

The Intensity of Lyrical Landscapes in Shelley and Lawrence ‘Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici’ and ‘Cypresses’

This essay, linking Romantic and Modernist poetic genres, examines the lyrical language of seascapes and woodland in poems written during the Italian sojourns of Percy Bysshe Shelley and D. H. Lawrence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Shelley (1792-1822) was a major figure of Romanticism and one of the finest lyric poets in the English language, yet he achieved fame posthumously, with many works suppressed in his lifetime and little financial gain from his writing. His polemicist beliefs, atheism, and desertion of his wife for Mary Godwin had estranged him from his own society and in 1818 the couple relocated to the Continent, where the poet continued an unconventional lifestyle while his verse steadily absorbed Mediterranean principles aligned to the political climate. Shelley believed passionately, as did many Anglo-expatriates like Byron and the Brownings, in the Risorgimento’s aim of re-unification, and in fact his best work was composed in Italy where Romantic sentiment, topography and politics proved a workable, and inspirational formula. The stay in Pisa (1819-1820) was a period of exceptional creativity; among others, *Prometheus Unbound*, ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, ‘To a Skylark’, ‘Ode to the West Wind’, ‘Ode to Naples’, and his celebrated treatise, *Defence of Poetry* (1821), portraying him as avatar of political and social justice. Such prolific artistry was a far cry from Matthew Arnold’s labeling of Shelley as a ‘beautiful but ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain’ (Arnold, 1888: 120).

On July 8th, 1822, a month before turning thirty, the poet who regretted that he had been schooled in the classics instead of swimming drowned in a storm while sailing his schooner *Ariel* back from Livorno (Leghorn), where he had visited Byron, to Lerici. Speculation ranged widely on the fatality, but the *Ariel*’s cumbersome design had proved inadequate against a fierce and unforeseen squall. Fournier’s melodramatic *Shelley’s Funeral Rites* (1889), renders the poet’s Homeric-style cremation on Viareggio’s shore in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

The harbour town and commune of Lerici dates back, perhaps, to exiles from the Trojan war but certainly from the Etruscan period about the seventh century BC. Lerici became popular with many artists and poets and the wide bay of La Spezia has long been synonymous in locale and literature as ‘the Gulf of the Poets’. From May 1822 the Shelley family was living in a dilapidated boat house, Casa Magni, with the sea lapping the doors, near the tiny village of San Terenzo. Shelley’s last poem, ‘Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici’ (1822),

composed over the summer solstice shortly before the poet's death, existed only in manuscript folio in the Bodleian library among loose sheets which included an unfinished work, *The Triumph of Life*. Richard Garnett appended a posthumous title and published the poem in two separate forums: in *Macmillan's Magazine* of June 1862 and again later that year in his biography *Relics of Shelley*.

This lyric in form and content is low-keyed, compared to the intellectual antithesis of Shelley's political verse, but its sensuous tones endorse the power of his literary imagination. Most readers and critics agree that the poem is inspired by Jane Williams who relocated with her partner Edward from the Pisan circle to Casa Magni. Ironically, Williams had objected to an experienced sailor joining them on the Livorno excursion and was fated to drown along with Shelley. For the poet this domestic trio, Mary, Jane and Edward, were 'Marina, Vanna, Primus...' ('Epipsychedion', 601), that is 'sea', 'moon' and 'lord of light' respectively. The poet admired Jane's beauty and enchanting music, and gave her a guitar that April. Casting themselves familiarly as 'Ariel' and 'Miranda' apposite Shakespeare's play, he addressed several late lyrics to her in *Poems Written in 1822*. In June they would all go sailing together:

Williams is captain, and we drive along this delightful bay in the evening wind, under the summer moon, until earth appears another world. Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present could content me so well that I could say [with Faust] to the passing moment,
"Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful." (Frosch, 2005: 378).

