David Lean's Lawrence: "Only flesh and blood"

> He was one of the finest men who ever trod the globe, better than Christ, better than any of them.
>
> A. E. Chambers (Mack qtd. in Jackson 25)

> A man who gives himself to be a possession of aliens leads a Yahoo life, having bartered his soul to a brute-master. He is not of them. He may stand against them, persuade himself of a mission, batter and twist them into something which they, of their own accord, would not have been. Then he is exploiting his old environment to press them out of theirs. Or, after my model, he may imitate them so well that they spuriously imitate him back again. Then he is giving away his own environment: pretending to theirs; and pretenses are hollow, worthless things. In neither case does he do a thing of himself, nor a thing so clean as to be his own (without thought of conversion), letting them take what action or reaction they please from the silent example.
>
> T. E. Lawrence (5)

Whenever a film bases itself on the life of an actual person or sets its action against a backdrop of historical events, the inevitable question will be asked by someone: Is it accurate? I find it rather surprising that so few people have asked the question of David Lean's justly celebrated film *Lawrence of Arabia*.[1] As historian Jeremy Wilson has observed, for every person who has read T. E. Lawrence's own *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, there are hundreds, possibly thousands that have seen Lean's film and take it as a true picture of Lawrence and the Arab revolt.

That the film leaves history in the dust—or sand—is beyond dispute. As Wilson acutely points out, Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson, co-scenarists of Lean's *Lawrence*, were far more interested in giving vent to their anti-war, anti-imperialist views than in painting for filmgoers a careful portrait of the real T. E. Lawrence or the events that placed him on the world's stage.[2] Scene after scene in the movie, as the historian Wilson meticulously shows, distorts real events or simply creates "history" for reasons that had more to do with early sixties leftist politics than biography or the sweep of real events. Anyone interested can read his point-by-point examination of the screenplay's flaws—the skewing of facts, character assassination, misplacing of events out of proper time frame, and outright falsification—which mount with the examination, building a case so damning of Bolt's (and Lean's) myopic vision and ulterior motives that those who ever regarded the film as history must revise their

opinions. Wilson's phrase "the scene is entirely fictitious" and similar comments in his lecture almost begin to tire the reader, but there is no denying the justice of the complaint.

With respect to history, that is. Those who wish to defend or damn the politics of the screenplay will have their say doubtless. From the perspective of the historian, Wilson rightly objects to the Lawrence of the screen. This sad predicament, let us not forget, is nothing new in film or in literature. Every time a screenwriter or a novelist sharpens his nib to write "history" he runs the risk of offending the historian. Worse still, readers and viewers have a tendency, as Wilson laments, to join in as accomplices in believing everything the cinematic or literary work tells them. And the historians stand ready with tar and feathers to set things right for the few who will listen.

But is the problem quite as serious as Wilson believes? My point will be clearer if I remind the reader of another great offender against the perpendicular facts of history, William Shakespeare. To take a famous example, although the Hal of the Henry plays is probably a lot closer to history as Shakespeare knew it (meaning Holinshed and Hall) than the Lawrence Robert Bolt cooked up, he is a man Elizabethan historians did not know in some crucial senses. Holinshed's Hal is, like Shakespeare's, the reprobate of Eastcheap, but the foundational soliloquy at the end of l.2 of *Henry IV, Part I* (the famous "I know you all" speech), evincing a strong current of a near Machiavellian calculation that runs all the way to the end of *Henry V,* is nowhere to be found in *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Alvis 207).[3] No doubt, many take the play as history, which it is not, but I stopped being troubled by that fact long ago. What Shakespeare was trying to say with this interesting falsification of Hal's career was what interested me, and I have found it worth the trouble to understand him.

And so it is with David Lean's Lawrence. As with Shakespeare's plays, I cannot remember thinking too much about the historicity and less about the then trendy politics of *Lawrence of Arabia* during the thirty or so years that I have watched the film. I might have been gulled into thinking it history on my first viewing, but the politics I dismissed because they were not mine. Granting that, the more I saw of Lean's film, the more I began to understand it as something neither historical nor political, but rather as something essentially symbolic, with a symbolism so consistently trumpeted in the action and characters that one might be tempted to charge Lean with a lack of subtlety. The resulting film is primarily neither anti-war nor anti-imperialist agitprop but something entirely different in nature.

