The Imperialist Character

By Hannah Arendt

Of the two main political devices* of imperialist rule, race was discovered in South Africa and bureaucracy in Algeria, Egypt and India; the former was originally the hardly conscious reaction to tribes of whose humanity European man was ashamed and frightened, whereas the latter was a consequence of that administration by which Europeans had tried to rule foreign peoples whom they felt at the same time to be hopelessly their inferiors and in need of their special protection. Race, in other words, was an escape into an irresponsibility where nothing human could any longer exist and bureaucracy was the result of a responsibility that no man can bear for his fellow man and no people for another people.

The exaggerated sense of responsibility in the British administrators of India who succeeded Burke’s “breakers of law” had its material basis in the fact that the British Empire actually had been acquired in a “fit of absent-mindedness.” Those, therefore, who were confronted with the accomplished fact and the job of keeping what had become theirs through an accident, had to find an interpretation that could change the accident into a kind of willed act. Such historical changes of facts have been carried through by legends since ancient times, and legends dreamed up by the British intelligentsia have played a decisive role in the formation of the bureaucrat and the secret agent of the British services.

Legends have always played a powerful role in the making of history. Man who has not been granted the gift of undoing, who is always an unconsulted heir of other men’s deeds, and who is always burdened with a responsibility that appears to be the consequence of an unending chain of events rather than conscious acts, demands an explanation and interpretation of the past in which the mysterious key to his future destiny seems to be concealed. Legends were the spiritual foundations of every ancient city, empire, people, promising safe guid-

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ance through the limitless spaces of the future. Without ever relating facts reliably — mostly alluding to them — they offered a truth beyond realities, a remembrance beyond memories.

Legendary explanations of history always served as belated corrections of facts and real events, which were needed precisely because history itself would hold man responsible for deeds he had not done and for consequences he had never foreseen. The truth of the ancient legends — what gives them their fascinating actuality many centuries after the cities and empires and peoples they served have crumbled to dust — was nothing but the form in which past events were made to fit the human condition in general and political aspirations in particular. Only in the frankly invented tale about events did man consent to assume his responsibility for them, and to consider past events his past. Legends made him master of what he had not done, and capable of dealing with what he could not undo. In this sense, legends are not only among the first memories of mankind, but actually the true beginning of human history.

The flourishing of historical and political legends came to a rather abrupt end with the birth of Christianity. Its interpretation of history from the days of Adam to the Last Judgment as one single road to redemption and salvation offered the most powerful and all-inclusive explanation of human destiny. Only after the spiritual unity of Christian peoples gave way to the plurality of nations, when the road to salvation had become an uncertain article of individual faith rather than a universal theory applicable to all happenings, did new kinds of historical explanations emerge. The nineteenth century has offered us the curious spectacle of an almost simultaneous birth of the most varying and contradictory ideologies, each of which claimed to know the hidden truth about otherwise incomprehensible facts. Legends, however, are not ideologies; they do not aim at universal explanation but they are always concerned with concrete facts. It seems rather significant that the growth of national bodies was nowhere accomplished by a foundation legend, and that a first unique attempt in modern times was made precisely when the decline of the national body had become obvious and imperialism seemed to take the place of old-fashioned nationalism.

The author of the imperialist legend is Rudyard Kipling, its topic is the British Empire, its result the Imperialist character (after all the only true character form of modern times). And while the legend
of the British Empire has little to do with the realities of British imperialism, it forced or deluded into its services the best sons of England. For legends attract the very best in our times, just as ideologies attract the average and the whispered tales of gruesome secret powers behind the scenes attract the very worst. No doubt, no political structure could have been more evocative of legendary tales and justifications than the British Empire, than the British people's drifting from the conscious founding of colonies all over the world into ruling and dominating foreign peoples all over the world.

The foundation legend, as Kipling tells it, starts from the fundamental reality of the people of the British Isles.1 Surrounded by the sea, they need and win the help of the three elements of Water, Wind and Sun through the invention of the Ship. The ship made the always dangerous alliance with the elements possible and made the Englishman master of the world. "You'll win the world," says Kipling, "without anyone caring how you did it: you'll keep the world without anyone knowing how you did it: and you'll carry the world on your backs without anyone seeing how you did it. But neither you nor your sons will get anything out of that little job except Four Gifts—one for the Sea, one for the Wind, one for the Sun and one for the Ship that carries you. . . . For, winning the world, and keeping the world, and carrying the world on their back—on land, or on sea, or in the air—your sons will always have the Four Gifts. Long-headed and slow-spoken and heavy—damned heavy—in the hand, will they be; and always a little bit to windward of every enemy—that they may be a safeguard to all who pass on the seas on their lawful occasions."

