Leaning Toward the Past: Pressures of Vision and Narrative in *Lawrence of Arabia*

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> In his work [T.E. Lawrence's] we can see most clearly the conflict between narrative history and vision...The great drama of Lawrence's work is that it symbolizes the struggle, first, to stimulate the Orient (lifeless, timeless, forceless) into movement; second, to impose upon that movement an essentially Western shape; third, to contain the new and aroused Orient in a personal vision whose retrospective mode includes a powerful sense of failure.
>
> --Edward Said, *Orientalism*

> The modern young man [talks] rather feebly about man being master again. He knows perfectly well that he'll never be master again.
>
> --D.H. Lawrence, "On Matriarchy," 1929

> By all means, bring on the girls.
>
> --Andrew Sarris, *Confessions of a Cultist*

Background

In Britain, after World War II, the Atlee Government (1945-1951) carried out the Labour Party's mandate to institute a welfare state, to grant

independence to India, and to nationalize industry. With the 1951 election, the Labour Party had a marginal majority, but because of the peculiarities of the British electoral system, the Conservative Party came to power and maintained it for thirteen years. The Conservatives kept Labour's social reforms and ended rationing and shortages; the country, which had wanted change, moved to the right. The culminating events of this period of "order, peace, and prosperity" crystallize the contradiction between British fantasy and British reality at that time: in 1953, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was heralded as beginning a new Elizabethan age; in 1956, the diplomatic and military disaster at Suez effectively ended the idea and the reality of the British Empire. (These events are, one could say, parodied in the parallel media events of the marriage of Charles and Diana and the Falklands "victory," three decades later, "dramas" feeding the suburbanite tastes of the Thatcher electorate like reruns of the fifties to the theme of "hard work and happy days").

In 1953, the Ealing Studios, which had an allegiance to Labour, were sold to the BBC, and an era of comedies, satirizing British class styles and manners, ended. The petit-bourgeois Ealing comedies were superseded in popularity by a genre which had been an official, enforced taboo since 1917: the relations between labor and industry. The British Board of Film Censors had guarded against the taboo, particularly since the thirties. In 1959, Richard Attenborough made the satire on trade unionism, *I'm All Right Jack*, a big money-maker, beating out Hollywood's *The Big Country*, the carry-on comedies, and the prestigious *Room at the Top*. Not surprisingly, the British left got riled up. The critic in *The Daily Worker* referred to it as "All *Right* Jack and No Left." Logically, the Tories were pleased: Queen Elizabeth arranged a screening of it as her choice of entertainment for Harold MacMillan up for the weekend at Balmoral (Richards and Aldgate, 99-128).

The first film in Britain to make a claim for the left was the acclaimed, ultimately ambiguous but politically alive-to-working-class-ideology *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1960), directed by Karel Reisz, with a script by Alan Sillitoe adapted from his best selling novel. The BBFC made some grudging but accommodating compromises, contending with competition from the "kitchen sink" dramas and from the cinema renaissance flooding out of France--The New Wave.

Pro-Filmic Aura: The Making and Restoring of *Lawrence of Arabia*

> A lived hegemony is always a process...It does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continuously to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified.
>
> --Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

Why did David Lean make *Lawrence of Arabia* in 1962? He had intended to make a film about Gandhi, but the question would still apply. Why heroes of the British Empire? And let us not forget that the hero of the

