

Lawrence Durrell's Woven Web of Guesses

(Durrell Studies 2)

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(Durrell Studies 2)

By

Richard Pine

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By Richard Pine

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**For Melanie,
who still has the coat**

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PREFACE

I chose the expression “A woven web of guesses” as the signpost to these essays on Lawrence Durrell because it expresses the complex fabric of his life and work. The phrase comes from the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes the Colophoniot (c. 570 – c.478 BC). The surviving fragments of his writings include the following (in Karl Popper’s translation):

The gods did not reveal, from the beginning, all things to us, but in the course of time, through seeking, we may learn and know things better. But as for certain truth, no man has known it [...] If by chance he were to utter the final truth, he would himself not know it: for all is but a woven web of guesses.

This can definitely be said of studying Lawrence Durrell’s work. He himself challenged the critic:

Though you a whole infinity may take
You’ll not unravel the entire mosaic.

How one “unravels” a mosaic is a problem we do not have to solve here, but for once the meaning is clear and it chimes with Xenophanes: even if one hit upon a “final truth” or even a “certain truth”, it would not be self-evident and would in any case, like Durrell’s mosaic, prove to be a tessellary of supposition. No critic can claim to make definitive statements about the subject, and Durrell offers far more opportunities for error and misjudgement than most. Critics who persuade themselves that they have hit on a “certain truth” should re-examine their calculus and their conscience.

Durrell’s personal life, which was for many crucial years a combination of public service and private endeavour, involved marriages, extra-marital relationships and parenthood, which offer themselves to numerous “readings”. His literary associations (and friendships) with major figures like Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, George Seferis, Richard Aldington and Theodore Stephanides, require far more consideration than they have so far received, and the relation of his poetry to his prose has yet to be carefully examined.

The inauguration of *Durrell Studies* (of which this is the second volume) offers the chance to both established and emergent critical talent

to remedy these lacunae, and as Series Editor I am confident that scholarship can be combined with responsible judgement to do so.

Durrell's writing has fascinated me since adolescence, and has elicited two books: *The Dandy and the Herald: manners, mind and morals from Brummell to Durrell* (1988) and *Lawrence Durrell: the Mindscape* (1994/2005) of which a third edition will appear in 2022.

Despite having written about Lawrence Durrell for the past fifty years, I am still surprised and taken unawares by his insights, by words and phrases which, as if previously unrecognised, leap from the page with all the freshness with which he conceived them. He placed much emphasis on the *ideogram* as the sigil of poetry and so often his verbal pictures – whether of people or their thoughts and emotions – arrest the reader and send him or her back again to the start of the labyrinth (a labyrinth with mosaics, of course).

Having known him, if only slightly, from 1972 until his death, enriched my life over those years and continues to do so, as will be apparent, I believe, in what follows.

The present volume is a collection of new and previous essays. The topics of Chapters Six, Seven, Eight and Ten arose in seminars of the Durrell School of Corfu from 2002 onwards and have been substantially revised and enlarged from their original epiphany. Chapter One, a “reconsideration” of Durrell, has emanated from a growing awareness of the need to consider – and if possible understand – Durrell from the perspective of psychology, and I owe much to Rony Alfandary for casting his professional eye over the chapter. Chapter Nine was commissioned for a volume of essays on Otto Rank which never reached publication. Chapter Three, “The End of Our Romantic Life”, was given first as a paper to the International Lawrence Durrell Society's conference at the University of Cincinnati in 1998, subsequently published in *A Café in Space – the Anaïs Nin Literary Journal* and revised for publication here. Chapters Two, Four and Five have been written specially for this occasion.

Richard Pine
Durrell Library of Corfu

ABBREVIATIONS

The principal archive of Lawrence Durrell is held at the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, which acquired it in two *tranches*. The first, collection 42, is indicated in the footnotes as “SIUC” followed, where appropriate, by the file number: e.g. 42/8/1. The second, collection 163, is designated as “SIUC/Accession II” because it had not been fully catalogued at the time I was studying it.

A source of particular importance is a notebook which Durrell labelled “Corfu-Egypt”, from which I quote frequently; this is believed to be now in the Durrell Archive at the Université Paris-X at Nanterre; it is cited as “Notebook Corfu-Egypt” or simply “Corfu-Egypt”.

After Durrell’s death, his surviving partner, Françoise Kestman, established a “Centre d’Études et Recherches Lawrence Durrell” in their house in Sommières. Items in the remaining archive were catalogued as “CERLD” and appear as such here, although, with the closure of the Centre, the collection was relocated at the Université Paris-X at Nanterre, which is also the repository of other Durrell-related material.

A frequently quoted source is *The Durrell-Miller Letters 1935-1980*, edited by Ian MacNiven in 1988; for ease of reference this is cited as “*Durrell-Miller Letters*” in the footnotes.

An earlier collection of letters (1963), *Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller: a private correspondence*, edited by George Wickes, is cited as *Private Correspondence*.

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My sincerest thanks to the following are a small repayment of my indebtedness for the kindness, generosity, consideration, professional acumen, assistance and advice from friends and associates over the years.

Rony Alfandary, author of the ground-breaking *A Psychological Study of Lawrence Durrell's The Alexandria Quartet: exile and return*, friend and adviser; Peter Baldwin, publisher and collector, for his encyclopaedic knowledge of Durrelliana; Ciara Barrick, researcher *extraordinaire* and emergent critical talent, for ongoing indefatigable interest in Durrell; Roderick Beaton, author of *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, biographer of George Seferis and constant source of support; James Dekker, editor of *Nexus – the International Henry Miller Journal*; David Green, essayist, traveller and friend; Paul Herron, editor of *A Café in Space – the Anaïs Nin Literary Journal* and of many Nin-related volumes; Vera Konidari, my friend, colleague, translator of my work and writer on Theodore Stephanides; Aaron Lise, curator of the Lawrence Durrell Archive at SIUC, whose application to the material in his custody is exemplary, especially in making available the illustration by “Oscar Epfs” for the cover of this book; Ian MacNiven, long-term friend, biographer of Lawrence Durrell and invaluable source of wisdom; Ravi Nambiar, author of another ground-breaking study, *Indian Metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's Novels*, for friendly advice and assistance.

