

The Apocryphal Space of T.E. Lawrence

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Abstract—Lawrence’s dealing with the Arabian Desert is part of his response to the world of the Arab/Moslem- the Other of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. The subtitle of the book, “A Triumph”, refers to the assuming of “another’s pain or experience...his personality.” Lawrence does not find himself in the Other, as some critics of the book maintain, but takes the place of the other and in this manner, reproduces the imperialist venture in his own personal experience. In his account of the Arabian Desert, he, in fact, produces little more than the imperialist obliteration and displacement of the Other.

The displacement of the Other in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is made possible by a deliberately limited characterization of the Other. The people Lawrence deals with are “Arabs”, sometimes referred to more broadly as “Semites,” and always defined by the stock racial qualities that the Western consciousness has attached to them. Their historical, moral and spiritual heritage is never, in Lawrence’s account, part of their definition.

It is not accidental that Lawrence’s response to the Arab/Moslem should primarily and predominantly be a response to the space in which this Other is located. By making space subjective and apocryphal and thus smuggling into this world a modernist (and colonialist) vision of experience, Lawrence strives to negate the epistemological and moral foundations its experience. One important aspect of the Arab/Moslem cultural heritage is its postulation of the actual and the objective at the heart of experience and that the personal and the subjective become possible through a significant relationship to a real external world. The actual and the objective are almost always projected, in this culture, as external space. In the Quran, the Islamic traditions and the Arab cultural legacy space has a central position and it is always defined as actual and objective and a necessary aspect of human experience without which it is not possible to make sense of life. In all these aspects of the Arab Moslem culture perception is directed to the outside, to a space on earth and sky controlled and defined by “signs” (objects that are made into thought-provoking makers) that provide perceptual and cognitive deliverance from the void on earth and heaven and hence a rationalization for the systems of Islam and Arab culture. Thus, if Lawrence, in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, visits Arab Moslem culture only in order to negate it, this is because of his sense that it provides an effective ideological opposition to the imperialist venture he identifies with.

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PAPER

Since T.E. Lawrence became the subject of writing in 1920s, each phase of the twentieth century came up with an

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image of him and reading of his venture that differed completely from and sometimes contradicted that which another phase produced. From the 1920s biographies by Robert Graves (Lawrence and the Arabs) and Lowell Thomas (With Lawrence in Arabia) that started the Lawrence legend as the imperialist agent who led the Arab Revolt and who became virtually the uncrowned king of Arabia, to the 1950s and 1960s accounts of Lawrence by Richard Adlington, Suleiman Mousa, Philip Knightley, and Colin Simpson that attacked the legend, tried to dismantle it or at least revise it, to discussions of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in late 1970s and early 1980s, influenced by postcolonial theory and Edward Said’s Orientalism, that read Lawrence’s book as an example of the orientalist discourse that justified the western hegemony, and finally to the writings of the late 1980s and early 1990s that attempted to rehabilitate Lawrence’s image either by restoring part of the lost lustre of the legend as John Mack in his *Prince of Our Disorder* and Jeremy Wilson in his authorized biography, *Lawrence of Arabia*, attempted to do, or ‘balanced’ accounts of Lawrence as in Malcolm Brown and Julia Cave’s *A Touch of Genius*, Lawrence James’s *The Golden Warrior* and Jeffery Meyers’s (ed.) *T.E. Lawrence: Soldier, Writer, Legend*—the twentieth century poems to have achieved, at best, a sense of the elusiveness of the man and the mystification at the heart of his experience.

As in all legends the issue of the creditability and truth is inevitably present in any account of Lawrence. The suspicion that Lawrence’s account of his experience is at least partly fiction has always been there sometimes glossed over by describing *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a work of literature as much as it is a work of history. But in the case of Lawrence the question of truth is complicated by Lawrence’s deliberate effort to confuse truth and untruth and blur the boundaries between them and by the sense that his experience was essentially a masquerade and that he was playing contradictory roles. Lawrence always encouraged doubt about his experience and endeavored to mystify those who questioned him about it. He once wrote Robert Graves in answer to a question about his journey behind Turkish lines into Syria: “You may say that ‘the more picturesque incidents reported of this journey are demonstrable untrue; but L’s (failure on) refusal to provide accounts details throws upon him the responsibility for such fictions as current.”

