

Tone Mihle Asklund

**T.E. Lawrence's contradictory
creation of legacy and identity in
*Seven Pillars of Wisdom***

Bachelor's thesis in BENG

Supervisor: Yuri Cowan

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



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Abstract

While *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* has lost credibility as a purely historical account of the Arab Revolt after many decades of scrutinization and reinterpretation, it remains the most valuable source of information about T.E. Lawrence himself. By analysing Lawrence's relationship to literary authorship and the generic conventions that shaped his book the juxtaposition reveals the specific ways in which he used his authorship to create a legacy for himself. Lawrence's inconsistent attitude towards his own work illustrates how this process was at times contradictory, and in their contradictions we can see the competing impulses that were at work as he authored *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and his own identity.

Introduction

In the introductory chapter of the autobiographical narrative detailing his campaign with the Hashemite Bedouin during the Arab Revolt of World War 1, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T.E. Lawrence states “In this book also, for the last time, I mean to be my own judge of what to say.”¹ It is a powerful assertion of authenticity and authority, yet it allows for two dual interpretations. Obviously prominent in Lawrence’s mind, judging from the rest of the content in the introductory chapter, is the need to accurately represent what he feels has been either misrepresented or hidden about the Arab Revolt and his role in it. Throughout *Seven Pillars* and in correspondence with friends he bemoans what he calls lies and deceptions having been used to secure Arab cooperation with the British in the war against the Ottoman Empire, and through the quoted passage he invokes the right to tell his own story as he sees fit without the restraint that the war demanded of him. However, the wording and his previous emphasis on the reticence he resorted to during the war makes it clear that Lawrence is not merely taking charge of his historical narrative by choosing what to say, but also by choosing what *not* to say. He invokes not only the right to tell the truth, but to hide parts of it; to not only tell the story of the Arab Revolt and himself in it, but to caretake it; to actively create an impression and representation with pieces missing so as to create a desired effect.

In the years following his early demise in 1935 Lawrence’s legacy has been increasingly scrutinized and renegotiated, and in the worst of these deconstructive analyses *Seven Pillars* has been used merely as a tool to determine the truthfulness and historical accuracy of Lawrence’s claims. Was Lawrence merely trying to write an historical account of the Arab Revolt that was unduly favourable to himself this sort of simplistic analysis that seeks to unmask a fraud would be enough; but *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is not a history book, and a simplistic analysis leaves us with an unfairly simplistic answer to the question of how Lawrence used *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to create and cement his own legacy and identity. In autobiography the author presents an image of themselves for the consumption and interpretation of an audience, and to understand *what* Lawrence is attempting to say about himself through *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* it is necessary to also examine *why* he is saying it, and *how*. A complete understanding would require complete knowledge, and no one, not even Lawrence himself, had or will have all that knowledge available to them. Pieces of the puzzle can still be put together if one knows what pieces will best inform the shape of the whole, and this thesis will engage its areas of focus to best illustrate and explain how

¹ T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 8

Lawrence consciously attempted to create an identity and a legacy for himself through autobiographical authorship. In trying to examine the specific ways in which Lawrence fashioned himself an identity and a legacy through his writing it is important not to take the fact that he chose to do so through an autobiographical book for granted. He could have chosen to tell his story about his time with the Arab Revolt through any number of different mediums and genres; he could have corroborated or collaborated with others who were disseminating his legend for him; he could have stayed silent or confided only in a select few. Since he did end up writing an autobiographical narrative it is easy for a modern scholar to see the existence of *Seven Pillars* as a certainty, but the choices that led to its existence are of as great importance to understanding Lawrence's self-fashioning as are the contents therein. An autobiographical book is not "only" a book: it is a specific site and mode of storytelling, and all stories are shaped by the medium through which they are presented. Examining Lawrence's choice of site and medium for his story will inform our understanding of *why* he chose to tell it in the first place, which in turn will illuminate many of the creative decisions he took and how they shaped his legacy.

Chapter I: Authorship and autobiography

Lawrence offered conflicting reasons as to why he wrote *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. On the 17th of August 1922 he wrote the first letter he ever sent to the playwright and author George Bernard Shaw, who would become a close friend of Lawrence; the two had briefly been introduced through Fitzwilliam Museum curator Sydney Cockerell some months prior but had had no further familiarity. In the letter he asks whether Shaw will read a draft of *Seven Pillars* and give him some feedback, but Lawrence disclaims that, before Shaw commits to reading anything of *Seven Pillars*, he must be told that Lawrence is not a writer and never aspired to be one. However, Lawrence had in fact toyed with the idea of writing books before: in letters to his parents he references past ideas of his to write history and travelogue books.² One prospective work, which was the book he originally conceived the title *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* for, was even explicitly discussed as having overt literary devices and bears a superficial similarity to the actual, eventual *Seven Pillars*: "it recounted adventures in seven type-cities of the East (Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, etc.) and arranged their characters into a descending cadence: a moral symphony."³ He had also already written a thesis about crusader castles in Europe and the Middle-East for his degree at Oxford and

² Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence*, 74

³ David Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 39

had authored two reports on the geography of Sinai: *The Wilderness of Zin* and *Military Report on the Sinai Peninsula*.⁴ Biographer Jeremy Wilson notes that the descriptions of desert landscapes in *The Wilderness of Zin* foreshadow the elaborate descriptions of the same type of scenery in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.⁵