Françoise Kestman, Lawrence Durrell's partner, and Norah Perkins of Curtis Brown, agents for the Lawrence Durrell Estate, and Anthea Morton Saner, Durrell's previous agent at Curtis Brown, have as always been courteous and considerate.

The dedication is long overdue.

PART ONE

RECONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

LAWRENCE DURRELL: A RECONSIDERATION

The man

I begin this reconsideration of Lawrence Durrell's writings with a brief statement of his biography, signalling the chief events and his principal dates of publication, since the circumstances of his life relate intimately to what he wrote and its effect on both himself and his readers.

Lawrence George Durrell was born in Jullundur, near Lahore, in the Punjab province of north-west India, on 27 February 1912. His father, Lawrence Samuel Durrell, and his mother, Louisa Florence (née Dixie), had both been born in India: "neither my father nor my mother had seen England or experienced the English at home". He described himself as "a colonial, an Anglo-Indian".¹ His was a family dedicated to a colonial service which echoed Disraeli's declaration in *Tancred* that the East was "a career";² indeed, Durrell's mother put it succinctly when she said "Most people talked of home and meant England, when we said home we meant India."³ It was a formula for a cultural confusion which would have distinct repercussions for Durrell in terms of his relations with the notion of "orientalism" and the siting of "images of the Other".⁴

Durrell's father, the son of a Suffolk-born army sergeant, was an engineer working for the Indian railway companies (for example, building a railway bridge across the Brahmaputra river) until 1920, when he established Durrell & Company at Jamshedpur, in Bihar province, where he built a hospital and the Tata Iron and Steel Works. His success was short-lived, however, as he died eight years later at the age of forty-three. Durrell's earliest memories were of villages in Burma and present-day

1 "From the Elephant's Back", pp. 1, 2.

2 B. Disraeli, *Tancred* as paraphrased by E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.

3 G. Durrell, *The Corfu Trilogy*, p. 675.

4 See Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 1, 2, 11, 20-1, 41, 157.

Bangladesh; in 1918, his family moved to Kurseong in the north-east of India, in the triangle tucked under the Himalayas in the lap of Nepal, where his father was responsible for the maintenance of railways, including the narrow-gauge Darjiling line.⁵ “The track ran through landscapes of dreams [...] You had the snows and the mists always opening and closing upon sheer precipices”.⁶

Durrell’s mother came from Irish stock (her father’s family, Dixie, is believed to have originated in Cork and her paternal grandmother was a Joanna O’Brien), and his inherited sense of Irishness gave an edge to an empathy which enabled him to regard himself as a thorn in the side of the “Establishment”. It was a simple fact of his family circumstances that Durrell would never, in conventional terms, “fit” into any orthodox system: when it was put to him that “an English father, an Irish mother and India as a cradle” had created an “unusual triangle”⁷ he agreed that while his Irishness was somewhat intangible, he had no real roots: “*nous étions tous dechaussés [...] perdus* [we were completely adrift, lost]”.⁸

Durrell first went to school at a local Jesuit college. But his father intended him to follow the traditional colonist’s pattern of an education “at home” and then to return to India to shine in the colonial system: “*il s’agissait de nous repasser à l’anglaise* [he was so anxious that we should acquire Englishness]”,⁹ “we were so pro-colonial, all the money was poured into getting us educated ‘at home’ so that we were very much colonial stockpot.”¹⁰

At the age of eleven he was sent to England where he attended school in London (St Olave’s and St Saviour’s Grammar School in Southwark) and then St Edmund’s, Canterbury (a minor public school), experiences which provided a solid and significant basis for his first three novels. One of the most significant encounters during these years was his

5 “Darjiling” was Durrell’s preferred spelling of “Darjeeling”. The track, which continues in service, runs from Siliguri, through Kurseong, to Darjiling; it is celebrated in the documentary film *The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway – a journey to the rooftop of the world* (dir. Rick Melling, 2001).

6 “From the Elephant’s Back”, p. 5.

7 Another “triangle” would develop when he began to discover himself in Greece, with his philhellenic empathy with the Greek people, referring on one occasion to “the dim unstable consciousness of the Greek, who is one of the finest persons in Europe, internally divided and confused like the Irishman but with a greater traditional manner and poise” – letter to Elizabeth Smart, *circa* 1940, quoted by I. MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell*, p. 224.

8 *Les nouvelles littéraires*.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Conversation with the author, 1988.

discovery, in Southwark Cathedral, of a group of recently recoloured and regilded tombs: “in form, proportion, heaviness of decoration and unapologetic brightness of colour – particularly of colour – they at once brought India to his mind”.¹¹ The discovery also served as an introduction to the literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, and began that chain of association which brought India itself – both the India of Kipling’s *Kim* and the India of the Upanishads – in his imagination, into commerce with western ideas: the colours of India, and later of Greece, would make a junction, in his always visually alert mind, with the vigour of the Elizabethan period.

