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From Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to David Lean's film (1962)

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Edward Said's short piece on T.E. Lawrence—"Lawrence of Arabia"—in Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient—has provoked some debate, though less than one might expect. This article takes a further look at Said's argument. It suggests that in calling for a "new dialectic" in his discussion of Lawrence and the Arab Revolt—so recognizing the need of the contemporary orientalist not only to understand the Orient but also to participate in the process of change—and in introducing the concept of narrative as an alternative to the concept of vision, Said partly undermines his own position regarding orientalism. The article also looks further at Lowell Thomas's contribution to the creation of the Lawrence myth, and at contrasting interpretations of the principal film version, David Lean's Lawrence of Arabia (1962).

Keywords representation; orientalism; discourse; narrative; vision; film

Introduction

I can't remember when I first heard of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia)—the archetypal English hero who, so we were led to believe, more or less single-handedly raised the Arab Revolt in Arabia during the First World War and secured the liberation of the Arabs from Ottoman (Turkish) rule—but it was probably some time in the late 1930s or early 1940s. I certainly knew something about Lawrence when I heard L.B. Namier talk about him in a lecture he gave at Manchester University in 1953;¹ and in the late 1950s I read the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935). Moreover, about the same time, I read Richard Aldington's *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (1955), a book which sparked off a vigorous debate about the reliability of Lawrence's account of the Arab Revolt and other related issues; I saw *Ross* (1960)—a play by the English playwright Terence Rattigan, based partly on the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London; and David Lean's epic film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). But it was only in the 1970s, when I began to look more closely at the Lawrence myth and all that it entailed, that I began to realize what a protean figure Lawrence was, one capable of being represented variously as a modern romantic hero, an inveterate dreamer, a great writer, an anti-imperialist, a surrogate woman and even a god. Amongst these representations, Edward Said's representation of Lawrence in *Orientalism* (1978), as a typical

(white, European) orientalist, although not the most thoroughly worked out, is undoubtedly (from my point of view) one of the most interesting.

Lawrence of Arabia and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)

Said's critique of Lawrence in *Orientalism* has provoked a number of recent responses. Mohammad Nour Naimi, in "T.E. Lawrence and the Orientalist Tradition" (1992)—a doctoral thesis at the University of Essex that fully confirms Said's own view of Lawrence—finds that Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an archetypal product of the orientalist tradition. In the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* Lawrence represents the Middle East as an intellectual void, a geographical space to be possessed and circumscribed by himself, a recognized "expert" due to his earlier travels in Syria, his studies of the crusades, Charles Doughty and other travellers, and his indoctrination by David Hogarth, his Oxford mentor. In particular, Naimi seeks to investigate the sources of these orientalist influences on Lawrence and of the self-images and multiple modes of hero which Lawrence constructed and which were later adopted by his contemporaries in the early biographies of him. Susan Williams, on the other hand, in "On *Orientalism*: Re-viewing Said's View of T.E. Lawrence" (2002), citing extracts from *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence's letters, and some of his other writings, challenges Said's view that, with regard to the Arabs, Lawrence was a racist, an imperialist and, in a dogmatic sense, an orientalist. In particular, Williams is very critical of Said's interpretation of Lawrence's vision of himself as a "standing civil war" (Said 242), an expression that Williams believes Said largely misunderstood. Finally, O. Kwon's "Said, *Orientalism* and T.E. Lawrence" (1998)—an article written in Korean which I have been able to read only as an abstract translated into English—compares and contrasts Dennis Porter's reading of T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in "Orientalism and its Problems" (Barker et al. 179–93) with that of Said. This article deals with a number of the issues raised in these articles, though I perhaps pay rather more attention to the precise nature of Said's analysis of orientalism and to the "orientalist" manner of Lawrence's representation in film.

