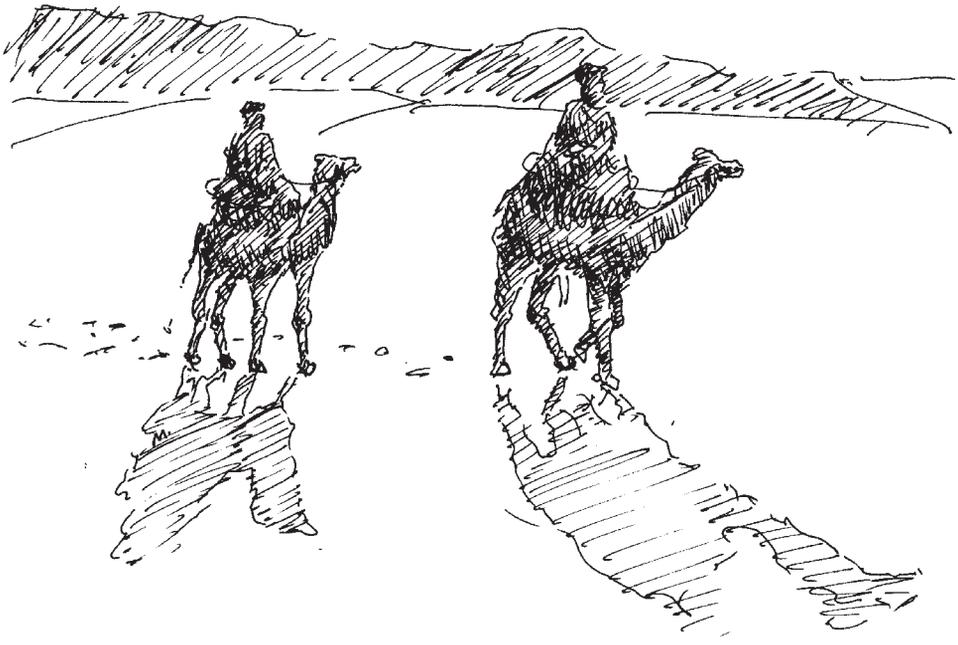


Ewa Łukaszyk

**Friendships of the Desert:
The Europeans in Arabia**



Ewa Łukaszuk

Friendships of the Desert: The Europeans in Arabia

The interior of the Arabic Peninsula, never colonized nor directly controlled by any European power, has always constituted a tempting attraction for numerous European travellers and adventurers. First explored as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century and described in the *Narrative and Voyages of Ludovicus Vertomannus, Gentelman of Rome*, printed in Italy in 1510, still remained a mystery at the time of Richard Burton. Even nowadays, several decades after the oil boom, the central Arabia, a region where nearly a half of the population actually consists of immigrants, including numerous Westerners, is often seen as an alien, dangerous, and impenetrable reality, the only heart of darkness that remains from the time of the colonial explorers. Like any sanctuary, actually far too fragile to survive.

The intent of coming back to the adventurous era of Lawrence of Arabia is thus a nostalgic one. On the other hand, speaking of friendship in such a context clashes not only against the Huntingtonian vision of the world, but also against the deconstructing tradition established by Edward Said and his followers. The analysis contained in the third part of *Orientalism* accentuates the shortcomings of the vision represented by the “Oriental experts,” such as Thomas Edward Lawrence, David George Hogarth, or Gertrude Bell, who allegedly encountered not living beings capable of friendly feelings, but an immutable, abstract entity, “the Arab.” Nonetheless, “agents of empire, friends of the Orient” is how Said qualifies them:

They formed a “band” – as Lawrence called it once – bound together by contradictory notions and personal similarities: great individuality, sympathy and intuitive identification with the Orient, a jealously preserved sense of personal mission in the Orient, cultivated eccentricity, a final disapproval of the Orient. For them all the Orient was their direct, peculiar experience of it. In them Orientalism and an effective praxis for handling the Orient received their final European form, before the Empire disappeared and passed its legacy to other candidates for the role of dominant power.¹

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 2003, p. 224.

In these optics, the abstract concept of “the Orient” is neither a territory to occupy nor a problem to tackle, but a personified object of all kinds of affects, going from fascination, friendship, love, till “the final disapproval.”