Nature becomes an enabling metaphor for transcendence of the poet's present-continuous condition in lines that express a congenial ambience between man and his solicitous milieu. The mood and context differ sharply from Shelley's 'A Vision of the Sea' (1820), a grim poem of figurative language about a relentless tempest testing the limits of human endeavour: 'While the surf, like a chaos of stars, like a rout / Of death flames, like whirlpools of fire-flowing iron, / With splendour and terror the black ship environ. ...' (18-20). But the poet at Lerici is more than content to delineate, retrospectively, a self-contained world, desirous of perpetuating this time-locked experience on La Spezia's bay in his allusion to Faust's well-known dilemma; that is, to be chained to the soothing present or to strive beyond the non-permanent moment.

Scholars have noted the syntactical and symbolic patterns of the solitary verse of the 'Lines...', where the immediacy of the speaker's subjectivity draws resonances from Shelley's turbulent lifestyle at Casa Magni close by. His psychological stress had been evident for weeks in nightmares and hallucinations, along with Mary's precarious miscarriage, her life saved by her husband's first-aid. Inevitably, the context of the poem derives partly from the personal. The poetic

speaker is marginal to sea and land, day and night in symmetry with the Ligurian shoreline. One could say that the closing statement of the ode 'To a Skylark' (1820) defines the lyricism of this poem too: 'Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.' (xviii, 90). And in both settings a solitary darkness becomes the measure of the speaker's condition. The verse is structured in octosyllabic couplets of masculine rhyme, supported by enjambment and assonance, all lending a degree of formality to the fifty-two running lines. Their content expounds on love and nature in a typical lyric theme, that of the internalized memory of a parting, which sets the poem's literary frame and the role of the subconscious in the creative process. Opening lines introduce the feminine principle and the properties of nature's beauty, through Jane and the extended simile of the moon:

She left me at the silent time
When the moon had ceased to climb
The azure path of heaven's steep,
And, like an albatross asleep,
Balanced on her wings of light,
Hover'd in the purple night,
Ere she sought her ocean nest
In the chambers of the West. (1-8)

Conversely, this sum of allusions above fosters an undercurrent of negativity; abandoned speaker, bird of ominous Romantic fame, and ultimate extinction of natural light. In parenthesis, one notes Shelley's quaint misconception that the ocean seabird could sleep in flight. It should also be noted that this essay's focus on Shelleyan landscape excludes discussion of the extract above in relation to a five-line manuscript regarded by some scholars as the intended opening lines. (Matthews, 1961: 40; Reiter, 1967: 287-90).

More significantly indeterminacy exists, with an ambivalence emerging not only from Shelley's legendary rhetorical abstraction but also from line ten onwards in aural and tactile images of Jane's strumming. Alternative meanings of music or speech derive from 'tone' (10), along with a synaesthesia of physical and emotional sensory perceptions, all of which impact on the interplay between memory and fancy. The speaker's receptive recall is not wholly articulate: 'And feeling ever--oh, too much!--' (15). The intonation here could suggest clandestine intimacy but Shelley is describing idealized love, within the transient happiness of an interlude. Reality and imagination obscure the brief suspension of time between 'Memory' and 'Fancy' which will take a disconcerting turn in line twenty-eight. Meanwhile, self-absorbed contemplation, introduced from line one, is intensified by the medial caesura in line nine: 'She left me; and I stay'd alone', and again 'I lived alone / In the time which is our own' (1, 23):

She left me; and I stay'd alone,

Thinking over every tone,
Which, though silent to the ear,
The enchanted heart could hear,
Like notes which die when born, but still
Haunt the echoes of the hill,
And feeling ever--oh, too much!--
The soft vibration of her touch,
As if her gentle hand even now,
Lightly trembled on my brow,
And thus, although she absent were,
Memory gave me all of her
That even Fancy dares to claim
Her presence had made weak and tame
All passions, and I lived alone
In the time which is our own... (9-24)

Like many landscape poems, this one interprets the poet's vision of Ligurian topography for descriptive and moralistic purpose, implying a consonance between the natural world and the divine. The layered text arranges a sequence of 'and' conjunctions to stage a flurry of reflection imagery on 'the twinkling bay' (44): 'And the wind', 'And the scent', 'and the coolness', 'and sweet warmth' (39, 41-3). Even so, since a Romantic lyric conventionally focuses on the speaker's sustained meditation along with the scene, the harmony of elements is at odds up close with his 'sweet and bitter pain' (38). Organic unity between the poem's form and content is illustrated in this collage depicting nature's Elysian role of panacea which fails, nevertheless, the human psyche when a perverse attendant spirit takes up residence on this most tranquil of June evenings. He withdrew himself, the speaker says, from nightfall's panorama:

The daemon reassumed his throne
In my faint heart. I dare not speak
My thoughts; but thus disturbed and weak
I sat, and saw the vessels glide
Over the ocean bright and wide... (28-32)

In fact, the enchanting vista proffers little consolation in a narrative of loss as the speaker turns nature's opulence into a fatalistic vision of life, underlined by his divulgence: 'I dare not speak / my thoughts ...' (29-30). Though not inferring any notion of the Romantic Sublime, Shelley did conceive of the world as in flux and these closing lines reconstruct the rocky promontories where he fished at night with Williams. The furtive fisher becomes a pathological transitive, denoting perhaps Shelley's self-perception at that point in time:

And the fisher, with his lamp
And spear about the low rocks damp

Crept, and struck the fish which came
To worship the delusive flame
Too happy they, whose pleasure sought
Extinguishes all sense and thought
Of the regret that pleasure leaves,--
Destroying life alone, not peace! (45-52)

The implied reader is lulled initially into a sense of normality while the mood turns uneasy with predatory violence which disrupts the octosyllabic rhythm when stress falls strongly in turn on the generic 'fisher', 'spear', and 'crept'. Any close reading sets astir competing 'voices', distorting nocturnal tranquility, and raising debate about the vulnerability of both fish and fisherman and, in a reflexive twist, even about the helplessness of the speaker too. Keach ponders the alternative outcomes, and goes a stage further, wondering if the poet is both fisher and fish, 'luring the reader, Jane, and himself towards a grim ending' (Keach, 1985: 232). In this case, the 'lamp' of poetic imagination would surely play accomplice. Heightened by the extended syntax of 'Too happy' (49) through to line fifty-two, the poem ends obscurely. In fact, the incomplete rhyme of 'leaves' and 'peace!' concludes 'Lines...' on an indecisive note, not one of sound resolution of rhyme and metre. Critical practice can identify the closing lines as a moral abstraction, reminiscent of yet lacking the craftsmanship of neoclassical couplets, for instance. In summary, Keach contends that the predatory image and unpredictable ending 'is like nothing else in Shelley, or even in English Romantic poetry'. (Keach, 1985: 232). Certainly, the skeptical and ambivalent fusion of covert fishing metaphor with overt natural similes is hardly epiphanic, revealing only disquiet and irresolution in the night-watch at Lerici's bay.

Another restless Anglo-Italian, the novelist, artist, poet, essayist David H. Lawrence (1885-1930) noted the co-habitation of civilization and barbarity in the early twentieth century, and advanced primitivism as remedy for the uncivilizing effects of modernity. He too had left controversy behind in England, when so-called obscenities in his prose led to censorship and prosecution. An elopement with a married woman propelled them on a pilgrimage across the Old and New Worlds: 'It has been a savage enough pilgrimage these last four years', he wrote in February 1923 (Moore, 1962: 736). Diagnosed with terminal tuberculosis in Mexico in 1925 he died in southern France, after spending his final years near Florence. Overall, three elements - a surprisingly bookish childhood in a mining community, the chronic tuberculosis, and an up-close relationship with a palpable Nature - were determining factors in his life and writing. The success of his novels has until recently overshadowed his prolific versifying, although he had been composing verse since 1905 (*Love Poems and others*

1913). More generally, Lawrence's lifelong disrepute has been slowly redressed through critical recognition of his canonical status and integrity, heralded by F. R. Leavis in 1955.