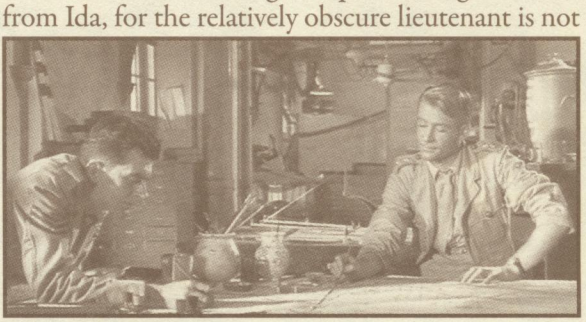
Then what did Lean intend—or, rather, regardless of what he thought he was doing, what did he produce? To arrive at an answer, one first must recognize the messianic and Christological images and symbols that dot the film almost from beginning to end. It is fair to say that for every historical inaccuracy that Wilson found in the presentation of Lawrence, one will see an image of Lawrence as savior, god, or prophet (which Wilson himself finds but identifies only as another misunderstanding of Lawrence). Nevertheless, the images are there, presenting a disturbing picture. What the images offer is a jigsaw-puzzle portrait of Lawrence as, to borrow Dostoevsky's phrase, the man-god. There are so many symbolic and imaginative references to "Orance" as perfect, god, and prophet that listing them all would be an exercise in redundancy; but exactly what all of these cinematic instances are meant to tell the

audience remains a tricky matter. Suffice it to say that by the conclusion of the film Lean has framed a picture of a false Messiah—false due to a notably and specifically modern confusion rooted in, to borrow Allen Tate's words, a hypertrophy of the imagination and will (457). This confusion consists primarily of a wrong-headed approach to the doctrine of the incarnation, the Christian belief in the God-become-man, being supplanted by the modern idea of the man-become-god, coupled, I would say almost necessarily, with an equally modern view of the power of mind and of the will, the mind in action. That God might will Himself to become flesh is one thing, but for a man to will himself to become God smacks of presumption, Gnosticism, and, to select a word frequently used in *Lawrence*, blasphemy (*Lawrence*; ch. 19). Lean's Lawrence can do this only if he sees himself as fundamentally spirit or mind. In other words, the film Lawrence tries to transcend his own being through a kind of forceful and imaginative legerdemain as the Englishman who will become both an Arab (who manifestly is not an Arab) and savior—a project that must fail as it runs square into the hard realities of who he is and what all men are, a mixture of spirit and flesh.

In other words, the project will founder on the rocks of Lawrence's human limits.

The film begins minutes before Lawrence's death as he is preparing to leave the village of Bovington riding the motorbike that will carry him to his fatal accident (Wilson). The village itself is glimpsed briefly, a static, idyllic setting, as English as can be. The man who rides out of this setting is another matter: an increasingly vibrating, indistinct figure, half in sunlight, half in shadows, moving faster and faster toward his end. Our lack of focus on the man, orchestrated by Lean, anticipates with a kind of cinematic bravura the question that will be put to every major character in the memorial service and that no one—not Brighton, Allenby, Bentley, or Murray—can answer satisfactorily: Did you know him? (*Lawrence*; ch. 2). Before long, the viewer will see how often Lawrence asked the question himself.

After the scene at St. Paul's, Lean takes us back to Cairo in 1916 in the midst of the Great War in what would have likely been, but for Lawrence, a much less celebrated campaign against the Turks. Here we get our first real glimpse of the Lawrence nobody really knew. I will not press the fact that he is overlooking a map of the region much as Zeus gazed at the fields of Troy from Ida, for the relatively obscure lieutenant is not alone at his task as cartographer and colorist. At the same time, I will not say it is insignificant; Lawrence will seek to re-draw the map of Arabia. As he laments the indifference of the high command and English press to the Arab attempt on Medina, we get our first hint of the mystery



that is Lawrence in the curious match trick. Lawrence appears strangely capable of extinguishing a match with his bare thumb and index finger without blinking. Corporal Michael George Hartley, fellow cartographer, comments with some alarm, "You do that once too often. It's only flesh and blood." When another fascinated witness, Corporal William Potter, attempts the same feat in Lawrence's presence, he bellows, "It damn well hurts!" To whom Lawrence offers the terse comment, "Certainly it hurts." Potter's demand "Well what's the trick then?" receives a reply both memorable and significant: "The trick, William Potter, is not *minding* that it hurts." Comic enough, but the meaning that will surface presently is not so funny. Ordinary men are subject to the flesh, but the *extraordinary* man—something Lawrence clearly thinks he is—does not *mind*. Through the force of mind and will, he rules the body. And if a small limitation such as the body does not bother Lawrence, what other limits will (*Lawrence*; ch. 3)?