story of Indian independence in the British psyche is not Gandhi but Lord Louis Mountbatten, to whom Lean had payed homage with *In Which We Serve* (1943). "Suez," of course, loomed large as the principal motivation--not the canal, the place, but the date: Suez, 1956, when the British Empire, under Anthony Eden's stewardship at 10 Downing Street, suffered its final military and diplomatic humiliation. The French allies in the zone, smarting from recent defeat in Indochina and now busy with the Algerians warming up for the final drive for independence, left their British allies to fend for themselves in those Oriental places where the Lawrence legend flourished. The perfidy of the French, a running sore in British memory, may not be dismissed as the least of the motivations for *Lawrence of Arabia*. During the planning of the film, France was savaging Algeria with a policy of mandated torture and *maquis* occupation--to no avail. A film about the "gentlemanly" disentanglement from India would have made a flattering contrast with French "fanaticism" in Algeria, but, as *Gandhi* would not be realized until the Thatcher years (and then, by Attenborough), Lean appears to have settled on a second-best example of British "benevolent" rule, embodied, in popular lore, in the policies leading to the Franco-British Palestinian Mandate. These events, a record of diplomatic hypocrisy and greed, are known as the "Arab Revolt," a venture of supposed chivalric and crusading zeal, led by T.E. Lawrence, "Prince of Mecca." With this story, Lean could certainly chide the French with what the British Empire was all about: initiative, self-sacrifice, endurance for the advancement of freedom of a "splendid" but "backward" people--not to mention that a spectacle about Lawrence might blur the shame of the recent spectacle endured by the British public on television, featuring British tanks ignominiously scampering in disarray over the Sinai. If "history is what hurts," as Fredric Jameson puts it, then it is not surprising that Lean would feel a need to apply a bandage to the Suez wound with the exploits of an imperial agent, known on the home front as a hero.

Then too, financial backing of the film was negotiable: British investors looked confidently upon a film about a folk hero of the ruling class, which, itself quaintly fading out of contemporary history, could be merchandized as an object of nostalgia and as a model for the consolidation of a new hegemonic class equally eager to promote dominant class interests of British life. As for American investors, they needed to recognize in Lawrence, before liberally reaching for their wallets, the traits of their own newly-minted hero/type, the Kennedy Peace-Corps volunteer, mucking about the world in pursuit of a vision to the refrain of "ask not what your country can do for you," generally confusing global interferences and downright pushiness with "neighborly niceness" and "public service." Lawrence among the Arabs was an ideal promotion for the ideology of the New Frontier, a phrase that veiled the naked ambition for an new empire--American style.

Returning to the French (the oedipal rivalries of European colonial powers are farcical in their longevity and pettiness and always a source of

fun), they had proved, even before Suez, to be as shameless as habitually expected. In 1955, they had published a biography of Lawrence, *Lawrence L'Imposteur,* translated from the yet-unpublished English text. The author, Richard Aldington, had set out to show, in a painstaking, well-researched way, that Lawrence was a self-promoter, a tool of the Imperial bureaucracy, a misogynist, personally and professionally silly, and, literarily, a melodramatic, at times lurid, purple-prose addict--a style which, in Aldington's view, no historical truth could transcend. The only thing Aldington did not call the hero of Damascus and Akaba was "coward." In fact, he took pains to praise his endurance and ended the account of Lawrence partially (and fairly) absolving him of the worst accusation: personal lunacy. Aldington's last line to the biography reads like an epitaph: "Lawrence was the appropriate hero for his class and epoch. *Requiescat"* (388). This biography, soberly entitled in English, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry,* hastily scooped up by the French who gave it a provocative title, caused a furor. Some defenders of Lawrence in Britain (notably Christopher Sykes in the introduction to the English edition) accused the author of homophobia, while at the same time vigorously protesting Lawrence's "virginal" innocence of sex and his "pure" and "clean" habits, which presumably make one exempt from the practice of homosexuality. The Aldington smear (actually a rather convincing account of Lawrence's subordination to the plans at Cairo Headquarters and the London War Office) yielded in 1961 Anthony Nutting's biography, *Lawrence of Arabia, The Man and the Motive* and, in 1962, Lean's film--both texts strenuously reasserting the image of Lawrence as he enshrined it in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* while inscribing, in Lean's case, for the newly-emerging youth cultures of America and Britain, traits of Lawrence which could be accepted as models by the counter culture (i.e., exoticism, distrust of authority, kinship with "primitive" people, distaste for conventions).