On his second trip to Italy (1919-1921) Lawrence lived initially at Fiascherino on La Spezia. Earlier, in 1914, he had read the audacious Italian anthology of free verse, *I Poeti Futuristi* (1912), which shaped perhaps his conception of immediate poetry with its free syntax and rhyme in revolt against conventional form. September 1920 saw the composition of 'Cypresses' for his finest poetic volume *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) which he sub-divided thematically into Fruits, Trees, Flowers, Evangelical Beasts, Creatures, and so on. These much anthologized poems tend to employ Nature's pathetic fallacy not as background material or inspiration for an image but, as Draper phrases it well, 'a partner in the emotion' (Draper, 1970: 304). The poet was staying at Vitta Canovaia for about three weeks, writing up poems for the volume and exploring the ancient Etruscan town above Florence. Biographer Sagar notes in the 'Calendar': "sometimes he came to Fiesole, where I was now living, climbing by a steep track up through the olives and along the remains of Fiesole's Etruscan walls ... It was here several other poems were suggested - 'Cypresses', for example'. (Sagar, 1979: 105). Scenic Fiesole was probably founded in the ninth-eighth centuries BC, those walls (guarded by sacred ditches) testifying to its prominence in the Etruscan federation. Lawrence's sensitivity to the spirit of place was articulated in an eponymous essay and in a letter of July 1824: 'Myself, I am sick of the farce of cosmic unity, of world unison. It may exist in the abstract - but not elsewhere ... as soon as it comes to experience, to passion, to desire, to feeling, we are different. ... The spirit of place always triumphs. ' (Moore, 1962: 796).

Motifs of a figurative twilight of language run parallel with Lawrence's typical asymmetry and his moralistic conviction of humanity's urgent need to minimize its distance from Nature. Accordingly, in 'Cypresses' he presents a diachronic view of the physical world of Tuscany during anti-romantic, post-war Italy. One commentator points out that D. H. Lawrence was 'among other things an inheritor of the nineteenth-century lineage of Romantic protest against the mechanized wage-slavery of capitalism, its crippling social oppressiveness and cultural devastation.' (Eagleton, 1996: 37). Attuned to these times, Lawrence himself argued that poetry, in 'this age of stark and unlovely actualities', must be 'stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry.' (Zydaruk, 1981: 50). As in Shelley's poem, the play on darkness in 'Cypresses' symbolizes a metaphorical absence, though Lawrence once insisted that he would never attempt the 'treasured gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats' ('Poetry of the Present' 1919, Pinto, 1972: 182).

What was the fascination with Etruscans and cypress trees? While Lawrence was hampered by the paucity of information on Etruscan (Tyrrhene) culture and its legacy to modern Italy, his archaeological excursions facilitated direct cognizance and sensory awakening. For this exile, Italy symbolized the place where primitive pagan life was still alive: ‘to go to Italy – is like a most fascinating act of self-discovery – back, back, back down the old way of time. Strange and wonderful chords awake in us, and vibrate again after many hundreds of years of complete forgetfulness’. (Preston, 1989: 104). These sentiments are echoed in the poem, with the use of archaism perhaps identifying the poet with romantic Georgian verse: ‘What would I not give / To bring back the rare and orchidlike / Evil-yclept Etruscan?’ (52-54). Poetic licence in this line fifty-four employs the medieval ‘clepe’ (to ‘name’ or ‘call’) to protest more graphically the perpetual, not temporal, extinction of a unique race. The poet had been fascinated with this race, its art and its tombs since 1911 but ‘Cypresses’ is his first literary mention of the ruined civilization which he had surveyed on the perimeters of Florence.

Lawrence’s passion for trees, which he enacts dramatically in ‘Cypresses’, dated from his childhood ramblings in Sherwood forest and he made a lifetime’s habit of writing much of his work under them. Even the last novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) was written during his physical decline under the umbrella pines near the Villa Mirenda above Florence. In the preface to ‘TREES’ in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* he states:

‘IT IS SAID, a disease has attacked the cypress trees of Italy, and they are all dying. Now even the shadow of the lost secret is vanishing from the earth. “Empedokles says trees were the first living creatures to grow up out of the earth, before the sun was spread out and before day and night were extinguished, from the symmetry of their mixture of fire and water ... they are parts of the earth. ...” ’. (Pinto, 1972: 295).

