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D. H. Lawrence and Tuscany: Art, Nature, Ideology[1]

Italy played a crucial role in D. H. Lawrence's art and life, as a source of inspiration for many of his works – novels, essays, poems, plays, travel books – and above all as a place where he could find a more authentic approach to life and where he developed and clarified his own ideology and vision of the world.

Lawrence spent several years in Italy, and Italy came to embody for him a positive alternative to England.[2] Indeed, with its Victorian values, England stood for Lawrence as the emblem of moralism, hypocrisy, intellectualism, a land irretrievably devastated by industrialisation, a society dominated by an ideology mainly based on the principles of acquisition, power and money; Italy and its peasant civilisation, on the other hand, with its pagan and natural landscape, still displayed for Lawrence its profound association with essential values and vital feelings as a result of a vision of life centred on the most authentic driving forces of human existence.

Tuscany was certainly for Lawrence one of the deepest experiences in his contacts with Italian culture.

Lawrence was in Tuscany for the first time after the First World War, and his first writings about Tuscany can be dated back to that period: letters, essays, poems, and a novel, *Aaron's Rod*, which he had started in London in 1917, and which he completed in Italy in 1921. Its protagonist, like Lawrence, turns his back on England and his bourgeois lifestyle, and moves to Florence driven, like Lawrence, to a more authentic life centred on his artistic approach to existence which, in the case of Aaron, is inspired by music.

It is intering to compare some passages from the novel with two short prose writings on Florence – *David* and *Looking Down on the City* – written between the end of 1919 and May 1921.

David develops around Michelangelo's masterpiece, the marble statue in the Piazza della Signoria outside the Palazzo Vecchio, a strongly symbolic presence which cannot but attract the attention of passers-by. Lawrence too is deeply impressed by the huge marble sculpture and considers it from his own ideological perspective, interpreting it as the meeting-point and a sort of balance between those oppositions – north and south, fire and water, warmth and the cold, blood and mind, body and intellect, male and female – which were the backbone of his dualistic vision:

> David, by the Arno. […] Here his soul found its perfect embodiment, in the trembling union of southern flame and northern waters. (*SOEP* 187:29-33)

The city of Florence thus marks the boundary between north and south, and in David, symbol of the city, Lawrence can trace a double nature: "Dionysus and Christ of Florence. A clouded Dionysus, a refractory Christ" (*SOEP* 187: 4-5). David is the vigorous adolescent whose huge muscular body is in itself an exaltation of physical life, fixed as it is in the "fleeting moment of adolescence" (*SOEP* 187:38). Yet David is also the future leader, the great charismatic figure in whom Lawrence identifies the originator of the pre-Christian world and of an ideology which would eventually lead to the mortification of that same physicality so vividly celebrated in the moment caught by Michelangelo, an ideology which would gradually come to characterise modern western society and which would cause the loss of an authentic religious spirit and of a vital concept of human existence.[3]

The style of the essay *David* is very peculiar, structured as it is on a striking syncopated rhythm made up of a series of very short sentences, almost half broken, sometime consisting of one single word repeated often, typical of poems and songs and, as in poetry, they work on the reader's mind with great evocative strength, while their meanings gradually emerge and become clear. The narrative struc-

ture is also unusual and seems to draw inspiration from the use of the camera, following film techniques: from the window overlooking the Arno, Lawrence's eye moves towards a wider shot of Florence in the morning, then suddenly zooms on the statue of David in the Piazza della Signoria, and then moves back again, along the river, above the City, on David, while the soundtrack of the words, at first indistinct, gradually becomes clear and meaningful voicing Lawrence's thoughts. Here are the opening lines:

> Perpetual sound of water. The Arno, having risen with rain, is swirling brown: café-au-lait. […]
>
> Morning in Florence. Dark, grey, and raining, with a perpetual sound of water. Over the bridge, carriages trotting under great ragged umbrellas. […] Midday from San Miniato—and cannon shots. […]
>
> David in the Piazza livid with rain. Unforgettable, now I am safe in my upper room again. Livid—unnatural. He is made so natural that he is against nature, there in his corpse-whiteness in the rain. […] The Neptune, the Bandinelli statues, great stone creatures, do not matter. Water trickles over their flanks and down between their thighs, without effect. But David—always so sensitive. (*SOEP* 185:2-24)

A similar narrative pattern is followed in the chapter entitled "Florence" in *Aaron's Rod*. Aaron, in his room overlooking the Arno, hears the sound of the river through the open window, along with the noise of the traffic and that of the falling rain. He then goes out and walks through the streets of Florence until he arrives in the Piazza della Signoria where, though his eye is caught by the cluster of Bandinelli's marble statues first, he subsequently let his gaze linger on the statue of David:

> The first thing he had seen, as he turned into the square, was the back of one of these Bandinelli statues: a great naked man of marble, with a heavy back and strong naked flanks over which the water was trickling. And then to come immediately upon the David, so much whiter, glistening skin-white in the wet, standing a little forward, and shrinking.

> He may be ugly, too naturalistic, too big, and anything else you like. But the David in the Piazza della Signoria, there under the dark great Palace, in the position Michelangelo chose for him, there, standing forward stripped and exposed and eternally half-shrinking, half-wishing to expose himself, he is the genius of Florence. The adolescent, the white, self-conscious, physical adolescent: […] (*AR* 211:26-37)

In the following chapter, "High Up over the Cathedral Square", Aaron looks down from a terrace over the square, catching glimpses of the façade of the cathedral, and "the stem of Giotto's tower, like a lily stem […] Florence, the flowery town. Firenze […] The Fiorentini, the flower-souled. Flowers with good roots in the mud and muck, as should be: and fearless blossoms in the air, like the cathedral and the tower and the David" (*AR* 232:20-26). Lawrence's dychotomic vision is here resolved in the harmony of oppositions: tall lilies blossom from the roots buried in the mud, and they seem to long to reach upwards, just like the cathedral, like Giotto's tower, like the statue of David.

In *Looking Down on the City* Florence is described from above the Piazzale Michelangelo in emotional and intense words:

> The town lies below and very near. The river winds beneath one, under four bridges, disappearing in a curve on the left. And the brown-red town spreads out so thick, so intense, so far. One could almost stroke it with the hand. The Duomo—the naked tower of Giotto—the hawk-neck of Palazzo Vecchio—a few other churches— […] One has looked down on many cities […] But Florence is different, quite different: not worldly. […]
>
> A far-off sadness, an emotion deeper than the natural planes of emotion, unrealizable, lying in the sub-stratum of one's being. Florence! Beautiful, tender, naked as a flower— […] (*SOEP* 194:15-37)

The melancholic feelings evoked by Florence seem to depend, according to Lawrence, on its being a perfect symbol of the Renaissance:

> It must be, I think, the pain which overcomes a man when he eats of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. At the Renaissance mankind, and Florence perfectly, took a new apple and opened a new field of consciousness, a new era. With it came the sense of sin and despair, as well as of delirious triumph. (*SOEP* 195: 4-8)

Modern consciousness has caused, in Lawrence's opinion, a terrible loss of authenticity and spontaneity, and only a few people and a few places in the world still retain a correct awareness of the deep meanings of life. Florence is one of those rare places: "There is faith still in Florence" and "the Florentines still seek" (*SOEP* 195:26-31) as it happens with the adolescents.

In April 1926 Lawrence moved to Tuscany where he spent the last years of his life, and Tuscany became a great source of inspiration for many writings; among these, a number of short prose essays, written between June 1926 and May 1927, refer specifically to Florence and Tuscany.