Elizabethan literature, on which he cherished a long-term, unrealised, ambition to write a book, satisfied him because it was both elitist and popular, available and comprehensible to all, enabling the resolution of opposites. The audience

responded as readily to Hamlet’s flights as to the “common miming and jiggling” which made up such a large part of the Elizabethan stage-entertainment. The mythopoetic¹² sense of the ordinary man was, it would seem, so highly developed that the artist did not have to strive after purely technical effects (as he does today) in order to hold the attention of his public [...] The broad popular appetites of Elizabeth’s day saw nothing wrong in being able to enjoy both tragedy and comedy.¹³

Meanwhile, Durrell’s father had died prematurely in India, and his mother moved to England – first to London, where she lived in a house in the suburb of South Norwood (which became a setting for the hotel in Durrell’s novel *The Black Book*) and later in Bournemouth, which would

11 See Keith Brown, “Lawrence Durrell”, p. 93; and *A Smile in the Mind’s Eye*, p. 19: “One day while passing the Jesuit school chapel [in Darjiling] I found the door ajar and tiptoed inside, curious as children are. In the deep gloom I came upon a life-size figure of Christ crucified hanging over the altar, liberally blotched with blood and perfectly pig-sticked and thorn-hatted. An indescribable feeling of horror and fear welled up in me. So *this* was what those austere garbed and bearded priests worshipped in the dense gloom among the flowers and candles! It was hardly a logical sequence of feelings and sentiments – it was quite spontaneous and unformulated. But the horror remained with me always; and later on, when my father decreed that I must go to England for my education, I felt that he was delivering me into the hands of these sadists and cannibals”.

12 Durrell uses this, rather than the more common “mythopoetic”, thus signalling that he regarded the *sense* as both myth-making (mythopoetic) and capable of being used creatively as poetry.

13 “The Minor Mythologies”.

become a base for the whole family in later years.

After school, Durrell failed – deliberately, it is said – to win a university place (“*si j’étais un cancre [dunce] à Canterbury, c’est délibérément*”)¹⁴ perhaps wishing to emulate Shakespeare who, he said, “always felt somehow dishonoured by the fact that he was not a university man”.¹⁵ Instead, he took to earning a sort of living as a rent-collector, a railway porter, an apprentice racing driver and, less improbably, playing jazz piano in a night-club (and indeed composing and selling jazz songs using his mother’s surname as a partial nom-de-plume,¹⁶ running a photographic studio and, later, writing drama criticism.¹⁷

Durrell married Nancy Myers, an art student, and they lived at first in the Sussex countryside at Loxwood with their friends George and Pam Wilkinson.¹⁸ At this stage, Durrell had published nothing except three

14 *Les nouvelles littéraires*.

15 An expression Durrell used in an address on Shakespeare which he gave to a meeting of UNESCO [letter to Durrell from Alexander Blokh, 24 November 1970] CERLD uncatalogued typescript, 5 pp.

16 “Two Dance Tunes for the Blue Peter Night Club Band... Sung by little Dixie Lee... 1935” – SIUC 42/9/3; see also *Pied Piper of Lovers*, pp. 370-1, where Walsh writes songs with titles such as “To Be or Not to Be”, “Hold Your Woman” and “Never Come Back”: “‘Never Come Back’ is our epitaph, our requiem, our good-bye”. The songs were recorded and frame the spoken words on a BBC/British Library CD of Durrell reading poems and in conversation: NSACD 76 issued at the time of Durrell’s centenary (2012).

17 See *Durrell-Miller Letters*, pp. 121, 125.

18 In a copy of *Transition* (published by the Caduceus Press), inscribed to the Wilkinsons, Durrell wrote: ‘Its [*sic*] a sign, my sweets, that the delightful genius which I derive from an holy age of colonial warblers, still spates in an unbroken torrent of capricious continuity’ (CERLD reserve no. 1705). The caduceus, a rod entwined by two serpents, was a symbol of power and one of the attributes of Mercury, the messenger of the gods: as a device for Durrell’s early poems it is an interesting herald of his later interest in the phenomenon of ophitism as manifested particularly in *The Avignon Quintet*. In his copy of *The Worship of the Dead or the Origin and Nature of Pagan Idolatry and Its Bearing Upon the Early History of Egypt and Babylonia* by Col. J. Garnier (1909) Durrell marked the following passage: “All the pagan gods were eventually identified with the Serpent, which was also regarded, like the Sun, as the Great Father, and was a symbol of the Sun. The Serpent, in short, was regarded both as the source of life, and also of wisdom and knowledge, and as the instructor of men [p. 108]... Worship of the Sun and Serpent... by means of which the idolaters were eventually led, by a gradual process of development, to worship the Prince of the demons himself [p. 213]... The [Serpent was] the form which the Prince of the Demons took when he

small collections of poetry, *Quaint Fragment* (1931), *Ten Poems* (1932) and *Transition* (1934) and, in 1933, under the pseudonym “Gaffer Peeslake”, a satire of Shaw’s *Black Girl* entitled *Bromo Bombastes*.¹⁹ He was, however, starting to produce both prose and poetry, simply because, as we shall see in examining his psychology, he was a born writer – one prone to loneliness and unhappiness: “from the very beginning he was determined to become a great writer. He was quite certain that he would be one”.²⁰

But Durrell’s main occupation both in London (in the Reading Room of the British Museum)²¹ and in the following years was to undertake a prodigious reading schedule which provided him with a system of thought adequate for a lifetime’s pioneering work: it was a voyage of discovery for philosophical and literary vistas which could nourish his own mindscape, his “private country” – the title he gave to one of his earlier volumes of poetry – and it found him circumnavigating that *locus classicus*, the “middle sea” within him which was the essential core of his imagination, the islands and littorals of his own sensibility.²² In London and Sussex he wrote his first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers*, a semi-autobiographical account of an Indian childhood and transitus from India to England.

The context of these initial twenty-three years is significant since it demonstrates the emotional and intellectual background against which much of his subsequent life would be led.