The 1962 print was "restored" in the eighties with the glitz attending a procedure still new to film compared to its practice rountinely applied, in media obscurity, to most salvageable frescoes. At least one motive for the restoration can be deduced from the climate of the times. While Oliver North and the rest of the gang in Reagan's White House never could aspire to the glamour of an Oxonian product, effete in literary matters but masculine in action, a gentleman soldier, Lawrence's celebrated initiative appeared to match, at least in intention if not in style, their vulgar, grubby patriotism. Cowboy at heart, in spite of or perhaps because of his Pre-Raphaelite yearning for the Middle Ages (he adored William Morris), Lawrence, the knight errant, could lend some credibility, along with "class" (having been an *actual* person), to Rambo's implausible *gestes* against the Evil Empire. In Britain, as well, it was time for the revival of the Lawrence cult, especially because British cinema persisted in snickering about Thatcher's imperial delusions. One film in particular, *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983), was a scathing indictment of Thatcher's exploits in the Falklands, goaded, according to this film, by the suppurating thirty-year-plus sore inflicted by the disgrace of Suez.

> Lawrence is in many ways a transitional hero, standing as he does between the new-medieval romantic heroes of the nineteenth century and the moral realists of the twentieth.
>
> John E. Mack, *A Prince of Disorder*

Of course, the above author equates realism with morality (not to mention "moral realists" with the twentieth century), and so, I will argue, does Lean.

Why, in the midst of the activities of Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, and the French New Wave, would so much money be squandered in 1962 on a realist epic? Terry Eagleton contends, in another context, that "empire was a response to modernism" (5). Stylistically, Lean went against the current of his time, which in the cinema was modernist. In privileging realism to serve the narrative of an imperial protagonist, Lean was retarding a cinema struggling to emerge from Hollywood's own hegemony--classical, realist, narrative cinema. This "camel opera," as Bosley Crowther dismissed it in his 1962 review in the *New York Times*, was, above all, a defense of a menopausal empire and of "Englishness" against the mounting assaults from the margins and centers of Europe by sympathizers of the cause of world liberation movements and, more parochially, a European modernist cinema. It is relevant to note, in passing, that the Lawrence of the film never uttered a word which was not in English, although the real-life counterpart wrote (and bragged) profusely about his knowledge of Arab dialects and took the trouble to speak them. From water-boys to Prince Faisal, from the Howeitat Auda to his little son, the imperial hegemony of English in the film was rampant, total. To be human was to be English, one could not escape fearing. Clearly, the vision of universal "Englishness" repulsed the effort of the narrative to be liberal. There is no doubt that *Lawrence of Arabia* meant to promote liberal humanism, the only banner an empire sympathizer could raise while mustering justifications for approving the domination of other people. Lean, the future adapter of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1988), pleaded already in *Lawrence of Arabia* for a dialogue between East and West while at the same time advancing the notion that the more Westernized the colonial Other got, the easier the dialogue became. Witness the romance between Ali and Lawrence, growing with Ali's indoctrination into Western ideology to which he acceded by reading about parliamentary democracy--a reading he undertook stung by Lawrence's charge that the "Arabs are a little people" and would not become great until they put their differences aside, as Europeans presumably do, in their parliaments. Witness, by contrast, the alienation between Lawrence and Auda, portrayed as an un-reclaimable residue of Arab tribalism, a naturally good man (even fatherly) but habituated to the Bedouin's love of plunder and to allegedly "amusing" and childish notions of honor. Lean's portrayal of Auda as brave but simple-minded is the more damning as Auda, not Lawrence, seems to have been, according to Aldington's account, the real

strategist, with British approval, behind the Akaba plan and its true leader. The condescending or outright hypocritical liberal postures go on: Lean celebrated Forster's famous cliche "only connect" with Lawrence's passion for Arabia, a passion regrettably, the film qualified, thwarted by English habits of repression so that Lawrence gave it expression through battle; similarly, the disinterested, passionate hero was undermined, bogged down, and finally compromised by a bureaucratic order which he despised. As a liberal film, therfore, *Lawrence of Arabia* was racked with contradictions, bleating two cheers for the Empire, in Forster's witty tradition of cheering democracy with which Lean equated the British venture of conquest.

The film's style was realist because for the adapter of Dickens' *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist,* it could not have been anything else. But it was not just a matter of skill and habit that bent Lean toward this narrative mode; it was, rather, the ideological pact that went with it. Realism was the narrative style of the nineteenth-century novel, with its oedipal trajectory of conflict and resolution. For Lean, choosing realism was a way of looking back to narrative models that supported a precise ideological position in Victorian England. Epic Realism, too was a choice of deliberate reaction against films such as *A Room at the Top*, which were demanding an acknowledgement of the disintegration of the class that had ruled the Empire and of the emergence of a class to supplant it.

