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T. E. Lawrence's SEVEN PILLARS

OF WISDOM: Vision as Pattern

UNDERSTANDABLY, THE ATTENTION PAID to the personality of T. E. Lawrence has taken precedence over close examinations of the narrative form and style of his major work, including *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Many readers of only the first few chapters of this long book probably regard the implied judgment of Herbert Read as confirmed—here is pretentious writing, full of clichés and overblown emotion.¹ Yet, as Robert Graves has pointed out, Lawrence is at his worst when he is most self-consciously literary; when he is simply trying to tell a story, he often writes excellent prose.² E. M. Forster, suggesting that *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* should be read as a kind of pastoral, begins to lead the reader's attention to the book as a work of art, and Victoria Ocampo's analysis (although still centering on Lawrence's own personality) emphasizes the important theme of the will driving toward ascetic spirituality against a recalcitrant body—reminding us of the universal aspect of Lawrence's very personal struggle.³ Perhaps the next step is to try to read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* on its own terms, on the assumption that it may be a successful artistic whole, the form of which is an exemplification of its themes in imagery and tone.⁴ A reader who persists and who brings some attention to his reading may begin to see that there is an inner design to the work, one which holds it together and enables us to discuss it in terms of literature as well as biography. For the purpose of this analysis it is necessary to keep in view the distinction between the real Lawrence recounting things that happened to him in the Arab Revolt, and the fictive Lawrence, the narrator and central figure of the book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

The outward form of the narrative is, of course, clear enough. The ten books are carefully organized to lead us from the almost accidental involve-

ment of Lawrence in the desert campaign to the grand entry of the victorious allies into Damascus. The self-revelations of the real Lawrence—the reflections and self-analysis—are set within the framework of great events, unfolding in a controlled pattern. The first four books rise to the climax of the capture of Akaba; there follows a series of frustrations and abortive efforts, recounted in books five to eight, during which Lawrence himself is tested to the limit of endurance. Then, after the “balancing for the last effort” in book nine, the “triumph” of the subtitle is described in book ten.⁵ Those interested in Lawrence the man have probed this outer narrative for its contradictions and omissions, and have been at pains to measure discrepancies, accounting for these in terms of psychological or even religious factors. Pursuing, however, Forster’s suggestion that *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an expression of the pastoral vision, and removing from the purely biographical sphere Victoria Ocampo’s reference to the conflict between flesh and spirit, between action and contemplation, it is possible to see the inner form of the book begin to emerge.⁶

In chapter three Lawrence presents his view of the desert Arab as the ascetic vehicle in which a creed finds expression and through whom this creed is carried to the city, only to lose its purity and simplicity in the new environment. It is the prophets especially who go through the whole cycle, since they begin in the city, move to the desert, and return to the city, bearing their message. “Their birth set them in crowded places. An unintelligible passionate yearning drove them out into the desert. There they lived a greater or lesser time in meditation and physical abandonment; and thence they returned with their imagined message articulate, to preach it to their old, and now doubting associates” (37). The desert itself is the purifying instrument. Kept simple by circumstance, the Bedu are like an empty vessel, ready to be filled with a vision. Their love of simplicity, illustrated in the anecdote of the best taste being no taste, allows them to feel “the emptiness of the world and the fullness of God” (39). Their only luxuriousness is in “abnegation, renunciation, self-restraint” (40). This desert faith is impossible in towns. “To live, the villager or townsman must fill himself each day with the pleasures of acquisition and accumulation, and by rebound off circumstance become the grossest and most material of men” (40). By contrast—Lawrence expands much later—the strength of the Bedu was “the strength of men geographically beyond temptation: the poverty of Arabia made them simple, continent, enduring. If forced into civilized life they would have succumbed like any savage race to its diseases, meanness, luxury, cruelty, crooked dealing, artifice; and,

like savages, they would have suffered them repeatedly for lack of inoculation" (227). The Semite, Lawrence argues, "hovers between lust and self-denial" (40). They are "incorrigibly children of the idea, feckless and colour-blind, to whom body and spirit were forever and inevitably opposed" (41). And "since the dawn of life, in successive waves they had been dashing themselves against the coasts of flesh"⁸ (40). "One such wave (and not the least) I raised and rolled before the breath of an idea till it reached its crest, and toppled over and fell at Damascus" (41).

