

The Heraldic World of Lawrence Durrell

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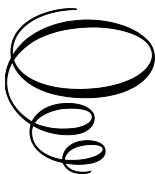
The Man, His Circle, and His Art

(Durrell Studies 4)

By

Bruce Redwine

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Heraldic World of Lawrence Durrell:
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(Durrell Studies 4)

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For Kit Choy

I find art easy. I find life difficult.

— Lawrence Durrell, *The Paris Review* 22 (1960)

An artist's work and his private life are like a woman in childbed and her child. You may look at her child, but you may not lift up her chemise to see if there are any bloodstains on it, that would be indelicate on the occasion of a maternity visit.

— Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo, 11 March 1882

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FOREWORD

The trauma of birth has a special appeal for male artists. Otto Rank wrote a book on the subject with that same title. Both Freud and Jung wrote on the topic, and so did Lawrence Durrell. The connection between conception and creativity is long and obvious: women are naturally creative, and men must find a substitute. So it's not surprising that Van Gogh would choose birthing as being analogous to artistic creation. Van Gogh, however, emphasizes the "child" over the "bloodstained" sheets, and he advises his brother Theo not to lift the chemise of a woman on her maternity bed. Birthing considerations aside (Durrell actually believed he could recall his own birth), Lawrence Durrell and Vincent van Gogh had much in common besides artistic careers. Among other things, a type of creative madness included, they could have been neighbours, were the times right — both spent their last years in the south of France, and some of Durrell's landscape paintings resemble the Dutch painter's. Durrell may have approved of Van Gogh's advice to Theo, but I do not see that warning as relevant to the role of a literary critic. I understand that role to go beyond the printed page. I appreciate the need for privacy, but I will not follow Van Gogh's admonition to respect the proprieties. Instead, I shall take Durrell's own confession as a guide and offer some suggestions as to why he found "art easy" and "life difficult".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND INDULGENCES

Scholarship, or simply writing about writing, is a collaborative enterprise. I've found discussions among colleagues as a form of dialectic, as a way to test and refine my ideas. Over the years, I've been indebted to many people with whom I've had the pleasure of personal contact. This is especially true about the vast field of studies dealing with Lawrence Durrell. His literary genius and breadth of knowledge require the endeavours of many specialists to approach a rough understanding of his great achievement. On literary matters, I owe special thanks to Richard Pine for his support, advice, and innumerable insights into Lawrence Durrell. My friend Richard is today's premier scholar in Durrellian studies.

I have also benefited from exchanging ideas with the following people: Rony Alfandary, William Apt, Ciarán Benson, David S. Callahan, Candace Fertile, Pamela Francis, Kennedy Gammage, James Gifford, William Leigh Godshalk, David Green, Paul Herron, David Holdsworth, Benjamin Keatinge, Ian S. MacNiven, Ray Morrison, Sumantra Nag, C. Ravindran Nambiar, Nicholas Poburko, Charles L. Sligh, and, most importantly, Michael Haag. I have also benefited from the assistance of Andrew Stewart in the field of Classics and Anthony Durrell in psychoanalysis. In Egyptology, I have relied upon the published expertise of scholars I have not met. Those I have duly cited. None of the aforementioned individuals is responsible for any of my errors in whatever form they may take. All errors are mine.

Versions of these essays and reviews have appeared in the following publications: *Arion*, *C.20*, *A Café in Space*, *Islands of the Mind* and *Mosaic*. I have made minor corrections and revisions to these essays. Each of my chapters acknowledges the source of the original publication. I thank the editors of these journals and series for their willingness to publish my articles. My long essay, "Ancient Egypt and *The Alexandria Quartet*", makes its first appearance in this monograph. A short and preliminary version of this essay, "The Ancient Egyptian Context of *The Alexandria Quartet*", appeared in *Mosaic* 16.1 (2016). My final essay on Durrell and Rilke is new.

Finally, because this book is a collection of essays, published on many different occasions, some repetition of my argument is inevitable. I request the reader's indulgence in this regard.

REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Primary references to Lawrence Durrell's works are cited in the main text and take a shortened form. They use the abbreviations listed below. Secondary sources are footnoted and also take a shortened form. Full citations to all works are listed in the bibliography.