For Said, writing in *Orientalism*, Lawrence was a typical orientalist who saw the Oriental (the Arab, the Semite) not as an empirical reality (a being who might be met with, spoken to or observed) but as an ontological and epistemological type, a specific category or essence, transtemporal, transindividual, and, in a predictive sense at least, inevitable. This inclination to classify was a product of a process of pseudo-scientific 19th-century thinking that, on the basis of supposedly empirical data (anthropological, biological, cultural) succeeded in dividing the world up into a series of more or less autonomous groups—racial, ethnic and linguistic (Said 229–33). From the exigencies of this conceptual classification no Western orientalist—a category that for Said includes anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient—could escape. Orientalists such as Doughty, Hogarth, Lawrence and Vanessa Bell may have believed that their vision of things Oriental was "individual, self created" out of some sort of "intensely personal encounter" with the East, but they were in fact all compelled to view the Orient through orientalist spectacles—and so saw the oriental "other" as hostile, irrational, inferior, unchanging and effeminate. As for orientalism, that was in effect an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture; a corporate institu-

tion for dealing with the Orient; a Western style for having authority over it; and a systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient, politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively.

In *Orientalism* Said, according to his own account, was tempted to view orientalism as a sort of Foucauldian discourse or tradition. Unlike Foucault, however, who believed that in general the individual text or author counts for little in a discursive formation, Said did make some allowance for the determining imprint of the original writer upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts (23). Similarly, with regard to Foucault's analysis of the power/knowledge relationship, Said remarked that, with regard to orientalism, at least the relationship should not be seen as the outcome of a "mere unconditioned ratiocination", but as the product of a "*willed human work*". No hard and fast rule about the relationship should be established. Rather, the issue should be looked at in the context of the subject and its historical circumstances (15).

The evidence that Said assembles to prove the typicality of Lawrence's orientalism is taken almost entirely from the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In the first two or three chapters of Lawrence's account, Said notes, we find the whole panoply of orientalist concepts: the archetypal Arab (the Arab "could be swung on an idea as on a cord"); the essential Semite ("the Semite hovered between lust and self-denial"); the mandatory Asia ("the new Asia which time was inexorably bringing upon us"); the obligatory East ("I have restored to the East some self respect"); and the all-embracing generalization ("the Semitic capacity for enjoyment") (Said 241–42). Nor is that all. Said might also have noted the Semites who "had no half tones in their register of colours", the Arabs who displayed a "universal clearness or hardness of belief"; and the desert Arab who "found luxury in abnegation, renunciation and restraint". It was, no doubt, on the basis of such evidence that Said felt able to identify Lawrence as yet another of those European orientalists who, in the tradition of Edward William Lane, Doughty and Lady Hester Stanhope, felt able to characterize the Oriental (the Arab, the Semite) as an archetypal "other", radically different from the European "self" (Lawrence chaps 1–3).

Said's analysis of Lawrence's orientalism appears, at first sight, very convincing. But it does, I think, give rise to two problems, both of which Said almost certainly recognized. First, the events of the Arab Revolt which Lawrence describes in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* are almost entirely concerned with change and not with stagnation as the orientalist paradigm would require. Second, the various orientalisms which Said identifies in Lawrence's work are nearly all confined to the introductory chapters. The remainder of the work, based mainly on Lawrence's own personal memory of events, his own diary record and similar official and unofficial sources (one can ignore here Lawrence's sometimes elaborate literary constructions: the supposed "discovery" of Feisal as a leader of the Arab Revolt, the Allied "deception" of the Arabs, the drama of betrayal, etc.), is almost entirely free of them. In effect, therefore, the orientalist part of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* can be seen merely as a sort of prologue to the work, one that introduces or frames its much more important reconstructionist element.

Said's solution to the problems raised for his thesis regarding orientalism—that the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is almost entirely concerned with change, and that the orientalist sections are mostly confined to the introductory chapters—is, I think, similarly twofold. First, he discovers in the Arab Revolt the emergence of what he refers to as a

“new dialectic”, one which requires the contemporary orientalist not only to understand the Orient as heretofore but also to participate in its process of change:

Now the Orient must be made to perform, its power must be enlisted on the side of “our” values, civilization, interests, goals. Knowledge of the Orient is directly translated into activity [. . .] The Orientalist has now become a figure of Oriental history, indistinguishable from it, its shaper, its characteristic *sign* for the West. (Said 238)

Second, he discovers, not only in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* but also in literature in general, a radical distinction between vision—essentially static and unchanging—and narrative, i.e. a method of dealing with and describing change. Vision, a product of orientalism amongst other things, is a static system of “synchronic essentialism”. Narrative (diachronic) reveals the instability that lies hidden behind it:

What seemed stable—and the Orient is synonymous with stability and unchanging eternity—now appears unstable. Instability suggests that history, with its disruptive detail, its currents of change, its tendency towards growth, decline or dramatic movement, is possible in the Orient and for the Orient. History and the narrative by which history is represented argue that vision is insufficient, that the “Orient” as an unconditional ontological category does an injustice to the potential of reality for change. (239–40)

Narrative, in other words, invariably challenges vision, while vision, driven by a Nietzschean will to power, attempts to dominate reality, to impose (Apollonian) being on (Dionysian) becoming (Said mentions the word Apollonian in *Orientalism*, but strangely not Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian). As for the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, that work can, in Said’s view, be seen as a classic example of the struggle between vision and narrative, one in which (contrary to my view) vision comprehensively defeats narrative (239–40).

Now it can, I think, be easily admitted that in the period of the Arab Revolt, and indeed in many earlier periods—witness the period of the 19th-century Eastern Question—orientalists did in fact become actively involved in history; though whether we need a “new dialectic” to explain this process is doubtful. But Said’s discovery, or rediscovery, of the distinction between vision and narrative has, it seems to me, profound implications, not only for the business of literature in general—which it obviously has—but also for Said’s orientalist thesis in particular. For in allowing the possibility of a narrative account of developments in the Middle East in the period of the Arab Revolt is Said not tacitly admitting the possibility of a non-orientalist account of events in the Orient? And if this is the case—and it seems to me that it is—can one not also conclude that orientalism does not have to be—has not always been—a systematic (autonomous) discipline, by which European culture was able to manage, and even produce, the Orient, and a corporate institution for dealing with it, from whose exigencies the orientalist is unable to escape? Might not many orientalists, in other words, have written narrative histories of the Orient, Islam, the Arabs and so on, which were never intended to imply some kind of synchronic essentialism? I would certainly count myself amongst that number (see Macfie, *Ataturk; The End of the Ottoman Empire*), as I suppose, despite his many

orientalisms, would Lawrence who, in the first chapter of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* declares that the Arabs are a “manufactured people”, whose name has been changing in sense year by year; and in the second chapter argues that it is incorrect (as with most scientific terms) to call the peoples of Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Arabia Semites, though they did speak related tongues and possibly have a common origin. Or did Said perhaps assume—as I think he did—that it is impossible for anyone, oriental or occidental, to write about the Orient, the East, the Arab, the Semite and so on, without assuming an element of essentialism, an assumption that implies that we are all, whether we like it or not, because of the structure of the language we use, orientalists. And if that is the case, how is it possible to make such a clear distinction between vision and narrative?

Said’s concept of the relationship between knowledge and power is essentially post-structuralist, although leavened with a significant amount of Marxism. In *Orientalism* he explains that orientalism should not be looked on as some kind of airy European fantasy or myth but as a created body of theory and practice, one in which there has for many generations been a considerable material investment. European culture, that is to say, driven by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections, exercises a sort of Gramscian hegemony that enables a “sovereign” Western consciousness effectively to create the Orient. At the same time, continued European investment makes orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering the Orient into Western consciousness. In Lawrence’s case at least, there is little doubt that he was, in part at least, shaped by a “sovereign” Western, mainly English (capitalist), consciousness; and that he in his turn contributed significantly to the filtering through of the Orient into Western consciousness. The only problem is that in the period of the First World War, at least, the sovereign European consciousness and the orientalism that that consciousness supposedly created, appear to have split into two separate parts (I make no mention here of the Russian, Austrian and Italian contribution to the process): an Anglo-French part that sought to impose an intellectual hegemony on a new Arab East, and a German part that sought to impose an intellectual hegemony on an old Ottoman (Turkish) East. Indeed, so great were these and other similar divisions (religious, ethnic, cultural) that one wonders whether there ever was any such thing as a European “sovereign” consciousness.