Lawrence sets up in this remarkable vision or mythical pattern, the whole fictional context of his story. With the discovery of Feisal (who may be said to stand for the desert Arabs as a whole) the narrator is launched on his enterprise. He himself is the prophet whose word must force the Arabs from their slumber. His meeting with Feisal is rightly tinged with charismatic colours:

I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek—the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory. Feisal looked very tall and pillar-like, very slender, in his long white silk robes and his brown head cloth bound with a brilliant scarlet and gold cord. His eyelids were dropped; and his black beard and colourless face were like a mask against the strange, still watchfulness of his body. His hands were crossed in front of him on his dagger.

I greeted him. He made way for me into the room, and sat down on his carpet near the door. As my eyes grew accustomed to the shade, they saw that the little room held many silent figures, looking at me or at Feisal steadily. He remained staring down at his hands, which were twisting slowly about his dagger. At last he inquired softly how I had found the journey. I spoke of the heat and he asked how long from Rabegh, commenting that I had ridden fast for the season.

"And do you like our place here in Wadi Safra?"

"Well; but it is far from Damascus".

The word had fallen like a sword in their midst. There was a quiver. Then everybody present stiffened where he sat, and held his breath for a silent minute. (92)

The dramatic context of such a scene is the pattern just described; and the writing forges emotional links through the use of evocative detail: Feisal is "pillar-like", the brilliance of his dress is contrasted with the colourless face to suggest power and mystery; he holds a dagger; Lawrence's words fall like a sword. It is a fitting description of the launching of the crusade that will roll against "the coasts of flesh".

The personal drama of the narrator is further linked to the larger myth in the description of Lawrence's passage from city to desert. Before meeting Feisal he has already undergone the first purgation of his new environment, the heat. "My skin was blistered by it, and my eyes ached with the glare of light striking up at a sharp angle from the silver sand, and from the shining pebbles. The last two years I had spent in Cairo, at a desk all day or thinking hard in a little overcrowded office full of distracting noises, with a hundred rushing things to say, but no bodily need except to come and go each day between office and hotel" (85-6). The sloughing off of the city-self and the emergence of the new desert-self will later be fixed in the reader's mind by the Arab clothing Lawrence is given to wear, "splendid white silk and gold embroidered wedding garments", an appropriate emblem of his new dedication (129). Assuming the prophetic role after his "discovery" of Feisal, Lawrence can indulge in visions, orchestrated in suitably exotic terms:

My duty was now to take the shortest road to Egypt with the news: and the knowledge gained that evening in the palm wood grew and blossomed in my mind into a thousand branches, laden with fruit and shady leaves, beneath which I sat and half-listened and saw visions, while the twilight deepened, and the night; until a line of slaves with lamps came down the winding paths between the palm trunks, and with Feisal and Maulud we walked back through the gardens to the little house, with its courts still full of waiting people, and to the hot inner room in which the familiars were assembled; and there we sat down together to the smoking bowl of rice and meat set upon the food-carpet for our supper by the slaves. (99)

But this vision of plenty is one thing and the accomplishment of the goal another; so much depends on Lawrence himself. Self-doubt soon invades the narrative, and is developed in terms of the two conflicts mentioned above—the one between action and contemplation and the other between body and spirit. Lawrence explains how he is really at home, not with men, but with objects; how can he become the leader of a great campaign? Baulking at the job of advisor to the Arab cause, he explains, "that in all my life objects had been gladder to me than persons and ideas than objects. So the duty of succeeding with men, of disposing them to any purpose, would be doubly hard to me: I was not practised in that technique" (117). And later he reflects:

Before me lay a vista of responsibility and command, which disgusted my thought-ridden nature. I felt mean, to fill the place of a man of action; for my standards of value were a wilful reaction against theirs, and I despised their happiness.