What brings the little tale of the "First Sailor" so close to ancient foundation legends is that it presents the British as the only politically mature people, caring for law and burdened with the welfare of the world, in the midst of barbarian tribes who neither care nor know what keeps the world together. Unfortunately, this presentation lacked the innate truth of ancient legends; the world cared and knew and saw how they did it and no tale in the world could have convinced them that they did not "get anything out of that little job." Yet, there was a certain reality which in England herself corresponded to Kipling's legend and made it at all possible, and that was the existence

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1 Rudyard Kipling, "The First Sailor" in Humorous Tales (1891).
of such virtues as chivalry, nobility, bravery, even though they were utterly out of place in a political reality ruled by Cecil Rhodes or Lord Curzon.

The fact that the “white man’s burden” is either hypocrisy or racism has not prevented a few of the best Englishmen from shouldering the burden in earnest and from making themselves the tragic and quixotic fools of imperialism. As real in England as the tradition of hypocrisy is another less obvious tradition that one is tempted to call a tradition of dragonslayers who went enthusiastically into far and curious lands to strange and naive peoples to slay the numerous dragons which had plagued them for centuries. There is more than a grain of truth in Kipling’s other tale “The Tomb of His Ancestor”\(^2\) in which the Chinn-family “serve India generation after generation, as dolphins follow in line across the open sea.” They shoot the deer that steals the poor man’s crop, teach him the mysteries of better agricultural methods, free him from some of his more harmful superstitions and kill lions and tigers in grand style. Their only reward is indeed a “tomb of ancestors” and a family legend, believed by the whole Indian tribe, according to which “the revered ancestor . . . has a tiger of his own—a saddle tiger that he rides around the country whenever he feels inclined.” Unfortunately, this riding around the countryside is “a sure sign of war or pestilence or—or something,” and in this particular case it is a sign of vaccination. So that Chinn the Youngest, a not very important underling in the hierarchy of the Army Services, but all-important as far as the Indian tribe is concerned, has to shoot the beast of his ancestor so that people can be vaccinated without fear of “war or pestilence or something.”

As modern life goes, the Chinns indeed “are luckier than most folks.” Their chance is that they were born into a career that gently and naturally leads them to the realization of the best dreams of boyhood. When other boys have to forget “noble dreams,” they happen to be just old enough to translate them into action. And when after thirty years of service they retire, their steamer will pass “the outward bound troopship, carrying his son eastward to the family duty,” so that the power of old Mr. Chinn’s existence as a government-appointed and army-paid dragonslayer can be imparted to the next generation. No doubt, the British government pays them for their services; yet,

\(^2\) In *The Day’s Work* (1898).
it is not at all clear in whose service they eventually land. There is a
strong possibility that they really serve this particular Indian tribe,
generation after generation, and it is consoling all around that at
least the tribe itself is convinced. The fact that the higher services
know hardly anything of little lieutenant Chinn’s strange duties and
adventures, that they are hardly aware of his being a successful re-
incarnation of his grandfather, gives his dreamlike double existence
an undisturbed basis in reality. He is simply at home in two worlds,
separated by water — and gossip — tight walls. Born in “the heart of
the scrubby tigerish country” and educated among his own people in
peaceful, well-balanced, ill-formed England, he is ready to live per-
manently with two peoples and is rooted and well-acquainted with the
tradition, language, superstition and prejudice of both. At a moment’s
notice he can change from the obedient underling of one of His
Majesty’s soldiers into an exciting and noble figure in the natives’
world, a well-beloved protector of the weak, the dragonslayer of old
tales.