Lawrence might not have applied himself as thoroughly to writing as he had previously done to history, archaeology, or to the Arab Revolt, but he had demonstrated an interest in the creation of the books both in terms of authorship and in technical production: he long harboured a dream of starting a printing-press, a scheme his college-friend Vyvyan Richards was to be involved in, and before his passing in 1935 he planned to install a printing-press in his cottage with which to print *The Mint*.^{6 7} While we can interpret Lawrence saying he was not and never wanted to be a writer as a defence mechanism to lessen the blow to his ego should Shaw provide uncomplimentary feedback, he consistently rejected the term for himself, even after he had admitted in a December 1922 letter to Shaw that “I care very much for [*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*], as it’s been my ambition all my life to write something intrinsically good.”⁸ Consistently in several of his letters he uses the term “born writer” in a manner that reveals a deterministic belief that writers are “born”, not made; as much as Lawrence might have wanted to become one later in his life, he believed himself essentially unsuited or unworthy of the title.⁹

It is telling that, when speaking of *Seven Pillars* in relation to other works of literature, Lawrence does not mention other autobiographies or histories (even rejecting the numerous comparison with Charles Doughty’s *Arabia Deserta* despite the fact that Doughty was a mentor and inspiration to him), but literary and philosophical fiction: “Do you remember my telling you once that I collected a shelf of ‘Titanic’ books [...] and that they were *The Karamazovs*, *Zarathustra*, and *Moby Dick*. Well, my ambition was to make an English fourth.”¹⁰ Lawrence’s own juxtaposition of *Seven Pillars* alongside *The Karamazovs*, *Zarathustra*, and *Moby Dick* serve as an illuminating illustration of what he wished to achieve (but did not necessarily believe himself capable of) with his own book and his authorship. Lawrence was attracted to artists and wanted to be one himself but thought

⁴ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 135, 153-154

⁵ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 140

⁶ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 55, 86

⁷ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 920

⁸ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 165

⁹ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 163, 195, 293, 373

¹⁰ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 149

himself on some fundamental level unable to achieve on the level of his contemporaries.¹¹ He frequently uses words with commercial connotations like “journeyman”, “trade”, and “bricklaying” to refer to his writing instead of more artistic descriptions such as “create”, “author”, and “profession”.

In the Modernist period Lawrence was living and writing in there was increasing industrialization, consumerism, and globalization which meant that writing was becoming more and more prolific. More people were writing than ever before, but a lot of these writers were copywriters, clerks, typists, journalists, and authors of formulaic fiction and short stories that were published in weekly pulp-magazines and periodicals, and a cultural divide differentiated this commercial type of writing from more prestigious, esteemed, and select literature.¹² This dualistic conception of writing in the early 20th century has been described by Sean Latham as “the radical expansiveness of mass culture on the one hand and a tightly restrictive economy of prestige on the other.”¹³ *Seven Pillars* was not merely an account of the Arab Revolt written down for posterity: Lawrence used the opportunity that writing the book would provide him to attempt to create a legacy of himself as an author in the prestigious, exclusive meaning of the word. *Seven Pillars* was not only the *means* to cement and create his own identity, a matter of “setting the record straight”: the great work of literary art that he hoped it would become was to be an identity signifier in and of itself. Despite the fact that he appears to view himself as failing to create on the level of the contemporary and historical artists he admired, the fact that we know that this was his aspiration tells us that the choice of medium and the reception and status he hoped his work would acquire was on his mind while writing *Seven Pillars* and therefore an intrinsic part of its inception.

Lawrence obviously wanted to belong to the “restrictive economy of prestige”, and if he could not, then he refused to be part of the “radical expansiveness of mass culture”; hence his insistence on not really being a “writer”. Following the revelation of his ambition to make an “English fourth”, Lawrence continues: “You will observe that modesty comes out more in the performance than in the aim!”¹⁴ The high bar he set himself doubtlessly contributed to the many qualms he suffered over *Seven Pillars*, and he acknowledged that his ambitions coloured his own perception of his work: “If [*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*] had been simple stuff it wouldn’t have mattered [...] but it’s elaborate and self-conscious: ambitious if you like: and

¹¹ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 370

¹² Sean Latham, “Industrialized Print: Modernism and Authorship”, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*, 165-166

¹³ Latham, “Industrialized Print: Modernism and Authorship”, 166

¹⁴ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 149

that makes failure a discredit. It doesn't matter missing if you don't aim".¹⁵ Seen in the context of Lawrence's habit of denigrating his own writing and of concealing the personal motivations and hopes he had for his authorship, the quoted passage implies these were tools Lawrence used as defences should he fall short of his own aspirations.

After abasing his own writing profusely throughout his first letter to Shaw, Lawrence finds himself having to provide a motive for writing to him when he anticipates that Shaw will likely ask why he's bothering to solicit feedback: "You'll wonder, why if all this is true (and I think it is) I want any decent person still more a person like yourself to read it. Well, it's because it is history, and I'm ashamed for ever if I am the sole chronicler of an event, and fail to chronicle it".¹⁶ Implicit in Lawrence's statement is an audience that the Revolt will be chronicled *to*: for a story to need to be told there must be an audience that needs to hear it. This is a stark contrast to a letter he wrote only five days later on August 22nd to friend and editor Edward Garnett, where he claims that *Seven Pillars* was neither fit to be published nor was it written to be: "So please don't consider the point of publication. That never came into my mind when writing it: indeed I don't know for whom I wrote it, unless it was for myself."¹⁷ Writing once more to Shaw on August 27th, he again stresses that he does not want to publish: this insistence is consistent with his sentiments in his letter to Garnett, but seems to contradict his earlier letter to Shaw wherein he implies that he is writing about the Revolt with a prospective audience in mind. Lawrence also bemoans to Shaw in his first letter how difficult it is to write about the subject-matter: "*Your* first book was not perfect, though it was a subject you had chosen for yourself, and you had an itch to write!",¹⁸ inferring again that Lawrence does not personally want to write a book at all nor would he have chosen the Arab Revolt as his topic if he had aspired to write on his own volition. In his solicitation to Shaw Lawrence is curating an impression that *Seven Pillars* is merely a "professional duty" that he is the only person able to uphold, describing himself as the "sole chronicler of an event" and "the only literate person in the Arab Army".¹⁹