As an autobiographical work that invites an immediate and simple-minded reading, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922) actually brings about several quite convincing images of friendship, including the relationship between the author and Auda Abu-Tayi. Yet the requirements of post-colonial analysis are particularly severe on such a point. Following their school of suspicion, A. Clare Brandabur and Nasser al-Hassan Athamneh comment:

Indeed the self/other relationship common to all autobiography is complicated in the imperial model by the disparity of power, which is further distorted by what Fanon called the imperialist’s requirement not merely for submission, but, perversely, for love from the subordinate. *The Seven Pillars* adds the ultimate twist to this relationship: an Oriental expert who comes to see himself as inferior to those he had presumed to dominate. In Lawrence’s admission that he saw in himself no such heroism as that of Auda Abu-Tayi, we have essentially Kipling’s less elegant “You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din.”²

The post-colonial way of deconstructing the relations of power and dominance, schematic as it is, works for most contexts. Nonetheless I have always had a controversial, yet persistent impression that the Arabs, especially those uncolonized Arabs of the central Arabia, the “pure” ones,³ constituted an exemption in the mental framework of the colonial era. They were something else, nobler, more admirable, not in the humble sacrifice of the water-bearer saving the life of the white soldier,⁴ but in quite a different, yet specific meaning: perhaps even placed in the position of a secret, non-revealed *superego* of the Western man. In any case, desired friends among colonial servants. This positive, even if muted prejudice in favour of the Arabs might be a distorted echo of a very distant past, perhaps of the exquisiteness, reinforced in legends, of the Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages, of which the Europeans got merely glimpses in Spain and at the time of crusades. Curiously, the English seem particularly prone to the Arabian charm, but they are by no means the only Europeans to do so.⁵ Be as it may, it is

² A. Clare Brandabur and Nasser al-Hassan Athamneh, “Problems of Genre in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*,” *Comparative Literature* 52.4 (Autumn, 2000), p. 322.

³ Said deconstructs also the myth of this supposed Arab purity and refinement as a part of the orientalist syndrome, “associated with Arab perdurability, as if the Arab had not been subject to the ordinary process of history” (*Orientalism*, op. cit., p. 230).

⁴ Gunga Din is a Bhishti, an Indian water-bearer who saves the white soldier’s life in Kipling’s poem written in 1892. As Gunga Din is shot and killed, the Englishman regrets the abuses committed against him and recognizes his superior humanity revealed in the act of sacrificing his own life to save the other. Nonetheless, neither the sacrifice nor the regret contributes to modify the general framework of colonial relations.

⁵ The limited space of this essay forces me to skip many interesting cases, such as the Dutch scholar and explorer Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, whose photographs of Mecca would add a parallel thread to the analysis of the visual documents which is attempted here. For a presentation of this figure, see Ziauddin Sardar, *Mecca. The Sacred City*, London–New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2014, pp. 277–280. In Sardar’s

probably incorrect to level the Arab with any Indian companion of the Englishman, no matter how dear they might seem to the colonial childhoods. First of all, Arabia is an adult's dream. It plays a particular role as a powerful, appealing alternative in relation to Western social and cultural environment. Penetrating deep into the wilderness, the Europeans found their *alter ego*, the point of extimacy, to use the Lacanian-Žižekian vocabulary, sort of counter-intimate relationship, an inverted closeness encountered at the maximal distance. No wonder why Mecca became, as we will see, a crucial point also in their imaginary geography.

I.

The vogue of “becoming an Arab” had persisted for more than a century in the aristocratic milieux all over Europe, having left behind an important archive of such materials as painted, engraved, and photographic portraits in Arab garb, produced both by the adventurers and those who merely posed for their pictures in comfortable ateliers in Europe, without bothering to travel to the Middle East. This pleasure of wearing Arabian has no equivalent in any other ethnic attire of the colonial world. It accompanies the tendency to stretch the limits of the dream till the brink of transforming it into the reality. In many cases, the fashionable eccentricity is also at the brink of social alienation and perhaps of sheer madness.

