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## Etruscan Places, Defiant and Obedient towards Death

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#### Abstract

*Sketches of Etruscan Places,* the last and unfinished travel novel of D. H. Lawrence, one of the most controversial writers of twentieth century, offers a unique view of life and death. In this travel book, Lawrence records his phantasmagoric experience about travelling to a dead and fantastic civilisation. Though the civilisation had been brutally annihilated by the Romans and is dead now, it did not succumb to death because of their very pure and magical conception of death. Their sculptures, mainly tomb paintings by Etruscan painters, convey their basic concept of life, love, death, and sex. In the tombs, all the cave paintings were equipped with experimental instruments dedicated to know the reality of life and the mystery of death and to enjoy both of them. The paper attempts to decipher the oxymoronic concepts of death cherished by the ancient Etruscans as interpreted by Lawrence that they tried to transcend death at the deadliest form of the term and, at the same time, to welcome it most.

### 1. Introduction

"The Etruscans, as everyone knows, were the people who occupied the middle of Italy in early Roman days, and whom the Romans, in their usual neighbourly fashion, wiped out entirely in order to make room for Rome with a very big R. They couldn't have wiped them all out, there were too many of them. But they did wipe out the Etruscan existence as a nation and as a people" (*Etruscan Places 9*): this is how *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (*EP*) (1932), the last and unfinished travel book of D. H. Lawrence starts, so much like a history book. The Etruscans were destroyed by the Romans and getting the first-hand information about them becomes difficult. The best we can get is the tomb of the civilisation, and the writings of the contemporary writers who wrote about the civilisation. Lawrence, at the very beginning of the book, invites readers to judge afresh the assumptions about the Etruscans. It is an earnest appeal to their critical ability, because people can and should form an unbiased opinion about this civilisation.

Lawrence draws the attention of the readers to the concept of death and life and its real applicability. The first striking point is that death appears so splendid in the tombs. The city and the civilisation were ostensibly very affluent as the dead people were buried with many valuable metals and wealth particularly when "Rome had very little gold, even bronze was precious" (*EP* 18). It is also significant to note the Etruscan concept of death is totally non-Christian; death is not a period of reaping the consequence of life in heaven or in purgatory. There is no question of enjoying supreme bliss or atonement, as death is just the uninterrupted continuation of life and an extension of it into which life culminates. And

this idea has been propagated by leaving jewels, wine, and flutes to the corpse in his coffin.

Death for the Etruscans is not horrifying, but only orgasmically pleasurable. The symbols of phallus and ark confirm this, as "fruition" symbolises procreation. Lawrence was totally aware of Shiva lingam of Mahadeva in India. And he discovered the resemblance between the phallic stones by the doors of many tombs and the "Shiva lingam at Benares" (EP 19). This act of relating the two is more entrancing than the similar appearance of the entrance stone of the tomb and the Shiva lingam. The tomb of a woman differs from a tomb of a man in shape. Every woman's tomb had one rectangular stone house or "chests over it" (EP 20) where as every man's tomb had one of the phallic stones or lingams. But Francesco Brighenti wrote, "What D.H. Lawrence terms as "lingas" are not phallic emblems, but funerary *cippi* [Latin, singular. *cippus* (stela)], usually placed on tombs in Etruscan necropolis" ("Shiva Linga and the Etruscans."). Lawrence, on the contrary, was very much determined about that and wrote, "And all these tombs along the dead high-way would seem to have been topped, once, by the beautiful roundness of tumuli, the great mounds of fruition, for the dead, with the tall phallic cone rising from the summit" (EP 21). The word "fruition" symbolises "procreation". The line establishes that the death is not the final end of life.