Scholarly and governmental abbreviations conform to those in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition (2017). For references to Classical literature, Greek and Roman, I use the abbreviations in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition (2012). For Shakespeare's works, all my quotations from and citations to are derived from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edition (2016). All abbreviations to Shakespeare's plays are from C. T. Onions's *A Shakespeare Glossary*, 2nd edition (1969).

The following abbreviations will be used for Lawrence Durrell's works:

<i>Bal</i>	<i>Balthazar</i> [1958]
<i>BB</i>	<i>The Black Book</i>
<i>BL</i>	<i>Bitter Lemons</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>Blue Thirst</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems 1931-1974</i> [1980]
<i>CVG</i>	<i>Caesar's Vast Ghost</i>
<i>DL</i>	<i>The Dark Labyrinth</i>
<i>DML</i>	<i>The Durrell-Miller Letters</i>
<i>EB</i>	<i>From the Elephant's Back: Collected Essays & Travel Writings</i>
<i>GI</i>	<i>The Greek Islands</i>
<i>Jus</i>	<i>Justine</i> [1957]
<i>Key</i>	<i>A Key to Modern British Poetry</i>
<i>MI</i>	<i>The Magnetic Island</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>Prospero's Cell</i>
<i>Quartet</i>	<i>The Alexandria Quartet (Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, Clea)</i>
<i>Quintet</i>	<i>The Avignon Quintet (Monsieur, Livia, Constance, Sebastian, Quinx)</i>
<i>RMV</i>	<i>Reflections on a Marine Venus</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sicilian Carousel</i>
<i>Sel</i>	<i>Selected Poems</i>
<i>SME</i>	<i>A Smile in the Mind's Eye</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Spirit of Place</i>
<i>WES</i>	<i>White Eagles over Serbia</i>

A word about dating. For dates associated with Lawrence Durrell's life, ancient Egyptian history, and classical studies, I rely upon the following sources: Brewster Chamberlin's *The Durrell Log* (2019), Toby Wilkinson's *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (2008), and *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2012).

INTRODUCTION

Impressions and memories imprint themselves early in life. They endure and remain fresh through time. Some of mine began with readings in Egyptology and *The Alexandria Quartet*. When I was a teenager in the 1950s, I read histories such as James Henry Breasted's *History of Egypt* (1909) and John A. Wilson's *Burden of Egypt* (1951). Many years later, my interest in archaeology resulted in academic course work on the topic, and then, in 2000 and 2004, I participated in archaeological "digs" (excavations) at Tel Dor, Israel. But, at the beginning, Egypt came first. Hollywood films on ancient Egypt inspired my early adventures in these historical "realms of gold". Then, quite by accident, I came across Lawrence Durrell's *Quartet* in the late 1950s and assumed it too was about Egypt. I was initially wrong but was immediately drawn into a world of evocative experience. Durrell's Egyptian world, on the surface at least, has very little to do with ancient Egypt as such. His Alexandria — his "capital of Memory" — is largely an enclave of the imagination. The city is not unlike several of his island books: isolated geographically, poetic in its ambience, and entirely unique unto itself. It does not exist in the real world and cannot be found on any map. Durrell's claim in the note to *Justine* that "only the city is real" is highly misleading.

A short anecdote illustrates this point. In 2007, my wife and I attended the Durrell Celebration in Alexandria, Egypt, sponsored by the British Council. In *Balthazar*, Durrell uses the image: "flocks of spiring pigeons glittered like confetti as they turned their wings to the light" (*Bal* 45) (Note: "spiring" in the 1958 edition, replaced by "spring" in the 1962 edition.) We stayed at Durrell's Cecil Hotel on Durrell's "Grande Corniche". Late one afternoon, we went to the top floor of the Cecil and had drinks on a terrace overlooking the "White City". I longed to see Durrell's pigeons turning like confetti in the fading light. I didn't see any, however, nor do I remember seeing any such sight during our entire stay in Egypt. The image of flocks of pigeons recurs throughout the *Quartet* (*Quartet* 22, 234, 280, 670). Pigeons are a staple of the Egyptian diet, and "pigeon-tower[s]" or roosts dot the Delta countryside (*Quartet* 257). Nevertheless, Durrell's image, to my mind at least, remains odd and out of place. Then, in 2019, I believe I found Durrell's source. That year we went to Corfu, the Greek island where Durrell resided in the 1930s, and