Does this make him a god, a Messiah? According to Kevin Jackson, Lean in subsequent interviews mentioned his use of Sun-god imagery in the film, notably (I would say to anyone with eyes) in the famous walk along the top of the railway cars, but also during the scene with Dryden of the Arab bureau where they discuss Lawrence's duties among the Arabs. After his interview with General Murray and Dryden, Lawrence tells the increasingly skeptical bureaucrat, with the strange mixture of calm cockiness that characterizes the self-assured, "I'm the man for the job" (*Lawrence*; ch. 6). It would seem that no one, not even Dryden, would gainsay the claim (although he does). But when Lawrence declares that the expedition to the Arabs will be "fun," Dryden assures him that "only two kinds of creature get fun in the desert: Bedouins and gods, and you're neither." Lawrence's answer by way of repetition, "It's going to be fun," prefaces the striking of another match. As he prepares to perform the match trick once again, he pauses, smiles to himself, and blows it out. The point? It is not likely that Lawrence is suddenly "minding" the flesh and blood Hartley cautioned him about. Indeed, in the background, Lean has on the wall an ancient tapestry of the glorious sun above what appears to be a Pharaoh (Jackson 76-77). More likely Lawrence is sharing a joke with himself, the joke of the man-god who will, for a moment, be like other men and refrain from performing what they cannot. The joke is the flesh itself through which the

Sun god becomes a perverse Son-God, a Messiah who does not need the flesh, but will take it on as a kind of fool's game and cast it off at will.

The degree to which the flesh poses no real limit to Lawrence's imagination manifests itself time and time again as the expedition to Prince Feisal leads to the ambitious dream of taking Aqaba via the impassable Nefud desert and making the various Bedouin tribes into an Arab nation. Two scenes in rapid succession indicate Lawrence's ability to change nature by force of mind. First, he refuses the water Tafas his guide offers him, preferring to conduct himself as the Bedouins he will soon join, whose dress he will don, whose food he will eat, and with whom he will ride. Second, he declares his singularity. While Lawrence and Tafas camp under the stars, the latter quizzes the Englishman about "Britain." Is he truly from there? Is it a desert country? Lawrence answers that, no, it's "a fat country, fat people." But Lawrence, as Tafas observes, is not fat. "No. I'm different," he responds dreamily (*Lawrence*; ch. 7).

In this, Lawrence establishes his own nature, here and with the preceding action, as a man distinct from other men, to whom the desert will be "fun," whose mind can conquer the body and dream dreams other men regard as folly—and, yes, make them come true—and, even more to the point, a man who can work, as Feisal puts it, "what no man can provide," namely, "a miracle" (*Lawrence*; ch. 13). Lawrence's silence at such moments (here to Feisal, and later when he is told to thank God for the safe passage across the Nefud (*Lawrence*; chp.19) is interesting. Small men cannot work miracles; they rely on God for that. But Lawrence will cross the Nefud and create the Arabs, not *ex nihilo* although as far as lesser men, such as Colonel Brighton and even Auda Abu Tayi (Anthony Quinn) are concerned, it is very close to that.[4] The strange Englishman has come to lead the tribes, as the film suggests, like Moses into the promised land of nationhood (*Lawrence*; ch. 31).

These events take place in a mere half hour of the film, but the theme of Lawrence's peculiar mind has already established itself and with it some inescapable defects. The danger of Lawrence's deific disposition, however magnificently he dreams, is that it carries death along the way, something he never reconciles with his egoistic vision of himself. Tafas is the first victim, though really an incidental casualty of Lawrence's project. The execution of Gasim is another matter entirely although this does not occur until a series of important events has transpired.

The expedition across the Nefud to Aqaba is central to any understanding of Lawrence as Lean envisions him. Prologue to it is Lawrence's moment in the desert where he develops the idea of the "miracle," the attack on Aqaba, where his night of silent meditation is witnessed by two young Arabs, Daud and Farraj, who are determined to "serve" the man they call "El Orance." At the oasis just before the Nefud where they declare their intention, Sherif Ali complains, "These are not servants; these are worshipers" (*Lawrence*; ch. 17). Later, in their journey across Sinai,

these Children of Israel will treat their exalted guide as Lord indeed, with Daud at one point answering one of Lawrence's pronouncements with "Then it shall be so, Lord" (*Lawrence*; ch. 31).