The point is that these queer quixotic protectors of the weak who
played their role behind the scenes of official British rule were not so
much the product of a primitive people’s naive imagination, as of
dreams which contained the best of European and Christian traditions,
even when they had already deteriorated into the futile boyhood ideals.
It was neither His Majesty’s soldier nor the British higher officials
who could teach the natives something of the greatness of the Western
world. Only those who never had been able to outgrow their boyhood
ideals and therefore had enlisted in the colonial services were fit for
the task. Imperialism to them was nothing but an accidental oppor-
tunity to escape a society in which one had to forget his youth if he
wanted to grow up. English society was only too glad to see them
depart to far away countries, a circumstance which permitted the
toleration and even the furtherance of boyhood ideals in the public
school system; the colonial services took them away from England and
prevented, so to speak, the conversion of the ideals of their boyhood
into the mature ideas of men. Strange and curious lands attracted the
best of England’s youth since the end of the nineteenth century, deprived
her society of the most honest and the most dangerous elements, and
guaranteed, in addition to these blisses, a certain conservation, or per-
haps petrification, of boyhood-noblesse which preserved and infant-
tilized Western moral standards.
Lord Cromer, secretary to the Viceroy and financial member in the pre-imperialist government of India, still belonged in the category of British dragonslayers. Led solely by “the sense of sacrifice” for backward populations and “the sense of duty” to the glory of Great Britain that “has given birth to a class of officials who have both the desire and the capacity to govern,” he declined in 1894 the post of Viceroy and refused ten years later the position of secretary of state for foreign affairs. Instead of such honors, which would have satisfied a lesser man, he became the little publicized and all powerful British Consul General to Egypt from 1883 to 1907. There he became the first Imperialist administrator, certainly “second to none among those who by their services have glorified the British race”; perhaps the last to die in undisturbed pride:

Let these suffice for Britain’s meed
No nobler prize was ever won,
The blessings of a people freed
The consciousness of duty done.

Cromer went to Egypt because he realized that “the Englishman straining far over to hold his beloved India [has to] plant a firm hold on the banks of the Nile.” Egypt was to him only a means to an end, a necessary expansion for the sake of security for India. At almost the identical moment, it happened that another Englishman set foot on the African continent, though at its opposite end and for the opposite reasons: Cecil Rhodes went to South Africa and saved the Cape Colony after it had lost all importance for the Englishman’s “loved India.” Rhodes’ ideas on expansion were far more advanced than those of his more respectable colleague in the north; to him expansion did not need to be justified by such sensible motives as the holding of what one already possessed. “Expansion was everything” and India, South Africa and Egypt were equal in importance or unimportance as stepping-stones in an expansion limited only by

3 Lawrence J. Zetland, Lord Cromer (1932), p. 16.
5 Lord Curzon at the unveiling of the memorial tablet for Cromer, Zetland, op. cit., p. 362.
6 Quoted from a long poem by Cromer, Zetland, op. cit., p. 17-18.
7 From a letter Lord Cromer wrote in 1882, ibid., p. 87.
the size of the earth. There certainly was an abyss between the vulgar megalomaniac and the educated man of sacrifice and duty; yet they arrived at roughly identical results and were equally responsible for the "great Game" of secrecy which was no less insane and no less detrimental to politics than the phantom world of race.

The outstanding similarity between Rhodes' rule in South Africa and Cromer's domination of Egypt was that both regarded the countries not as desirable ends in themselves but merely as means for some supposedly higher purpose. They were therefore similar in their indifference and aloofness, in their genuine disinterest in their subjects, an attitude which differed as much from the cruelty and arbitrariness of native despots in Asia as from the exploiting carelessness of conquerors, and the insane and anarchic oppression of one race tribe through another. As soon as Cromer started to rule Egypt for the sake of India, he lost his role of protector of "backward peoples" and could no longer sincerely believe that "the self-interest of the subject-races is the principal basis of the whole imperial fabric." 8

Aloofness became the new attitude of all members of the British services; it was a more dangerous form of governing than despotism and arbitrariness because it did not even tolerate that last link between the despot and his subjects which is formed by bribery and gifts. The very integrity of the British administration made despotic government more inhuman and inaccessible to its subjects than Asiatic rulers or reckless conquerors had ever been. Integrity and aloofness were symbols of an absolute division of interests to the point where they are not even any longer permitted to conflict. In comparison, exploitation, oppression, or corruption look like safeguards of human dignity, because exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed, corrupter and corrupted still live in the same world, still share the same goals, fight each other for the possession of the same things; and it is this tentium comparationis which aloofness destroyed. Worst of all was the fact that the aloof administrator was hardly aware that he had invented a new form of government but actually believed that his attitude was conditioned by "the forcible contact with a people living on a lower plane." So, instead of believing in his individual superiority with some degree of essentially harmless vanity, he felt that he belonged to "a nation which had reached a comparatively high plane of civiliza-