Wacław Rzewuski, who by 1820 was still one of the first Europeans to boast of having reached the central Arabia, became a figure celebrated in the Polish Romantic consciousness that tended to take him more seriously than he deserved. As we see him today, confronting his narration with what we know about the history of the Arabian Peninsula, he seems a case coming dangerously close to monomania. Like Anne Blunt later on, he travelled for the reputed Arabian horses, or at least chose the horses for his excuse. For sure, at least in the Polish case, the Arabian horse was not a novelty; it had arrived with the Turks. Already in 1778, Franciszek Ksawery Branicki founded a stud in Szamrajówka that soon excelled in breeding those horses. No wonder that it was also the time of the legendary expeditions in search of the finest specimens: firstly by Kajetan Burski working for the family Sanguszko and secondly by Rzewuski. But in the latter case the interest in buying horses was merely a cover for a megalomaniac cultivation of his own legend as “the emir of all the Arabs” or allegedly the leader of the influential Anizah confederation which was to produce Ibn Saud's dynasty several decades later. Of course, nothing was true in this story narrated back at home. No wonder thus that in spite of his alleged position in local politics, Rzewuski seems to pay so little attention to the human reality of the region. The content of his Arabian journal-treatise (written

appreciation, his photographs of Mecca are quite opposite of the stereotype of picturesque Oriental chaos, showing “a well-planned city nestling in a valley between mountains, with handsome, evenly distributed houses surrounding the Sacred Mosque. The Meccans, mostly sitting and in formal dress, look serious but elegant. The pilgrims, photographed in groups and in their national costumes, appear tired, but happy to be photographed” (p. 279).

in French and profusely illustrated with watercolours) corresponds to its title: *Sur les chevaux orientaux et provenant des races orientales*.⁶ If one admits that Rzewuski actually reached as far as Najd and Jabal Shammar, fact of which we cannot be sure, he did not invest too much time and attention in the detailed description of those unexplored regions. He concentrated obsessively on the horse, scarcely commenting on folklore and tribal structures. He was one of those early alienated travellers, taking Arabia for an opportunity to dream. To dream about dominating the Bedouin, to rule over them, not to become friends with them.

The time of the Romantic adventures was undoubtedly an era of solitary, megalomaniac fantasies. Yet this situation was to change in the decades to come, with the explorers determined to penetrate not only the physical, but also the mental and spiritual spaces of Arabia. A place apart in this story going beyond the usual colonial patterns is reserved to women, such as Anne Blunt, Evelyn Cobbold, and several others, for whom, as for the politically disinherited Polish aristocrat in times of the partition of Poland, the Orient constituted not necessarily the playground of imperial interests, but first of all a parallel world offering a perspective of evasion. Half a century after Rzewuski, the horses were still an excuse for the grand-daughter of Byron. Anne Blunt, having travelled to Arabia with her husband, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, founded the famous stud Crabbet, contributing for the translation of the Arabic concept of *asil* into the European notion of a pure-bred horse. The archives conserve of her the photographic testimony of “becoming the Orient.” The portrait of Anne Blunt with her favourite mare Kasida, produced by unknown photographer around 1900, shows the aristocrat in Bedouin attire, garbed in a heavy, plain, yet extremely ample *abaya*, a headdress and a double *aqal* (headband). Curiously, this is clearly a male costume. Again, curiously, the horse does not wear Arabian: the bridle and the saddle we can see on the photograph belong to the efficient, minimalistic, perfectly Western type. Blunt’s fascination with clothes, male clothes, and perhaps her naïve belief that wearing them is an efficient way of “becoming the Orient,” derives from the external vision of Arabia, reflected in her journal, *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* (1881), where “each tribe seemed so readily recognized by their fellows, and [...] each has certain peculiarities of dress or features well known to all.”⁷ But once again, this external vision was to change into the interplay of intimate persuasions and soon the time had come when the way of “becoming the Orient” started to pass through religious conversion.

⁶ Fragments of Rzewuski’s manuscript, treasured in the Polish National Library under the no. 6475 II, had been published for the first time in Polish translation by Teofil Rutkowski as “Wiadomość o rasach koni arabskich,” *Biblioteka Warszawska*, vol. 4, 1866. Cf. also Tadeusz Majda, *Podróż do Arabii: o koniach kobejlanach, beduinach i przygodach w Arabii (na podstawie rękopisu Wacława Seweryna Rzewuskiego „Sur les chevaux orientaux et provenant des races orientales”)*, Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2004.

⁷ Anne Blunt, *A Pilgrimage to Nejd, the Cradle of the Arab Race*, vol. 1, London: John Murray, 1881, p. 163.

2.