Fireworks, probably the first of these writings, contains a vivid description of Florence and the fireworks organised to celebrate St. John's day (24 June 1926). Lawrence observes the fireworks from above the Piazzale Michelangelo, and, also in this case, his comments tend to suggest symbolic meanings as when he underlines the medieval charm of the Palazzo Vecchio, untouched by the "modern spirit" in spite of the electric light bulb put there specially for the feast:

> The Palazzo Vecchio […] lifts its long slim neck, and is like a hawk looking round; […] Like an old fierce bird from the Middle Ages it lifts its head over the level town, eagle with notched plumes. (*SOEP* 203:17-21)

Lawrence then describes the crowd, the people who, from a distance, look very small in comparison with the tall buildings and the statues in the Piazza della Signoria:

> People were streaming out of the piazza, all in one direction; and all having that queer little lively crowded look, under the high buildings, that you see in the street-scenes of old pictures. Throngs and groups of striding and standing and streaming little humans, that still have a charm of alert life. And all diminutive, because of the large buildings that rise around them. (*SOEP* 204:17-22)

The impression produced on the spectator is totally different from that of the crowd observed from the top of a skyscraper in New York City:

> Look down on the street from the twenty-second storey in New York, and you see people creeping with the quick mechanical repulsiveness of ants. (*SOEP* 204:25-27)

Here, Florentines and New Yorkers are compared according to Lawrence's ideological perspective, as emblems of two opposed lifestyles: the Florentines are still in touch with real values, still having "a charm of alert life", whereas the New Yorkers appear dehumanised by a mechanical society which makes them similar to lifeless robots, akin to repulsive ants.

A detailed description of Tuscan nature is offered in *Flowery Tuscany* (February-April 1927), an essay consisting of four parts: in the first two parts, Lawrence describes Tuscan nature, and reveals his profound love for nature and his wide knowledge of flowers in particular. The third part, following the previous discourses on nature, develops into ideological comments and remarks, discussing the concept of permanency as a deathly characteristic of the northern countries, whose sense of tragedy is determined by their non-acceptance of the temporal, and consequently the idea of death; conversely, "in the sunny countries, change is the reality, and permanence is artificial and a condition of imprisonment" (*SOEP* 237:20-21). Lawrence openly declares his 'southern', non-tragic view of life:

> For my part, if the sun always shines, and always will shine, in spite of millions of clouds of words, then death, somehow, does not have many terrors. In the sunshine, even death is sunny. And there is no end to the sunshine. (*SOEP* 238:17-21)

The fourth part of *Flowery Tuscany* opens with the description of the joyous singing of the nightingales in Tuscany and then continues with the portrayal of two young Germans striding through the streets of Florence towards some unknown destination, talking to each other, and giving the impression that they have brought with them "that sense of remote, far-off lands […] that sense of mysterious, unfathomable purpose" (*SOEP* 239: 25-27), the mystery of "*somewhere else*, of an unknown country, an unknown race, a powerful, still unknown northland" (*SOEP* 241:1-2). Towards the end of this essay Lawrence gradually makes his point: the young Germans are turning to the south and the sun "in the great adventure of seeking themselves" (*SOEP* 242:10-11), as the predominance of rational thought has prevented them from experiencing real life; now, at last in Italy, in Florence, they can be free from the weight of mechanical concepts and view of life:

> The young don't choose to think any more. Blindly, they turn to the sun.
>
> Because the sun is anti-thought. Thought is of the shade. In bright sunshine no man thinks. So the Wandervögel turn instinctively to the sun, which melts thoughts away, and sets the blood running with another, non-mental consciousness. (*SOEP* 242:30-35)

The same quest for authentic vitality is, indeed, what has led Lawrence to Italy, to Tuscany, an experience which enriches him and makes him more perceptive and capable of understanding human nature.

During the period spent in Tuscany, in April 1927, Lawrence visited the Etruscan places, an experience that made a strong ideological impact on him and one he described in his essays *Sketches of Etruscan Places* on Cerveteri, Tarquinia and its painted tombs, Vulci, and Volterra.