8 Lord Cromer, op. cit.
tion” and therefore held his position by right of birth, regardless of personal achievements.

Lord Cromer’s career is so fascinating because it contains the very turning-point from the older colonial to imperialist services. His first reaction to his duties in Egypt was a marked uneasiness and concern about a state of affairs which was not “annexation” but a “hybrid form of government to which no name can be given and for which there is no precedent.” In 1885, after two years of service, he still harbored serious doubts about a system in which he was the nominal British Consul General and the actual ruler of Egypt and wrote that a “highly delicate mechanism [whose] efficient working depends very greatly on the judgment and ability of a few individuals . . . can . . . be justified [only] if we are able to keep before our eyes the possibility of evacuation. . . . If that possibility becomes so remote as to be of no practical account . . . it would be better for us to arrange . . . with the other Powers that we should take over the government of the country, guarantee its debt etc.” No doubt Cromer was right, and either, occupation or evacuation would have normalized matters. As it were that “hybrid form of government” without precedent was to become characteristic of all imperialist enterprise, with the result that a few decades afterwards everybody had lost Cromer’s early sound judgment about possible and impossible forms of government, just as Lord Selbourne’s insight that a race society as a way of life was unprecedented. Nothing could better characterize the initial stage of imperialism than the combination of these two judgments on conditions in Africa: a way of life without precedent in the South, a government without precedent in the North.

In the following years, Cromer reconciled himself to the “hybrid form of government”; in his letters he began to justify it and to expound the necessities of the government without name and precedent. At the end of his life, he laid down (in his essay on “The Government of Subject Races”) the main lines of what one may well call a theory of bureaucracy.

Cromer started by recognizing that “personal influence” without a legal or written political treaty could be enough for “sufficiently effec-

9 Zetland, op. cit., p. 89.
10 From a letter Lord Cromer wrote in 1884, ibid., p. 117.
11 From a letter to Lord Granville, a member of the Liberal party, in 1885, ibid., p. 219.
tive supervision over public affairs” in foreign countries. This form of informal influence was preferable to a well-defined policy because it could be altered at a moment’s notice and did not necessarily involve the home government in case of difficulties. It required a highly trained, highly reliable staff whose loyalty and patriotism were not connected with personal ambition or vanity and who would even be required to renounce the human aspiration to have their name connected with their achievements. Their main passion would have to be a passion for secrecy (“the less British officials are talked about the better”), for a role behind the scenes; their greatest contempt would be aimed at publicity and people who love it. Cromer himself possessed all these qualities to a very high degree; his wrath was never more strongly aroused than when he was “brought out of my hiding place,” when “the reality which before was only known to a few behind the scenes [became] patent to all the world.” His pride was indeed to “remain more or less hidden [and] to pull the strings.” In exchange and in order to make his work possible at all, the bureaucrat has to feel safe from control — the praise as well as the blame, that is — of all public institutions either Parliament, the “English Department” or the press. Every growth of democracy or even the simple functioning of existing democratic institutions can only be a danger, for it is impossible to govern “a people by a people — the people of India by the people of England.” Bureaucracy is always a government of experts, of an “experienced minority” which has to resist as well as it knows how the constant pressure from “the inexperienced majority.” Each people is fundamentally an inexperienced majority and can therefore not be trusted with such a highly specialized matter as politics and public affairs. Bureaucrats, moreover, are not supposed to have any general notions of political matters at all; their patriotism should never lead them so far astray that they believe in the inherent goodness of political principles in their own country; that would only result in their cheap “imitative” application “to the government of backward populations,” which, according to Cromer, was the principle defect of the French system.

12 From a letter to Lord Rosebery in 1886, ibid., p. 134.
13 Ibid., p. 352.
14 From a letter to Lord Rosebery in 1893, ibid., pp. 204-205.
15 From a letter to Lord Rosebery in 1893, ibid., p. 192.
16 From a speech by Cromer in Parliament after 1904, ibid., p. 311.
17 During the negotiations and considerations of the administrative pattern for the
Nobody will ever pretend that Cecil Rhodes suffered from a lack of vanity. According to Jameson, he expected to be remembered for at least four thousand years. Yet, despite all his appetite for self-glorification, he hit upon the same idea of rule through secrecy as the over-modest Lord Cromer. Extremely fond of drawing up wills, Rhodes insisted in all of them (over the course of two decades of his public life) that his money should be used to found "a secret society . . . to carry out his scheme," which was to be "organized like Loyola's, supported by the accumulated wealth of those whose aspiration is a desire to do something," so that eventually there would be "between two and three thousand men in the prime of life scattered all over the world, each one of whom would have had impressed upon his mind in the most susceptible period of his life the dream of the Founder, each one of whom, moreover, would have been especially—mathematically—selected towards the Founder's purpose." 18 More far-sighted than Cromer, Rhodes opened the society at once to all members of the "Nordic race" 19 so that the point was not so much the growth and glory of Great Britain—her occupation of the "entire continent of Africa, the Holy Land, the valley of the Euphrates, the islands of Cyprus and Candia, the whole of South America, the islands of the Pacific, . . . the whole of the Malay Archipelago, the seaboards of China and Japan [and] the ultimate recovery of the United States" 20—as the expansion of the "Nordic race," which organized in a secret society would establish a bureaucratic government over all peoples of the earth.