attended the Durrell Library of Corfu's symposium on "Islands of the Mind". There, in open-air restaurants, I watched huge flocks of swifts swooping and turning like confetti in the sky. The experience was overwhelming. Moreover, "spiriting" aptly describes the flight of swifts — far more than does the bland adjective, "spring". And that emendation may be an indication of the image's original source. Most probably, Durrell's ubiquitous "mind's eye" conflates and transposes this and other such imagery onto other times and other places. His imagination creates its own reality — its own world — and that "reality" is what enthalls his readers.

So, around 1957, I began reading *Justine* for the first time, swallowed its opening "hot nude pearl" — which is not unlike the rich pearl Cleopatra swallows during her banquet with Antony — and awoke into another world. As a teenager, the power of Durrell's prose and poetry would cause me to lie awake late into the night and dream as though I were looking through a powerful lens into an immense sidereal universe. I no longer feel the same way, but I vividly recall the memory of those exhilarating experiences.

Durrell's world owes much to what he calls his "Heraldic Universe", a world of metaphor, poetry, and memory existing in some timeless and irrational dimension. In a strange and obscure way, "heraldic" characterizes Durrell's world. I seriously doubt that Durrell understood exactly what he meant by this concept. He says various things about it at various times and in various media. The Heraldic Universe can be transcendent, illogical, non-causal, timeless, symbolic, ideogrammatic, magical, or an "alchemical sigil". It can be a Buddhist mandala, Lao Tzu's *Tao*, or one of Durrell own poems. I prefer to interpret the concept — which is much like Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in *The Republic*¹ — as an attempt to go beyond the mundane world of time, change, and causality and to reach some eternal and immutable realm beyond the dictates of rationality. A couple of my essays shall briefly explore Durrell's idea, but I basically stick to the Platonic analogy.

Durrell's Heraldic Universe is not an original idea. It is important as a stage in his own poetic development and personal philosophy, but his obscure concept is neither unique nor seminal. Alfred North Whitehead famously writes that "the European philosophical tradition" is "a series of footnotes to Plato".² I am lumping Durrell in with this Platonic tradition, although he would probably object strenuously to my presumptuousness. Durrell's thought processes were often Eastern. In his *Paris Review*

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, pp. 227-35 (VII. 514A-521B).

² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 39.

interview, he speaks of the “confluence” of “Eastern and Western metaphysics”.³ True. And so are some of Plato’s ideas as they come under Eastern influences, particularly when he reverts to myth and allegory, much as Durrell himself does. Plato’s use of myth is a way to avoid direct statements about matters not conducive to rational explanation, so he suggests in his “Seventh Letter”.⁴ And Durrell’s use of obscurity serves a similar, albeit highly personal, function, especially in his poetry.

The pursuit of obscurity was one aspect of Lawrence Durrell, man and artist. His psychology was unusual but not unique. He had company in the pursuit of fame and anonymity. He was like another Lawrence, T. E. Lawrence (1888-1935), also known as Lawrence of Arabia. After his famous exploits, Colonel Lawrence of the British Army enlisted in the RAF under the pseudonym of Aircraftman John Hume Ross. He later joined the Tank Corps where he became Private T. E. Shaw.⁵ Two years after Lawrence’s death in 1935, Durrell published his second novel, *Panic Spring*, using the pseudonym of “Charles Norden”. Creating pseudonyms became part of a pattern. In 1963, Durrell created the pseudonym of “Oscar Epsf”, which he used to sign his paintings over the years. The pseudonymous artwork was exhibited and sold in several French venues.⁶ Assuming false identities is another aspect of Lawrence Durrell. It is also called fabrication.

Durrell was a fabulator. He was not always the person he self-portrayed in his numerous interviews. This is a common human fault. Nevertheless, he misled his audience and threw up smoke screens to elude his interviewers. His public and private personae did not always mesh. Two authors have presented controversial views of Durrell’s private life — one is Joanna Hodgkin, daughter of Durrell’s first wife Nancy Myers by her second marriage; another is Sappho Jane Durrell, his own daughter with his second wife, Yvette (Eve) Cohen. I have reviewed both of their writings and offered my opinions of how each adds something important to a portrait of a very complex man.