In the representation of himself he hopes to impress upon Shaw Lawrence distances himself from artistic authorship in general and from any personal investment in the book's future; by hiding his true motivations and hopes he is attempting to save face by getting ahead of failure, and the insistence on not publishing while taking deliberate steps towards

¹⁵ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 148

¹⁶ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 145

¹⁷ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 145

¹⁸ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 145

¹⁹ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 145

that end is the most reoccurring example of this behaviour. Lawrence remained irresolute on the issue of publishing up until the publication of the Subscriber's Edition of *Seven Pillars* in 1926 and the abridgment called *Revolt in the Desert* in 1927, but he still circulated his manuscript and solicited feedback most productively in the later years he was writing it. While by his own account he had already been writing *Seven Pillars* for three years by the time he solicited Shaw and Garnett, the August of 1922 was the inception of the period where instead of labouring secretly, he began the circulating drafts of *Seven Pillars* for an audience – all the while creating, implicitly if not purposefully, the impression that it was a secret, private project that he hesitated to let others view. He alternated between glib and insistent on the issue of not publishing, but concurrently he was cultivating an exclusive and prestigious audience that included, but was not limited to: author and playwright George Bernard Shaw, his wife Charlotte Shaw, editor Edward Garnett, Gertrude Bell, author Thomas Hardy, poet and author Siegfried Sassoon, author E.M. Forster, and visual artist Eric Kennington.^{20 21} This network of prestigious and cultured friends not only gave Lawrence feedback on the technical aspects of *Seven Pillars* but also consistently encouraged him to publish it, which Lawrence replied to with thanks and an either playfully coy or stubbornly insistent response on the matter of publishing.

In *Telling Sexual Stories* sociologist Ken Plummer categorises the contributory factors which are instrumental to autobiography: someone who tells the story, something that elicits the story, and someone who receives and interprets the story. The person, persons, occasions, or institutions who elicit the story is called a coaxer.²² In the aforementioned letters to Shaw and Garnett, Lawrence presents himself as responding to two different kinds of coaxers. The first coaxer is external: an audience that he believes needs hearing the story of the Arab Revolt, and by writing *Seven Pillars* he is upholding a duty to this audience and to the Revolt. The second coaxer is internal: he is responding not to a need in a perceived audience but a need in himself to *perform to* an audience. We can sort these two types of coaxers into the rough categories of “requests” and “compulsions”, but make no mistake: the compulsion is also responding to a type of request, albeit a more oblique, obfuscated one: it is the result of existing in a society that the subject might feel a need to confess, explain, justify, or affirm himself to;²³ in a letter to Edward Garnett Lawrence says that *Seven Pillars* was “the whole

²⁰ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 720, 728, 721, 735

²¹ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 150

²² Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds*, 21

²³ Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 64-67

facts *I found it needful to put on record*" (emphasis mine).²⁴ Lawrence started working of *Seven Pillars* during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, where he was an adviser of the British Delegation and worked with Prince Feisal in negotiating the future of Syria.²⁵ By Autumn 1919 he had written enough to make an almost complete first draft, which was unfortunately left by Lawrence at Reading train station by accident and never recovered.²⁶ In the same period the American journalist Lowell Thomas, who had visited Lawrence in Akaba in March 1918, was putting on a travelogue in London: originally titled "With Allenby in Palestine, including the Capture of Jerusalem and the Liberation of Holy Arabia", his portrayal of Lawrence and the liberation of Damascus soon proved to be so popular with audiences that it was renamed "With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia".²⁷ Thomas capitalized on the popularity of the travelogue and in the years to come he would tour, give lectures, and write articles about Lawrence, which Lawrence disavowed but which were nonetheless popular and cemented a romantic image of him to the public, who soon bestowed titles like "Lawrence of Arabia", "king-maker", "prince of Mecca", and "The uncrowned King of Arabia" on him.²⁸

Lawrence was becoming a national hero and romantic figure at the same time as he struggled to negotiate a future for Syria and the Arabs that satisfied his conscience, and his discontent with both events must be accounted for when analysing the context of why he chose to write *Seven Pillars* in the first place. In a letter to Charlotte Shaw from 1924 Lawrence writes to her about how dissatisfied he is with how he is being portrayed and how he feels that much of the praise he is bestowed is not only given based on an inaccurate impression of him, but is also in contradiction with his own values: "it rankles in my mind to be called proud names for qualities which I'd hate to possess ... or for acts of which I'm heartily ashamed".²⁹ While he might have told Shaw that he felt it necessary to tell the story of the Arab Revolt for its own sake, a point he reasserts in the introductory chapter of *Seven Pillars*, the fact that he found his legend being created and disseminated by people other than himself in a manner he disagreed with must also have been a motivation for taking charge of his own historical narrative. Lawrence says as much in a 1923 letter to William Hogarth in the period where Lawrence was debating whether to publish *Seven Pillars* completely, in