Narrative style and historical reality were in conflict in *Lawrence of Arabia* precisely because Lawrence as a vision, embodying the "best" of the British soldier of the past, was a patent lie as to what or whom such "soldiers" really served. And yet realism is the language of facts, proceeding chronologically, objectively even. It is, after all, the style of journalists. Why the conflict? Edward Said explains in *Orientalism* that historical narrative is a mover, a catalyst: to narrate is to deal with time and change. Hence Lean's vision of a benevolent Empire, once focussed on an event that clearly negated it, came unravelled before the evidence of the tale he spun. A defense of Englishness as a superior, if painful, way of life presupposes a subjugation of Otherness: one cannot be defended without the other being degraded. Likewise, a defense of Otherness problematizes the identity of the self as central. This much T.E. Lawrence acknowledged in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom:*

> In my case, the efforts of these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: They destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith (7).

A lived vision, like a fantasy, is a contradiction. A film promoting a vision of empire dragged along by a realist narrative that blames the victims of imperial designs for their failure to achieve freedom is also a contradiction. I know it is the rule of such epics to be "realistic," but I am arguing that the rule is also their alibi: the realist mode obscures the truth while supposedly

serving it. Indeed, realism has been the official style of humanism, which after all speaks for a few, select representatives of Western civilization.

Which bring us about to the question fo women in *Lawrence of Arabia.*

Aldington quotes T.E. Lawrence saying that "there was nothing female in the Arab movement but the camels" (335). Ditto for the film. Women, whose presence in narrative cinema traditionally energizes sexual fantasies, were here displaced by Arabia, the desired adoptive land, wooed, conquered, then symbolically raped at the Tafas massacre, her "clean" sands streaked with blood in vengeance for a personal insult visited on the bodily sanctity of her master, Lawrence, by her enemies, the Turks. That much was made, at the climactic sequence, mid-point through the movie, of the taking of Akaba from the rear, after crossing the scorching hell-fire of the Nefud desert (a condition of desire almost laughable in its cliched symbolism) was a sign of fustration at Arabia's elusiveness, her "mystery," her impenetrability as well as gesturing to Army barracks slang to signify what is visited on any subject if it resists the taking. Thus, the sado-masochistic longing of Lean's protagonist reached fulfillment at Akaba, and the rest of the film was a punishment for the symbolic transgression of the *manner* of the act. This fanciful interpretation is given credence by the fact, observed in Aldington's biography, that Akaba could have been taken frontally and had been twice before in the war. A more impartial critic than myself--a female viewer guiltily enthralled by the intimacy and exclusiveness of men at war in a story unchecked by sentimental complications usually blamed on women--a more impartial critic might point out that with the absence of women Lean proposed the thesis that women's presence civilized human events (this would be the liberal view), but the events he recounted were supposedly "real" and historical, so the absence of women underscored the irrelevance of a feminine intervention in history. More incriminating than even this notion, was the inadvertent suggestion of a link between empire and misogyny. It goes without saying that any need to keep the race of empire pure enforces the marginalization of women, their exclusion from the melee of the forging and, later, of the administering of empire. It is at once a protectionist and an oppressive stance. Lean illustrated this problem with the story of T.E. Lawrence, a misogynist, as anyone who reads the ravings against women in his novel, *The Mint,* can verify. This story, which Lean glossed with patinas of existential angst, collided with his vision of a liberal-humanist empire. Lawrence said that he wanted to help men to stand on their own feet in Arabia, but Lean knew that Lawrence would have approved the imprisonment of the suffragettes at home. After all, if women could not be men, he wanted nothing to do with them, as he wrote to Robert Graves in *T.E. Lawrence to His Biographers:* "I try and talk to a woman as I would talk to another man, or to myself; and if she does not return the compliment, I leave her" (60). Naturally, Lean did not include this pronouncement in the film. The sexist side of empire is not consonant with the vision of a liberal mission.