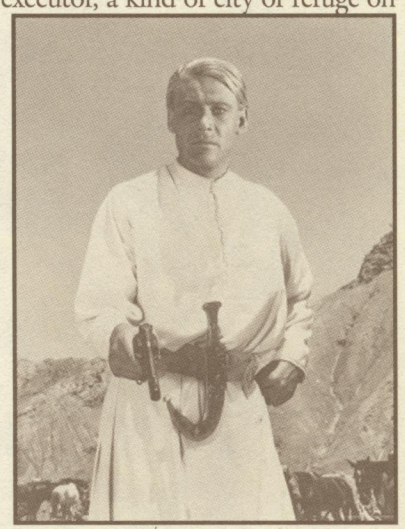
The statement merely makes explicit what the rest think after the rescue of Gasim. Up to that point, Lawrence is someone who has dared and won, but only by the beneficence of God. But as the Englishman and his fifty men escape the inferno of the Nefud, they notice that Gasim, who earlier blessed Lawrence's adoption of the "worshipers" (*Lawrence*; ch. 17), has fallen from his camel during the night. What is to be done? Nothing. As Ali says, God alone knows where he is. They must go on; Gasim's time had come, or, as the Arabs prefer to say, "It is written." Lawrence will not accept that, replying, "Nothing is written." To this declaration, Ali states flatly, "In God's name we cannot go back." Lawrence's "I can" is telling. Every time in the film that God's name is invoked, Lawrence answers with silence or with a deed that draws attention to himself as if to say, "*I* can ... *I* will." Ignoring the angry rebuke of Ali, he heads back into the desert with day approaching to find Gasim, departing with a promise: "I shall be at Aqaba. That *is* written," adding with a tap on his own skull, "in here." The writing, one cannot fail to note, is his (*Lawrence*; ch. 19). When he returns against all odds with Gasim, he tells the admiring Ali, "Nothing is written" (*Lawrence*; ch. 22). But, of course, he has affirmed what he said earlier by writing his deeds in his head before they happen, as if to say to himself, "Then it shall be so, Lord."

For whom is nothing written? I have said enough to indicate that it is God Himself who, indeed, does his own writing; yet even He is constrained by His own holiness. But we must not forget that God Incarnate, the Son, follows the decrees of the Father. Christ's "not one jot or tittle will pass away" (Matt. 5:18) until all the law be fulfilled demonstrates that for Him, something is most definitely *written*. The man who believes as Lawrence that nothing is written except what is in his head has, unlike Christ, cast laws and limits aside in favor of his own expansive imagination. He is the modern man, the god and savior of his own universe.

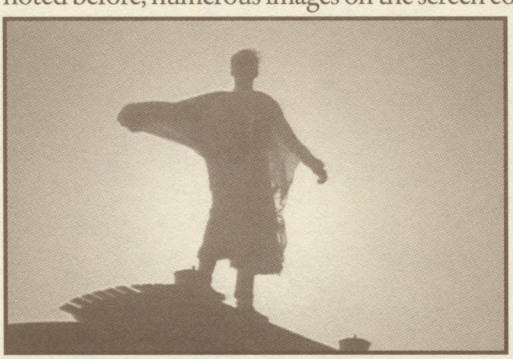
Yet Lawrence as savior is not in the end the Lawrence of Lean's film. Slowly at first, but with increasing clarity, this man who thinks and wills his own and others' fates is going to dissolve before our eyes. The first sign of dissolution is the execution of Gasim. Lawrence by now has come to fancy himself as an Arab incarnate. Ali has burned his uniform and given him the clothes of a sheriff—notably of purest white. (It is worth noting, that at least one of the photographs of the real T. E. Lawrence shows him in colored native garb; the white of the film Lawrence is obviously symbolic.) However, the incarnation is bogus. When Auda sees him for the first time, solitary and cavorting in his new outfit, he asks his son, "What fashion is this?" His son answers "Harith" accurately to Lawrence's approval; but when Auda says, "And is he Harith?" the

son shoots back, "No, Father: English." Lawrence's crestfallen face says what words cannot. Even *his* imagination cannot take him past his own flesh.