²⁴ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 155

²⁵ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 592

²⁶ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 627

²⁷ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 626

²⁸ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 624-626, 633

²⁹ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 739

abridged form, or at all: “Yet Lowell Thomas lurks still in the background, and if his book is the fulsome thing I expect, he will force the truth out of me. It might be better to get my blow in first.”³⁰ Even if Lawrence had started writing the book purely as an exercise for himself with no intention whatsoever of eventually publishing, which is a dubious claim, the public’s attention for him soon made him realize that if he was not going to tell his story then someone else was. Autobiographical narratives are contingent on memories, and what memories are invoked and how they are reconstructed and utilized are specific to the context of writing and telling the narrative.³¹ The writing of *Seven Pillars* and Lawrence’s passages in the introductory chapter where he asserts his right to tell his own story must be seen in the context of the years 1918-1925 and how in that period Lawrence’s legacy was taking shape without his involvement or approval, and it was used to prop up an image of British involvement in the Arab Revolt that he did not agree with. However, if Lawrence had merely wanted to disprove or disavow the incorrect portrayals of him and the prominent reputation as he was beginning to acquire in the early 1920’s, it was not strictly necessary to do so in the form of a autobiographical book, much less one as elaborate as *Seven Pillars*; he also started writing *Seven Pillars* almost immediately following the war and would not have yet experienced the fame that Lowell Thomas’ publicity and his own enlistment in the R.A.F. under a fake name would bring him. No doubt he was motivated by the desire to correct what he felt was an inaccurate image of himself and his wartime experiences in Arabia, but this motivation accounts for only one part of the “coaxing” that led Lawrence to write the book.

Let us return to one of Lawrence’s letters to Edward Garnett where he says that “indeed I don't know for whom I wrote it, unless it was for myself.”³² In telling stories about ourselves we are forced to confront how we might look from the point of view of others, both in the inception and in the production of the narrative. The way we feel we are perceived by others might coax us into presenting a version of ourselves more consistent with who we believe we are or want to become, and in telling the story we anticipate how an audience will perceive what we are telling them and make creative choices accordingly. In this process the narrator-“I” that tells the story composites a subject-“I”, and how the narrator-“I” acts upon this remembered and conceptualized version of the self reveals how the narrator-“I” sees themselves both in the remembered past and in the present.³³ In externalizing our view of

³⁰ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 721

³¹ Smith & Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 24

³² Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 145

³³ Smith & Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 73, 79-80

ourselves we can “discover” ourselves, which might be why journaling, a type of autobiographical narrative, is so commonly touted as a helpful tool to make sense of oneself and one’s actions. These types of life-narratives are in no way free from the literary devices that people might assume are reserved for fiction: in remembering and writing down their experiences authors use select memories to construct a narrative with themes, plot, characters, and motifs. The “I” in an autobiography is first and foremost a character: he might share Lawrence’s name, but he exists only as a way for the actual Lawrence who wrote the story to further his intentions. When Lawrence says he might have written *Seven Pillars* “for himself”, it is possible that he was seeking to understand himself better through this autobiographical method of externalizing the self: what he then chooses to present to the world informs our knowledge of how Lawrence saw himself as much as it does our knowledge of Lawrence.

It is perhaps then not so odd that the process of writing *Seven Pillars* was such a complicated issue for Lawrence: the coaxing he is responding to is so variable that it makes compiling a single response to it a substantial and difficult task. Writing down the efforts of the Arab Revolt for posterity, correcting an unduly favourable and romantic image of himself that is propagated through popular culture, and discovering and coming to terms with who he really is are very different foundations for a narrative and an author would envision different prospective audiences for these different types of narratives. Writing and publishing *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was a process that took roughly seven years, and though in the book a solitary narrator-Lawrence disseminates the story, he is the creation of an actual, historical Lawrence who lived and changed during the writing process; one might say that the narrator-Lawrence is the creation of many different Lawrences. The “different” Lawrences might be responding to separate coaxers and impulses at different points during the writing process, resulting in the extensive rewrites, delays, the tumultuous relationship to his own writing, and his alternating attitudes towards publication.

As early as 1920 Lawrence had considered publishing an abridgment of *Seven Pillars* in America, which was to fund the purchase of land and materials for the printing press he hoped to start with Vyvyan Richards, but this abridgment was abandoned.³⁴ In 1922 Edward Garnett offered to create a new abridgment for Lawrence from the Oxford text manuscript, which Lawrence tentatively agreed to. Even though this time also Lawrence’s motive was that of monetary gain, he rejected Garnett’s job-offer as an editor on a new literary magazine,

³⁴ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 634

all the while wrestling with his professed dislike of publishing for money as well as what he felt was an untrue and unfairly favourable impression of himself in the abridgement.³⁵ Despite his claims of not wanting to leave the R.A.F. or publish the abridgment he made several references to possibly living on the income that publishing it would provide him with, and biographer Jeremy Wilson suggests that Lawrence displayed reckless behaviour in the R.A.F. at the same time which might have stemmed from a feeling of future financial security.³⁶ When hearing of the abridgment-scheme in 1923 George Bernard Shaw pressured Lawrence intensely to publish the whole *Seven Pillars* first, and at the same time the news broke of Lawrence's enlistment in the R.A.F. under a false name; the effect of both incidents on Lawrence was that he stalled any further work on the abridgment and clung harder to his existence in the R.A.F..³⁷ The confusion and tumult Lawrence experienced just as he had reached a tentative final decision on publishing the abridgment made him reconsider the publication of *Seven Pillars*, and it is in letters to friends about the various possibilities that he first expresses the idea of a Subscriber's Edition for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.³⁸

While the abridgement, which was meant only for the American market, had initially been conceived as a way for Lawrence to make money while avoiding publicity in England, he ended up taking none of the profits from the abridgment, eventually published as *Revolt in the Desert*, nor the Subscriber's Edition of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, citing his reluctance to profit from his wartime experiences in Arabia.³⁹ As honest a motive as that probably was, the result was that Lawrence was left virtually broke and in debt, and while this was no doubt an additional stressor for Lawrence, it also cemented the image of him as a penniless and eccentric writer that was much more in line with the previously mentioned "economy of prestige" that mythicised many of the great writers of the early 20th century and which Lawrence wanted to be a contemporary of. The fact that Lawrence deliberately ended up not earning any money from either *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* or *Revolt in the Desert* despite mentioning monetary gain several times early in the writing process has not only become a fixture of his legacy in and of itself, but this also means that we must put greater emphasis on the other impulses that informed the writing and publishing of *Seven Pillars*.