And

“You may make public if you like the fact that my reticence upon this northward raid is deliberate, and based on private reasons, and record your opinion that I have found

mystification, and perhaps statements deliberately misleading and contradictory, the best way to hide the truth of what really occurred, if anything did occur.”

He had written before to Graves:

“All the documents of the Arab revolt are in archives of the Foreign Office, and will soon be available to students, who will be able to cross-check my yarns. I expect them to find small errors, and to agree generally with main current of narrative.”

But about the same time, he wrote to one of his historian friends:

“The documents are liars. No man ever yet tried to write down the entire truth of the action in which he has been engaged.”

But not all the aspects of Lawrence’s experience have been treated with skepticism. The one aspect of this experience that has never been questioned or subjected to any careful scrutiny is his presentation of the space where his experience took place. Almost all the accounts of Lawrence focus on what he did with himself or with the human other. The desert space that gave his experience its distinctive quality is treated casually as a backdrop of the more significant, subjective, and historical experiences. At best, some of Lawrence’s poetic descriptions of the desert are referred to appreciatively without much commentary. Malcolm Brown and Julie Cave, for example, insert two pages of passages from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* about the desert with pictures and entitle them ‘Lawrence and the Desert’ without any commentary.

Underlying discussions of Lawrence’s experience is the assumption that the desert in his account is to a large degree identical with actual desert. Lawrence may occasionally romanticize the desert or make it the subject of contemplation but all these mental activities take off from the actual. In other words, the actual desert precedes any ideas about Lawrence’s experience; it is implicitly there in all the writing that takes his presentation of the desert for granted.

I think that a careful reading of Lawrence’s experience as he presents it in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* will show that Lawrence subordinates the actual reality of the desert to his own subjective sense of that space which in his case, had been there in his mind before the actual space. Lawrence’s desert space in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is really an apocryphal space, fabrication that he had had in his mind before he came to Arabia in the form of ideas and images of the desert and their associations put together from his studies and reading. Moreover, Lawrence saw the desert mostly through the screen of his original cultural experience. But more importantly, there is the sense that the desert world has become in Lawrence’s account implicated in his tortured subjectively and has featured therefore not as simple harmless world but as a possibly menacing experience that could negate his being and hence his feeling that must be contained.

The clues to Lawrence’s intention and method in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* are given from the outset. In the introductory chapter, Lawrence characterizes his account of

the Arab revolt as, largely, a constructed story, put together from memory and some notes - - after the first draft based on solid and reliable sources had been lost - - and ‘intended to rationalize the campaign’ for Arab freedom. He states that:

“My proper share was a minor one, but because of a fluent pen, a free speech, and a certain adroitness of brain, I took upon myself, as I describe it, a mock primacy. In reality, I had never any office among the Arabs; was never in charge of the British mission with them.

The effect of this qualification of his account of the Arab revolt is to make superfluous that doubts about its historical authenticity and the questions raised about verisimilitude and to cast the book more properly, not as history or biography, but as one which moves from the restrictedness of history and biography to the spaciousness of imaginative expression. In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence frequently engages in transforming reality into Apocrypha in an effort to vindicate poetically what cannot be maintained historically. Therefore, the improbability of the imperialist agent becoming an Arab nationalist and heading the Arab Revolt can be diminished and altogether removed in an account where the actual is replaced by the apocryphal. But in Lawrence’s case the issue of replacing the actual by the apocryphal is more complicated than the sublimation of the actual into the apocryphal in a modernist writer like Faulkner (who uses these terms to describe his artistic practice) where the actual is sublimated into apocryphal in an obvious and direct way by using and polishing the techniques of modernist literature. It would not excessive to claim that Lawrence engaged in the actual for the sole purpose of transforming it into imaginative literature and thereafter produced something that is more compatible with the imagination than it is with objective and historical reality. Lawrence had *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in his imagination before he joined the Arab Revolt. The Revolt provided material that filled in the ready structure. The idea is expressed clearly in the book:

“I had one craving in my life - - for the power of self-experience in some imaginative form - - but had been too diffuse ever to acquire a technique. At last accident, with perverted humor, in casting me as a man of action had given me a place in Arab Revolt, a theme ready and epic to direct eye and hand, thus offering me an outlet in literature, the technique-less art. Whereupon I became excited only over mechanism.”