The Etruscans did not forsake joys of revelry even after death. From the tomb painting it is clear: "...it is the dead man banqueting in the underworld; for the underworld of the Etruscans was a gay place...with a lady to offer him garlands and slaves to bring him wine" (EP 46). It shows their defiant attitude to death. Their defiant attitude to death is indicated by viewing it as a new beginning of pleasure and happiness. The painting (EP 48-49) on one tomb depicts a scene of revelry. But where it differs from common festivity was that a dead man's feast was being celebrated here. All the half naked men, fair-haired courtesans, naked slaves, wines are employed for one man's pleasure-the dead man. Their philosophy was distinct. Even after forsaking earthly existence, they grasped life with greater firmness—not the whole life, only the pleasurable part of it. Death itself is extremely painful, but the Etruscans wanted to engage themselves in merry making. They refuse to grieve after death. Death had lost its sting. Nudity, sexuality, and wine were used to combat death. Nudity and sexuality represent instinct and primitivism-the instinctive unreasonable behaviour compelled by élan vital. These two celebrate life at its original form and denounce death. Wine drowns all the anxieties about death. More wine leads to more carefree feeling and more enjoyment and more satisfaction. The naked slave with a circlet waving for more wine for the front couple typifies that (49).

And that orgasmic orgy completes itself with a ritual of honour. One feaster was about to put a garland to the other to give him respect á la Indian custom. Lawrence's fascination for Indian culture and philosophies are also clear here. Perhaps Etruscans also believed that no pleasurable relation can exist without a sense of respect. Real happy connection must be complemented by inherent respect and honour. They were banqueting, they were cheering up a dead man, and at the same time, they were paying respect to the individuals. They were complete Etruscans. Above the banquet scene, there are two leopards facing "each other heraldically" (EP 49). Here the leopards were not drawing the chariot of Bacchus, but watching over the exits and "entrances of the passion of life" (EP 49). So passion was strongly guarded by the leopard, since passion evokes life.

Another important aspect of the paintings is the mystery that originates from the secrecy of the underground tombs and partial obscurity of the paintings and a deeply felt sign or warning that a momentous or calamitous event is likely to happen. These two aspects of the cave paintings added an extra dimension to its aesthetic beauty. It clearly said that this was not a commonplace life and is something deeper and more significant, because the pictures bridge death and life and shows life in death.

Apparently they are ordinary pictures without any sort of imposition. But those simple pictures can elicit deep reflection.

And the woman body in the painting reminds Lawrence of the old pronouncement that body is the manifestation of gods. The inwards direction of the psyche—anima, the inner pursuit for attainment of god or perfection became obvious through the various parts of the body and the curves as an inseparable part of the soul. Simonetta de Filippis, the editor of the Cambridge edition of the book also writes:

Primitive civilisations believed in the 'anima', the soul (Latin) as a vital principle, which was sometimes identified with organs or parts of the human body; Indo-European pre-Christian philosophical doctrines never considered soul as something separate from the body whereas Christians conceived man to be the result of two principles: the material, the body, and the spiritual, the anima. Plato (427-347 BC) was the first philosopher who formulated explicitly the dualistic conception of man. (*EP*, "Explanatory notes," 304)

Lawrence also tells us in "A propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," that "all the emotions belong to the body" including "the higher emotions" and "love in all its manifestations, from genuine desire to tender love, love of our fellow-men, and love of God" ("A Propos," 96, 104, 114). "Wildly the bacchic woman" who "throws back her head and curves out her long strong figures" (*EP* 50) only culminates the idea of complete affinity of body and soul and the celebration of the latter not by relinquishing but by rejoicing the former.

And the painting of the dead man "on his bed, with a woman leaning gently over to cover his face" (*EP52*) underlines the fact that death was so sweet to them. At the parting bed, the dying man was accompanied by his woman who covered his face for the last time and perhaps prepares him to enjoy uninterrupted merriment after death.