How different the impulses that led Lawrence to write and publish *Seven Pillars* were would account for much his behaviour during the writing and publication process and

³⁵ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 685-687

³⁶ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 690-693

³⁷ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 697-702

³⁸ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 721

³⁹ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 765

understanding them provides a focus with which we can analyse how he attempted to reconcile these difficult differences in himself, his work, and his audience. Analysing select passages in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and comparing them with an earlier draft of the book called the Oxford text provides some examples of illuminating changes that he made during the writing process that illustrate the specific difficulties he faced in trying to reconcile the competing motivations and coaxers. The passages chosen for analysis are the ones most conducive to showing how Lawrence wrangled with the different motivations for writing *Seven Pillars*, which informs our understanding of how he attempted to reconcile them into a conclusive narrative while he also attempted to create and reconcile his identity and his prospective legacy.

Chapter II: Self-representation and identity in *Seven Pillars*

Any textual analysis that uses interpretation to suggest authorial motivations and intended meanings behind ambiguous passages stands the risk of facing objections from people who insist that there is nothing conclusive to be gained from such analyses, and this kind of textual analysis can be accused of being inappropriately psychoanalytical and prescriptive. The arguments that make up either side of this debate will not be further discussed, but it is a relevant issue to address because in this specific case the author considered the ambiguousness in his narrative a strength and an intrinsic part of his work. In a 1923 letter to the author Lionel Curtis Lawrence says that “Isn’t it just faintly possible that part of the virtue apparent in the book lies in its secrecy, its novelty, and its contestability?”⁴⁰ This is not to say that Lawrence himself would have concurred with or even approved of the specific analysis in this thesis; merely that he would have agreed that, in the case of *Seven Pillars*, the ambiguity that invites and informs such analysis is inherent and intentional. The crux of this chapter is that not only can we extrapolate certain things about Lawrence from his autobiographical writing through textual analysis, but that this type of interaction between author and audience was something he wanted for his own authorship; this allows us to contextualize the creative decisions in his narrative as being deliberate acts in the service of creating a certain image and legacy for himself.

Let us repeat in rough detail the different, yet related impulses already covered that would have influenced Lawrence during the writing of *Seven Pillars*: the chronicling of the Arab Revolt for posterity, the wish to be an author of a great work of literature, the wish to correct what he felt was an inaccurate portrayal of himself and the Revolt, and the wish to

⁴⁰ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 183

understand himself through externalization. Each motivation is powerful enough to guide Lawrence and his creative decisions in different directions and each could result in a book with different prospective audiences. The different motivations were also difficult to reconcile in that indulging one could be counter-productive to the achievement of another: most obviously there is a conflict between the premises of writing *Seven Pillars* as an historical account of the Arab Revolt and of writing *Seven Pillars* to gain understanding of himself and his role in it, as the two approaches would necessarily result in two different subjects of focus: the Revolt, or Lawrence in the Revolt. By his own admission Lawrence ended up writing a narrative much more personal and intimate than a purely historical account of the Revolt would have been: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is, as Lawrence clearly states in the preface, “a personal narrative” that “does not pretend to be impartial”.⁴¹ A reoccurring qualm he had about the textual contents of *Seven Pillars* was about to which degree he could or would expose himself and the impact that his divulgements would have on his audience’s perception of him; Lawrence preoccupation and consistent struggle with this aspect of his autobiography accounts for this chapter’s focus on justification, confession, and exhibition in the analysis of how he wrote *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

After August 1922, when he first solicited feedback from George Bernard Shaw and Edward Garnett, Lawrence increasingly corresponded with friends and contemporaries about his writing-process on *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Despite his enduring reputation as a reticent and coy figure, he is surprisingly candid in epistles to friends about his need to conceal and obfuscate aspects of himself in *Seven Pillars*, even if he’s not always completely transparent about *what* he needs to conceal; several times he admits to substituting the explicit truth for something of representational value. In a letter to Edward Garnett from September 1922 Lawrence struggles with the nature of autobiographical “truth” in his writing: “*The personal revelations should be the key of the thing: and the personal chapter actually is the key, I fancy: only it’s written in cypher. [...] on no account is it possible for me to think of giving myself quite away. There would be only two ways out of this — one to do like Pepys, and write it in cypher, as I have done — one to write what is not true, or not complete truth — and the second I don’t like.*”⁴² (emphasis mine). Lawrence acknowledges that he has written something that is not “true”, but that he still feels that it represents “truth”, and that the words he has written has representational rather than biographical accuracy. It is important to

⁴¹ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

⁴² Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 154

emphasize that Lawrence is not talking about merely *withholding* information when he's discussing his inhibitions like in the aforementioned letter to Garnett: he is not hiding the "personal revelations" but disguising them, and whatever he dares not say explicitly is left in the text for an audience to decipher.