Nevertheless, he does unite the Harith and Howeitat tribes for the attack on Aqaba, though the project nearly collapses when a Harith kills one of the Howeitat. The requirements of blood feud arise to destroy the expedition in a "tribal bloodbath," something that Lawrence cannot allow. "Then I," he cries, standing between both tribes, "will execute the law. I have no tribe, and no one is offended." It is a defining moment—nearly. Lawrence may not be lawgiver (although Ali seems to says as much, observing, "The writing is still yours"), but he is its executor, a kind of city of refuge on two legs, and not himself subject to the law. As he walks over to shoot the offender, the face of the guilty man is revealed as Gasim's. The execution is painful and carried out brutally and ironically. The man who makes his own reality, who knows no law, unexpectedly becomes the unwilling executioner in the "miraculous" world of his own creation. Contrary to what he has insisted before the killing of Gasim, even this world, because it is human, has rules, laws, and limits that the mind and will of man cannot transcend. When Ali explains to Auda that the executed Gasim was the man Lawrence saved, Auda notes, "It was written, then" (*Lawrence*; ch. 28). Only Lawrence did not know it.



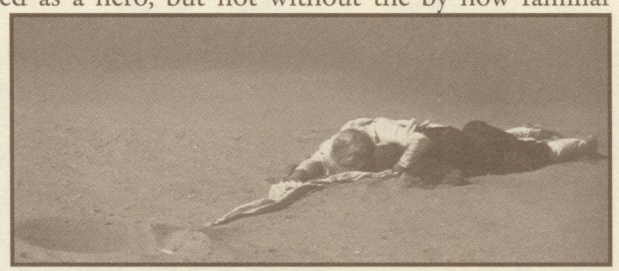
The taking of Aqaba has all the appearances of cementing the tie between Lawrence and the Arabs. He is the man who writes his own book, creates his own reality; and the fact that the reality happens to be Arab "freedom," which, as he tells Jackson Bentley (Arthur Kennedy), he is going to "give" them, he rises almost to the heights of deity (*Lawrence*; ch. 40). As I noted before, numerous images on the screen confirm this, most notably the parading atop the railway cars before the adoring band of followers after sabotaging the train (*Lawrence*; ch. 39). Acknowledging all of that, one sees how incapable Lawrence discovers he is to sustain the godlike image he has made for himself. Even so, Ali ratifies both events by giving Lawrence new dress, praising him as the man for whom nothing is written, and labeling the successful raid a "miracle," deserving of garlands.

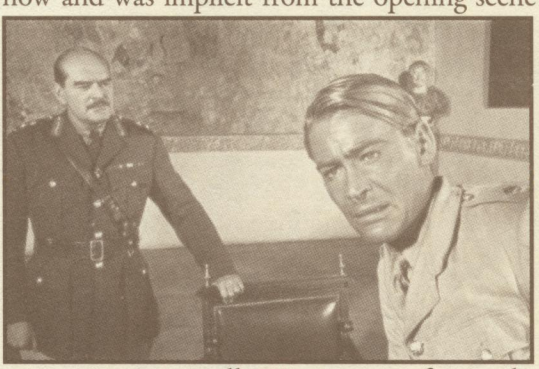


Nonetheless each of these moments is undercut by Lawrence's tortured sense of inadequacy. After he returns with Gasim, he confesses to Ali his illegitimate birth: the son of a lord, but no inheritance—a twisted reflection of the birth of Christ if ever there was one (*Lawrence*; ch. 23).[5] As he stalks away from the dead Gasim he grimly hurls the revolver he has used into the crowd of tribesmen nearby, even as Ali tries to assure him that he is still the author of his own fate. And when Ali praises him before the sea in front of Aqaba, "Tribute for the prince; flowers for the man," Lawrence can only reply, "I'm none of those things, Ali." What is he then? "Don't know" (*Lawrence*; ch. 30).

Still, within what must be minutes he is again the supreme figure of the man for whom nothing is written. He will carry news of the successful raid to Cairo via Sinai with the two worshipers, Farraj and Daud. Auda rebukes him before he goes for two reasons. The first is that "Orance" lied about there being gold in Aqaba (that is, honorable spoil), proving that the Englishman is "not perfect"; the second is for taking two boys with him to cross Sinai. To both of these charges, Lawrence asserts his own special nature as answer enough. Does Auda want gold? The king of England will supply it, "Signed in his Majesty's absence," Lawrence concludes, "by ... me." As for taking Daud and Farraj across Sinai, he quips, "Moses did." To Auda's angry rejoinder, "Moses was a prophet and beloved of God," Lawrence, as he rides out the gate, says precisely nothing (*Lawrence*; ch. 31).