At this point (1935) Lawrence and Nancy took a major decision: on the advice of the Wilkinsons, to move to Corfu to join them, and to be followed very soon by Mrs Durrell and the three siblings, Leslie, Margaret (Margot) and Gerald. This relocation, which was of immense consequence for every member of the family, was thus the second major change in their lives, the first being the removal from India. From 1935 onwards, Lawrence Durrell would be virtually a stranger to England, its *mores* and its culture, while remaining their vigorous and sarcastic critic.

persuaded Eve to eat... and the Serpent was thus represented in paganism to be the bestower of knowledge and wisdom on man [p. 216]”. Durrell’s copy is held in SIUC/LD/Accession II; see also *A Smile in the Mind’s Eye*, p. 13.

19 Re-published in *Endpapers and Inklings 1933-1988*, vol. 2, pp. 316-33.

20 Theodore Stephanides, “First Meeting with Lawrence Durrell” in *Autumn Gleanings*.

21 Durrell’s ticket for the reading room of the British Museum [today, the British Library] contained in a notebook of 1938 inscribed “Lawrence Durrell, human being”, is numbered B52750: SIUC 42/9/2.

22 See M. Haag, obituary of Lawrence Durrell, *Independent* 9 November 1990.

The four years in Corfu (1935-39) were interrupted by the visits of Lawrence and Nancy to Paris (where they met Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, who had been the inspiration for the prose-poems “Zero” and “Asylum in the Snow”) and also to London (where they met John Gawsworth, Tambimuttu, T S Eliot and Dylan Thomas). *Pied Piper of Lovers* was published in 1935. During these years, Durrell was writing his second novel, *Panic Spring* (published in 1936) and the work he regarded as his first major novel, *The Black Book* (published in Paris in 1937 but not in Britain until 1973). It was in these years that they met Theodore Stephanides, a scientist and poet, who was to have a profound effect on the work of both Lawrence and Gerald Durrell, and Lawrence befriended the Armenian writer Gostan Zarian.²³

The outbreak of war in 1939 precipitated Lawrence and Nancy into mainland Greece and, later, Egypt. They were firstly in Athens, where their daughter, Penelope, was born, and where they worked briefly at the British Embassy, before Lawrence was given teaching work for the British Council, and was then appointed to direct the British Council school in Kalamata, in the southern Peloponnese. Greece entered the war in October 1940, and was soon over-run by German and Italian troops; the Durrells escaped from Kalamata to Alexandria in April 1941.

The unforeseen immersion in wartime Egypt signalled the end of the Durrells' marriage; it brought Durrell into contact with a large number of expatriates (mostly British, but among them the Greek poet and diplomat George Seferis) and he collaborated in the editing of a poetry journal, *Personal Landscape*; his own poems, *Private Country* and *Cities, Plains and People* were published respectively in 1943 and 1946. Egypt also created a condition of disturbance by war which would become the backdrop to both his major novel sequences, *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Avignon Quintet*, in addition to other works such as *The Dark Labyrinth*. It also enabled him to create his first volume of “foreign residence” writing, his memoir of Corfu, *Prospero's Cell* (published in 1945).

Following the war, Durrell, whose life as a writer for the next ten years would run parallel with his employment as a British public servant, was posted to Rhodes, capital of the Dodecanese islands which, under British supervision, were being transferred from Italian rule to the Greek state; his work as an information officer and newspaper editor would be chronicled in his *Reflections on a Marine Venus* (1953). Here he married Eve Cohen, who had been his lover since 1943 in Alexandria.

23 His letters to Zarian were published in *Endpapers and Inklings 1933-1988*, vol. 1, pp. 325-344.

In 1948 Durrell was employed by the British Council in Argentina, at the university of Córdoba, where he lectured on poetry, leading to his one critical work, *A Key to Modern (British) Poetry*, published in 1952.²⁴ Durrell disliked Argentina intensely and resigned his position before the expiration of his contract; he was then appointed as press attaché at the British Embassy in Belgrade, capital of the Yugoslav Federation, another location with which he was out of sympathy. While living in Belgrade (and travelling throughout the constituent republics of Yugoslavia) Durrell garnered material for the series of satirical “sketches from diplomatic life” generally known as “Antrobus” which were collected in three volumes in 1957, 1958 and 1966. He also witnessed the atmosphere of the “Cold War” which he later described in his thriller *White Eagles over Serbia* (1957). And he wrote his first play, *Sappho*, which was published in 1950 but not performed until 1959. His and Eve’s daughter, Sappho-Jane, was born in 1951, but Eve’s deteriorating mental health meant that Sappho-Jane was often in her father’s sole care, especially after his move to Cyprus.

Durrell moved to Cyprus in 1953, intending to set to work on what was emerging in his mind as a multi-volume novel. The choice was made because although he wanted to live in Greece, that did not seem practical, and Cyprus, a British colony, which was predominantly ethnically Greek, was an attractive proposition. To earn a living, Durrell taught English at a school in Nicosia, and began writing the first volume of *The Alexandria Quartet, Justine* (published 1957). However, from 1954 until he left at the height of the *enosis* crisis (the failed attempt by Greek Cypriots to join the state of Greece) he was employed by the British government as Director of Information Services. His experiences would give rise to *Bitter Lemons* (1957). He began to live with Claude-Marie Vincendon, whom he married in 1961 after his divorce from Eve.