His interest in the Etruscan culture can be dated back to his previous visit to Tuscany, in 1919-1920. In September 1920, at Fiesole, he

wrote the poem "Cypresses", in which he offers his first interpretation of Etruscan culture as the repository of the ancient mystery of life: "The undeliverable secret,/Dead with a dead race and a dead speech, and yet/Darkly monumental in you,/Etruscan cypresses […]". His vision, however, still remains blurred and indistinct, expressed as it is in an undecided tone and in the repetition of a series of interrogative forms, questions which are left unanswered: "Tuscan cypresses,/ What is it? […] Is there a great secret?/Are our words no good? […] Is it the secret of the long-nosed Etruscans? […] Were they then vicious, the slender, tender-footed/Long-nosed men of Etruria? […]" (*CP* 296). The cypresses appear to the poet as dumb witnesses of a wiped-out people; a year later, in September 1921, Lawrence again refers to the Tuscan cypresses in a letter to his mother-in-law, and draws an almost physical parallel between those mysterious trees and the inhabitants of ancient Etruria:

> This is Tuscany, and nowhere are the cypresses so beautiful and proud, like black flames from primeval times, before the Romans had come, when the Etruscans were still here, slender and fine and still and with naked elegance, black haired, with narrow feet. (10 September 1921; *L* iv 84)

In the same period Lawrence completed his novel *Aaron's Rod* in which he also writes about cypresses describing them as a significant and revealing presence for the rather uneasy protagonist:

> […] he took the tram to Settignano, and walked away all day into the country, having bread and sausages in his pocket. He sat for long hours among the cypress trees of Tuscany. And never had any trees seemed so like ghosts, like soft, strange, pregnant presences. He lay and watched tall cypresses breathing and communicating, faintly moving […] And his soul seemed to leave him and to go far away, far back, perhaps, to where life was all different and time passed otherwise than time passes now. […] In the dark, mindful silence and inflection of the cypress trees, lost races, lost language, lost human ways of feeling and knowing. Men have known as we can no more know, have felt as we can no more feel. Great life-realities gone into darkness.

> But the cypresses commemorate. In the afternoon, Aaron felt the cypresses rising dark about him, like so many high visitants from an old, lost, lost subtle world, where men had the wonder of demons about them, the aura of demons, such as still cling to the cypresses, in Tuscany. (*AR* 265:15-34)

Thus, in 1920-21 Lawrence already interprets the Etruscans as a people capable of feeling the real meaning and flux of life, the keepers of true knowledge and understanding of the profound significance of human existence; later, during his visit to the Etruscan sites, in 1927, Lawrence's own ideology seems to find a clearer structure and expression in his contact with the past and the remains of Etruscan culture.

It is no surprise that Lawrence felt attracted and intrigued by the Etruscans, particularly the mysterious charm that had always been attributed to that ancient civilisation. For centuries historians, archaeologists, linguists and scholars have tried to penetrate that halo of mystery, trying to explain their origin, to decipher their language, to interpret the symbols in their archaeological remains. Lawrence was inevitably tempted by the mystery of that still unknown civilisation and felt free to elaborate his own interpretation of that ancient world. The Etruscan culture was, in Lawrence's view, the symbol of a lost vitality, of the spontaneity and the sense of wonder that the modern world had sadly lost; the Etruscans expressed an ideal of life which seemed to correspond to Lawrence's own vision of existence, and then, to him, the Etruscan culture represented the ancient order, the pagan world which had retained all the virtues he associated with the pre-Christian world.