In Cairo, Lawrence is hailed as a hero, but not without the by now familiar ambivalence. He arrives in virtual anonymity with Farraj, having lost Daud in a quicksand during their crossing. He notes of Aqaba to the bartender in the officers' mess, "We've taken Aqaba," only to add seconds later, "Cross my heart and hope to die, it's true. *I* did it" (*Lawrence*; ch. 34). That "*I*" cannot be ignored. In it lie both justice and egoism. But the robes have become soiled after the deaths of Gasim and Daud, and although soon they will become white again, the dirt will return after Farraj's death in an accident during a later attempt at sabotage. What is important now and was implicit from the opening scene of the film is Lawrence's fragmented nature. Indeed, one may say that it has become the theme of the film. As he sits before Allenby, he presents himself as a man of superlative confidence—telling Allenby what he is "going" to do militarily, as if by divine decree—yet moments afterwards declaring that he does not want to be a major (*Lawrence*; ch. 35). The statement surprises Allenby, and Lawrence's reasons are more surprising still. We must not forget that lurking behind this refusal of rank lies the persistent conviction that he is "different," "extraordinary," a side of him at





war with the man who wants to be merely normal. Yet this desire for anonymity (something the real Lawrence would later crave) has an odd foundation. He confesses to Allenby that he does not want to go back among the Arabs because he killed two men: Daud and Gasim. Of Daud, little is made, but with respect to Gasim's killing he offers the strangest intelligence. He "enjoyed it" (*Lawrence*). Why would he have felt such a peculiar emotion? Sadism? Perhaps, but I suspect it is the power over life and death that frightens Lawrence. Yet before the scene ends Lawrence, smirking puckishly, assures Allenby that he is "of course" going back (*Lawrence*).

The skirmish of egoism and self-abnegation thus ends, at least temporarily, with the victory of ego, although Lawrence would not be Lawrence if it were final. The implications, however, of this particular episode are not seen immediately, but a series of events underscores its enormity. The triumphant Lawrence is evident everywhere: in glory on the train; in the interview with Bentley; even amid the dissolution of his army with his conviction that his followers will return eventually; and in his mad insistence that, in spite of his dwindling numbers, he will take Deraa (*Lawrence*; ch. 42). But the chinks in the armor are visible, too, though he does not fully appreciate them, in the Turkish soldier who wounds him before his victory march on the railway cars, and in the death of Farraj (*Lawrence*; ch. 39 and ch. 42). And most of all in Deraa, where, deserted by all his followers except Ali, Lawrence seeks "[s]ome way to announce myself," just before, as if to drive the point home, walking on water—the only body of water he *can* walk on, a dirty puddle in a muddy street (*Lawrence*; ch. 42). Will the Turks not take him? Lawrence merely laughs at the thought: "I am invisible" (*Lawrence*). This announcement and invisibility are at odds, and the contradiction should not be overlooked. The Messiah who walks in scripture is incarnate, not invisible: very God, but also very man. Lawrence's imitation of Christ, suggested so often in the film in the strange spectacle of the Englishman become Arab who will free his people, argues that Lawrence sees himself as a savior. But with these exceptions: first, as we have seen so far, he tries to skirt the law, not fulfill it; second, here in Deraa he asserts the fully dispensable nature of the flesh. He dons the "dirty" (*Lawrence*; ch. 42) guise of the Arab when it suits him and similarly doffs it according to his own mysterious purposes. The man without law may do such things as the will dictates. Yet it is this quality of mind and its realization through the capricious will that divest Lawrence of every messianic pretense. Neither Christ nor Moses, he moves through the desert trying to assert some kind of godlike nature, stumbling when the limits of reality—his own human limits chiefly—block his progress, only to revive his dream with another project that will "be fun." The attack on Aqaba, the desert raids, the walk into Deraa, and finally the campaign to take Damascus all begin with the more or less wild dreams of the dreamer *par excellence*, to be realized by the only man who can make them come true, the dreamer himself. An Arab, an Englishman, or invisible—it is all the same to Lawrence. Still, despite the obvious hubris implicit in his belief that he, the extraordinary man, must succeed, all of his projects fall flat in the end, sometimes with tragic poignancy, and at other times in a manner that verges on the ridiculous.

Gasim, Daud, and Farraj all suffer from their attachment to Lawrence. He does not save; he destroys. And the biggest victim of all is Lawrence himself.