From 1957 onwards, until his death, Durrell lived in the south of France, first in a rented house in Sommières, then buying an old farmhouse, the “Mazet Michel” about fifteen kilometres from Sommières, before eventually returning to the town to buy a large mansion. The years at the Mazet (much of which he built with his own hands) and which deepened his love for, and companionship with, Claude, were, I think, the happiest as well as the most productive of his whole life – but, once again, punctuated by the decision to move to the big, dark house in Sommières, followed by the unforeseen death of Claude. During the years 1957-58 he wrote *Balthazar* (1958; the sequel to *Justine*) and then, in quick succession,

24 It was published in Britain as “Key to Modern Poetry” and in the USA as “Key to Modern British Poetry”.

Mountolive (1958) and *Clea*, the final part of the quartet which appeared in 1959. These were followed by the first edition of his *Collected Poems* in 1960 (the second edition would appear in 1980), his second play, *Acte*, published and performed in 1961, and his third, *An Irish Faustus*, published and performed in 1963.

The publication of the volumes of *The Alexandria Quartet* (and their appearance as a single volume in 1962) established Durrell as a major author, with successful translations into French and other languages. The media attention was often intense; among many television interviews we can mention a BBC *Monitor* programme, with interviewer Huw Wheldon²⁵ in 1960, and later programmes by Margaret McCall (who was Durrell's lover) in 1965 and 1969. He was commissioned to make two television travelogues with director Peter Adam, *Lawrence Durrell's Greece* and *Lawrence Durrell's Egypt* in 1975 and 1977 respectively. As a celebrity he could command considerable fees from magazines such as *Holiday* and *Travel and Leisure* for "travel writing" in cities such as Geneva, Vienna, Dublin and Avignon.

Durrell was also, as a successful writer, approached by Hollywood, and spent two very well-paid years in 1960-61 working on scripts for *Cleopatra* (starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton) and, in 1962-63, *Judith* (starring Sophia Loren). He also wrote a screenplay for *Oedipus the King* in 1965-66.²⁶ He was a judge at the 1973 Cannes film festival. A film of the Quartet, generally judged to have been a poor adaptation, was screened as *Justine* in 1969, with Dirk Bogarde (Pursewarden), Anouk Aimée (Justine), Philippe Noiret (Pombal) and Michael York (Darley); Durrell apparently never saw it.

Under Henry Miller's tutelage while they were staying in Paris, Durrell had also begun to paint, and as this developed he adopted the pseudonym "Oscar Epsf", and from the 1960s he held exhibitions of "Epsf" in oils and watercolours.

Universities and academic publishers encouraged research into his work, and three, in particular, are notable: *The World of Lawrence Durrell* edited by Harry T Moore in 1962;²⁷ *Lawrence Durrell: a study* by his friend from Cairo, the poet G S Fraser, in 1968; and Alan Warren

25 Later Sir Huw Wheldon, managing director of BBC television.

26 The film treatments for *Cleopatra* and *Oedipus the King* were published in *Endpapers and Inklings 1933-1988*, vol. 2, pp. 116-174. The version of *Judith*, written as a novel, was published serially in the 1960s and in volume form in 2012.

27 This was a substitute for an abandoned project, commissioned by Moore, for a study of Durrell by Richard Aldington.

Friedmann's *Lawrence Durrell and The Alexandria Quartet: Art for Love's Sake* in 1970. Many monographs, critical essays and unpublished university theses would follow, and continue to appear despite Durrell's diminishing reputation.

A collection of his "Essays and Letters" was published as *Spirit of Place*, edited by his friend Alan Thomas, in 1969. His huge correspondence with Henry Miller, begun in 1935, was published in an edition by George Wickes in 1963, and a fuller edition, after Miller's death in 1980 had brought the correspondence to a close, was edited by Ian MacNiven (Durrell's future authorised biographer) in 1988. MacNiven (with Harry T Moore) also edited Durrell's correspondence with Richard Aldington, whom Durrell had encountered and befriended after his move to Provence.

During these years, Durrell was a frequent revenant to Corfu, and in later life contemplated living there, possibly with one of his close friends, Sourayya Frick, with whom he stayed in 1981 and 1982 while working on the later volumes of *The Avignon Quintet*.

The years 1965-1969 saw a deterioration in Durrell's world-view, as he observed what he saw as the decline of western civilisation and its blindness to the virtues of an eastern mindscape. This coincided with the unexpected death of his wife, Claude, on 1 January 1967. He was at work on a pessimistic two-volume novel, published as *Tunc* (1968) and *Nunquam* (1970), which concentrates on the issues of creativity and freedom. 1970 also saw Durrell recording the words and music for his projected musical "Ulysses Come Back" (issued as an LP by Tower Books: "outline sketch of a musical based upon the last three love-affairs of Ulysses the Greek adventurer of mythology, adapted rather lightheartedly from Homer"); it was a celebration of the "Ulysses myth" which had attracted him since his time in Corfu in the 1930s. Finding the appeal of islands irresistible, Durrell also took up the suggestion of a book on Sicily, partly as a tribute to Marie Millington-Drake who had been his lover in Cyprus and who had recently died in Sicily;²⁸ *Sicilian Carousel* was published in 1977, the same year as his synoptic "coffee-table" book, *The Greek Islands* to which his old friend from Corfu, Theodore Stephanides (to whom it is dedicated), contributed much information.

28 Marie Millington-Drake was the daughter of Sir Eugen Millington-Drake, a British diplomat and founder of the Hudson Institute for Latin American Studies; a copy of her unpublished novel "The Bamboo Flute" is in the Durrell Archive at SIUC.

From 1971 onwards, Durrell was consumed by the long-cherished ambition to write a “Tibetan novel”, but his declining health, and the capacity to sustain the philosophical momentum through a five-novel sequence (which would become *The Avignon Quintet*) endangered the success of the project. The volumes were published as *Monsieur* (1974), *Livia* (1978), *Constance* (1982), *Sebastian* (1983) and *Quinx* (1985). A further volume of ideas about Taoism appeared in the middle of this project: *A Smile in the Mind’s Eye*, published in 1980.

