquest" (*SEP* 167). This idea, not very different from the one expressed by T.S. Eliot in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), arouses the same contempt when Lawrence speaks of another archaeologist, a young German who is very informed about the Etruscans and who can distinguish the different layers of a fresco, but for whom Etruscan art is "*nicht viel wert*" (*SEP* 119)<sup>22</sup> and the symbols in the paintings are meaningless decorations. It is as if modernity has mechanized the mind, so that the primeval human ability to respond with wonder, feeling, and enthusiasm to the surrounding world has completely dried out. The images are "*nicht viel wert*" for the German archaeologist (a parody of Theodor Mommsen), whereas for Lawrence they are overflowing with life, the expression of a pulsing life, in harmony with the cosmos. This pseudo-scientific underestimation and disqualification of Etruscan art is ultimately for Lawrence, the result of Roman propaganda.

Lawrence's denunciation of Roman imperialism extends – although not overtly – to Christianity, the very soul of modern Western imperialism. The arrogant attitude of the Romans, who destroyed the Etruscans and considered them morally inferior, was not basically different, according to Lawrence, from the Christian treatment of the "heathen", who were forcibly converted. The point for him is that this kind of intolerance is inherent in all civilizations that aspire to permanence and transcendence. And, for Lawrence, the Romans' yearning for some kind of Absolute is all the more to be condemned in that, while fostering intolerance and violence, it produces an absurd ethos of self-denial, leading to the renouncing of present joy for the sake of some abstract future achievement.

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<sup>21</sup> Lawrence 1992, 130: "But naturally enough, historians seized on these essentially non-Etruscan evidences, in the Etruscan late tombs, to build up a picture of a gloomy, hellish, serpent-writhing, vicious Etruscan people who were quite rightly stamped out by the noble-Romans."

<sup>22</sup> "Not worth much." Translation by the author.

Lawrence sees the Romans' world view ("you cannot dance gaily to the double flute and at the same time conquer nations or rake in large sums of money," *SEP* 379) as the cause that led them to spread their power and impose their cultural models on "other" peoples.

Almost inevitably, Lawrence's criticism extends to any form of contemporary imperialism, notably the attempt of Italian Fascism to recreate Rome and to ban as "evil" any form of "otherness", or different view and behaviour. But his scope is wider, in that he questions the powerful moral keystones of Western civilization, whose oppressive heritage is responsible for the unhappiness of modern man and for his inability to accept naturally and spontaneously any form of physical life. Like Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals*, Lawrence indicts the false concepts of good and evil as the weapons used by the powerful to their own advantage,<sup>23</sup> and to oppress subordinates, including minorities. He therefore also indicts the historical approach that, in glorifying the great empires of the past and the present, ignores that an empire achieves unity and stability by means of the suppression of "difference." Its aims are achieved by crushing the identity and the cultural heritage of the communities it subjugates and by sanctifying ideological (and physical) violence "carrying morality [...] as a cloak for its inner ugliness" (*SEP* 56).

In *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, Lawrence implies clearly that Western imperialism had always involved violence against Nature. This is even more apparent in his attitude towards the Etruscans, whose social-cultural order was rooted in the natural world, as was that of "all the great old civilizations" (*SEP* 58). It is only in the communities on the edge of Western civilization, the few which still survive in spite of the oppression caused by the requirements of Christianity to conform ideologically, living in harmony with the cosmos, not looking for expansion and respecting the otherness of neighbouring communities, that this kind of order can still be found.

Thus Lawrence perceives a link between the Etruscans and the Native Americans, both of whom put vermilion on their faces so as to gain a deeper religious insight into the surrounding universe and within themselves: "in the early days, men smeared themselves with scarlet when they took on their sacred natures. The Red Indians still do it" (*SEP* 50).

As he writes at the end of the poem "Cypresses":

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<sup>23</sup> When considering the apparently balanced and vital duality of the Etruscan symbols, Lawrence (1992, 63) observes that "this is 'the *impious* pagan duality [which] did not, however, contain the later *pious* duality of good and evil.'" Emphasis by the author.

Evil, what is evil?  
 There is only one evil, to deny life  
 As Rome denied Etruria  
 And mechanical America Montezuma still.<sup>24</sup>

In the “Vulci” essay Lawrence claims that the Romans destroyed not only the Etruscans but even the landscape which surrounded them, turning it from a place of life into a desolate place of death. “Under the Etruscans, apparently, it was an intensely fertile plain [...]. Under the Romans, however, the elaborate system of canals and levels of water fell into decay” (*SEP* 140). The Etruscans, as well as other ancient peoples, knew how to listen to Nature, to live in harmony with it, avoiding domination and rationalization.

Finally, Lawrence's apology for cultural *difference* calls art into question, in that he sees it as the result of an interaction with a specific environment, the outcome of a creative, vital interaction with the spirit of place, and as such should never be manipulated into a generalizing system: “If you try to make a grand amalgam of Cerveteri and Tarquinia, Vulci, Vetulonia, Volterra, Chiusi, Veio, then you won't get the essential *Etruscan* as a result, but a cooked-up mess which has no life-meaning at all. A museum is not a first-hand contact: it is an illustrated lecture” (*SEP* 171).

Lawrence's experience of Etruscan civilization develops into a vindication of the right of each community to defend its own identity and to live according to its own traditions. *Sketches of Etruscan Places* anticipates post-colonial ideas by deconstructing the *centrality* of the Western historical and cultural system of values and reconstructing, although partially, the non-canonical multiplicity of ethnic separateness. Once a civilization has been colonized, the inevitable result is its decadence, both cultural and moral, caused by the loss of independence, which involves, in turn, a loss of dignity, a degradation into the condition of slavery.

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<sup>24</sup> Lawrence 2013, 249–251.

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