> From Christopher's [Isherwood] and Wystan's [W.H. Auden] point of view, the Truly Weak Man was represented by Lawrence of Arabia, and hence by their character Michael Ransom in [*The Ascent to*] F6.
> --Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind, 1929-1939*

> [Lawrence's mother tried to] redeem herself through her sons and transmitted to them a sense of sin.
> --Arnold Lawrence, T.E. Lawrence's brother, quoted by John E. Mack in *A Prince of Order*

The popularizer of the Lawrence legend was the American journalist, Lowell Thomas, who photographed him obsessively and called him the "Prince of Mecca." Then came the biographies of Robert Graves, including, *Lawrence to His Biographers* a dialogue among Lawrence, Graves, and Liddell Hart. With Lawrence's own *Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* all these had in common the aim of sustaining the legend. E.M. Forster, another Lawrence admirer and friend, wrote in 1936 that:

> The little fellow who is labelled for posterity as Lawrence of Arabia detested the title. He often asked people to call him T.E... He hated deference...T.E. was a very difficult person, and no one who knew him at all well would venture to sum him up. But he entirely possessed the three heroic virtues: courage, generosity, and compassion...What T.E. himself thought of war is impossible to say. He spent most of his life waging it or helping to prepare for it, but...he did not believe in killing people. Probably he was muddled and rattled like the rest of us, and cherished the theory that war is inevitable in order to steady himself. He was, of course, devoted to the Arab cause. Yet when it triumphed he felt that he had let down both his own countrymen and the foreigner by aping foreign ways, and became more English than ever. To regard him as "gone native" is wrong. He belonged body and sole to our island (142-7).

Forster's investment in Lawrence as a national treasure was typical of the generation which had attended Oxford or Cambridge in the twenties. Out of the carnage of the Great War, some myth of "courage, heroism, and compassion" had to be maintained in order not to face the awful truth of a wasted generation. But after World War II, it became impossible to hold on to such delusions: the stench of Auschwitz's ovens was too strong to believe in heros. In 1955 came Aldington's shocker, claiming Lawrence had been irrelevant to the "Arab cause." This was followed by Nutting's outraged defense in 1961, and by another attack, this time from an Arab's point of view, Suleiman Musa's *T.E. Lawrence: an Arab View,* which, needless to

say, was largely ignored.

All these biographers acknowledged that the central fact of Lawrence's life had been his illegitimacy. His father, Thomas Chapman, and his mother Sarah Maden, a woman of strict religious beliefs, never married. Chapman, an Anglo-Irish baronet, had eloped with Sarah, then the governess of his daughters by his legitimate wife, and adopted the name of Lawrence. They eventually settled in Oxford, where Lawrence was educated at Jesus College. Until Aldington's biography, which questioned, above all, Lawrence's military genius but also his character, Lawrence's flaws were acknowledged to be those of any English traveler/adventurer/orientalist serving Britannia in the eccentric way of the times: vulnerable, uneasy in the company of women (if a man), scholarly, fanatically enduring, devoted to a punishing stoicism. In *Lawrence to His Biographers*, Graves sketched him as not liking to shake hands, to drink, to smoke, to eat with other people, to sleep regular hours, to join clubs, society, or groups (71-73). Graves wrote:

> His uncertainty about women corresponded closely with his uncertainty about himself--he alternated between romantic elevation and disgust...Lawrence idealized masculinity partly because he knew he was not conventionally masculine himself, in spite of his great physical strength and habitual knight errantry. I do not mean that he was homosexual--he was not. But he could never squarely face the fact of the existence of women; he placed them in general on a romantic plane remote from reality, in which their actual presence made him uncomfortable (8-9).

None of the complexity of character implied by his biographers transpired in the film, although Lean seized upon Grave's insight into the schizophrenic aspect of Lawrence's identity.

> His [Lawrence's] nature has ever since [The Arab Revolt] been divided into two conflicting selves, the Bedouin self always longing for the bareness, simplicity, harshness of the desert--the state of mind of which the desert is a symbol-- and the over-civilized European self (63).

To which Lawrence himself added:

> The two selves, you see, are mutually destructive so I fall between them into the nihilism which cannot find, in being, even a false god in which to believe (*Lawrence to His Biographers*, 63).