Nudity is a part of their joy and celebration. The stark nudity of the slaves appeared more natural than any clothing. Their nudity had become their dress—more comfortable, more normal: "Their nakedness is its own clothing, more easy than drapery. The curves of their limbs show pure pleasure in life" (*EP* 56). The outlines of their body, the curves, their dance, that involved the last inch of each limb—all these things show their vitality emerges from a particular domain of life that modern men are unable to get: "as if they drew their vitality from different depths, that we are denied" (*EP* 56). The image of the naked "flute-boy" says that: "And this man has a naked flute-boy, lovely in naked outline, coming towards him" (*EP* 53). Flower ("dandelion-stems"), music ("flute-boy"), and nudity go together. All these things represent death. They did not portray death as an abandonment, inhibition, or restraint, but as the final ceremony of life, like the "the strange gesture of finality" by the "dark impressive figure of the naked man" (*EP* 53) with a vertical wine bowl in his hand in one cave painting. They were not satisfied with life only; they were much more willing to enjoy death to the lees, accepting its potentialities and possibilities.

Lawrence marked one thing about modern civilisation that is worth mentioning here. The greatest thing our modern civilisation misses is the art of living. This is not only art but logic, a science about living. We are driven by a senseless madness by the name of "civilisation." An example has been posed by Lawrence. A labourer working in the street was not allowed to take off his shirt in hot summer in the name of decencies. But logically it would help him work more freely. On the contrary, the revealing female arms and legs in the streets are actually done to draw attention of the people to some particular body parts. Inviting special attention to some particular body parts is unnatural perversion and in the same way, shows disrespect for the other parts and thereby the whole human body. But that remained unquestioned, while the utilitarian opening of the torso of the workman not. We are over-anxious about skin showing and confuse between naturalness and perversion. Inherent Etruscan "inner carelessness" (*EP* 115) is the answer.

The connectivity of the two worlds—the world of death and the world of life—was very much obvious by one Etruscan practice. In the city of Volterra, the person prepares his own death effigy (*EP* 169). They prepare the lid on which their real portraitures were curved. But the person himself could not choose the chest where his ashes would be kept. The uncertainty about the manner of death prevented them from choosing their chest. They left it to the survivors. The prominent mismatch between the lid and the chest were perhaps due to the fact that ordering of the chest and procuring of the same were done in great haste by the bereaved relatives. So, this also suggests the previous practice that lid and the chest were not prepared by the same person, at the same time, and at the same mood. And as the lid carries the portrait of the dead person, it was probably prepared in his life time, the chest not.

This speaks of one simple idea: they had a solid understanding about their death and they were not afraid of it. Leaving the option of choosing the size and design of the chest to the living ones proves their belief of connection between the two worlds—the world of the living and the world of the dead. Their minds were biologically programmed from the beginning about the complementary connectivity of these two worlds.

In Volterra, the dead men were not kept like southern Etruscans. First difference was that they were not "naked to below the navel" as the prescribed religious order maintained in the south. Another difference is, instead of holding the sacred patera as per the southern way, they held a "tippling wine cup" (EP 169). Sometimes he held a wine jug in the other hand suggesting full carousal and revelry. Religiosity had been replaced by noisy festivity. The gloominess of death as well as inveteracy of the rituals had been challenged by the uncontrollable Volterrans. They were rebels. They were alive even after death.

The guintessence of man-woman relationship channelising to cosmic attunement and thereby winning death is illustrated on one tomb painting. A woman, "a handsome and jewelled lady in fine robes" (EP 258), offers a garland to her man keeping her left hand on his "naked breast." The painters were very much conscious about the place and purpose of these paintings. They battled death. They believed that a man can combat death and attain eternity by receiving a real garland from a real woman in the real manner. And only a woman can offer this eternity to a man: "The garland or necklace is long and flexible, and is placed over the head for love, and is really that eternity which the woman alone can offer to man" (EP 258). The quintessential femininity could be employed to fight male menopause just by making him eternally young and creative. That means, when our civilisation in its post-modern era holds an ultimate sexiest attitude that objectifies woman and this objectification results in virtually killing sex, Etruscan painting can stimulate a feeling of gaining eternity through the touch of a woman. The real response from flesh motivated by "blood consciousness" can overcome flesh and offer eternity. The garland is long and flexible suggesting the space in the man-woman relationship. It is not bondage, but a bond between souls that can be extended to eternity.