Lady Cobbold – or Lady Zainab, as she preferred to call herself – roughly contemporary to much more celebrated figures such as T.E. Lawrence or St. John Philby, remained for a long time in their shadow. As a daughter of a relatively less affluent Scottish aristocrat, Charles Adolphus Murray, Seventh Earl of Dunmore, she used to spend her winter vacations in a villa situated not far from Algiers, frequently escaping the control of her nurses to learn Arabic and to visit the nearby mosques in the company of local children. Her unexpected declaration that she was a Muslim, pronounced on the occasion of an audience in the Vatican during her Italian trip, might have been just an eccentricity or a clever way of escaping an awkward question (was she a Catholic?). Yet during the travels throughout North Africa her affiliations became more and more clear. There were friendships in the background, too; a series of her letters to Arab friends in Egypt and Syria in 1914–1915 were written in Arabic.

One might remain sceptical about the seriousness of the Scottish aristocrat's unexpected conversion. Yet in the contemporary Saudi Arabia she is a rather well known and cherished figure. While Lawrence of Arabia suffers from ill reputation, being remembered either as a spy or a traitor, Lady Cobbold is celebrated as “the first British-born Muslim woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca” and a contributor to “the literature of the *Hajj*,”⁸ namely with her travelogue of the journey to the Holy Cities, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, published in 1934.

In 1933, Cobbold's journey was indeed an event very far apart from the earlier European tentative penetrations into the holy space. Eighty years earlier, Richard Burton had carefully hidden his identity. His widow, Lady Isabel, boosted the legend, writing in the preface of the Memorial Edition of his *Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1855) on the extreme difficulty and risk of the Meccan adventure:

My husband had lived as a Dervish in Sind, which greatly helped him; and he studied every separate thing until he was master of it, even apprenticing himself to a blacksmith to learn how to make horse-shoes and to shoe his own horses. It meant living with his life in his hand, amongst the strangest and wildest companions, adopting their unfamiliar manners, living for nine months in the hottest and most unhealthy climate, upon repulsive food; it meant complete and absolute isolation from everything that makes life tolerable, from all civilization, from all his natural habits; the brain at high tension, but the mind never wavering from the role he had adopted.⁹

Quite unlikely, Lady Evelyn's journey did not require to shoe her own horses, unless in a metaphorical sense. It was arranged by the Saudi ambassador in London, Sheikh Hafiz Wahba, who obtained the official permission of the king and later on wrote the

⁸ William Facey, “Mayfair to Makkah”, *Saudi Aramco World* 59.5 (2008), p. 18.

⁹ Isabel Burton, “Preface to the Memorial Edition,” in: Richard F. Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, vol. 1, Toronto: General Publishing Company, 1964, p. xviii.

preface to her travelogue. Once in Jiddah, she could count on the assistance of a similarly minded British couple, namely Philby and his wife Dora.

Harry St. John Bridger Philby, who converted to Islam in 1930 adopting the name of Sheikh Abdullah, was indeed a complex personage. Intelligence officer and alleged traitor to the British Crown, adviser to Ibn Saud implicated in the biggest oil deals in the history, he contributed to ornithology as well, having studied the Arabian woodpecker (called *Dendropicos doraë* to celebrate his beloved wife) and Philby's partridge (*Alectoris philbyi*). He arranged for Cobbold the travel by car to Madinah and then to Mecca, the accommodation there, as well as some prominent social contacts, including a tea with the prince Faisal. The emir, as she pointed out in her diary, arrived punctually at five o'clock.

It would be misleading to imagine Lady Cobbold according to the contemporary stereotype of the insipid and submissive female convert to Islam. She has indeed much more in common with the line of adventurers going from Burton to Lawrence of Arabia. Great traveller and hunter, she is known to have excelled in deerstalking. After the separation from her husband, John Dupuis Cobbold, from whom she received the deer forest of Glencarron in the Scottish Highlands, she spent her time as much on field sports as on religious studies. Also in her Arabian travelogue she mentions as much the motor drives in the desert and diving in the coral reefs as her pious recollections. Perhaps the common denominator among her various fascinations is the longing for the unattainable she often talks about in her diaries. Her *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) undoubtedly differed not only from the secretive adventure of Burton, but also from the experience of the other pilgrims. Once in Arabia, she regained all the benefits of her privileged social status. She was treated with deference by the Saudis who had just started the oil negotiations with American and British engineers. She dined with the wives of the negotiators. She travelled by car – a rare luxury at this time – on the road that usually takes ten days on a camel and up to three weeks on foot.¹⁰ She also appears to have taken quite a mundane pleasure in her Arabian clothes, switching between black veils and the white garb of the pilgrimage, perhaps moved as much by the religious exaltation as by the thrill of “becoming the Orient.”