Deraa, though not the climax of the film, stands out as the defining moment of Lawrence's career because it is such a deflating failure. What he wishes to accomplish there never becomes clear. Does he seek another miracle—perhaps the single-handed taking of the garrison? Is it martyrdom he craves? Or does he wish to prove, to borrow a Homeric phrase, that he is something "more than man" (*Iliad* 5.438)? Whatever he imagines, it cannot be what happens. He is taken and brought before his Herod/Pilate for interrogation while Ali, the disciple, waits nervously outside. The martyrdom never comes; instead Lawrence is whipped like some offending schoolboy when he violently refuses the Turkish Bey's homosexual overtures (*Lawrence*, ch. 43–44). Afterwards he is thrown out into the mud where Ali is waiting. They return to Azrak with Lawrence a thoroughly dispirited man, neither martyr nor victor. It cannot be accidental that Ali must make Lawrence sleep and eat with the statement, "You have a body like other men" (*Lawrence*; ch. 45).

Lawrence does not deny that, not after so plain a humiliation as he experienced. His conclusion is to give up. If the extraordinary man cannot will himself the glory, the fun, or even the martyrdom of his imagination, he may as well forget plain duty, even plain success, and be a nonentity, the thing Lawrence now manifestly desires. He has "learned" his lesson and "come to the end of himself" (*Lawrence*; ch. 46) Ali's objection, using his teacher's own words, that "a man can be whatever he wants," no longer impresses. Lawrence will depart because the "me" he has discovered is the flesh he cannot get past. He is too much like others (like "any man" [*Lawrence*; ch. 46]) to continue the revolt in the only terms that ever mattered to him, as the god who wrote his own law as he made his way to glory. It is all or nothing, and Deraa has left Lawrence with nothing but the flesh, which notably, as a man waking from a dream, he pinches to demonstrate the point (*Lawrence*; ch. 46). The mind that wrote the scriptures above all other scriptures has reached the frayed end of its tether.

Or that is what he says. However, ordinary is something Lawrence cannot be, mainly because his mind will not permit it. When he next visits Allenby, he is as broken as he was with Ali after Deraa, begging for transfer (*Lawrence*; ch. 47).[6] That the general will not accept Lawrence's request is a foregone conclusion, and before long he has the tortured Lawrence into admitting his extraordinary nature and affirming that he will lead the Arabs to Damascus. The best of the Arabs, he says, will be coming for Damascus, which "I'm going to give them." That is not the whole of his pronouncement. Before he finishes he modifies his view of what the

"best" will come for: "They'll come for me" (*Lawrence*; ch. 48). So there we have him. He arrives begging for total effacement and leaves announcing his will from on high: the fragmented, modern personality, a man who sees himself as simultaneously nothing and everything.

The Lawrence, whose coming Ali and Auda await, approaches the Arab army from a distance to the chorus of "Orance! Orance!" Is it the same man? Auda tells Bentley there is only "one Orance," but Ali sits on his horse a disturbed man. To him, Lawrence has not changed as Bentley believes but is the "same man ... humbled." What sounds like denial is crystal clear to the viewer the closer Lawrence gets. The robes glisten in the sun, whiter than ever, but something about the man and the scene, a quite intentional something, cries blatant mockery. The sign on the truck that brings Bentley (camera in hand) tosses out the first clue: "T. Mikopolous & Son; Finest Fresh Bread Delivered; Gordon St.: Jerusalem." Could it be that Lawrence is, in effect, the new bread of life, delivered to his worshipers to give them what he himself has assured them they desire, in the shape of Damascus, independence, and "me?" There is more. He arrives flanked by murderers, his picked "bodyguard," a gaggle of "not ordinary men" (*Lawrence*; ch. 49). Maybe this picture does not match Christ on the cross perfectly, but the idea of self-crucifixion is present. To be sure, Lawrence is a tortured man here as surely as he was in Cairo with Allenby, but in the sense that he has become a self-conscious caricature of himself.

Also, a deadly one. Far removed from the salvific Christ of scripture, Lawrence has become a figure of anti-Christ, death itself. By this juncture in the film the idea is not new, but Lawrence as the bringer of death has changed. Earlier he was the instrument in the deaths of Gasim, Daud, and Farraj apart from any intention of his own. Surely, the unexpected nature of those losses underscores the limits of his power, but the atrocious slaughter of the Turkish column on the road to Damascus offends even Bentley. The column consists largely of the sick and wounded, and, as Ali urges, may be easily by-passed, but Lawrence, urged by one of his bodyguard, madly bellows "No prisoners," and the massacre begins. When Lawrence amid the killing lifts up his bloody knife and stares at it, he almost perfectly reflects the man who earlier lifted up presumably the same knife to admire himself in his new and then strange Arab garb.[7] Does he see the "savior" he fancied himself or the butcher? Bentley sees the latter in words

that are as telling as they are unforgettable. With camera in hand, he catches up to the army in the aftermath of the bloodbath exclaiming "Jesus wept"—something that, indeed, the real Christ might have done at such a sight—followed by "Oh, you rotten man" as he confronts Lawrence. The splendid, white robes have, of course, become filthy again, and the irony stands all but complete. Christ wept for Lazarus, all the while knowing He would raise him momentarily; there will be no resurrection of these slaughtered Turks (*Lawrence*; ch. 52).