In *Orientalism* Said writes that the great drama of Lawrence’s work is the struggle it symbolizes, 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 and betrayal (241). That may be true. There is certainly some evidence for it. But if it is true one should also be aware of the immense strain that such a theatrical pretence entailed for Lawrence. As he wrote in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, by February 1918, at a low point in the Arab Revolt, he felt that his contribution to the struggle for Arab independence was finished. He had made a mess of it and was determined to beg General Allenby, the Commander of the British Forces in the Middle East, to find him a smaller post elsewhere. He now had “no tricks left worth a meal in the Arab market place”. What he wanted now was the “security of custom”, to “pillow myself on duty and obedience: irresponsibly”:

I complained that since landing in Arabia I had had options and requests, never an order: that I was tired to death of free-will, and of many things beside free-will. For

a year and a half I had been in motion, riding a thousand miles each month upon camels: with added nervous hours in crazy aeroplanes, or rushing across country in powerful cars [. . .] Generally I had been hungry: lately always cold: and frost and dirt had poisoned my hurts into a festering mass of sores.

However, these worries would have taken their due petty place, in my despite of the body, and of my soiled body in particular, but for the rankling fraudulence which had to be my mind's habit: that pretence to lead the national uprising of another race, the daily posturing in alien dress, preaching in alien speech: with behind it a sense that the "promises" on which the Arabs worked were worth what their armed strength would be when the moment of fulfilment came [. . .] My will had gone and I feared to be alone, lest the winds of circumstance, or power, or lust, blow my empty soul away. (502)

Lowell Thomas and the invention of the "Lawrence of Arabia" myth

Surprisingly, in *Orientalism* Said pays little or no attention to Lowell Thomas, the American journalist who, in the period immediately following the end of the First World War, not only turned Lawrence into a world figure but also, incidentally, in the process created one of the most powerful orientalist images ever invented. Unofficially sponsored by the American government, which wanted to increase popular support for American participation in the war, Thomas, after a series of failed attempts to discover a story with the right kind of popular appeal in Europe, visited General Allenby in Jerusalem in January 1918, where he met Lawrence and had his photographer, Harry Chase, take several photographs of him in Arab dress. Then, in March 1918 he visited Lawrence again in Akaba, where he stayed for some 14 days and acquired several more photographs. Thus equipped with his photographs of Lawrence, a rudimentary knowledge of the desert campaign, and a brilliant imagination, Thomas gave a series of lectures in March 1919, at the Century Theatre off Central Park West in New York, entitled "With Allenby in Palestine and the Conquest of Holy Arabia". After an uncertain start, so successful were these lectures, the title of which was quickly changed to "With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence of Arabia", that in the following years Thomas was invited to give his lecture, or travelogue as he sometimes called it, variously at the Madison Square Garden, New York, the Royal Opera House, London—where it was illustrated with other photographs of Lawrence in Arab dress, taken this time in London, more than 240 lantern slides, some 30 film segments, Levantine music and even an oriental dance routine—the Albert Hall and the Queen's Hall. Indeed, according to Joel C. Hodson in *Lawrence of Arabia and American Culture* (1995), in the four years from March 1919, a period during which Thomas travelled not only to Europe but also to Australia and New Zealand, Thomas may have given his lecture as many as 4000 times, speaking to more than four million people. As a result, by the time that Lawrence published the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935), he had already become very well known as "Lawrence of Arabia", the "Prince of Mecca", and the "Uncrowned King of Arabia"—images further augmented by Thomas's publication in 1924 of his *With Lawrence in Arabia* (Hodson chaps 1, 2).