What made Rhodes overcome his innate monstrous vanity and discover the charms of secrecy was the same thing that had made Cromer overcome his innate sense of duty: the discovery of an expansion

annexation of the Sudan, Cromer insisted on keeping the whole matter outside the sphere of French influence; he did this not because he wanted to secure a monopoly in Africa for England but much rather because he had "the utmost want of confidence in their administrative system as applied to subject races." Quoted from a letter to Salisbury in 1899, ibid., p. 248.

18 Rhodes drew up six wills, the first already composed in 1877, all of which mention the "secret society." For extensive quotes, see Basil Williams, Cecil Rhodes (London, 1921) and S. Gertrude Millin, op. cit., pp. 128 and 331. The citations are upon the authority of W. T. Stead.

19 It is very well known that the Rhodes "secret society" ended as the very respectable Rhodes Scholarship Association to which even not only Englishmen, but all members of the "Nordic Race," such as Germans, Scandinavians and Americans, are admitted.

20 Basil Williams, op. cit., p. 51.
which was not driven by the specific appetite for a specific country but conceived of as an endless process in which every country would serve only as stepping-stone for further expansion. In view of such a concept, the desire for glory can no longer be satisfied by the glorious triumph over a specific people for the sake of one's own people, nor can the sense of duty be fulfilled through the consciousness of specific services and the fulfillment of specific tasks. No matter what individual qualities or defects a man may have, once he has entered the maelstrom of an unending process of expansion, he will, as it were, cease to be what he was and obey the laws of the process, identify himself with anonymous forces that he is supposed to serve in order to keep the whole process in motion; he will think of himself as mere function, and eventually consider such functionality, such an incarnation of the dynamic trend, his highest possible achievement. Then, as Rhodes was insane enough to say, he could indeed "do nothing wrong, what he did became right. It was his duty to do what he wanted. He felt himself a god — nothing less." 21 But Lord Cromer sanely pointed out the same phenomenon of men degrading themselves voluntarily into mere instruments or mere functions when he called the bureaucrats "instruments of incomparable value in the execution of a policy of Imperialism." 22

It is obvious that these secret and anonymous agents of the force of expansion did not feel any obligation to human laws. The only "law" they obeyed was the "law" of expansion and the only proof of their "lawfulness" was success. They had to be perfectly willing to disappear into complete oblivion once failure had been proved, if for any reason they were no longer "instruments of incomparable value." As long as they were successful, the feeling of embodying greater forces than oneself made it relatively easy to resign and even to despise applause and glorification. They were monsters of conceit in their success and they were monsters of modesty in their failure.

At the basis of bureaucracy as a form of government and its inherent replacement of law with temporary and changing decrees, lies this superstition of a possible magic identification of man with the forces of history. The ideal of such a political body will always be the man behind the scenes who pulls the strings of history. Cromer

21 S. Gertrude Millin, op. cit., p. 92.
22 Lord Cromer, op. cit.
finally shunned every "written instrument, or, indeed, anything which is tangible," 23 in his relationships with Egypt, even a proclamation of annexation, in order to keep free to obey only the law of expansion, without obligation to a man-made treaty. Thus does the bureaucrat shun every general law, handling each situation separately by decree, because a law's inherent stability threatens to establish a permanent community in which nobody could possibly be a god because all would have to obey a law.

The two main figures of this system whose very essence is aimless process are the bureaucrat on one side and the secret agent on the other. Both types, as long as they served only British imperialism, never quite denied their descent from dragonslayers and protectors of the weak and therefore never drove bureaucratic regimes to their inherent extremes. A British bureaucrat almost two decades after Cromer's death knew "administrative massacres" could keep India within the British Empire; but he knew also how utopian it would be to try to get the support of the hated "English Departments" for an otherwise quite realistic plan. 24 Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, showed nothing of Cromer's noblesse and was quite typical of a society that increasingly inclined to accept the mob's race standards if they were offered in the form of fashionable snobbery. 25 But snobbery is incompatible with fanaticism and therefore never really efficient.