The length and flexibility of the garland is also denoted by the pervading mood and the nature of the place. Etruscans did not imagine a place where only one man and one woman were planning their eternity. It was a real banquet, a cluster of naked slave boys, "maiden playing on the flute," "two maiden with garlands," and of course "splendid wine jars" (*EP* 258). Lawrence commented that the garlands mean the circle of eternity that a dead man really needs. So they were not ordinary garlands. Pleasure was the only good to Etruscans. Remarkably death-door was painted "dark red" (*EP* 55) in the tombs, perhaps to mark a start of an incessant life more hectic, more mysterious, and more joyous. They were given to get the joyous aspect of life even after death. Etruscans are not afraid of death by their banqueting power. Man and woman together won death. Flesh is the vehicle, eternity is the tenor. Lawrence argues that "Etruscans really believed in a gay death" (*EP* 258). To an Etruscan, life is pleasure. And absence of pleasure is death. If one can ensure the continuous supply of ever renewable pleasure, one is death-less. Death will lose its teeth if a person is engulfed in pleasure. Sensuality is a great source of pleasure. When sensuality meets sensitivity and pleasure comes out of the endlessly renewable reaction of manhood and womanhood, it is indomitable because in this way a man understands the full potential of his human soul and really connects it to the cosmos. When he connects his soul to the cosmos, he overcomes death. Overcoming death means becoming free from the fear of death. Death will be painless to him. He will enjoy his life to the full extent without being afraid of death. He would accept death joyously and excitedly as a new phase of life. This attitude towards life was naturally present among Etruscans and gave birth to these portraits.

At the end we can conclude by saying that life was mysterious to them; but death was more mysterious. Life had been depicted as "Man moves naked and glowing through the universe" (*EP* 60). It probably means the basic elemental life full of inner glow and original happiness. And death is departure through the sea into the underworld. In the tombs, all of the cave paintings were equipped with experimental instruments dedicated to know the reality of life and the mystery of death, and to enjoy both of them. They tried to transcend death at the deadliest form of the term and, at the same time, to welcome it most lively.

The artificial "Ideal" and false civilisation make man unnecessarily fearful about death and thereby make him eternally tragic in an ever-happy universe. In the essay "Flowery Tuscany," Lawrence deeply professed this idea:

Hence, strictly, there is no tragedy. The universe contains no tragedy, the man is only tragical because he is afraid of death. 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 of the sunshine. (EP, 237)

The original wisdom is always fearless. Tagore also dreamt of a heaven "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;" (*Gitanjali*, No35 n.p.). It is only possible when man can shake off "Ideal" and embrace one's own instinct. Instinct, intuition and imagination will make him the deathless eternal man.

In the essay "Nightingale," Lawrence critiques John Kesats' poem "Ode to a Nightingale" and our take on life and death. Here he professed that being originally imperfect men are unable to enjoy the perfectness of a nightingale. It makes him particularly sorry by making him aware of his limitations and imperfectness. And in this connection he also affirmed that the eye is cleverer than the ear. The ear believes, but the eye tests and detects impurity and adulteration. For example, the awesome beauty of a peacock appeals to our eye; it actually makes an attack on our eye and taste. It is disturbing to the eye. When we say that the nightingale is sad, we use Transferred Epithet. The song of the bird makes us sad and we assume that the bird is sad. But the reality is, according to Lawrence, that the nightingale is the most "unsad thing" in the world. And Keats' interpretation of Nightingale is actually the interpretation of his own self. Nightingale is not the symbol of death, not does it stimulate the death thought in any human. The bird would be surprised if it could know the reaction of Keats hearing his song. Lawrence here directly mocks John Keats for his death-wish at midnight, and pities Keats' beloved Fanny Brawne for her desolation. Lawrence accused this death-loving nature of male is against the life force. If the male loves to die at midnight (painfully or painlessly), what the female would do then? Her condition, as well as, the condition of the species is utterly wretched, unhappy and pitiable. Lawrence humorously commented that"[t]here are better uses for midnights" (EP 216).