Lean highlighted this existential rupture with the very structure of the film: it begins with Lawrence's death in Dorset, flashes back to Cairo and Arabia, closes on Lawrence's tortured expression as he rides, in his major uniform, the jeep taking him to the boat bound for the motherland. It is an expression, after the liberating and monstrous excesses of the revolt, of self-loathing and of closure, a division of self between past and present, for which no adequate political explanation is ever given. It is an expression that betrays the idealization of an experience that Frantz Fanon qualified sardonically as the colonial "intellectual with a tormented conscience," idealized also in Joseph

Conrad, Camus, Orwell, and Malraux, among many others. It is, as Edward Said notes throughout *Orientalism,* an idealization of *personal,* not *political,* failure, and it was idealized in the film because it wanted to underscore that a British hero had no political motives beyond the personal interest in the people he had come to subdue, for their own advancement, as he must have seen it.

Another tactic of distraction was the film's subtext, pivoted deliriously on the denial of a personal motive more repressed than existential guilt: the desire to be among men--Arab men. Lean glossed over this desire by contrasting it with visual clues of Lawrence's distress and uneasiness in the British officers, who, we were led to assume, reminded him of his not-quite-cricket class credentials, and who were drab in their khaki uniforms. When Lawrence, in flowing soiled Arab robes, returned from Akaba to the Cairo officers' club with his water boy in tow and ordered him a lemonade at the bar, the terrified Egyptian bartender protested, "This is a British officers' club," to which Lawrence retorted witheringly, "That's all right. We are not particular." This quip summarizes Raymond William's point, in his admirable study, *Orwell,* in which he ascribed to Orwell a qualilty of "negative identification"--the impulse to escape the injuries of one's own class or group by adopting the cause of another (in Orwell's case, the English proletariat's). Williams was careful to add that such an alignment, born out of personal pain, leads to nihilism and despair, a "double vision" in which "the affiliation to a new group is a function of the subject's initial and formative social experience" (15-16). Williams meant that such writers as Orwell, who turned away in revulsion from imperialism, were the very ones who conducted "the dirty work of empire," as Orwell himself put in in "Shooting an Elephant," by virtue of education, class, and economic necessity. Orwell, of course, had other problems and is another story, but Lawrence's "negative identification" with the Arabs sprang, almost certainly, from class-repressed sexuality. Graves defended Lawrence strenuously from what he considered to be the stigma of homosexuality, going so far as to say that the S.A. of the dedication in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was a woman (S.A. was almost certainly an Arab young man, whom Lawrence befriended on an archeological expedition) and that the relationship was "pure." Aldington refutes this hypothesis by arguing that the dedicatory poem is clearly sexual and that, at any rate, Lawrence's orientation was "anti-female and pro-male" (336). How can anyone, Aldington asks, mistake for "pure" the explicitly homo-erotic meaning of such passages as this, from the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom:*

> We had no shut places to be alone, no thick clothes to hide our nature...Our youths began indifferently to slake off one another's few needs in their own clean bodies--a cold convenience...sexless and even pure.
>
> Later, some began to justify this sterile process, and swore that friends quivering together in the yielding sands with intimate hot limbs in supreme embrace, found there hidden in the darkness a sensual co-efficient of the mental passion which

was welding our souls and spirits in one flaming effort (28).

What is interesting about all this jousting over Lawrence's sexuality is the intensity of the charges and disclaimers. One is tempted to conclude that such arguments marginalize the real "flaw" in his character: an unsporting, unstinting, and, worse, *explicit* dislike of women and reproduction. Lawrence wrote to Robert Graves that:

> all the women who ever wrote original stuff could have been strangled at birth, and the history of English literature (and my bookshelves) would be unchanged (102).

He didn't like children either, writing to Graves:

> I am afraid of them and sorry for them. They remind me of the shame of our existence. I am sure life is not good enough to invite outsiders to share it (74).

Given his view of women and children, the concept of the reproduction of the race was not a duty to Lawrence. Lean banned this unsavory stuff from his bio-pic, possibly provoking Pauline Kael to explode in her review of the film, "what makes a David Lean spectacle uninteresting finally is that it's in such goddamn good taste" (132).