Durrell’s circle included many fellow writers, acquaintances, and critics. He carried on an extensive correspondence with all of these, most notably Henry Miller. I shall, however, concentrate on only one of his followers, Michael Haag (1944-2020), whom I knew personally for a short period of time. Haag met Durrell at his home in Sommières, France and spent years working on a biography of the writer. The biography, which

³ L. Durrell, “Art of Fiction”, p. 57.

⁴ Plato, *Complete Works*, p. 1659.

⁵ J. Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, pp. 681-82, 710.

⁶ Chamberlin, *Durrell Log*, pp. 136, 138, 147, 157, 168, 186.

would have been his magnum opus, remained unfinished at his death. Haag was not an academic or a professional literary critic. He was educated and trained as an anthropologist. A polymath, he wrote books on a variety of subjects, historical and literary, and became an authority on Egyptian culture and history. Haag was also a practitioner of a type of biography that I will call a version of “field anthropology”. To study his subject, like a good anthropologist, he went into the field, held interviews, and gathered information. He eschewed armchair scholarship in favour of first-hand experience. He was also interested in Durrell’s use of obscurity and the way he used it to create “his own world”. Haag saw obscurity as a dominant mode of Durrell’s fiction and poetry, and he explained it in terms of Durrell’s deep need to conceal — and yet to hint at — his private life and his anxieties. I shall explore the implications of Haag’s analysis, as I understand his ideas and expand on them.

Finally, there is the matter of Durrell’s art. I use *art* broadly. Lawrence Durrell was primarily a writer of prose and poetry. But his writings often had the descriptive qualities of paintings. He had the eye of an artist and was an evocative painter of people and landscapes, although he modestly called himself a “dauber” in *The Paris Review*.⁷ Self-deprecation was one of Durrell’s techniques to deflect attention from the mysterious workings of his art — and from himself. It had the opposite effect, of course. The simile of pigeons and confetti quoted above was immediately followed by the parenthetical jest of “(Fine writing!)”, which makes a fine image seem too self-conscious. The poet making fun of himself falls flat.

Durrell was very self-conscious. As previously mentioned, he was a fabulator, and his primary subject of invention was his own multifarious identity. He was a master of creating *alter egos*, such as Darley and Pursewarden in the *Quartet*. Another example is Count D. in *Prospero’s Cell* and possibly the narrator himself. And nowhere is that clearer than in his travel book, *Sicilian Carousel*. The narrator of that book, purportedly Durrell himself, is another fabrication on a fabricated journey around Sicily.

Why? Why all the deception and misdirection? We must go back to the key concept of the psychological need for obscurity, Durrell’s need to obscure his art and then, ultimately, himself. The need finally leads to a kind of self-extinction. I discuss this process in terms of Durrell’s use of Virgilian pastoral and his suppression of indebtedness to ancient Egypt. I am not offering a solution to the problem of *why*. That would be far too

⁷ L. Durrell, “Art of Fiction”, p. 60.

presumptuous. I am simply suggesting some of its parameters.

My reading of Lawrence Durrell is personal, and my “I” will intrude in the following essays whenever appropriate. So this introduction ends where it began — in ancient Egypt and the profound effect Egypt had on Durrell — and on me. Another visitor to Egypt and its monuments was the great poet of the German language, Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke’s Egyptian experiences in 1911 were equally profound and lasting. They would later reappear in his landmark *Duino Elegies* and other poetry.⁸ Durrell held the Bohemian-Austrian poet in high esteem and wrote an important comment, translated into German, on Rilke’s only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). I provide an English translation of Durrell’s short essay as it appeared in a German newspaper. The two poets had much in common. As men, they were both exiles and rootless. As artists, they both dwelled within the confines of their own imaginations and listened to their own muses or angels. That sense of isolation (“*Islomania*” as Durrell reified it) or solitude (“*Einsamkeit*” as Rilke extolled it) was both real and symbolic. So Durrell emphasizes that Rilke’s protagonist creates his art alone in a dark room, which is closed, shut off, and timeless. That imaginative space is similar to the Platonic dimension of Durrell’s “Heraldic Universe”, which also involves an attempt to transcend a cave-like experience.