Lawrence himself likened the purpose of the book to that of confession in a particularly vulnerable and frustrated letter to Robert Graves from 1924: "its sincerity, I fancy, absolute, except once where I funk'd the distinct truth, and wrote it obliquely. I was afraid of saying something, even to myself. The thing was not written for anyone to read. Only as I get further from the strain of that moment, confession seems a relief rather than a risk."⁴³ When recalling memories, we try to make sense of and establish control over the present by creating a narrative that establishes continuity with the past, and creating a narrative of ourselves and our lives through memory is a type of autobiographical storytelling.⁴⁴ What memories we choose to invoke are contingent not only on the circumstances in which they are recalled, but also on what memories we consider to be indicative of ourselves.⁴⁵ Deciding what memories and experiences are indicative of oneself and what they will become signifiers of in the minds of the audience was an additional difficulty that Lawrence faced during the writing process of *Seven Pillars*, and it would have been exacerbated by his inability to decide who his audience really was. Here it becomes necessary to attempt to extrapolate *what* exactly Lawrence was so hesitant to put into writing, and doing so will help us understand why he felt the need to include it in disguised form when he obviously feared the consequences of putting it in print.

Perhaps the most prolific discussion about *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that has taken place since Lawrence's death is about the veracity of his description of a sexual assault and flogging that he claimed to have suffered at the hands of Ottoman forces in the town of Deraa. It has become a mainstream enough point of discussion that a new reader who picks up the Wordsworth Classics Edition of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* with Angus Calder's 1996 Introduction will believe the Deraa incident to be entirely fabricated before having read the book themselves.⁴⁶ Proving whether the Deraa incident as Lawrence described it was true, distorted, or invented is not within the scope of this thesis; what *is* important is that regardless of its veracity its inclusion in *Seven Pillars* was extremely contentious for Lawrence, and

⁴³ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 210

⁴⁴ Nicole Maurantonio, "The Politics of Memory", 1

⁴⁵ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 40

⁴⁶ Angus Calder, "Introduction" in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Wordsworth Classics of World Literature 1996 Edition)

even if it was wholly invented its invention and inclusion is of tremendous analytical importance when examining Lawrence's self-representation in *Seven Pillars*. As Smith and Watson say in *Reading Autobiography*, "Any utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer."⁴⁷ Lawrence agonized a great deal over writing and including the Deraa chapter, and his focus on it in other letters alone makes it a probable candidate as the event Lawrence was referring to when he told Graves that he once "fucked the distinct truth, and wrote it obliquely".⁴⁸ A passage excised by the time *Seven Pillars* was published was this revealing wording about the painful experiences at Deraa: "and which had journeyed with me since, a fascination and terror and morbid desire, lascivious and vicious perhaps, but like the striving of a moth towards its flame."⁴⁹ A.W. Lawrence himself, T.E. Lawrence's younger brother, referred to this excised passage in relation to Lawrence's flagellation disorder and claimed that the passage inferred that "the beating he received at Deraa resulted in a longing for a repetition of the experience."⁵⁰ The revelation years after Lawrence's death of the fact that he enlisted a young man to flog him to the point of orgasm during his stay in the R.A.F has solidified the interpretation that the Deraa incident was Lawrence's way of confessing, in "cypher", his own fascination with and indulgence in homosexual masochism.⁵¹

A code or a cypher is meant to be solved and interpreted by only select people, and the implicit audience is important because it shows that Lawrence in his reticence was not only concealing aspects of himself to present a better image of himself for posterity but that he simultaneously wanted to divulge something that only an exclusive audience would or could engage with. If this exclusive audience was the previously mentioned network of friendly writers and visual artists that Lawrence distributed his manuscript of *Seven Pillars* to before its publication, it makes sense that he would also hesitate to publish it for a common audience. Lawrence made several comments about how the abridgement, which does not contain the description of the assault at Deraa, was more suitable for general publication.⁵² Additionally, he wrote to Edward Garnett about his decision not to include the death of the young Ageyli Farraj, who had served Lawrence as a manservant during the Revolt, in the abridgment: "The 'private delectation' of 115 people is better than the public delectation of

⁴⁷ Smith & Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 15

⁴⁸ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 210

⁴⁹ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Oxford Text), Wilson ed., 502

⁵⁰ John E. Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence*, 428

⁵¹ Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, 428-437

⁵² Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 690

10,000. My men are not to walk the common street.”⁵³ Lawrence not only seemingly puts a value on exclusivity in this exchange, which serve as an additional illumination on his thoughts about prestige and exclusivity in the publication of literary works, but seen in the context of the other deletions in *Revolt in the Desert*, namely the Deraa incident, it seems he resisted putting the most personal and intimate parts of *Seven Pillars* into the abridgment and ensuingly into the hands of a wider audience. This might be because the principal audience Lawrence wrote *Seven Pillars* for was not a general audience, but the network of friends and peers he had already distributed the manuscript to; whatever prospective audience he had in mind it was certainly a select one, as seen by the elaborate and exclusive Subscriber’s Edition *Seven Pillars* was eventually published as and the fact that a trade edition was not published until shortly after his death.

In a letter to Edward Garnett dated 12.11.22, Lawrence writes this about editing *Seven Pillars*: “I’ve got on to Akaba with the cutting-up process [...] There is a good deal coming out of the Akaba history: I feel a horrible satisfaction when I’m able to cut a piece out of myself, and draw the edges neatly together.” There is no way to know for sure what chapter, event, or passages Lawrence was referring to with “the Akaba history”, as Akaba is mentioned several times throughout the book and Lawrence stayed there for periods of time after its capture on July 6th, 1917. However, a significant event in Akaba, included in the draft called the Oxford text but cut by the time the Subscriber’s Edition of *Seven Pillars* was published, details how an Ageyli youth and a British soldier were caught in “open enjoyment” and subsequently punished for their sexual relations with flogging. Lawrence writes that he told the offending British soldier that “he was not being condemned by me morally, since neither my impulses nor my convictions were strong enough to make me a judge of conduct.”⁵⁴ Although Lawrence writes openly about homosexual relationships between Bedouin throughout *Seven Pillars* this is the only instance of an interracial homosexual relationship, one that is explicitly if not wholly sexual and one that Lawrence found himself having to personally engage with as a person of authority in Akaba.