Whilst there is no doubt regarding the effectiveness of Thomas's creation of the "Lawrence of Arabia" image as an orientalist representation, what Hodson surprisingly reveals in his careful reconstruction of Thomas's lectures is the complete poverty of the language in America and possibly also in England associated with the orientalist paradigm. According to Said, the orientalist paradigm (discourse or episteme) should have provided any typical English or American orientalist with a rich assortment of orientalist phrases with which to identify oriental (Arab) backwardness, irrationality, barbarism, despotism and cruelty, in contrast to the superiority, rationality, creativity and humanity of the European (Westerner). But what Hodson establishes is that Thomas's choice of language, with regard to both the British forces in the Middle East and the Oriental (the Arab, the Turk), was drawn almost entirely from the Bible and mediaeval romance. Thus the British army became Allenby's crusaders, and the roads they traversed the same roads that Godfrey of Bouillion and Richard Coeur de Lion had tramped along eight centuries before. Battles against the Turks were fought on the "Plains of Sharon", where the "Moslem horde" of Saladin had once vanquished the flower of feudal chivalry. An air battle (staged by Chase) was fought above the hills of Moab, and a battle between the Scots and the Turks on a field where David had slain Goliath. Auda Abu Tayi was identified as a sort of Bedouin Robin Hood, and the crew of a Red Sea tramp steamer as a "mottlier crew than ever sailed the Spanish Main". Lawrence himself, although occasionally referred to as "Shereef Lawrence", the "Uncrowned King of Arabia" and the "terror of the Turks", was almost as often identified as a figure comparable to Clive of India, Gordon of Khartoum and Kitchener of Omdurman, a latter-day Achilles, Siegfried or El Cid. As Hodson remarks, what Thomas offered his war-weary audiences in his lectures was the picture of a romantic campaign that they could celebrate and the story of a "gentleman cavalry officer" (Allenby) capturing Jerusalem, and a modern-day knight in white clothes (Lawrence), doing remarkable things in the desert. In other words, he offered a peculiarly romantic sort of orientalism, one shaped not by the orientalist concepts of the 19th century, but by the Bible and the Middle Ages (Hodson 32–44).

Sam Spiegel and David Lean's film, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

Hodson is in almost no doubt that the Lawrence myth as cultivated by Thomas in his lectures and books, and of course by Lawrence himself in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, contributed greatly to the rise of what he refers to as the Hollywood "sun and sand" film, a genre that almost always promoted the orientalizing of the Arab "other" as sensual, cruel and exotic. In the 1920s such films included *The Sheik* (1921) (with Rudolph Valentino), *The Sheik of Araby* (1922), *The Arab* (1924), and *The Sun of a Sheik* (1926) (again with Rudolph Valentino); and in the 1930s *Morocco* (1940), *The Lost Patrol* (1934), and *Beau Geste* (1939). But surprisingly, it was not until 1962 when Sam Spiegel and David Lean, using a screenplay written by Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson, made *Lawrence of Arabia*, that the Lawrence of Arabia myth was at long last translated directly into film;² though failed attempts had already been made by Alexander Korda, the Hungarian-born British film producer, in 1934; by J. Arthur Rank in the late 1950s;³ and by Herbert Wilcox, the British film producer, who appears to have flirted with the idea of making a film about Lawrence on several occasions. Not that all such attempts

to dramatize the Lawrence of Arabia myth in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were unsuccessful. In the late 1950s, Terence Rattigan wrote *Ross: A Dramatic Portrait*, a play based on Lawrence's experiences in Arabia and the RAF, performed with Alex Guinness as Lawrence in 1960 at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. Surprisingly, Rattigan originally intended the work as a screenplay for David Lean, but the project came to nothing as Lean, for reasons which remain obscure, withdrew.

The orientalism contained in the Sam Spiegel and David Lean version of the Lawrence of Arabia myth appears at first sight evident enough. In *Lawrence of Arabia* Lawrence is represented as the archetypal "White Man" busy managing—and even producing—the Orient (Arabia) on behalf of a Western colonial/imperial power. In the process, according to Ella Shohat in "Gender and Culture of Empire" (1991), Lawrence unveils the mysteries of an unknown space, accomplishing thereby a sort of *rite de passage* that allegorizes the Western achievement of virile heroic stature, or as General Murray puts it in the film, makes a "man" of him. The Oriental (the Arab), by contrast, as Said remarks in *Orientalism*, cannot represent himself but must be represented, in this case by Lawrence. It is Lawrence who, in the film, as in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, carries the storyline, Lawrence who gives shape to the Arab Revolt, and Lawrence who directs its strategy. And when a second opinion is called for, it is to Lowell Thomas (played by Jackson Bentley) that the film turns and not one of the Arabs; though Emir Feisal and Sharif Ali do have one or two pointed things to say from time to time. Nor is it lost on the Arabs in the film that Lawrence describes them as a little people, a silly people, "greedy, barbarous and cruel". As for the Turks, they are represented as being cruel and beastly, murderers and rapists, much in need, no doubt, of European tutelage.