The same is true of the members of the British Secret Service. They, too, are of illustrious origin—what the dragonslayer was to


24 "The Indian system of government by report was . . . suspect (in England). There was no trial by jury in India and the judges were all paid servants of the Crown, many of them removable at pleasure. . . . Some of the men of formal law felt rather uneasy as to the success of the Indian experiment. 'If,' they said, 'despotism and bureaucracy work so well in India, may it not be that perhaps at some time it would be used as an argument for introducing something of the same system here?'" The government of India, at any rate, "knew well enough that it would have to justify its existence and its policy before public opinion in England, and it well knew that that public opinion would never tolerate oppression." A. Carthill, The Lost Dominion (1924), p. 70 and 41/42 respectively.

25 Harold Nicholson in his Curzon: The Last Phase 1919-1925 (Boston-New York, 1934) tells the following story which apparently was told with some delight by Curzon himself: "Behind the lines in Flanders was a large brewery in the vats of which the private soldiers would bathe on returning from the trenches. Curzon was taken to see this dantesque exhibit. He watched with interest those hundred naked figures disporting themselves in the steam. 'Dear me!' he said, 'I had no conception that the lower classes had such white skins.'" Curzon would deny the authenticity of this story but loved it none the less," pp. 47-48.
the bureaucrat, the adventurer is to the secret agent—and they, too, can rightly lay claim to a foundation legend, the legend of the Great Game as told by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*.

Of course every adventurer knows what Kipling means when he praises *Kim* because “what he loved was the game for its own sake.” Every person still able to wonder at “this great and wonderful world” knows that it is hardly an argument against the game when “missionaries and secretaries of charitable societies could not see the beauty of it.” Still less, it seems, have those a right of voice in this argument who think it “a sin to kiss a white girl’s mouth and a virtue to kiss a black man’s shoe.” 26 Since life itself ultimately has to be lived and loved for its own sake, adventure and love of the game for its own sake easily appear to be a most intensely human symbol of life. It is this underlying passionate humanity that makes *Kim* the only novel of the imperialist era in which a genuine brotherhood links together the “higher and lower breeds,” in which Kim “a Sahib and the son of a Sahib” can rightly talk of “us” when he talks of the “chain-men,” “all on one lead-ropе.” There is more to this “we”—strange in the mouth of a believer in imperialism—than the all-enveloping anonymity of men who are proud to have “no name, but only a number and a letter,” more than the common pride of having “a price upon [one’s] head.” What makes them comrades is the common experience of being—through danger, fear, constant surprise, utter lack of habits, constant preparedness to change their identities—symbols of life itself, symbols for instance of happenings all over India, immediately sharing the life of it all as “it runs like a shuttle throughout all Hind,” and therefore no longer “alone, one person, in the middle of it all,” trapped, as it were, by the limitations of one’s own individuality or nationality. Playing the Great Game, a man may feel as though he lives the only life worth his while, because he has been stripped of everything which may still be considered to be accessory. Life itself seems to be left, in a fantastically intensified purity, when man has cut himself off from all ordinary social ties, family, regular occupation, a definite goal, ambitions, and the guarded place in a community to which he belongs by birth. “When every one is dead the Great Game is finished. Not before.” When one is dead, Life is finished, not before, not when one happens to achieve

whatever he might have wanted. That the game has no ultimate purpose makes it so dangerously similar to life itself.

Purposelessness is the very charm of Kim's existence. Not for the sake of England did he accept his strange duties, nor for the sake of India, nor for any other worthy or unworthy cause. Imperialist notions such as expansion for expansion's or power for power's sake might have suited him, but he would not have cared particularly and certainly would not have constructed any such formulas. He stepped into his peculiar way of "theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die" without even asking the first question. He was tempted only by the basic endlessness of the game and by secrecy as such. And secrecy again seems like a symbol of the basic mysteriousness of life.

It somehow was not the fault of the born adventurers, that is of those who by their very nature used to dwell outside society and outside all political bodies, that they found in imperialism a political game that was endless by definition; they were not supposed to know that in politics an endless game can only end in catastrophe and that political secrecy hardly ever ends in anything nobler than the vulgar duplicity of a spy. The joke on these participants in the Great Game was that their employers knew what they wanted and used their passion of anonymity for ordinary spying. But this triumph of the profit-hungry investors was temporary, and they were duly cheated when a few decades later they met the players of the game of totalitarianism, a game played without ulterior motives like profit and therefore played with such murderous efficiency that it devoured even those who financed it.