The only admission of Lawrence's private troubles the film allowed was Lawrence's ominous confession, "Ali, my father didn't marry my mother," delivered in boy-scout embarrassment at a campsite in the desert, the intense shame laboring to elevate a child's trauma into the Tragic Flaw.. And that's it for psychology: let the smut-mongers hang. This position would be tolerable if it were itself the result of tolerance. But the silence over transgressive desire worked as an indictment of the "love-that-dare-not-speak-its-name."The Deraa incident in the film, in which Lawrence was captured and flogged (and gang-raped by Lawrence's own account in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) by Turks, baffled audiences because of the beast it drew out in the hero. If this hero, who liked Arab boys in the tradition of Gide's *The Immoralist*, was deranged by the experience of homosexuality (tastefully suggested in the film) and not by the brutality of the rape (never represented), what assumptions as to his sexuality was the audience asked to make for the rest of the film? From the beginning, it had been invited to be quiescently tolerant: now it was asked, through identification not to be. Lean's investment in this obfuscating tactic was to yield a vision of Lawrence as loathing homosexuality. After Deraa the hero turned murderous, and Lean justified him with the loathing of homosexual desire. This mis-treatment of Lawrence's actual or desired homosexuality was a sign of the need for the hero not to be marginal in any way if he was to be a paragon of British military virtue. The anxiety over sexual matters was made all the more acute by British intelligence being found in the 1950's and 60's to be infiltrated by double-agents, KGB moles, all notorious for "buggery." To be homosexual then, in the Cold War climate of the film's production, was to be a Communist. This was patently hypocritical considering that in British spy circles, of which Lawrence had been certifiably a member, the practice was, if not automatic, at least a hum-drum one, but it was a hypocrisy convenient in its petit-bourgeois righteousness to cold-war ideologues. Of the two

"problems," homosexuality and illegitimacy (the *mother's* taint), Lean chose to underscore the latter and to adopt E.M. Forster's humanist view, "when [Lawrence] analyzes himself, it is as a spiritual outcast on the line of Herman Melville's Ishmael" (145), or we might add, as Orwell's "shock absorber of the bourgeoisie." But Aldington saw it more clearly. He described Lawrence as an "Oxford Pre-Raphaelite esthete," and asserted that what was true of William Morris was true of Lawrence: "What he [Morris] was was really attacking was not so much capitalism, as ugliness, and what he wanted to destroy was not class distinctions but industrialism...Like Oxford and Morris, Lawrence looked back wistfully to the past" (49-50). So much for "shock absorbers of the bourgeoisie" (*pace* Orwell, taken out of context!). They change the rifle for the sword, as Lawrence did at the Tafas massacre. Sentimental historicism is a bourgeois idea, or, as Raymond Williams understated it in *Marxism and Literature*, "any significant emergence, beyond or against a dominant mode, is very difficult" (126).

Conclusion: Lawrence the Orientalist

> Many Arabs view the Lawrence legend as a Western fabrication
> --Suleiman Musa, *T.E. Lawrence: An Arab View*

> *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* could be reviewed authoritatively by a staff officer who knows the East.
> --E.M. Forster, "T.E. Lawrence"

> All our subject provinces to me were not worth one dead Englishman.
> --T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Both Suleiman Musa and Richard Aldington insist that Lawrence's campaigns in Arabia, as sanctioned by the "legend," were largely fantastical. Musa advances a case for the Arabs being far more prepared to fight and aware of their perils vis-a-vis the Turkish occupation than Lawrence, the *condottiere*. First, he describes Lawrence as having a "low, apologetic voice, a silly giggle, a schoolboy grin, a habit of playing stupid practical jokes, and above all, a perpetual kidding" (34). Second, Aldington argues, "he was determined," like his father, "not to work," aping the medieval custom that a knight overlord "never work in order that no peaceful means of gain should mitigate his military ferocity" (40). Third, he attacks Lawrence's prose: "Something like six thousand words of fine writing are devoted to a two-day camel ride from the coast to Feisal's camp, which shows a singular contempt for his reader's patience" (328). Fourth, he sneers at the myth of Lawrence's the Medieval scholar, which had it that he read "strange" books, chief among them, *The Song of Roland*, a classic that, in Aldington's words, "every schoolgirl" of his generation read (40). Fifth he tackles Lawrence's military prowess: he was not, as he promoted himself, the lone saboteur of the Hejaz railroad but worked with a task force of French officers (140); Akaba was Auda's initiative, ordered by the London War committee on 16 July 1916 (183); Lawrence did not like Feisal (whom he considered a weak