Such a characterization of *Lawrence of Arabia*—as an archetypal orientalist work—is, however, somewhat misleading for, as several students of the subject have pointed out, David Lean's treatment of the Lawrence of Arabia myth in his film is deeply ambiguous. Steven C. Caton, in *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology* (1999), for example, points out that *Lawrence of Arabia*, far from being an archetypal orientalist work, the product of an imperialist and colonialist consciousness, is actually strongly anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist, concerned more with issues of gender and sexuality than with those of colonialism and imperialism (chap. 5). Michael A. Anderegg, in "Lawrence of Arabia: The Man, the Myth, the Movie" (1982), discovers in the film three "particularly absorbing" contradictions: that between weakness and strength; that between the good and bad imperialist; and that between self-promotion and self-abnegation. It is on these paradoxes, in Anderegg's opinion, much more than on any specific account of Lawrence's life, that David Lean and Robert Bolt constructed their version of the Lawrence myth (286–88). And Alain Silver and James Ursini, in *David Lean and his Films* (1974) find in *Lawrence of Arabia* not an historical account of Lawrence's adventures in Arabia, or even an orientalist epic, but the story of a man's discovery of his individual destiny and "its consequential almost megalomaniac alienation" (163–81).

In his interesting and perceptive analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia*, particularly of the scenes concerning Lawrence's meetings with Feisal and Allenby, Caton shows that David Lean in his film, employing a method which Caton refers to as "dialectical criticism", actually creates an alternative narrative to that provided by the standard orientalist paradigm. This narrative identifies Lawrence not as the symbolic embodiment of the European "self", busily engaged in the political management and manipulation of an oriental "other", but as a psychologically empty vessel, a "desert", subject to the

unscrupulous management and manipulation not only of Allenby, the archetypal British imperialist, duplicitous, deceitful and dishonourable, but also of Feisal, the subtle and slightly less duplicitous instrument of Hashemite imperialism; the film makes clear that Feisal's ambitions are not so much national as imperial. In this world it is the Arab (Feisal, Ali ibn el Kharish, even Auda abu Tayi in his own peculiar way) who is made to appear sober, rational and judicious, and Lawrence, portrayed as a sado-masochist, who appears increasingly irrational, hysterical and even psychopathic. In *Lawrence of Arabia*, in other words, the traditional representation of the European "self" as rational, humane and superior, and the oriental "other" as irrational, aberrant and inferior, is reversed. Nor is Caton in any doubt that that is what Lean and Bolt (and probably also Wilson) intended for, as he points out, in their early days both Lean and Bolt had been communists, and they remained strong supporters of nuclear disarmament; Bolt spent a period in prison for civil disobedience in 1961. As Bolt remarked in an article published in the *New York Times* in 1962, "I was brought up to disapprove of figures like T.E. Lawrence as being the colourful ornaments and stalking horses of imperialism" (16).

Anderegg shows in "Lawrence of Arabia: The Man, the Myth, the Movie" that Lean and Bolt constructed their film on the basis of three paradoxes which they identified in Lawrence's life: the paradox of Lawrence, the Oxford graduate, aesthete, connoisseur of fine printed books, collector of brass rubbings, possibly homosexual, versus the dashing, magnetic Oriental, Prince of Mecca and uncrowned King of Arabia; the paradox of Lawrence, the lover of the East and liberator of the Arabs, versus Lawrence, the agent of British imperialism and betrayer of his Arab friends; and the paradox of Lawrence, the flamboyant exhibitionist who dresses up in Arab clothes, versus Lawrence, the recluse, who hides out in London, the RAF and the Tank Corps, and refuses to have his biography written. In this way, as Anderegg sees it, in *Lawrence of Arabia* Lean and Bolt succeed in writing an essay on the paradox of heroism, the conflict between history and myth, and the difference between self and self-image. In particular, Anderegg concludes, Lean and Bolt, far from identifying Lawrence as the typical, Western, masculine hero, and the Arab as the necessarily effeminate other, as the orientalist paradigm requires, actually represent him as a sexual deviant (possibly a homosexual), a sadist and a masochist, albeit one who succeeds at the cost of his mental stability in transforming himself into a successful man of action. What Lawrence's (played by Peter O'Toole) body language portrays in the film, in other words, is not masculinity but a stereotypical "gayness", one that contrasts sharply with the evident masculinity of General Murray (Donald Wolfitt), General Allenby (Jack Hawkins), Ali Ibn el Kharish (Omar Sharif) and Auda Abu Tayi (Anthony Quinn).