Always my soul hungered for less than it had, since my senses, sluggish beyond the senses of most men, needed the immediacy of contact to perceive perception; they distinguished kinds only, not degrees. (284)

This conflict comes to a head in the shooting of Hamed (chapter thirty-one), which erupts in the narrative with explosive force. What is worth noting in the description of this "murder" is the careful preparation for the actual shooting in the account of the narrator's exceptional psychological state, and the painfully emphasized detail. The narrative does not allow us to forget the sick body which has to gather its strength to perform the execution. "My body was very sore with headache and high fever, the accompaniments of a sharp attack of dysentery which had troubled me along the march and had laid me out twice that day in short fainting fits, when the most difficult parts of the climb had asked too much of my strength" (186). Dysentery is described as leaving men subject to "sudden breaks of nerve", and the narrator asks why his trial had to come "this day of all days when I was in pain" (186). When the killing is accomplished, we feel we have witnessed a frightening triumph of will over humanity, the spectacle of the contemplative man driving himself to an extremity to perform an action.⁹ And in the visual presentation of the scene one can justly call attention to a sado-masochistic dwelling on suffering. "He fell down on the weeds shrieking, with the blood coming out in spurts over his clothes, and jerked about till he rolled nearly to where I was" (187). The whole incident is shocking because we are made to feel that simple human compassion is being overridden by the will, and that sickness of the body is affecting the mind so that discipline is too ruthlessly exercised.

As the narrative develops, Lawrence chastizes himself in increasingly bitter terms for his failure of will. When he feels that the Arab movement is being used, that he is no longer part of a great crusade, he is still unable to act decisively, but simply carries on, while lamenting "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 fulfillment came" (514). Unable to extricate himself from this deceit, he finds that "we glozed our fraud by conducting their necessary war purely and cheaply. But now this gloss had gone from me. Chargeable against my conceit were the causeless, ineffectual deaths of Hesa. My will had gone and I feared to be alone, lest the winds of circumstance, or power, or lust, blow my empty soul

away" (514). And further: "Suffice it that since the march to Akaba I bitterly repented my entanglement in the movement, with a bitterness sufficient to corrode my inactive hours, but insufficient to make me cut myself clear of it. Hence the wobbling of my will, and endless, vapid complainings" (569).

He is unable to act because he is not a man of action at all. "As my war was overthought, because I was not a soldier, so my activity was overwrought, because I was not a man of action" (580). Worst of all, we see the narrator unable to imagine that he will achieve his goals as a writer—his failure of will affects the highest purpose he can conceive. The spectacle of the magnificent chieftain Auda causes him to reflect:

The irony was in my loving objects before life or ideas; the incongruity in my answering the infectuous call of action, which laid weight on the diversity of things. It was a hard task for me to straddle feeling and action. I had had one craving all my life—for the power of self-expression in some imaginative form—but had been too diffuse ever to acquire a technique. At last accident, with perverted humour, in casting me as a man of action had given me place in the Arab Revolt, a theme ready and epic to a direct eye and hand, thus offering me an outlet in literature, the technique-less art. Whereupon I became excited only over mechanism. The epic mode was alien to me, as to my generation. Memory gave me no clue to the heroic, so that I could not feel such men as Auda in myself. He seemed fantastic as the hills of Rumm, old as Malory.

Among the Arabs I was the disillusioned, the sceptic who envied their cheap belief . . . (565).