⁸ For Durrell’s note on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, see Vol. 2, pp. 279-80 of *Lawrence Durrell’s Endpapers and Inklings 1933-1988*.

PART ONE:

LAWRENCE DURRELL: HIS FAME AND TRIALS

Introduction to Part One

When Lawrence Durrell told *The Paris Review* in 1960 that he found “art easy” and “life difficult”, he was at the height of his literary fame. That statement was both accurate and prophetic. In 1960, he published *The Alexandria Quartet* as a single volume to the high acclaim of many literary critics. His fame, however, came at a price. Twenty years earlier, he had endured the trials of the Second World War while living and working in Egypt (1941-1945). That tumultuous experience was eventually followed by three fruitful but troublesome years on Cyprus (1953-1956). The island was then under British control and undergoing the Greek Cypriot struggle for *enosis* (union) with Greece itself. Subsequently, the author’s own life was endangered because of his involvement with the British government as Director of Information Services. In 1960, Durrell was also on the verge of marrying Claude-Marie Vincendon, his third wife (1961-1967). His first two marriages to Nancy Myers (1935-1947) and Yvette (Eve) Cohen (1947-1957) had been stormy and traumatic. Then, in 1967, Durrell’s beloved Claude died of cancer. More anguish would follow. In 1985, Sappho Jane, Durrell and Eve’s daughter, committed suicide. Aspects of Durrell’s literary fame and his personal trials are the subjects of the following three essays. The first of these essays reflects an event that will change over time, to wit, the fate of the Ambron Villa in Alexandria.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DURRELL CELEBRATION IN ALEXANDRIA¹

I

The convocation had set up microphones in the audience to enable general participation, and after a little hesitation, a boy rose to speak in a large auditorium full of much older people. The topic of discussion was the preservation of the architectural heritage of the city of Alexandria, and a panel of experts sat on the stage and fielded questions. The meeting served as a call to civic action. The boy, maybe ten or twelve, followed a number of adults who had been commenting on the difficulties of involving the people of the city and the government of Egypt in the enterprise. As many observed, common folk and governments often have more pressing concerns than undertaking aesthetic projects without immediate or tangible returns.

The young man spoke in Arabic, which required translation, and his comments were fluent, excited, and succinct. He agreed with the aims of the discussions and simply remarked that, if the work of the group was to succeed, the youth of Alexandria needed to be taught their history and the importance of preserving their heritage. It was a brave thing to do, for one so young to speak up before his elders and make such an eloquent and sensible plea. He deserved full credit for that, and the audience immediately applauded. It was a memorable moment. But credit also goes to the organizers and participants of the event that encouraged and facilitated his impassioned response: the Durrell Celebration in Alexandria.

II

The Durrell Celebration held in Alexandria, Egypt, in 2007 was the inspiration of Paul Smith, Director of the British Council and Cultural

¹ Originally published as “The Melting Mirage of Lawrence Durrell’s White City: Impressions of the Durrell Celebration, Alexandria, Egypt, 29-30 November 2007” in *Arion* 16.1 (2008).

Counsellor to the British Embassy in Egypt, and it commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Lawrence Durrell's *Justine*, the first novel of his great tetralogy, *The Alexandria Quartet*. Despite a little discord among some Egyptian observers, who apparently objected to the purpose of the event, I consider the conference a resounding success.

The celebration was primarily organized by the British Council, with the assistance of The Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Centre, under the direction of Dr. Mohamed Awad and his deputy Dr. Sahar Hamouda, and with the help of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

Other organizers included Smith's highly capable colleagues at the British Council, and here I must single out Cathy Costain, Manager of Knowledge and Information Services. She and her expert staff were gracious, accommodating, and made everything work smoothly. Michael Haag, author and historian of Durrell's Egypt, assisted in the selection and planning of the programme. Haag has written the best book on Durrell, *Alexandria: City of Memory*, and is working on his biography.