military leader) nor Feisal him (140); as for his "heroic" actions at the taking of Akaba, Aldington reports that "in fact, Lawrence accidentally shot his own camel in the back of the head and was thrown from it, remained stunned, and woke up when the action was over over and Turkish soldiers were being massacred [by Auda's tribe]" (184-185).

If "the East is a career," as Disraeli wrote in *Tancred*, the qualifications for success as evidenced by the Lawrence case were remarkably modest. But, then, more was at stake in an Eastern career than individual success. Edward Said's observation of the role of the "orientalist" is worth reproducing:

> Out of [such] a coercive framework, by which a modern "colored" man is chained irrevocably to the general truths formulated about his prototypical linguistic, anthropological, and doctrinal forebears by a white European scholar the work of the great twentieth-century Oriental experts in England and France derived. To this framework these experts also brought their private mythology and obsessions, which in writers like Doughty and Lawrence have been studied with considerable energy. Each--Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Doughty, Lawrence, Bell, Hogarth, Philby, Sykes, Storrs--believed his vision of things Oriental was individual, self-created out of some intensely personal encounter with the Orient, Islam or the Arabs; each expressed general contempt for official knowledge held about the East. "The sun made me an Arab," Doughty wrote in *Arabia Deserta*, "but never warped me to Orientalism." Yet in the final analysis they all (except Blunt) expressed the traditional Western hostility to and fear of the Orient. Their views refined and give a personal twist to the academic style of modern Orientalism, with its repertoire of grand generalizations, tendentious "science," from which there was no appeal, reductive formulae. ...They acted, they promised, they recommended public policy on the basis of such generalization; and, by a remarkable irony, they acquired the identity of white Orientals in their national cultures-- even as, in the instances of Doughty, Lawrence, Hogarth and Bell, their professional involvement with the East did not prevent them from despising it thoroughly. The main issue for them was preserving the Orient and Islam under the control of the White Man (237-38).

In other words, a professional orientalist had to deliver a vision of the Orient in a consonant narrative that might justify the West's will-to-power. One thinks, by way of an analogy, of those Ingres "Odalisques" in the Turkish baths, naked, fleshy, perpetually poised between the waters they have bathed in and the towels they cannot reach to dry themselves, trapped by their poses into immobility and blamed by the hypocritical spectator for their nakedness. Likewise, the hero of *Lawrence of Arabia* is constrained by the propaganda he is a vehicle for from emerging as a meaningful rather than a foolish contradiction. In the final analysis, *Lawrence of Arabia's* failure to

own up to the complexity about its hero is summed up by Said, writing about the actual Lawrence:

> In any event, what matters to Lawrence is that as a white expert, the legatee of years of academic and pop wisdom about the Orient, he is able to subordinate his style of being to theirs, thereafter to assume the role of Oriental prophet giving shape to a movement in the "New Asia." And when, for whatever reason the movement fails (it is taken over by others, its aims are betrayed, its dream of independence invalidated) it is Lawrence's disappointment that counts (243).

But there was more to the making of *Lawrence of Arabia* than an illustration of the thwarted, ill-fated romance between East and West. It offered the hope, in the shadow of the nuclear holocaust, that the tradition of war could be preserved. Paul Fussell remarks in *The Great War and Modern Mermory* that "the language of military attack--*assault, impact, thrust, penetration*--has always overlapped with that of sexual importunity" (270).

But in what "theater of war" could such "importunities" be performed? By the time of the film's debut, they were, in fact, already taking place in Vietnam: The future of colonial powers, and the warriors who served them, was in counter-insurgency. The East, after all could still be a career.

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