In the meantime in 1972 he had met Ghislaine de Boysson, whom he married in 1973; she accompanied him to California in 1974 for his lectures at the California Institute of Technology (which also facilitated reunions with Miller and Nin); they separated towards the end of 1974 and were divorced in 1977. Durrell’s last years were also clouded by the death of his first wife, Nancy, in 1983, and even more by the suicide of his second daughter, Sappho-Jane, in 1985.

Durrell lived mostly alone in the years 1975-1984, until he met Françoise Kestman, who lived with him until his death but whom he did not marry. She was instrumental in sustaining him in both his work and his health, aiding in the editing of his final volume, a tribute to Provence entitled *Caesar’s Vast Ghost*, published just before his death in 1990.

The writer

Lawrence Durrell was, primarily and principally, a poet. I take a risk in stating that his chief reputation today, as the novelist of *The Alexandria Quartet*, and his secondary reputation as a “foreign residence” writer of “island” books, are due to his skill and passion in prose-poetry. When asked whether he was “a writer of ideas”, he preferred to describe himself as “a poet who had stumbled into prose”.²⁹ Conversationally, it seems that he was simply pointing his interviewer in the direction of the “prose-poetry” nexus rather than disavowing himself as a “writer of ideas”, since the *Avignon Quintet*, in particular, is driven by Durrell’s fascination with Taoism, gnosticism and other stimuli.³⁰

29 K Young, in Earl Ingersoll, *Conversations*, p. 445.

30 The idea of prose as poetry finds a parallel in the work of Elizabeth Bowen: although she disliked “Poetic prose” she acknowledged that sometimes “prose has to do the work of poetry – do more, in fact, than words can achieve *through reason*” (Bowen’s italics: quoted in Patricia Laurence, *Elizabeth Bowen: a Literary Life*, p. 108). The suggestion that prose works “through reason” and is therefore unable to achieve the same result as poetry, merits consideration.

Ideas undoubtedly did spring from his poet's eye: Durrell's origins as a poet show him to have possessed an *eye* which was both physical, in appreciating the world around him, and metaphysical, in that he *saw* ideas as *ideograms*, as intellectual or emotional constructs which could be carried by a narrative in either poetry or prose.

In *The Dark Labyrinth* the painter Baird is told "You know that the only life for you is one of curiosity – sexual curiosity and metaphysical speculation".³¹ One of Durrell's immediate attractions for any adolescent reading *The Alexandria Quartet* is the strategy by which he immerses the reader in both the sexual and metaphysical pursuit of satisfaction in sex and ideas. He jokingly (perhaps) referred to the Quartet as "a strange mixture of sex and the secret service"³² and this strategy of what he would call the "minor mythologies" of popular literature is present throughout his work.

The prose is easier to read than the poetry because it is not allowed to be as esoteric or as allusive as a poem. "For the poet less and less can be spoken about – for the novelist more and more must", he recorded in 1962.³³ But Durrell's eye and ear were poetic, conscious always of the effect of each word and its placing within his syntax. He saw himself, as early as 1939, when he was writing his first prose-poems "Zero" and "Asylum in the Snow", as "a conjunction between sentences".³⁴ The cardinal importance that Durrell gave to "the Word" ("In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was God" – see Chapter Six) alerts us to his persistent concern with finding the *mot juste*, the exact mapping of thought onto expression.

There is a parabola or legato line in his work from the earliest poem to the last, with all the prose work, from *Pied Piper of Lovers* to *Caesar's Vast Ghost*, in between. From the very first published poems available to us (in *Quaint Fragment*, 1931), "The Gift", "Pioneer", "Inconstancy", "Happy Vagabond" and "Sonnet Astray",³⁵ we can detect Durrell's principal topics and preoccupations: sexuality, tradition, birth, death, the building of necessary comforts, what he would later call "dromomania", a sense of failure and a sense of an ending. At his life's end, he was still acknowledging the affective power of history, of family relations, still searching for closure, for that sense of an ending, in the poems included in *Caesar's Vast Ghost*: "Le cercle refermé" invokes his

31 *The Dark Labyrinth*, p. 59.

32 *Spirit of Place*, p. 120.

33 SIUC 42/19/10: "Nîmes 1962".

34 SIUC 42/8/1.

35 *Collected Poems*, pp. 17-19.

childhood memories of India and alludes to his duality as “my heliocentric muse / With lunar leanings”.³⁶ In the opening poem of *Caesar’s Vast Ghost*, “Constrained by history”, the poet who was Lawrence Durrell asseverates that he sought to “cure his feelings of the world as threat / Knitting poems from them”.³⁷ In ill-health and facing the death which had been a massive presence throughout his life, he tells us that he had tried to make sense of the threats of the world by turning them into poems – poetry as a form of therapy through which, if they could not be defeated, they could at least be accommodated.

This “poetry” could not be contained within such a microcosm: it demanded to be knitted into a much larger canvas. “Knitting” is not at all an accidental choice of words for this most allusive and all-embracing of writers: an early notebook refers to his lifelong fascination with the relationship of space and time:

Space and time are really (as with all opposites) identical: they come into the world, as it were from different angles.

Imagine a woman knitting.

Time is the ball of wool entering the fabric in periodic motions:

Space is the same wool but in extension.

The conception of God is the whole jumper.

The duality is the two needles - the horns between which apprehension must pass to register.

Motion is the one law: time gives us our language, our nature etc: paradoxically *to enter the Void we must knit time*.³⁸

One of his passions was to defeat time by overcoming its linear nature and celebrating it as cyclic (again, *le cercle refermé*). Durrell was also fascinated to the point of obsession by what he saw as the error of polar or binary oppositions. He was constantly at pains throughout this notebook and elsewhere to come to terms with the duality that polarised good and bad, god and devil, being and not-being, life and death, arguing instead for the “rule of four” which made it possible to live in an otherwise unlivable world and drove the artist into his selfish autism. One must accept duality but must be discontent with it: this became the poet’s constant project because it led him towards the essential quality of the Heraldic Universe, the new relation of space and time.