Nonetheless, her gender positioning in the Orient differs from the games of Anne Blunt in her male Bedouin attire. On a photograph taken in Jiddah right before Cobbold's depart for Mecca, her costume might easily hurt contemporary sensibilities. She is garbed in white, wearing an Afghan-looking kind of veil that completely covers her face, with only several tiny holes letting the air in. Nonetheless, the emancipation of women is the topic she chooses to discuss with her Arab friends:

The sheikhs show some amusement, tempered with admiration at the methods adopted by the Western woman to win herself a place in the sun; their sympathy is all on the side of the ladies. Though I occasionally caught a twinkle in

¹⁰ Even if the Hijaz railway was to shorten the distance between Damascus and Madinah, the project of connecting Mecca directly to the modern communication system had been suspended for a while.

the eye of Sid Ahmed, and both the sheikhs often smiled, I never heard them give way to loud laughter...¹¹

In the meanwhile, still concerned with her feminine condition and unconscious of the fact, Lady Cobbold is already sharing the privilege of the Western women in many traditional contexts: they acquire a particular status as a trans-gender, neither male nor female, closer to the first than to the second. How else could the Arabs treat a deerstalker, alone on the *hajj*?

3.

The experience of the Orient fits the most exasperated egotisms; indeed, it is often an alienating one. T.E. Lawrence rightly confesses in the introduction to his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: “In these pages the history is not of the Arab movement, but of me in it.”¹² Lawrence of Arabia as a participant of the Arab movement stands far from the complete, fearful, yet voluntary isolation of Richard Burton. His intent of seeing himself in the mirror of the otherness still seems to preclude any possibility of authentic encounter. Nonetheless, the process of erosion of identities and loyalties is very clear. The history of Arabia is full of double agents, only too daft as manipulators, but uncertain of where their actual loyalties were. Philby, while he was still on the British intelligence’s payment roll, had allegedly passed military secrets to Ibn Saud. It was also his idea to provoke a rivalry among the oil investors that ultimately resulted beneficial for the Arabs. It has even been suggested that the Arabian career of Philby was a personal revenge on the British government. Be as it may, the tactics of “me in the history” are close at hand. Those “agents of empire, friends of the Orient” are much more the latter than the former. Cultivated eccentricities are befriended by the Arabs that tame them precisely by acknowledging and flattering their *non serviam*, be it a male egotism or a frustrated ambition of female emancipation.

Desert friendships and affinities are built on incommunicable, untranslatable, and first of all unshared experiences, such as the *hajj* of Lady Cobbold, travelling by car among the barefooted pilgrims. They require a non-human mediation, a third element to triangulate the incommensurable cultural contexts. This might explain the importance of the animals, be it horses or Philby’s partridges, in the Arabian adventures. Yet the search for transcultural friendship continues in the highest registers and progressively acquires intellectual depth. Outside the Najd and the Hijaz, the focal points that bind together this essay, the Sufi perspective of friendship with God had tempted yet another convert, Titus Burckhardt (or Sheikh Ibrahim Izz ud-Din) who, having embraced Islam in 1934, occupied a special place as the first eminent university scholar in this ambiguous gallery. In the meanwhile, again in the inner Arabia, the step towards the complete immersion in

¹¹ Evelyn Cobbold, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, London: Arabian Publishing, 2009, p. 288.

¹² T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p. 24.

the Orient had been given by a representative of *Mitteleuropa*, Leopold Weiss, a Galician Jew who, after his conversion, adopted the name of Muhammad Asad (“the lion,” just to render in Arabic his original name, Leo). His extensive autobiography, *The Road to Mecca* (1954), offers yet another testimony on the process of merging with the Orient. Similarly to the case of Lady Cobbold, the book gained high consideration across the Islamic world, becoming a contemporary religious bestseller. For sure, Asad is much more considerate in his choices than Cobbold, and his book is rather a deeply thought, spiritual apology than a travelogue. He traces back the spiritual and intellectual way that conduced him first from Eastern Europe to the Middle East, where he worked as a journalist, and then straight into the heart of Arabia. Travelling on foot or on a camel, all this time, not by car.