Silver and Orsini, on the other hand, in *David Lean and his Films*, discover in Lean and Bolt's work not a study in the resolution of paradox but a straightforward allegory of a man's descent into the desert of the self, in search of an "individual destiny" and a "primal identity" (163). In the process, strangely, Lawrence is transmogrified into a messianic figure, a hero and even a god, a god who spends his own "forty days" in the wilderness. It is as a god-figure that Lawrence performs miracles (the capture of Akaba), writes the future and raises the dead (Gasim); and it is as a god-figure that he is associated throughout with wind, speed, fire, heat and light. But in the end, unlike the true god, Lawrence cannot withstand the crucifixion which is apparently all too often the lot of gods, and he is brought brutally down to earth in the Deraa incident, as

just an ordinary human being after all, albeit one capable of extreme courage, violence and cruelty.

Conclusion

The availability of alternative interpretations of *Lawrence of Arabia* does not necessarily inhibit an orientalist interpretation. But it does suggest that meaning might be the product not so much of the text as of the reader, or at least of a complex and variable interaction between the two, sometimes involving—as Said frequently points out—discourse, ideology and institution, a conclusion which in turn suggests the difficulty of asserting in certain instances that a text is necessarily orientalist. A realist might refer the text—i.e. the film—to what Said refers to in *Orientalism* as the “brute reality” of the thing-in-itself (the Orient, Arabia, and so on), but such a reference is apparently ruled out by Said’s insistence that orientalism is always outside the Orient, unconcerned with it except as the first cause of its representation (5, 20). And in any case, as the post-modern philosopher of history would no doubt point out, the “brute reality” of the Orient which Lawrence was exposed to during the period of the Arab Revolt has long gone. It is no longer accessible except in the form of its fragmentary remains. All we are left with for the most part is words, and words are, as we all know, remarkably unstable in their meaning. In many instances, therefore (see, for example, the extract cited by Said, *Orientalism* 238), deciding whether a text is or is not orientalist poses difficulties. Though I suppose that in many other instances (“The Jew in the Metropole at Brighton, the miser, the worshipper of Adonis, the lecher in the stews of Damascus were all alike signs of the Semitic capacity for enjoyment [...]”; Said 241), it might be difficult to rebut such a charge.

Lean was not entirely ignorant of the real Orient, by the way. In 1960 he visited Jordan in search of a suitable location for the shooting of the desert scenes of *Lawrence of Arabia* (in the end most of them were actually shot in Morocco). There he discovered that the desert in the neighbourhood of Abu I-Lissan, was quite different from what he had expected from his reading in the books and magazines of his childhood and his viewing of Hollywood films such as *The Sheik* (1921) and *Beau Geste* (1939). What he discovered was something much less romantic (orientalist), yet, strangely, much more impressive: vast plains out of which hills and mountains rise like sugar loaves, extraordinary shades of colour and light, unbroken walls of rock. Not that he felt able to escape entirely from the “ cliché-ridden” nonsense of his childhood’s imagining, but in the Jordanian desert, he concluded, he had discovered something much more exciting (Caton 63–67). It is not clear to me whether Lean, in so doing, was discovering the real Orient or merely refurbishing the orientalism he had acquire in his youth. Said would probably argue that he was doing the latter. I am not so sure.

Notes

- 1 The contents of Namier’s lecture, I later discovered, were drawn almost entirely from an article he wrote, entitled “Lawrence as I Knew Him”, published in *In the Margin of History* (1939).

- 2 Wilson only received official recognition for his contribution to the screenplay after a long dispute that involved adjudication by the Producer's Association and the British Screen Writers' Guild.
- 3 Korda actually got as far as shooting some scenes in the Jordanian desert, but the film was aborted, not according to some accounts by Emir Abdullah, Feisal's brother, the founder of the Jordanian state, but by the British government, which feared that the film would alienate the Turks. Rank's film was apparently cancelled for political and other reasons (probably related to the collapse of British prestige following the Suez Crisis in 1956 and the expulsion of Glub Pasha from Jordan).

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