36 *Caesar’s Vast Ghost*, p. 205.

37 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

38 SIUC 42/8/1; my emphases.

The same notebook contains a message to himself which constitutes the ground-rules for all his subsequent fiction:

Enunciate most carefully the basic paradox: the rule of four:

*that in each statement the fulcrum of the counter statement finds itself ...
Until the artist has reached the paradoxical or hermetic stage of his
growth his art cannot cross the gulf which lies between the emblem and
the symbol.*³⁹

The “rule of four”, the acceptance of opposites which carry their opposite within them, became the blueprint for the Quartet: “Qualities are inherent in their negatives”, Durrell added. Again and again he saw the world as “the rule of four”, the couple mirrored within its shadow, its negative. (See Chapter Nine.)

In a notebook begun in Paris in 1937 – during his first meeting with Miller and Nin – he wrote of Lao Tzu:

He refuses the dogma with its sharp black and white tones. Within the experience there is room for infinite adjustment, infinite movement. The iron scheme is a violence which he dissociates himself from utterly; his method is a wingless flying - an act which operates on a line where the mere mechanics of the act is lost, is irrelevant ... a direct challenge to the world of dogmatic relations, where good is balanced against evil; the world of opposites, from which alone flowers the *canon*, the *principle* [...] He refuses to place himself at the mercy of the dogmatic assumption; which he recognises can carry embedded in it the poisons of the personality, against which the volatile principle of being is at war. Consequently the ratiocinative principle *itself* must go: and the *tabu* with it. Here we reach the very heart of Tao.⁴⁰

Lao Tzu, whom Durrell characterised as “the Chinese Heraclitus”,⁴¹ was in Durrell’s view susceptible to one major criticism: “that an attempt was ever made to reduce the Way to words: since the use of words themselves implies a formal coercion.”⁴² The inadequacy of words in expressing “the Way” was the continuing burden of occidental thought which Durrell was obliged to negotiate in his own path towards “the Tibetan novel”, as he envisaged *The Avignon Quintet*.

39 Ibid; emphasis original.

40 SIUC 42/8/1; this is a variant on the text which appears in *A Smile in the Mind's Eye*, pp. 56-7.

41 *A Smile in the Mind's Eye*, p. 2.

42 SIUC 42/7/2.

Durrell's early notebooks are crammed not only with jottings and scraps from a wide range of authorities and sources, but also with several embryonic essays of extraordinary significance for his intellectual biography. This continued throughout his life: the mental image of Taoism in the *persona* of Lao Tzu was forged in a series of returns to passages such as this, in which we can detect the continual remaking of the idea of "home". They found early expression in *Pied Piper of Lovers*, where we find (the passage is entirely italicised by Durrell):

*All philosophy seems to lead me towards a perfect spiritual detachment – a divorce from the world, and therefore towards sterility and deadness. Let me be content to say: I am, and content to be as fully as possible.*⁴³

Durrell's attraction to "ideas" is particularly in evidence when we consider that, like Aldous Huxley (I am thinking of his *Perennial Philosophy*) Durrell was a synthesiser of ideas which were both eastern and western approaches to understanding. When we add science to different aspects of the religious experience, the picture becomes even more challenging. His very wide reading as an undisciplined autodidact – much of it during the ages of nineteen to twenty-three – embraced any aspect of human thought or experience which he, as a fledgling writer, could accommodate within his fiction. His essays from this period, when he was influenced by Otto Rank, discussed Taoism and the theories of Graham Howe. Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, influenced by Georg Groddeck, he would meet writers as diverse as Francis J Mott, Arthur Guirdham, Henri Michaux and Claude Seignolle, all of whose works on the nature of the mind, magic, and spirituality he respected and admired.⁴⁴ It was not so much any specific philosophical propositions which he may have encountered, as their perspectives on life and literature which allowed him to absorb their essential reasons for being thinkers and writers.

Like these disparate writers, Durrell himself does not easily surrender to any single category or label as either a writer or a thinker. As James Clawson acknowledges in his discussion of Durrell's major novels, "Durrell's opus resists generic classifications of *modernism* and *postmodernism* [...] Durrell's desire for the opus to challenge established literary traditions signals his urge to break with [...] modes of modernism."⁴⁵ As a resolute non-joiner of any association, whether political or literary, Durrell

43 *Pied Piper of Lovers*, pp. 33-34.

44 Durrell's essays on Howe, Michaux and Seignolle are reprinted in *Endpapers and Inklings 1933-1988*.

45 J Clawson, *Durrell Re-Read*, p. 143.

disclaimed attempts to label him, for example, as a surrealist, announcing that he was “a Durrealist”,⁴⁶ a “Selfist”, or “autist”.⁴⁷ (In Chapter Two I discuss in particular the – in my opinion misguided – argument by James Gifford, of Durrell’s alleged “anarchism”.)