Cypresses, then, are the directional point of connection with a lost religion and culture. Oates notes how ‘Virginia Woolf objected to Lawrence’s art because, to her, he “echoes nobody, continues no tradition, is unaware of the past”- the very qualities that help to account for Lawrence’s amazingly vital genius. ... It was that past, the pastness of the past, the burden of history and tradition, that infuriated him. ...’ (Oates, 1972: 1). The poem, more specifically, commits to Nature’s witness of legendary Etruscan character in anthropocentric verse dealing with the spirit of place of a vanquished Etruria, absentee metaphor for cultural difference. The prehistoric *Etrusci* or *Tusci* civilization had expanded to inhabit one-third of Italy until assimilated by Rome about 500 BC. More specifically, its polytheistic theocracy

upheld all natural phenomena as emblematic of the divine. In such terms, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), a comprehensive study of human anthropology and the belief systems and institutions of primitive man, inspired Lawrence's poetic vision as it did that of contemporaries like Eliot and Pound. Lawrence had touched on, briefly, the lost legacy of primitivism even in his first novel *The White Peacock* (1911) but here in 'Cypresses' he constructs a primal encounter with Frazer's first stage of primitivism, that is a belief system of old wisdom: 'We have buried so much of the delicate magic of life' (61). Noting Frazer's influence Chaudhuri rates 'Cypresses' a key poem for Lawrence's reading of the past as 'a series of lost languages and differences homogenized by a powerful, monolithic and imperial race. A constant awareness of silences and differences is redemptive for Lawrence.' (Chaudhari, 2003: 133).

The funereal trees, Nature's marker of prolonged mourning, are a symbolic art form of customary dignity in the earlier 'Giorno dei Morti' (*New Poems* 1918), written at Lago di Garda in 1912, and depicting choristers and villagers in annual procession along the avenue of cypresses to tend the graves of all souls. 'Cypresses', though, demonstrates a more complex dimension of intra-textuality, with the evergreens now visible language rather than mere onlooker; in effect, the verse's invocation of a sacred past seems to possess 'a malleable consciousness' (Pinto, 1972: 9). For instance the poet, dubbed by one critic 'a flame-loving vitalist' (Stewart, 1999: 150), invokes monumental trees as 'flame-tall' (17) orators for a vanished landscape, and stubborn hoarders of its unfathomable language. Writing up his winter visits to Etruscan sites, where he confronted *in situ* the meaning of life, culture and truth, the motif of flame seemed fitting in 'San Gaudenzio' (1916):

'It is so still and transcendent, the cypress trees poise like flames of forgotten darkness that should have been blown out at the end of the summer. For as we have candles to light the darkness of night, so the cypresses are candles to keep the darkness aflame in the full sunshine.' (Lawrence 1997: 81).

In essence, the trees are engaged participants, transcending the temporal, and accorded agency of custodianship as the *Axis Mundi* of primordial gatherings. They attend physically, not dialogically, to the poet's self-conscious scrutiny of a Nature that is neither untamed savagery nor idyllic Arcadia but which is perpetually evolving beyond finite knowledge. As such, full comprehension of the cypress is thwarted since the tree remains stubbornly mute, unwilling to decipher and deliver Tuscan inscriptions, still awaiting translation: 'the language is lost' (4). Gilbert's observation that Lawrence 'almost always involves his audience in some kind of struggle' (Gilbert, 1972: 133) is germane

to the rhetorical questioning and verbal irony set down in these opening lines:

Tuscan cypresses,
What is it?
Folded in like a dark thought
For which the language is lost,
Tuscan cypresses,
Is there a great secret?
Are our words no good?
The undeliverable secret,
Dead with a dead race and a dead speech, and yet
Darkly monumental in you,
Etruscan cypresses.
Ah, how I admire your fidelity,
Dark cypresses! (1-13)