The desert emerges at the beginning of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as an alien experience and Lawrence has to rationalize it in order to come to terms with it. The burden of this experience becomes apparent when it is related to Lawrence’s response to Jeddah- the city at the edge of the desert. Although he describes it in terms that express distaste, it provides an accessible experience that requires no effort of mind to deal with it. Significantly it is compared to European cities and ultimately becomes another city like any one described in a nineteenth century or early twentieth century novel:

“The atmosphere was oppressive, deadly. There seemed no life in it. It was not burning hot, but held a moisture and a sense of great age and exhaustion such as seemed to belong to no other place; not a passion of smells like Smyrna, Naples or Marseilles, but a feeling of long use, of the exhaustion of many people, of continued bath-heat and sweat.”

But Lawrence expends a lot of thought and a great deal of emotional energy when he deals with the desert. In Chapter Three of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* he establishes an ideological frame within which he places the desert experience and there is a clear sense that the experience is arrested within that frame and that the following characterizations of and responses to it issue from definite ideological perspective. The desert is a landscape of great “vastness and silence” and it is “the great emptiness”, where the Bedouin comes nearest to God. In this world God is not within man but man is within God and hence the freedom and the physical abandonment of the Bedouin:

“The Bedouin of the desert, born and grown up in it, had embraced with all his soul this nakedness too harsh for volunteers, for the reason, felt but inarticulate, that he found himself indubitably free. He lost material ties, comforts, all the superfluities and other complications to achieve a personal liberty which haunted starvation and death...In his life he had air and winds, sun and light, open spaces and a great emptiness. There was no human effort, no fecundity in Nature: just the heaven above the unspotted earth beneath. There unconsciously he came near God. God was to him not anthropomorphic, not tangible, not moral or ethical, not concerned with the world or with him, not natural: but the being, thus qualified not by divestiture but by investiture, a comprehending Being, the egg of all activity, with nature and matter just a glass reflecting Him.”

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* Lawrence is simply the opposite of the Bedouin in his reaction to the desert. He rarely abandons himself to it but seems to choose carefully the objects and areas of his perception and plan his responses beforehand. The bulk of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is given to recoding, painstakingly and in meticulous detail, observations of places, terrain and varieties of external experiences which Lawrence calls sense-interests. This exercise is not an impartial presentation of an objective world or even a regarding of reactions to it but it is an effort to permeate that world with Lawrence’s awareness of it and contain it within his consciousness. Lawrence, that is, strives to make that world part of his subjectively and to become its “sole owner and proprietor” (to use William Faulkner’s characterization of his relationship to his own Yoknapatawpha County). Lawrence gives clear indication that, unlike the Bedouin, he cannot just be in the desert, that its *vastness* and indefiniteness are beyond his immediate and direct responses and therefore he resorts to thought. Apparently, Lawrence’s Bedouin associates, or at least one them, Auda Abu Tayi, intuited this aspect of Lawrence and once tried to point out to him the different way they experienced the desert: that it was theirs and it became

identified with them because they lived completely in it. It was an assertion of proprietorship different from Lawrence’s:

“Auda ranged up beside my camel, and pointing with his riding-stick told me to write down on my map the name and nature of the land. The valleys on our left were the Seyal Abu Ard, rising in Selhub, and fed by many successors from the great divide as it prolonged itself northward to Jebel Rufeiya by Tebuk...I cried Auda mercy of his names, swearing I was no writer-down of unspoiled countries, or pandar to geographical curiosity...”

The strain of the effort to contain the desert world by the exercise of sense-interest proves sometimes too much for Lawrence and therefore his observations are terminated by an illness which gives the sense of being not just a physical lapse but a loss of control over that world:

“...the sun moved in our view. As it climbed we shifted our cloaks to filter its harshness, and basked in luxuriousness warmth. The restful hill gave me something of the sense-interests which I had lost since I had been ill. I was able to note once more the typical hill scenery, with its hard stone crest, its slide of bare rock, and a lower slope of loose sliding screes, packed, as the base was approached, solidly within a thin dry soil.”