The difficulty described here is discussed in the very first chapter. Lawrence depicts himself as being unable to wear the Arab code as he wears the Arab dress. The narrative evokes the image of a man who suffers a failure of belief, who is torn between two cultures, and is not really at home in either. His actions can proceed from no fixed moral base, yet they must be decisive. "Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith" (30). This conflict remains unresolved, but helps keep up our interest in the narrative and its hero-victim, until it is brought together with the other themes, when Lawrence reaches Damascus.

The second great conflict the narrative invites us to experience is related to the question of action vs. contemplation; it is the war we observe between flesh and spirit, illustrated throughout the book, and comically present in the image of Lawrence reading Malory to overcome his sense of physical disgust (495). In the desert "such exaltation of thought, while it let adrift the spirit, and gave it license in strange airs, lost it the old patient rule over the body.

The body was too coarse to feel the utmost of our sorrows and of our joys" (28).

Immediately after the shooting of Hamed, Lawrence describes how he falls into a deeper illness, during which his mind is freed to work out the strategy of ultimate victory for the Arab cause—a strategy, incidentally, that closely resembles the Chinese and Cuban insurgency methods, with the ideological base in this case the vision of Arab nationalism. This is only one of several instances of the narrative's association of creativity with an escape from the body. It is just because the spiritual is so valued by Lawrence that the body is so despised; he is unable to conceive of man except chained to realities that pull him apart. "They talked of food and illness, games and pleasures, with me, who felt to recognize our possession of bodies was degrading enough, without enlarging upon their failures and attributes. I would feel shame for myself at seeing them wallow in the physical which could only be a glorification of man's cross. Indeed, the truth was I did not like the "myself" I could see and hear" (584). Riding on a camel he sometimes feels in its rocking motion, a release from the degradation of the physical. "Step by step I was yielding myself to a slow ache which conspired with my abating fever and the numb monotony of riding to close up the gate of my senses. I seemed at last approaching the insensibility which had always been beyond my reach: but a delectable land: for one born so slug-tissued that nothing this side fainting would let his spirit free. Now I found myself dividing into two parts" (461). Even more strikingly, after this feeling has passed, "and we did see our bodies, it was with some hostility, with a contemptuous sense that they reached their highest purpose, not as vehicles of the spirit, but when, dissolved, their elements served to manure a field" (477). The two most memorable revelations of this deep rift in the narrator's sensibility are the scenes describing the dead Turks in the moonlight near Akaba and the ultimate disaster of the Deraa expedition, when Lawrence is captured and "the citadel of (his) integrity irrevocably lost" (456).

Standing approximately midway in the narrative, the capture of Akaba generates its own narrative excitement, but here the most revealing passage is the one in which we see Lawrence walking in the moonlight, staring down at the dead bodies of the Turks:

The dead men looked wonderfully beautiful. The night was shining gently down, softening them into new ivory. Turks were white-skinned on their clothed parts, much whiter than the Arabs; and these soldiers had been very young. Close round them lapped the dark wormwood, now heavy with dew, in which the ends of the moonbeams sparkled like sea-spray. The corpses

seemed flung so pitifully on the ground, huddled anyhow in low heaps. Surely if straightened they would be comfortable at last. So I put them all in order, one by one, very wearied myself, and longing to be of these quiet ones, not of the restless, noisy, aching mob up the valley, quarrelling over the plunder, boasting of their speed and strength to endure God knew how many toils and pains of this sort; with death, whether we won or lost, waiting to end the history. (315)

The body is tamed at last, transformed into "a new ivory", a monument of the calm Lawrence desires to share. For "in the physical shame of success" he feels "nothing was worth doing and nothing worthy had been done" (314). Reading such revelations of longing for escape from the body, it is not perhaps fantastic to be reminded of Tolstoy. In both Lawrence and Tolstoy the return to the primitive is never complete because the natural bodily life is not trusted but is always opposed in the name of a higher "spiritual" vision.¹⁰ This is the kind of split in sensibility which D. H. Lawrence pronounced inevitable in the Christian consciousness, and Tolstoy did not escape it, for all his personalized Christianity, nor did T. E. Lawrence, who was too much a product of the stoic public school ethic of Christianity.¹¹