Is Lawrence triumphant? He does get to Damascus first and even organizes a hero's welcome for Allenby. Paradoxically, the time is not ripe, any more than the literally sour grapes that are brought to Lawrence from Damascus as he nears the city (*Lawrence*; ch. 52). The Arab parliament he organizes bursts into the splinters of old tribal rivalries as soon as it commences, eventually leaving the conquering hero writing meaningless dispatches while his only remaining friends, Ali and Auda, the Harith and Howeitat, squabble (*Lawrence*; ch. 53). The last act of futility arrives when Lawrence attempts all by his lonesome to "save" the dying at a squalid hospital. Frantically bustling to find water (living water perhaps?) where there is none, he finds himself confronted by a British medical officer just arrived who, surveying the "outrageous" state of things, slaps down the laughing and crazed Lawrence, mistaking him for a "filthy little wog" (*Lawrence*; ch. 54). Lawrence looks for all the world like one of *them* but without the glory. The officer who later meets the uniformed Lawrence as he departs will not even know the "wog" and the hero are the same man (*Lawrence*; ch. 55).

Modern men in their abysmal depths are too much like Lawrence, but they do not like to think so. They cling for dear life to old notions of honor, purpose, and duty. It is no wonder, then, that when Feisal speaks cynically of Lawrence as he departs to return to England ("We are equally glad to be rid of him, are we not?" [*Lawrence*; ch. 55]), Allenby demurs but not too convincingly preparatory to his and Feisal's negotiations on the apportioning of power in Damascus. Only Brighton is truly disgusted with

the heartless treatment of Lawrence, but he is too late to tell him so. Lawrence exits a broken man, wistfully surveying the people he hoped to save as he is driven "home" (*Lawrence*). Like the jittering image on the English road at the start of the film, the last picture of Lawrence as he rides away in a haze is of a man indistinct, almost faceless. The motorcycle that speeds by his car takes the film back to its beginning. Lawrence is a man drained of spirit, and for him, dead in a more profound sense than in the physical death that awaits him.[8] He is a man-god no more; the mind is vacant; he is "only flesh and blood."

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Notes

[1] All citations of the DVD are parenthetical by DVD chapter.

[2] To avoid confusion with the historian Jeremy Wilson, henceforth I will refer to Bolt as the script's author—with apologies to Michael Wilson. It's simply a case of one Wilson too many. All subsequent citations of the film will be parenthetical. When dialogue and action are covered in one paragraph, a single citation at the end of that paragraph will apply to all references.

[3] Kevin Jackson in his very perceptive work dealing with the film also refers to Shakespeare in much the same vein that I am doing here, only primarily with regard to *Hamlet* (but also to *Henry IV* in passing). Although I did not read any of Jackson's book until after I had completed a first draft of this article, I find that when he departs from his account of the difficult history of the making of the film and tackles the matter of interpretation, many of his opinions come very close to my own; I have chosen to credit only those passages that are original to him and, hence, new to me; where I arrived at similar interpretations independently there is no note.

[4] Brighton calls the Arabs "Bloody savages"; Auda says of "Arabs" that he has not heard of a tribe of that name.

[5] A similar idea arises when Lawrence convinces Auda to lend his support to the attack on Aqaba. What will convince Auda to commit the deed? Auda will do it "because it is his pleasure." It is Lawrence who says this, not Auda. What does Auda say in response? "Thy mother mated with a scorpion" (*Lawrence*; ch. 27): perhaps the new Virgin birth?

[6] In this scene the blood from the whipping that suddenly shows through his khaki tunic is a sign of pitiful humiliation, not triumph as it would have been for a really "risen" Christ-like figure. And whom did Lawrence shed his blood for anyway?

[7] Kevin Jackson also notices the mirroring with the perceptive comment: "The Sun God has become Kurtz" (86-87).

[8] Jackson's concluding words are apt: "This is a modern tragedy, not a Shakespearean one, and Lawrence is dead only in spirit, not in flesh. It was TE himself who—thinking of the death of Sir Roger Casement—devised the phrase which best designates his condition in the final shot: 'He is a broken archangel'" (117).

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