Lawrence ends the description of the event with this passage: “The others learnt from his misfortune, and we heard of no second case of British being mixed up with Arabs: which was a good thing, for many reasons other than the sanitary.”⁵⁵ Since Akaba was such an important part of the Arab Revolt and is therefore mentioned repeatedly throughout the book,

⁵³ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 227

⁵⁴ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Oxford Text), Wilson ed., 529

⁵⁵ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Oxford Text), Wilson ed., 531

it is not necessary that Lawrence was referring to this specific Akaba incident in his letter to Garnett. However, seen in context with the previously mentioned excised passage about Deraa the deletion of the Akaba story forms a pattern of Lawrence removing wordings that could indicate his own interest in homosexual masochism: the deleted Deraa passage and the Akaba story explicitly mention his own “morbid desire” and his weak “impulses and convictions” that position the homosexual acts in a context closer to Lawrence himself than his tender and romantic yet anthropological descriptions of Bedouin homosexuality. Whatever Akaba story he was indeed referring to though, his wording of “cut a piece out of myself and draw the edges neatly together” could be an illuminating choice of words regarding the matter of his notions of autobiographical revelations: he is not “cutting (him)self” out, which would imply he’s simply removing his role as an historical actor from the narrative of the book; he’s cutting “a piece out of (him)self”. There is a form of catharsis and closure alluded to in his words, in which the deletion of his recollections equalates a deletion of that experience and that part of himself, which allows him to “draw the edges neatly together” and stay closed and covert as opposed to the openness and revelations he feared to go through with, all the while seeking confession.

In a letter to Charlotte Shaw from 1924 he talks about his reservations about putting the Deraa incident into print, and a significant passage in this letter reveals that not only did Lawrence consider and dread the contemporary reaction that this particular revelation would receive, but that he was also concerned about how it would impact his legacy: “You may call this morbid: but think of the offence, and the intensity of my brooding over it for these years. It will hang about me while I live, and *afterwards if our personality survives.*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁶ In a 1928 letter to Bernard Shaw, two years after the publication of *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence explicitly addresses the fact that people would want to engage in analysis of his authored works to better understand him as a person, although he disparages the results it would yield: “*The Mint* is a private diary, interesting the world only in so far as the world might desire to dissect my personality. And, like my betters, I disapprove of vivisection. Things so discovered aren’t worth the cost of finding.”⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that in this letter he again displays a reluctance to publish his work but that by the time of his death in 1935 he had already circulated *The Mint* in a matter similar to how he disseminated *Seven Pillars* before its publication; though he delayed publishing *The Mint* for several years so as

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 739

⁵⁷ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 280

not to damage the reputation of the R.A.F, he planned to print it at a printing press which was to be installed at his cottage and he had ordered collotypes of the prospective cover before his death.^{58 59} Although Lawrence seems in his respective letters to the Shaws very little enthused by the prospect of people using his books to “dissect [his] personality”, seen together with his statements about writing *Seven Pillars* “in cypher” it would seem that Lawrence is consciously creating an image of himself that is palatable enough to the masses while leaving a palimpsest of himself for the benefit of a few, which together with his openness about this process to friends creates the impression of an enigmatic, ambiguous, and exclusive figure; traits that since the publication of *Seven Pillars* and Lawrence’s death have become synonymous with his myth.

Part of what makes analysing *Seven Pillars* and Lawrence himself so difficult yet so tantalizing for a scholar is how Lawrence displays a habit of being exceptionally frank about some things that could be seen as indecent or obscene while also staying reserved, ambiguous, and deceptive when it comes to other aspects of himself. He writes openly about private bodily functions, illness and weakness, the sexual indulgences of others, how revolting he found the processes of sex and childbirth, and his own professed celibacy, without mentioning any apprehension about sharing these things in the text or in letters to friends; yet he hides his own sexual interests in cypher and does not mention his own illegitimacy at all. Lawrence’s laments about how he is giving himself away and exposing himself are almost always written in the context of mentioning the Deraa episode, even though Lawrence describes many other private, shameful, or regretful moments in *Seven Pillars*. A permeating theme in *Seven Pillars* is how Lawrence feels duplicitous in his dual role as a British soldier and an Arab agent who is serving the contradictory goals of the British Empire and Arab self-government, and this problematization is conceptualized as crises of identity several times throughout the book; the crucial difference here is that *this* negotiation of contradictory identities is openly discussed in the text, while his homosexuality and masochism are relegated to cypher and therefore to a more exclusive audience.

Methods and genres of storytelling are informed by cultural and historical conventions, and how we formulate ourselves is dependent on the language available to us based on our belonging in different social groups.⁶⁰ In knowing who you are and what you have experienced you are dependent on the vocabulary and signifiers you can access and

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 920

⁵⁹ Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 868-869,

⁶⁰ Smith & Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 81

utilize to make sense of yourself and your experiences, which means that the creation and understanding of identity is socially and situationally contingent.⁶¹ The autobiographical author's awareness and understanding of themselves is informed by their identification with different groups and the language and discourses these groups utilize, which in turn shape how the author understands and presents themselves as a character in a story; autobiography might be such a helpful tool to make sense of oneself because the author is processing their role in society through the discursive language of their social groups while choosing what memories and experiences they consider emblematic of their life and identity. Herein lies the possibility of complication if the author either will not or cannot articulate memories and experiences that they consider intrinsic to their understanding of themselves.