In the Deraa expedition, during which occurs the physical "violation" of Lawrence by the Turks, the narrative reveals a certain sado-masochistic tinge, which leads us to suspect that all the protests against the body appear as necessary correctives to a physical appetite, which, if unchecked by such pressures, might dissolve in sybaritic self-indulgence. A man for whom the body is relatively unimportant would hardly need to devote so much energy to combating it. The undercurrent of the Deraa narrative is a secret fascination with pain as pleasure, echoed elsewhere in the tale. The suffering provides a kind of enjoyment, at least in the retrospect of the narrative. "I had strung myself to learn all pain until I died, and no longer actor, but spectator, thought not to care how my body jerked and squealed" (454). Until he is kicked by the corporal's nailed boots and remembers ". . . smiling idly at him, for a delicious warmth, probably sexual, was swelling through me; and then he flung up his arm and hacked with the full length of his whip into my groin" (454). The description is unsparing; the narrator seems to dote on his physical functions; yet nowhere does he pursue this fact to a conclusion comprehended within the self-analysis—the tension between flesh and spirit is exhibited everywhere and explained nowhere. In this, as in the case of the dichotomy between action and contemplation, the identification of the narrator with the Semitic "myth" discussed earlier is completely forged.¹² Whatever complexities of Lawrence's own nature are concealed or revealed in the book, it is clear that the telling has

established a deep unity between the personal and the epic scale, in terms of thematic identification.

In the end, notwithstanding the weaknesses of Lawrence and the divisions among the Arabs, and despite the British commitments in Europe, Damascus is attained. "When dawn came we drove to the head of the ridge, which stood over the oasis of the city, afraid to look north for the ruins we expected: but, instead of ruins, the silent gardens stood blurred green with river mist, in whose setting shimmered the city, beautiful as ever, like a pearl in the morning sun" (665). The great encompassing vision is achieved, and this story becomes part of the historical cycle earlier conjured up. Another ideal has been carried out of the desert into the corrupting city, and true to the form laid out in the beginning, is seen itself to be at once tainted by its new environment. The ironical intention of the subtitle now becomes clear; this is a "triumph" only in a very limited sense, for the Arabs are soon squabbling among themselves, and the narrator is worn out and disillusioned.¹³ The image of the dead and wounded left by the Turks in the barracks is here the key one, reminding us of the earlier moonlight scene, but without any consolations of mortality.

I stepped in, to meet a sickening stench: and, as my eyes grew open, a sickening sight. The stone floor was covered with dead bodies, side by side, some in full uniform, some in underclothing, some stark naked. There might be thirty there and they crept with rats, who had gnawed wet red galleries into them. A few were corpses nearly fresh, perhaps only a day or two old: others must have been there for long. Of some, the flesh, going putrid, was yellow and blue and black. Many were already swollen twice or thrice life-width, their fat heads laughing with black mouth across jaws harsh with stubble. Of others the softer parts were fallen in. A few had burst open, and were liquescent with decay. (677)

One of the most powerful passages in the book, this description is late-medieval, or decadent romantic, in its loving and horrified dwelling on the obscenities of death.¹⁴ Yet it brings together in remarkable fashion the various strands of the book's meaning. We are made inevitably to contrast these dead with those others under the desert moon, and this experience with the idyllic purity of those in the desert, even the violent ones. For it is in the city, Lawrence seems to show, that we meet the extremes of corruption; or of lust; in Damascus, in Deraa. The Arab movement will be finally betrayed in the city, while in the city, as this image of the victims of war makes clear, we shall be made

to face the pitiful ends of action, and the ultimate disgrace of the human body—its rotten mortality.