Before this happened, however, the imperialists had destroyed the best man who ever turned from an adventurer (with a strong mixture of dragonslayer) into a secret agent, Lawrence of Arabia. Never again was the experiment of secret politics made more purely by a more decent man. Lawrence experimented fearlessly upon himself, and then came back and believed that he belonged to the "lost generation." He thought this was because "the old men came out again and took from us our victory" in order to "re-make [the world] in the likeness of the former world they knew." 27 Actually the old men were quite inefficient even in this, and handed their victory together with

27 T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Introduction that was omitted on the advice of Bernard Shaw from the later edition. See T. E. Lawrence, Letters, edited by David Garnett (New York, 1939), pp. 262 ff.
their power down to other men of the same "lost generation," who were neither older than nor so dissimilar to Lawrence. The only difference was that Lawrence still clung fast to a morality which, however, had already lost all objective fundaments and consisted only of a kind of private and necessarily quixotic attitude of chivalry.

Lawrence was tempted into becoming a secret agent in Arabia because of his strong desire to leave the world of dull respectability whose continuity had simply become meaningless, because of his disgust with the world as well as with himself. What attracted him most in the Arab civilization was its "gospel of bareness . . . [which] involves apparently a sort of moral bareness too," which "has refined itself clear of household gods." 28 What he tried most of all after he came back to English civilization was to avoid living a life of his own, so that he ended by an apparently incomprehensible enlistment as a private in the British army, which obviously was the only institution in which a man's honor is identified with a loss of his individual personality.

When the outbreak of the First World War sent T. E. Lawrence to the Arabs of the Near East with the assignment to rouse them into a rebellion against their Turkish masters and to make them fight on the British side, he came into the very midst of the Great Game. He could achieve his purpose only if a national movement was stirred up among Arabic tribes, a national movement that ultimately was to serve British imperialism. Lawrence had to behave as though the Arab national movement was his prime interest, and he did it so well that he came to believe in it himself. But then again, he did not belong, he was ultimately unable "to think their thought" and to "assume their character." 29 Pretending to be an Arab, he could only lose his "English self." 30 He was more strongly fascinated by the complete secrecy of self-effacement than the obvious justifications of benevolent rulers over backward peoples that Lord Cromer might have used. One generation older and sadder than Lord Cromer, he took great delight in a role that demanded a reconditioning of his whole personality until he fitted into the Great Game, until he became the incarnation of the force of the Arab national movement, until he lost all natural vanity in his mysterious alliance with forces necessarily

28 From a letter written in 1918. Letters, p. 244.
29 T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom (Garden City, 1938), Chap. 1.
30 Idem.
bigger than himself no matter how big he could have been, until he acquired a deadly "contempt not for other men but for all they do," out of their own initiative and not in alliance with the forces of history.

When, at the end of the war, Lawrence had to abandon the pretenses of a secret agent and had somehow to recover his "English self," 31 he "looked at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me." 32 From the Great Game of incalculable bigness which no publicity had glorified or limited and which had elevated him in his twenties above Kings and Prime Ministers because he had "made 'em or played with them," 33 Lawrence came home with an obsessive desire for anonymity and the deep conviction that nothing he could still possibly do with his life would ever satisfy him. This conclusion he drew from his perfect knowledge that he himself had not been big, but only the role which he had aptly assumed, that his bigness had been the result of the Game and not a product by himself. Now he did not "want to be big any more" and determined that he was not "going to be respectable again," and thus was indeed "cured . . . of any desire ever to do anything for myself." 34 He had been the phantom of a force, and he became a phantom among the living when the force, the function was taken away from him. The thing he was frantically looking for was another role to play. This incidentally was the "game" about which Shaw inquired, kindly but uncomprehendingly as though from another century, not understanding why a man of such great achievement should not own up to it. 35 Only another role, another function would be strong enough to prevent his and the world's identification of himself with his deeds in Arabia and thus create a new personality. He did not want to become

31 How ambiguous and how difficult a process this must have been is illustrated by the following anecdote: "Lawrence had accepted an invitation to dinner at Claridge's and a party afterwards at Mrs. Harry Lindsay's. He shirked the dinner, but came to the party in Arab dresses." This happened in 1919. Letters, p. 272, note 1.