And some aspects of this world would force Lawrence, sometimes, to frankly retreat into a supposedly superior personal and cultural experience and articulate ideological differences in order to protect himself from being negated by an adverse experience:

“Poor Arabs wondered why I had no mare; and I forbore to puzzle them by incomprehensible talk of hardening myself, or confess I would rather walk than ride for sparing animals: yet the first was true and the second true. Something harmful to my pride, disagreeable, rose at the sight of these lower forms of life. Their existence struck a servile reflection upon our human kind: the style in which God would look on us, and to make use of them, toil under an unavoidable obligation to them, seemed to me shameful.”

Lawrence’s pursuit of the apocryphal puts severe strains on his subjectively. After the Arabs have taken Wejh and forced the Turks to abandon their advance toward Mecca for a passive defense of Medina and thus opening the way to Akaba and bringing the Hejaz war to a close, Lawrence refers repeatedly to the tensions he starts to experience, and to the sense of emptiness, barrenness and futility that pervades his subjectively and he specially underscores the difficulty of maintaining the persona that has enabled him to incorporate (or as he suggests throughout the book integrate) himself in the Arab Revolt. From Wejh to the capture of Damascus, Lawrence’s account consists largely of travesties and parodies of action which convey the sense of the unreality of his situation until his own fraud explodes in his face and his narrative is then beset by self-recommendation and confessions of being a fraud. But the effect of all this is really to accentuate the apocryphal essence of his experience in Arabia and bring it more clearly into focus. Toward the end of his account

Lawrence remarks that “fiction seems more solid than reality”, and the sense of masquerade, produced from stressing- perhaps overstressing- the dislocation between subjectively and the role it has assumed, cannot be missed.

It is in this context that the crucial and controversial Deraa episode is recounted. Lawrence claims to have been abducted, beaten and raped by the Turks. His biographers, however, have noted some of the “impossibilities” of the story as it appears in **Seven Pillars of Wisdom** and it is really impossible to know how much of the story has its basis in history. But the facticity of the story is entirely irrelevant. Examined carefully, in its proper context, the story will be seen as significant, primarily and essentially, as a text that summons the whole of Lawrence’s experience in Arabia in stark and extreme terms. Lawrence stresses that the episode cracks open his being, that in spite of his effort to detach himself from his body, he is split and shattered, his integrity lost forever. But the rhetoric overrides graphic description and betrays the episode as Lawrence’s poetic summation and his rationalization of his participation in the Arab Revolt and, perhaps, more than that, as an effort to attribute his psychic schism to the historical presence of the Turkish Empire. Lawrence, therefore, deliberately ends his experience not with a bang but with the whimper of a traumatized subjectively and a clear sense of ontological insecurity.

The transformation of the actual into the apocryphal and the emphasis on the dislocation between subjectivity and the role it has come to assume, are the constituents of the discourse of literary modernism which is manipulated here to contextualize and therefore make possible another discourse, not normally regarded as compatible with it-that is the discourse of colonialism. Essentially, Lawrence’s account of himself in **Seven Pillars of Wisdom** does not diverge from the historical and biological assessments, such as that of John Mackenzie, that project him as a “cultural imperialist”. He stresses from the outset, in unequivocal terms, the imperialistic nature of the project he is engaged in when he speaks of how Kitchener and other English men “allowed” the Arab Revolt to begin in order to defeat Turkey, Germany’s ally. And imperialism emerges as a benign project embodying the best human achievements, so that even what was then regarded as the occasional lapses of its representatives would seem ideal behavior compared to those of people like the Arabs- hence the homosexuality of colonial youth is “a cold convenience that, by comparison, seemed sexless and even pure.”

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Lawrence deals with are “Arabs”, sometimes referred to, more broadly, as “Semites,” and always defined by the stock racial qualities that the Western consciousness has attached to them. Their historical, moral and spiritual heritage is, never, in Lawrence’s account, part of their definition.

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