The book ends on a note of tension among irreconcilable elements. Nothing seems to be solved, yet a great deal has been done; and the reader has been presented with the intimate portrait of a complex human being, who is comprehensible within the limits of the narrative, whatever biographical echoes sound beyond the pillars of the book. Regardless of the insoluble problems of biography or history the book helped give birth to, it lives as a fiction. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* achieves after all an artistic unity of effect: the unresolved personal conflicts and the incomplete political attainments are brought together to create an epic tinged with ironies—an epic peculiarly suited to the twentieth century, in which action is almost always enmeshed in motives and circumstances that tend to deny it heroic fulfillment.

NOTES

1. Herbert Read, *English Prose Style*, London, 1956, p. 195.
2. Robert Graves, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, London, 1927, pp. 160-1.
3. Victoria Ocampo, 33817 T. E. (*Lawrence of Arabia*), London, 1963.
4. See, for example, Gordon Mills, "T. E. Lawrence as a Writer", *Texas Quarterly*, Volume V, Number 3, (1963), 35-45, and James A. Notopoulos, "The Tragic and the Epic in T. E. Lawrence", *The Yale Review*, LIV (March, 1965), 331-345. Mr. Mills discusses some of the motifs in *Seven Pillars*, while Mr. Notopoulos argues convincingly for the consideration of the work as a modern epic. I have tried to suggest here the connection between Lawrence's Semitic desert myth and the structure of the "epic", such as it is.
5. Lawrence, of course, was well aware of the form, despite his reference to literature as "the technique-less art". See his discussion in the Preface, section IV, under "Privately Printed Texts", and the letter to Edward Garnett, 9 October, 1922, reprinted in David Garnett, *The Essential T. E. Lawrence*, Penguin Books, 1951.
6. See E. M. Forster, "English Prose between 1918 and 1939", collected in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, New York, 1947.
7. Quotations from the Penguin Modern Classics edition, 1965.
8. See also page 152: "Again and again they had arisen, had taken possession, soul and body, of the tribes, and had dashed themselves to pieces on the urban Semites, merchants and concupiscent men of the world".
9. The justification of this execution, that it was necessary to prevent a tribal feud from starting up, does not lessen the horror we feel in reading this part of the narrative.

10. Compare, for example, the position of Olenin in *The Cossacks* with that of Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Both look on, entranced and shocked, at the ability of the "primitive" among whom they are living to take sexuality as a matter of course. Uncle Eroshka has to assure Olenin that love is no sin, while Auda is baffled by the necessity of explaining to Lawrence why he is furious at being disturbed in his tent in the arms of his latest wife.
11. In which body-training, of course, becomes the supposed foundation of morality, but which in its emphasis on the physical often descended to cruelty indistinguishable from sado-masochism, and which by persecution of the intellectual, aggravated the split between "spiritual" and "natural" values. Among many sources, see Harold Nicolson, *Good Behaviour*, London, 1956, p. 263.
12. Although the identification is made both in terms of narrative design and inner feeling, it should be noted that in the case of the Arabs the polarities (flesh-spirit; action-contemplation) achieve relative stability within the cultural and geographical context, whereas Lawrence suffers from being at the centre of their constant clash. The narrator's flight to the desert seems only to aggravate his conflict by isolating it within an environment stripped of distractions and by defining it in terms of primitives who carry similar conflicts with "unconscious" ease.
13. There is also a biographical reason, mentioned on the last page, which Victoria Ocampo interprets as the death of "S. A.", the book's mysterious dedicatee. See Ocampo, p. 72. This does not change the fact that the narrator's disillusionment is comprehensible in terms of his "betrayal" of the vision, and his failure to resolve his own problems.
14. This description, as well as his constant association of cruelty and beauty, connect Lawrence with the *fin de siècle* esthetes. The sado-masochism implicit in this kind of romantic taste is documented in Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, while J. C. Flugel's discussion of masochistic and epicurean asceticisms helps to clarify the precise tone of the narrative at certain key points. See J. C. Flugel, *Man, Morals and Society*, Peregrine Books, 1962, pp. 111-115.