While the conifers possess a resonating narrative of cultural memory, they also typify sacred phallic stone images or *cippi* that the poet observed on male tombs in Spring 1927. Accompanied by artist Early Brewster he applied his own oil painter's eye as well in visits to necropolis sites which were seminal to his verse composition by revealing through funerary art 'a deep, deep life which has been denied in us, and still is denied'. (Moore, 1962: 2, 966-967). At Volterra and Chiusi, especially, he saw in the mounded tombs of the late Etruscan Age a wealth of sculptures and bas-reliefs in vermillion, a hue consciously symbolic to Lawrence of a life-throbbing Etruria. Beyond this human and sexual symbolism, the spiral tree also expressed a solar-earthly polarity - a tension of kinetic opposites between light and darkness, language and silence. Obvious spatial parallels exist with impressionist art, reflected in *Starry Night* and other paintings: 'The visual image becomes visionary as Van Gogh and Lawrence reach out towards the palpable otherness of trees in acts of attention that extend their own being.' (Stewart, 1999: 146).

Lawrence's versifying repetition has often been seen as a weakness. However, anaphora of the word 'cypresses' (more than sixteen times) can be indicative of a plaintive if emphatic nostalgia for his anatomized subject. In the same way, sensory perceptions of primitive raiders are conveyed through repetitive double-epithet; for example, 'The long-nosed, sensitive-footed, subtly-smiling Etruscans' (15). For Lawrence the pictography on tombs certainly outclassed that lesser artistry of the highpoint of Italic renaissance culture, the parodic Mona Lisa: 'Nay, Leonardo only bungled the pure Etruscan smile' (51). The verse continues to weave the dynamic intra-textuality of trees and Etruscans:

Among the sinuous, flame-tall cypresses
That swayed their length of darkness all around

Etruscan-dusky, wavering men of old Etruria:
Naked except for fanciful long shoes,
Going with insidious, half-smiling quietness
And some of Africa's imperturbable sangfroid
About a forgotten business. (17-23)

Such rich description confirms an intense aesthetic interest in primitivism and in the Etruscans' harmony with their landscape. Hence Sagar's comment that the poet was not so much an 'inventive genius' but one who showcased an authentic real Nature, 'imbued with a sense of that place through the intensity of his observation and the vividness of his skill in interpreting its forms ... the actual rather than the theoretical' (Sagar, 1982: 243).

Lawrence has occasionally been labeled a Georgian poet but Ellmann disagrees, noting that 'unlike Georgian poets who look at principles of order and harmony in a rural scene, Lawrence asks the center of feeling' (Hoffman, 1953: 253). Vividness is part of this phatic register in a poem that spans regret, admiration, reproach, nostalgia, and solidarity as exemplified in the poet's use of the prefix *imperturbable*, and elsewhere '*undeliverable*', '*imperishable*', '*inviolable*' (22, 14, 32, 71) to credit ironic defiance and binary opposition. The verse accords Etruria fifteen references, but Rome only three, and points in innuendo to barbarism as an historical dichotomy: 'Naked except for fanciful long shoes ...' (20). In the same way, repetitive connotations of darkness pave the way for multi-pronged Roman allegations of viciousness: against the 'dead speech'; against the trees - 'Vicious, you supple, brooding, softly-swaying pillars of dark flame'; and against the race itself - 'vicious ... long-nosed men of Etruria?' (9, 37, 41-2). Duality of flame and human vigour were a persistent Laurentian motif as in the satirical 'Spiral Flame' (*Pansies* 1929) when young men consumed by World War I become pillars of historic flame to salvage their stolen youth.

Overall, the poet chooses to sidestep the alleged 'abominations' (60) of the Etruscans but he does question in this one-liner opinionated Rome's contention of savagery: 'Or was their way only evasive and different, dark, like cypress-trees in a wind?... ' (42). The third travel book on Italy, the engaging *Etruscan Places*, was a planned series of essays, left incomplete because of the poet's declining health. They resulted from a short tour of the ruined cities of Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci and Volterra. The first essay, 'Cerveteri', tackles the supposed viciousness of the Etruscans but Lawrence downplays the relevance of Rome's allegations. In fact: 'Myself, however, if the Etruscans were vicious, I'm glad they were. To the Puritan all things are impure, as somebody says. And those naughty neighbours of the Romans at least escaped being Puritan.' (*Etruscan Places* 12).