I have referred to Durrell’s critical writings, in particular his lectures on poetry and modern literature. In Argentina he concentrated on a fascinating aspect of modern English poetry: its emergence from the poetic tradition of the nineteenth century, indicating his deep awareness of influence, and the work of poets such as Hopkins, the Imagists, Eliot, Auden and MacNeice. The principal point of importance in these lectures is that Durrell identified the poetry with the *Zeitgeist*, the interaction of science, politics and poetry, culminating in statements such as:

- I am anxious to avoid dangers inherent in thinking along straight lines in a universe which science tells us is curved;
- To think according to the terms of relativity one has to train the mind to do something extraordinary: to accept two contradictory ideas as simultaneously true [...] How to state something which is beyond opposites in a language which is based upon opposites?;
- the trouble with the common reader is that he knows that the twentieth century is a battlefield, but he does not know what the battle is about.⁴⁸

In the California lectures, over twenty-five years later, he concentrated on Ford Madox Ford, Joyce and Lawrence; again, Durrell could look over the shoulder of literature at the Semantic Disturbance of Rimbaud and Laforgue and the “double theme” of the split personality, with

our changed notions about the world of the ego [...] Victorian certainty giving place to a more provisional view of the universe [...] What characterises most of the art of our age and our type of consciousness is [...] stress, *angst*, *angustia*, anxiety. Stress and the relief of stress became the great new preoccupations of the age.

Durrell was a subversive in literature, in the sense that he did not – with the exceptions of Joyce in prose and Eliot in poetry – subscribe to a *canon*

46 *Private Correspondence*, p. 24.

47 *Windmill* 2/6 (1947) “From a Writer’s Journal”, reprinted in *Endpapers and Inklings 1933-1988*, vol. 2, pp. 186-195.

48 *Key to Modern British Poetry*, pp. 7, 31, 144.

of literature. Probably Durrell's most subversive statement about modern literature is: "The greatest literary creation of the twentieth century is, of course, little Hans".⁴⁹

These "headlines" from Durrell's critical pen echo the "anxiety" leaping out of the pages of *The Alexandria Quartet*, such as the description of Purswarden as "a man tortured beyond endurance by the lack of tenderness in the world", or Balthazar's statement "We are all hunting for rational reasons for believing in the absurd" which chimes with Purswarden's statement "We live lives based upon selected fictions" (and, we must observe, its converse, that we live lives based upon selected truths or facts). Purswarden also tells us: "One writes to recover a lost innocence" and "There is no Other; there is only oneself facing forever the problem of one's self-discovery".⁵⁰ These, too, accompanied Durrell's exotic prose style in a disruption of a canon of "great" works of literature; by accommodating the philosophical propositions of relativity within an ostensible narrative structure, he caused a tsunami of the novel in the late 1950s and early 1960s which continues to wash up on the shores of contemporary criticism.

Both his critical works and his fiction demonstrate that Durrell was at home in exile: like Henry Miller, he lived *en marge*, "an anomaly, a paradox and a misfit";⁵¹ he related intimately to the margin, without being marginal. He stood on thresholds of his own making, a cusp "between sentences", aware, I believe, that he was his own uncanny.

One of his favourite motifs is the *mirror* and the many possibilities that it offers for both self-deception and the creation of multiple personalities. The mirror permeates his work, offering him a method for testing appearances, assessing the various aspects of the fragmented ego which replaced the "stable ego" of the nineteenth century and allowing him to explore a portrait of someone who was both himself and an Other. In *The Alexandria Quartet* Justine, "sitting before the multiple mirrors at the dressmaker's", observes "'Look! five different pictures of the same subject. Now if I wrote I would try for a multi-dimensional effect in character, a sort of prism-sightedness. Why should not people show more than one profile at a time?'"⁵² Multiple images, slightly and differently nuanced, defy any composite portrait. The multi-

49 He is referring to Freud's case study "Little Hans". The sentence occurs in his "From a Writer's Journal", but he also referred to "Little Hans" in his Californian lectures: *Endpapers and Inklings*, vol. 2, pp. 257-68.

50 *The Alexandria Quartet*, pp. 194, 79, 210, 475, 729.

51 H. Miller, "Introduction" to *Selected Prose of Henry Miller*, vol. 1.

52 *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 28.

profiled world of infinite possibilities, suggested to Durrell by his reading in Einstein and Bergson, continued to dominate his mind and work, up to the proposition in *The Avignon Quintet* that we are not only each part of one another, but interactively so. It was both a “reasoned” notion – if “reason” has a role in this process – and a way of escaping definitive precision.

To accompany Durrell on what he called the “long strip”⁵³ of his literary journey, from before *Pied Piper of Lovers* to the *Avignon Quintet* and beyond, is an intellectual and emotional – even spiritual – journey of discovery which involves not only a “perennial philosophy” but also a “perennial culture” in which Durrell combines (one of his favourite expressions was “soup mix”) images, characteristics, vocabularies, thoughts and suggestions. If, for him, it was a process of self-discovery, then that possibility is open also to the reader.

At the centre of the journey, between the undisputed achievements of *The Alexandria Quartet* and the ambitious intentions – whether realised or not – of *The Avignon Quintet* is the problematic *Tunc-Nunquam*:⁵⁴ problematic because it initially baffled those critics who expected more “vintage” Durrell, and because it incorporated science, rather than philosophical ideas, as the foil of creativity and the pursuit of freedom. Yet, as Durrell told me, it represented his most important book, possibly for this very reason: it departed from his characteristic romantic, lapidary style in order to confront the inevitable choice of “then or never” (*aut tunc aut nunquam*), the decisive moment of destiny in which freedom must be grasped, whatever the consequences.

As I have indicated, *Tunc-Nunquam* belongs to a period of profound depression, in which relocation to a town house fundamentally different from the rural isolation of the maret, sudden bereavement, drunkenness, the increasing disturbance of the public world (such as the worldwide momentum of the civil rights movement) were pushing Durrell to the limits of sanity and into a writing style which enabled him to confront these anxieties more effectively. (I discuss this further in Chapter Ten.)

I realise that I am going against the grain of critical opinion in doing so, but I believe that Durrell was more successful in finding himself in the process of writing *Tunc* and *Nunquam* than in the composition of

53 Conversation with the author, 1988.

54 Although these two novels constituted a single narrative, which was republished in one volume as *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, I retain throughout this book the original titles since Durrell himself disliked the composite title.