In Lawrence's case it is clear that he struggled with articulating and including his homosexual masochism in a way that was truthful to himself while not having access to the language and sense of belonging to a social group that would enable him to describe this struggle openly as part of his history. His identity as an Englishman, an Oxford Graduate, a scholar, archaeologist, and Orientalist provided him with the identifying language that allowed him to contextualize himself as torn between his duty to Britain and his sentiment towards the Arabs, between allegiances, and between places of belonging. In his first letter to Shaw in 1922 Lawrence wrote that "In my case, I have, I believe, taken refuge in second-hand words: I mean, I think I've borrowed expressions and adjectives and ideas from everybody I have ever read, and cut them down to my own size, and stitched them together again."⁶² The biggest tradition Lawrence is drawing from was articulated by Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, where he deconstructs how a long-standing power-imbalance between East and West has influenced academic scholarship and writing about "the Orient" for centuries; Orientalism is described as an "intellectual authority over the Orient within Western Culture".⁶³ The Orientalist tradition, in which the East is cast as a place of sensuality and sexual deviancy, is what allowed Lawrence to write so openly about Bedouin homosexuality as long as he maintained an anthropological distance to it, but it is also what demanded that distance in the first place. The vast canon of Orientalist literature that Lawrence had access to, including the previously mentioned *Arabia Deserta* by Lawrence's mentor Charles Doughty, offered a discursive language and established tradition of British involvement in the East that Lawrence could use to contextualize his own

⁶¹ Smith & Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 32

⁶² Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 145

⁶³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 19

experiences as an Englishman in Arabia and his ensuing crises of identity and allegiance. The “going native”, “noble savage”, White Saviour narratives that Orientalism creates, enables, and proliferates were common enough that he had a tradition and discursive language available to write his own version of these narratives that he could then integrate it into his identity openly – not so with other aspects of his identity that he tried to reconcile and understand in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

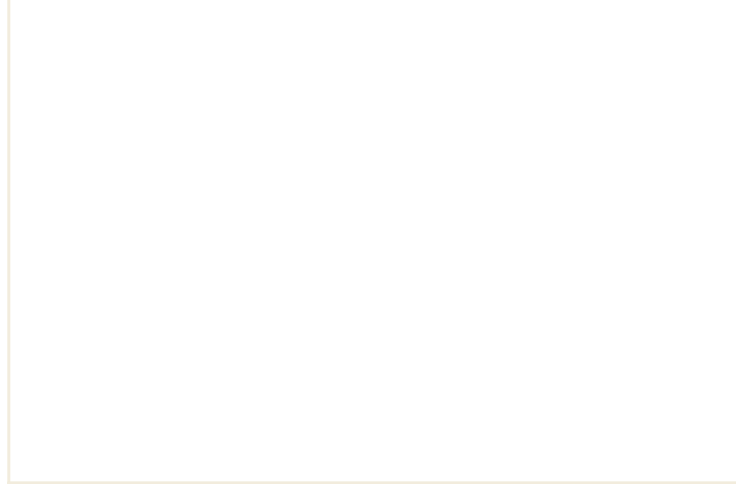
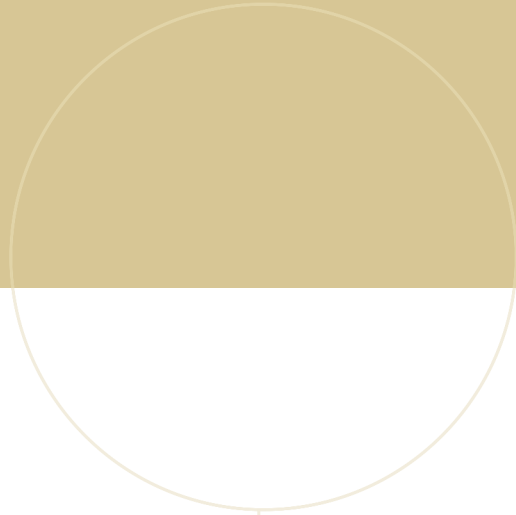
Importantly, these elusive aspects of him were not deleted from the book altogether, but disguised in a way that made them accessible only to a few. This deliberate interactivity between author and audience shows Lawrence’s preoccupation with how the book would shape his legacy and the fact that he was aware that that was what it was doing, as well as illustrating how he hoped people would engage with it: as a work of literary art and not merely as an historical account. Consider again the passage from the 1923 letter from Lawrence to Lionel Curtis where Lawrence says that “part of the virtue apparent in the book lies in its *secrecy*, its *novelty*, and its *contestability*” (emphasis mine).⁶⁴ Secret, novel, and contestable: these descriptors demonstrably apply to both *Seven Pillars* as a text as well as to Lawrence’s behaviour while writing and publishing it, and they are equally descriptive of how his myth and legacy have taken shape after his death.

Seven Pillars of Wisdom is not only a great work of literature that stands on in its own merits; as Lawrence’s magnum opus and the only authorial work of his published while he was still alive it is the largest primary source available with which we can analyse, understand, and contextualize Lawrence. While the historicity of some of its contents have been put under scrutiny as Lawrence’s myth has been renegotiated and retold, the ambiguity and contradictions that Lawrence imbued it with makes it repurposable and reinterpretable as culture and paradigms of historical and literary analysis evolve. The choice of writing *Seven Pillars* as an autobiography and the creative decisions he took in its construction continue to inform our knowledge of Lawrence as a person and an historical actor. Lawrence’s role in the Arab Revolt might have been the arena where his fame grew from, but it was in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* he cultivated it and used it to his own ends, which is why it remains such a paramount document to consider and analyse in the effort to understand how Lawrence viewed himself and what he wanted others to view him as.

⁶⁴ Garnett, ed., *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, 183

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Norwegian University of
Science and Technology