Lawrence specifies that he makes no scientific pretence because "There is really next to nothing to be said, *scientifically*, about the Etruscans. Must take the imaginative line" (*L* v 473). Indeed, he expresses his open disagreement with the accredited historians, even such prestigious names as the 19th century historian Theodor Mommsen, since they were far too inclined to celebrate the grandeur of Rome and, therefore, they could not treat the Etruscans with the due objectivity.[4] Lawrence admits that he aims to re-write Etruscan

history from an un-Roman perspective. The idea of the Etruscans advocated by those historians is that of a weak and depraved people; however, Lawrence, from his own ideological viewpoint, presents them as the symbol of simplicity, spontaneity, vitality, in total contrast with the values of the corrupted world of ancient Rome, ruled by the logic of power, conquest, and domination.

In his Etruscan essays, Lawrence develops his ideas according to a dualistic vision and formulates the ideological structure of his discourse on a series of oppositions: Etruscans and Greeks, Etruscans and Romans, past and present, Italian peasants and Fascist officers, life and death.

The essay on Volterra – the only Tuscan town among the Etruscan places depicted by Lawrence in his book – opens with a rather detailed and accurate geographic description:

> Volterra is the most northerly of the great Etruscan cities of the west. It lies back some thirty miles from the sea, on a towering great bluff of rock that gets all the winds and sees all the world, looking out down the valley of the Cecina to the sea, south over vale and high land to the tips of Elba, north to the imminent mountains of Carrara, inward over the wide hills of the Pre-Appenines, to the heart of Tuscany. […] Volterra is a sort of inland island, still curiously isolated, and grim. (*SOEP* 157:3-9, 14-15)

The icy weather makes Lawrence rather uneasy and he therefore prefers to visit the town museum where, though the cold is still quite severe, "Yet very soon, in the rooms with all those hundreds of little sarcophagi, ash-coffins, or urns, as they are called, the strength of the old life began to warm one up" (*SOEP* 163:23-25). Lawrence describes above all the alabaster urns which he finds "alive and attractive" (*SOEP* 163:35), and comments:

> For me, I get more pleasure out of these Volterran ash-chests than out of —I had almost said, the Parthenon frieze. […] they are fascinating like an open book of life, and one has no sense of

> weariness with them, though they are so many. They warm one up, like being in the midst of life. (*SOEP* 164:19-20, 29-31)

Lawrence, as usual, looks for signs and symbols which may express the deep sense and warmth of life, and therefore interprets the Etruscan urns in the Volterra museum in those terms corresponding to his own ideology and his own life vision. Towards the end of the essay, however, he criticises museums as a sort of "object-lessons" on extinct people, whereas "What one wants is a contact. The Etruscans are not a theory or a thesis. If they are anything, they are an *experience* […] A museum is not a first-hand contact: it is an illustrated lecture. And what one wants is the actual vital touch" (*SOEP* 171:1-2, 19-20).

In this essay on Volterra the political-ideological discourse is particularly open. The city is astir for the arrival of the new "podestà" sent from Florence by the Fascist regime, and a special celebration is organised. Some girls salute Lawrence in the street with the Roman-Fascist salute, "out of sheer effrontery: a salute which has nothing to do with me, so I don't return it. Politics of all sorts are anathema. But in an etruscan city which held out so long against Rome, I consider the Roman salute unbecoming […]…" (*SOEP* 158:33-37). Lawrence had already commented on the Fascist salute in the essay on Tarquinia, when he had observed some Fascist officers saluting "in the Fascist manner: alla Romana", and had criticised their stupid and arrogant behaviour by drawing a comparison between past and present, Etruscans and Romans in the past on the one hand, and Italian peasants and Fascist officers in the present on the other hand. Indeed, Lawrence points out the simple and natural behaviour of the peasants, so different from the arrogance and violence of the Fascists, who draw inspiration from the model of ancient Rome in the hope of reviving its great power according to the same logic of oppression and terror. The intense and passionate passages in which Lawrence deals with this matter are his best and most effective defence against those accusations sometimes levelled at him of favouring Fascist ideology, particularly with reference to the previous phase of his writing, namely

the "leadership novels" (*Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo* and *The Plumed Serpent*); in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, on the contrary, Lawrence explicitly criticises the Fascist ideology based on the glorification of Rome, and shows his open contempt for the Fascist regime and its clumsy attempts to revive the glorious past of the Roman empire.