The Road to Mecca is dedicated to “his Majesty King Faisal of Saudi Arabia in commemoration of forty-five years of friendship” – the very same emir who arrived punctually at five o’clock for Lady Cobbold’s tea. Asad records with exalted gratitude the cordial encounters in the Meccan royal reception room. In 1951, after an absence of eighteen years, he does not expect to be recognized:

I stopped before him and said, ‘Peace be upon thee, O Long-of-Age! Thou wilt have forgotten me...’ He looked up, and stared at me blankly for a fraction of a second; then his eyes lit up, and he stretched out both his hands and exclaimed, ‘Ahlan wa-sahlan: thou hast come to thy family, and may thy step be easy! How could I have forgotten thee!’ And then he took me by the hand and, as his father had so often done in bygone years, walked with me, slowly, up and down the long gallery, always holding me by the hand [...]; and it was easy and simple to talk to him as if we had parted but yesterday: for simplicity of manner and modesty of behaviour have always been the most obvious traits of Faisal’s personality.¹³

In the hard times before the oil revenues actually started to flow, friendship was the hard currency of the desert, permitting to repay people like Philby and “Leopold of Arabia,” who also occasionally played the role of a secret agent. The skillful creation of this home-feeling seems to be a direct, very well-felt response to the poetic ejaculation of Byron: “Oh! that the Desert were my dwelling-place” (*Childe Harold*, canto iv, stanza 177). The paternal figures of the Saudi rulers complete the European dream of the Arabian home.

Burton went as far as to circumcise himself in order to reach Mecca. In spite of the awful climate and repulsive food, as his wife attests, “he liked it, he was happy in it, he felt at home in it.”¹⁴ Nonetheless he never lost the overwhelming sensation of being a stranger, an alien element; he never merged with the crowd of the pilgrims, never thought it might actually be possible. Similarly, Lawrence of Arabia attests the same incapability of “becoming an Arab.” In 1918, he confessed in a letter to V.W. Richards:

¹³ Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1996, p. 377.

¹⁴ Isabel Burton, “Preface to the Memorial Edition,” p. xviii.

I know I am a stranger to them, and always will be; but I cannot believe them worse, any more than I could change to their ways.¹⁵

In the opening chapter of *The Seven Pillars...*, he repeated similar statements:

The efforts for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self [...]. At the same time, I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin; it was an affectation only.¹⁶

Nonetheless, not only the idea, but also the persistent longing of “changing to their ways” and “taking on their skin” was already there. Burton visited Mecca as a European in disguise; later on the very same clothes lost such a status. The Arab garb had been tried on, judged unfitting for a moment, but soon it became the cosiest dress of the European. The identities, liquefied by the modernity, ultimately merged – encountering, on the other end, the Arabs in European garb, of which those emirs who never come late for the tea were an early incarnation. This particular situation of encounter is at the foundation of the contemporary Arabia, a reality *sui generis*, apparently incoherent in its ultramodern conservatism. Similarly, as Victoria Carchidi says, in those desert biographies – of which Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars...* is the most celebrated example – the only coherence is incoherence:

And it is precisely that excess, that resistance to order, that has led to the endurance of his fame. [...] His autobiography throws practically everything into doubt – not just class, race, gender, but even the very idea of truth and representable realities. [...] Lawrence casts into chaos the very approaches we take to defining ourselves, our values, and our worlds.¹⁷

The adventures in Arabia, including that of Arabian friendship, brought a decisive outcome that was to be found nowhere else in the colonial experience of the Europeans, leading them out of the interplay of essentialist definitions of identity into completely new horizons of “becoming the Other.”

¹⁵ T.E. Lawrence, *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence of Arabia*, ed. D. Garnett, New York: Doubleday, 1938, p. 244.

¹⁶ T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Victoria Carchidi, “Creation Out of the Void: The Life and Legends of T.E. Lawrence,” in: *Mapping the Self: Space, Identity, Discourse in British Auto/Biography*, ed. Frédéric Regard, Saint-Étienne: Publication de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2003, pp. 270–271.