And Lawrence questions the basis of the general inclination for imposition on the part of mankind. It appeared very tiresome and lifeless. He expressed his penchant for natural, relaxed, unaffected, and easy-going things. And what he realised is that to become closer to life, its longevity should be limited.

Fundamentally, man longs to be immortal. The desire of a mortal being to be immortal and its inevitable physical futility and its realisation give birth to a wistful trying in art. They say art is long and life is short ["ars longe vita brevis"]. But if the art is to be long, it is to be impressive, gigantic, colossal, and larger than life. Lawrence's contention is that art must follow life and must be fragile in nature. If the art transcends life and shows a defiant attitude to fragility and transiency (of life) it may not be accepted and welcome by life itself. This is the reason why Michelangelo, one of the greatest artists of the world for all time "becomes at last a lump and a burden and a bore" (*EP* 33). Its beauty and appeal are seriously threatened by its durability. In the essay "Fireworks [Fireworks in Florence]," Lawrence used a term "idiotic fixity" (*EP*, 287). Also in another version of the essay, Lawrence criticised fixity:

How dreary things are when they never flicker and waver and change, when they keep on going on being the dreary same, and never rise on tiptoe, nor shake their fingers and become different, but pride themselves on their dead-head fixity. How stupid man has been, craving for permanency and machine-made perfection, when the only true permanent things are those that are always quivering and departing, like fire and like water. (*EP*, 204)

Etruscans were the vanquished, Romans the victor; but "how much more Etruscan than Roman the Italian of Today is." During his visit to Etruscan painting on ash-chest, Lawrence describes the nature of modern Italian persons. And he found much similarity between an Etruscan and a modern Italian. Etruscans were sensitive, shy, felt a powerful desire for symbols, and mysteries, able to be pleased with true pleasure "over small things." They were violent in spasms and altogether without sternness or natural will-to-power" (*EP* 166). Life has so many dimensions that refuse to be circumscribed in one form and conventional concept of life and death has been put upside down by the death of the Roman imperialism and the survival of the dead Etruscan among Italians.

In the essay, "Flowery Tuscany," Lawrence also expressed the tragedy of the beautiful "blue grape-hyacinth" (EP, 231) that last for a long time. Lawrence's submission is simple: fixity and beauty can never meet. If one prefers fixity, one is to get it at the expense of flesh. As Lawrence's travel literature, which started with Twilight in Italy (1916), and reached its climax in Etruscan Places (1932) gradually moves towards overcoming death and eternal life; the journey excludes anything that is fixed and permanent. This is singularly interesting to note that all those temporal ingredients aimed towards timelessness. Even the tomb painting that gave immortality to the dead civilisation is itself subjected to decay and death. And it is the criterion which they need to fulfil to give something eternity. If the paintings were very neatly painted on solid marble, if they were very fixed like Michelangelo's David, it is a doubt how much Lawrence would love them, how much they would be able to express a civilisation that celebrated life after death. So the life-in-death experience very much depends on real vital elements that do not boast of permanency like "beads of electric lights" (EP287), unlike long lasting hyacinth flower, but like fireworks; they come and go and form a garland of life. Every bead of the garland is very much transient, but this momentary rudiments magically offer eternity to the circuit of life. The garland which is being presented by a woman to her man to offer him eternity in one tomb painting (EP, 258) is perhaps the circle of life and its victory over death. The Etruscan tomb painting and the lights of the Florentine fireworks faded and the travel literature dissolved into a new awareness about life and death.

After spending few hours in the tombs of a completely exterminated civilisation that existed few hundred years before the birth of Christ, Lawrence came out of the underground and walked back to the present. In this moment a trance-like state took control of him. He was rather confused about the past and present, imagination and reality, death and life. Those people who lived thousands of years back still appeared so alive to him through their lively paintings that, though much faded, transcends death and oblivion. On the contrary, the "pale," "void," darkling present of the common day was lacking in the pulse of life. Thus, Lawrence, a mortal human being became the bridge between the worlds of the past and death and the worlds of the present and life. At that moment both of them were the very same to him. Differences between the two worlds—the dead and the alive—vanished by their strange juxtaposition. It did not matter much to him where-from he was coming and onto what he was heading. He left the place with a promise from his guide of seeing more tombs the next day ("The Painted Tombs of Tarquinia,"*EP* 56).