Rather than attempt to integrate an extant Etruscan culture within Western consciousness, the poem indicates, contrarily, that Etruria and its mores might still retain a dynamism by its very silence. Lawrence's reading of a lost culture presents a falling away from a golden age, with warring civilizations and marginal communities subordinate to the prevailing narrative of imperialism, albeit Rome or America: 'As Rome denied Etruria / And mechanical America Montezuma still.' (75-76). These closing lines have been criticized as superfluous but juxtaposition of Rome and America upholds a global history of cultural dominance against 'words' of silence and resistance, with the synecdoche of Aztec emperor Montezuma informed by the poet's residence in Mexico in the mid-1920s. Impassioned vocabulary of difference characterizes the Etruscans in one of the last things he wrote: 'Yet in a few centuries they lost their vitality. The Romans took the life out of them. It seems as if the power of resistance to life, self-assertion and overbearing, such as the Romans knew ... would always succeed in destroying the natural flowering of life.' (*Etruscan Places* 88). Closer to home, this essay of 1929 was contrasting a vanished Etruria with the frantic agenda of Mussolini's rising fascism. As such, the poet's diachronic rhetoric of the Other is registering overall what one critic succinctly terms 'a historical dissenting awareness.' (Chaudari, 2003: 208).

Many of Lawrence's longest poems are in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*, 'Cypresses' being one of them, and they all possess the descriptive free form of essays. The poet acknowledged his debt to Whitman's Romantic concern with man and Nature and his use of free rhythms, which inspired Lawrence's tendency 'to preach and orate, to talk about experience rather than express experience.' (Pinto, 1972: 10).

Typically:

They are dead, with all their vices,
And all that is left
Is the shadowy monomania of some cypresses
And tombs. (43-46)

Nevertheless, Lawrence as an anti-formalist remained concerned with debates over poetic form in the Modernist period. In his other perceptive role of literary critic he opposed what he termed the 'half said thing' of the contemporary verse of Yeats among others, as being only too appropriate to 1916, an age of 'unlovely actualities' (Zytaruk, 1981: 50). Rejecting formalism, the poet defended his asymmetric verse, arguing for the viability of non-metrical form. 'Much has been written about free verse', he commented. 'But all that can be said ... is that free verse should be direct utterance from the instant, whole man ... any rules would be mere shackles and death ... Such is the rare new poetry. One realm we have never conquered: the pure present'. (Pinto, 1972: 182). In the seventeen stanzas of variable lines and rhythms in

'Cypresses' the unshackled freedom of form monitors an elated sympathy with the free-flowing consciousness of the primitive spirit. And, in part, the free-ranging verse testimony compensates in rhythm and tone for defunct language, as in these crucial and empathetic lines from the poem:

Nay, tongues are dead, and words are hollow as hollow seedpods,
Having shed their sound and finished all their echoing
Etruscan syllables,
That had the telling. (25-28)

In the century after his death Shelley's impact on Italian literature was recorded by Italian poets like Gabriel D'Annunzio and Giosuè Carducci who celebrated him as poet of the natural world and 'il poeta del rinnovato mondo' with the uncanny ability to transform nature's aural and visual wonders into words and feelings. (Bennett, 1996: 155). During this century of espousal, and wider debates about Shelley's place in the literary canon, the romantic biography of Shelley in Italy partly overshadowed Shelley the poet. This becomes patently evident in the circumstances of the composition of his last complete poem at Lerici, where the poetic intention encompasses far more than the descriptive, and as such enhances a more appreciative reading of theme and master craftsmanship. Not surprisingly, for someone who had been seeking a more veritable lifestyle across many cultures, Lawrence presents the Etruscans in dramatic antithesis to a modern world in crisis. His own alienation from the troubled 1920s shapes a coherent search for a universal vision of the past in 'Cypresses'. While Shelley is preoccupied with the temporality of the passing moment 'In the time which is our own' (23), Lawrence pursues 'the spirits of the lost ... To bring their meaning back into life again' (67, 69). For both poets, in separate topographical encounters, representation of Italian sea and forest landscapes becomes the point of departure for evocative contemplation of the spirit of place.

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