32 T. E. Lawrence, op. cit., ch. 1.

33 Lawrence wrote in 1929: "Anyone who had gone up so fast as I went . . . and had seen so much of the inside of the top of the world might well lose his aspirations, and get weary of the ordinary motives of action, which had moved him till he reached the top. I wasn't King or Prime Minister, but I made 'em, or played with them, and after that there wasn't much more, in that direction, for me to do." Letters, p. 653.

34 Letters, pp. 244, 447, 450. Compare especially the letter of 1918 (p. 244) with the two letters to Bernard Shaw of 1923 (p. 447) and 1928 (p. 616).

35 Bernard Shaw had apparently asked Lawrence in 1928 "What is your game really?" and suggested that his role in the army or his looking for a job as a night-watchman (for which he could "get good references") were not authentic.
“Lawrence of Arabia” because he fundamentally did not want to regain a new self after having lost his old. His greatness was that he was passionate enough to refuse cheap compromises and easy roads into reality and respectability, that he never lost his awareness that he had been only a function and played a role and therefore “must not benefit in any way from what he had done in Arabia. The honors which he had won were refused. The jobs offered on account of his reputation had to be declined nor would he allow himself to exploit his success by profiting from writing a single paid piece of journalism under the name of Lawrence.”

The story of T. E. Lawrence in all its moving bitterness and greatness was not simply of a paid official or a hired spy, but exactly the story of a real agent or functionary, of somebody who actually believed he had entered—or been driven into—the stream of historical necessity and become a functionary or agent of the secret forces which rule the world. “I had pushed my go-cart into the eternal stream, and so it went faster than the ones that are pushed cross-stream or up-stream. I did not believe finally in the Arab movement: but thought it necessary in its time and place.” Just as Cromer had ruled Egypt for the sake of India or Rhodes South Africa for the sake of further expansion, Lawrence had acted for some ulterior unpredictable purpose. The only satisfaction he could get out of this, lacking the calm consciousness of some limited achievement, came from the sense of functioning itself, from being embraced and driven by some big movement. Back in London and in despair, he would try to find some substitute for this kind of “self-satisfaction” and would “only get it out of hot speed on a motor-bike.” Although Lawrence had not yet been seized by the fanaticism of an ideology of movement, probably because he was too well educated for the superstitions of his time, he had already experienced that fascination, based on despair of all possible human responsibility, which the eternal stream and its eternal movement exert. He drowned himself in it and nothing was left of him but some inexplicable decency and a pride of having “pushed the right way.” “I am still puzzled as to how far the individual counts: a lot, I fancy, if he pushes the right way.”

36 Garnett, op. cit., p. 264.
37 Letters, in 1930, p. 693.
38 Letters, 1924, p. 456.
39 Ibid., p. 693.
then, is the end of the real pride of Western man who no longer does “a thing of himself nor a thing so clean as to be his own,” 40 by giving laws to the world, no longer counts as an end in himself, but has a chance only in alliance with the secret forces of history and necessity of which he is but a function.

When the European mob discovered what a “lovely virtue” a white skin would be in Africa,41 when the English conqueror in India became an administrator who did not even believe in the universal validity of his own law, but rather in his innate capacity to rule and dominate, when the dragon-slayers turned into either “white men” of “higher breeds” or into bureaucrats and spies, playing the Great Game of endless ulterior motives in an endless movement; when the British Intelligence Services (especially since the First World War) began to attract England’s best sons who preferred to serve mysterious forces all over the world before serving the common weal of their country, the stage seemed to be set for all possible horrors. Lying before anybody’s nose were many of the elements which gathered together could create a totalitarian government on the basis of racism. “Administrative massacres” were proposed by Indian bureaucrats while African officials declared that “no ethical considerations such as the right of man will be allowed to stand in the way” of white rulership.42 The happy fact is that although imperialist rule of England sank to some level of vulgarity, cruelty played a lesser role between the two World Wars than ever before and a minimum of human rights was always safeguarded. It is this moderation in the midst of plain insanity that has paved the way for what Churchill has called “the liquidation of His Majesty’s Empire” and that eventually may turn out to be the transformation of the English nation into a Commonwealth of English peoples.

40 T. E. Lawrence, op. cit., ch. 1.
41 S. Gertrude Millin, op. cit., p. 15.
42 As put by Sir Thomas Watt, a citizen of South Africa, of British descent.