Rome and Etruria therefore represent for Lawrence two opposed visions: the Etruscan culture – and by extension life in the modern Tuscan countryside – is the expression of that vitality and natural sensuality characterising the pre-Christian world; conversely the Romans – and by extension the contemporary Fascists – are dominated by the will to conquering and expanding their power and, as a consequence, they do not pay attention to real life and cannot penetrate its true meaning. Based on this contrast, then, Lawrence defines his own image of the Etruscan world and comes to consider the wider opposition between past and present, between the ancient phallic consciousness of the Etruscan world and the mechanical and intellectualistic vision of the modern world.

Etruria is, in fact, the last stage in the long Lawrentian journey, a journey which had taken him to different continents in search of authentic and natural forms of life, a quest along which he is accompanied by his fictional characters: Alvina, the protagonist of *The Lost Girl*, and Aaron, in *Aaron's Rod*, leave England to go to Italy; the Somers in *Kangaroo* move to Australia; Kate in *The Plumed Serpent* measures herself against Mexico and the Amerindian culture; Lou and her mother, the two female protagonists of *St Mawr*, choose New Mexico; Juliet, the central character of the short story *Sun*, like Lawrence leaves the United States to go back to the Mediterranean and to Italy. In that long pilgrimage Lawrence and his characters seem to get closer and closer to their destination, but they never reach it refrained as they are by disillusionments and second thoughts, subjugated by the charm of civilisations which are too alien and remote from their own cultural roots.

Back in Italy, in Tuscany, Lawrence seems to have found the final destination of his search, and concentrates on the composition of

his prophetic novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but only after visiting the Etruscan places is he able to complete the third and final version of the novel.[5] Thus, at the end of his own journey and ideological quest, Lawrence takes his characters back to England, a world in which the contrast between nature and industry appears ever more strident, and entrusts his protagonists with his prophetic message of life and love as the only and essential means to recover a cosmic harmony.

Italy, Tuscany, Etruria, then, offer to Lawrence a cultural experience that provides him with significant answers to his long search, helping him to clarify his own ideals and his own vision of the world, those ideals and that vision that he fully expresses in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* through his provocative but vital and sincere message of life.

Endnotes

1 The subject of the present essay has been partly discussed in the "Introduction" to D. H. Lawrence, *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Italian Essays*. Ed. Simonetta de Filippis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999.

2 Lawrence first lived in the north of Italy, in Gargnano, on Lake Garda, and in Lerici, near La Spezia (1912-1914). In 1919, when the First World War ended, he returned to Italy and settled in Sicily, near Taormina, where he remained until 1922. In 1925, after a few years spent in the USA and Mexico, Lawrence returned to Italy again and lived in Spotorno, in Liguria, between November 1925 and April 1926; he then moved to Tuscany and for his last Italian period (1926-1928) he chose Scandicci, near Florence.

3 The young shepherd anointed by God is also the subject of a Biblical play, *David*, which Lawrence wrote in 1926; the play follows the story of David, from the killing of Goliath to his ascent as a political and religious leader, who gradually introduces a new religion and a new vision of life replacing the natural, primitive religion represented by Saul.

4 "Now, we know nothing about the Etruscans except what we find in their tombs. There are references to them in Latin writers. […] Most people despise everything B.C. that isn't Greek […] So etruscan things are put down as a feeble Graeco-Roman imitation. And a great scientific historian like Mommsen hardly allows that the Etruscans existed at all". (*SOEP* 9:11-12, 19-23)

5 The first two versions – *The First Lady Chatterley* and *John Thomas and Lay Jane* – were written between October 1926 and February 1927; in April Lawrence visited the Etruscan places; in the autumn, in November 1927, he began the third version of the novel.

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