In the first version of the essay Lawrence wrote, "And gradually the underground world of the Etruscans becomes more real than the above day. One begins to live with the painted dancers and feasters and mourners" (*EP* 263). What Lawrence told here can be directly termed as Magic Realism, a term coined by Franz Roh. The writer is amid the clash between the world above and the underground world. His unconscious mind took the underground world as real. The external reality, the above civilisation around him has become meaningless to him. Etruscan "dancers, feasters and mourners" that are only painted on the rough damage and dampish wall had created a phantasmagoric effect on his inner soul. This compels him to rise and float on a reality which is no longer real. The poetic and aesthetic effect of the paintings was so appealing, so irresistible to an imaginative mind.

Let us understand the above thought with a real life example. Thought and memory of a person are alternant with each other. Let me first define them for the easy understanding of the concept. Memory means the actual incidents experienced by the person. Thought means something which could have been, but did not happen actually. This can be best observed during dream when a person remains in a subconscious stage. The possibilities he thinks about or might have thought about or the impossibilities he desires to happen could really happen to him during dream and he felt the exactly same emotion, either emotion of delight or emotion of fear, or emotion of ennui or mixed emotions, as his real emotion during awakened and, hence, conscious stage to these actual incidents. And as the person really experiences them during his dream, it has become a permanent part of his memory. He does not need to experience it again in real. Or, if he again experiences it in real, he shall not certainly taste any new feeling, only his previous feelings will be awakened and revisited. So thought can and has become memory. Alternately memory can become a thought in his mind. The achievements that a person had really attained during conscious stage may appear unattained during his dream and he may re-experience the fear, agony and perspiration that precede the real achievement. In this way memory can become a possibility, a thought in dream. Unattained things, a man can attain in dream and can feel the whole gamut of real emotion associated with its attainment; attained things may appear unattained during dream and a person may need to go though again and again all the related emotions he already experienced in real life during its accomplishment. Why and how does it happen? How it may appear unreal what is very real in awakened stage and vice versa? It happens perhaps because the logical frame of mind changes. When we are awake and conscious, our brain follows a fixed and particular logical framework to judge and evaluate things and our take on the cosmos is shaped accordingly. And when we are asleep that very basic logical system changes and our attitude also changes.

Interestingly, after experiencing something in dream when we become awake gradually, we have to undergo a stage when we are half awake and half asleep. During this short transition period we become utterly confused about what is real and what is unreal. What we have experienced a few minutes ago is true or something else is true. This profound uncertainty occurs only due to the absence of some fixed and single logical system in our mind during this short transition period. When we become widely awake, we start believing that what we have experienced few minutes ago is *not* true and either feel sorry if the dream is very fascinating or sigh with relief if the dream is dreadful.

But this single experience singularly makes us believe that our take on reality has no real and absolute basis. It all depends on the logical frame or logical system of our mind. If the system has been changed, fantasy can be reality and thought can be memory. On the contrary, in a changed logical framework very reality can be total fantasy and memory can be simple thought.

This concept can deconstruct many of our strong and conventional ideas about the man and the cosmos and ultimately prove that truth is plural.

The dead men of Volterra are no longer in their tombs. With all their belongings they had been removed and tombs levelled down to get cultivable land: "Nearly all the tombs that have been opened in Volterra, their contents removed, have been filled in again, so as not to lose two yards of the precious cultivable land of the peasants" (*EP* 170). In one way the spiritual and aesthetic sense of man is being wounded by its utilitarian self and on the other hand, religious rituals and prescribed orders give way to human life force. Tombs were replaced by agriculture. Death had been superseded by evergreen life. And the eternal enigma of death and life remained unresolved.

All of Lawrence's travel writings aim to win death. Landscape has become mindscape. He did not travel through any country; he travelled into life to resist death.

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