The two-day affair was open to the general public and took place in the conference centre adjacent to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a worthy successor to the great Ptolemaic library of Alexandria. The new and beautiful library faces the Mediterranean like an open oyster and contains all the electronic equipment and bibliographic treasures one would expect of a first class institution.

The Bibliotheca is located on the Eastern Harbour Corniche (or Sharia 26th July) at Chatby, about a mile east of the Cecil Hotel. Giuseppe Alessandro Loria, a prominent architect, designed that landmark in the Moorish-Venetian style of 1929, and Durrell used it as a centrepiece of activity in *Justine*, which he set during the years immediately preceding the Second World War. For admirers of the *Quartet*, it was obvious — the Cecil was the logical choice as the conference hub for social gatherings and functions. Inside the Art Deco hotel were mirrors, potted palms, a French elevator cage, a permanent resident in cashmere jacket and suede bedroom slippers, who always sat in a particular chair in the lobby and who was the scion of a Syro-Lebanese family, and outside before the Midan Saad Zaghloul were the waiting gharries and the clip-clop of horses, although no double-parked "great silver Rolls with the daffodil hubcaps", which might have been *Justine*'s car (*Quartet* 29). All that to make any good Durrellian happy, notwithstanding the incongruity of a rooftop Chinese restaurant catering to a new global clientele.

Much jumbled history — political, architectural, literary — crowds this part of Alexandria on or near the sea, where names have changed to accommodate everchanging realities. Most recently, comparatively speaking,

Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolution of 26 July 1952 accounts for many of these resurgent sensibilities.

Until his death in 1933, the poet C. P. Cavafy lived in a nearby flat. His third-floor apartment, now a small museum on Sharia Sharm el Sheik, once known as Rue Lepsius, is a ten-minute walk away. The writer E. M. Forster came to Alexandria in 1915 and first stayed at the Majestic Hotel opposite the French Gardens. That hotel with its twin copulas is now a dreary office building, but it is also within walking distance of the Cecil. Durrell arrived on the scene in 1942, initially had a room in the Cecil, and later lived not far away on Rue Fuad, a street with a long history. During the Ptolemaic period, it was possibly called the Canopic Way, afterwards the Rue Rosette, then the Rue Fuad, and now the modern Egyptian Sharia Horreya ("Liberty Street"). Cab drivers, however, still know it as Rue Fuad. And today at the northwestern tip of the Corniche stands Fort Qaitbey. In 1480, the Ottoman conquerors constructed it on the granite and limestone ruins of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the Pharos lighthouse. The exact dimensions of that Ptolemaic monument are unknown, but recent reconstructions have it towering over the present fortress by perhaps a hundred metres.² And so looms the mythos of Alexandria itself.

Alexandria makes one aware of things being in continual flux. It is a city of reused ruins and renamed streets. Conquerors and revolutions come and go, but as Cavafy says in his poem "Exiles": "It goes on being Alexandria still".³ True. But that requires a little imagination. Another aspect of the city requires no imagination. Urban desolation is readily visible, especially as seen from Cavafy's balcony (**Figure 1**). That bleak prospect Cavafy could easily have lamented, or perhaps eulogized in "The City", as the "black ruins" of his life,⁴ and that metaphor Durrell's narrator in *Justine* interprets as the "melancholy provinces" of an internal landscape (*Quartet* 18).

The proceedings were held in a large auditorium with a seating capacity for several hundred people. The turnout was remarkable and enthusiastic — almost all the seats were taken. The people responded with lively questions and sometimes lengthy expostulations. The audience itself

² Romer and Romer, *Seven Wonders of the World*, fig. 9.

³ Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, p. 200.

⁴ Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, p. 28.



Figure 1: Rue Lepsius from C. P. Cavafy's balcony (© Michael Haag, 2004)

was diverse: educators, students, citizens, reporters, and the stray foreign visitors, such as my wife and I, who had travelled from California. The students were mainly young women, most of whom wore the colourful *hijab*, the headscarf now widely favoured in Islam as a sign of piety. They either had an interest in Durrell and his legacy or were conscripts from the Department of English at Alexandria University. Dr. Sahar Hamouda, moderator and professor of English, joked about familiar faces and required attendance.

I was reminded of D. J. Enright's descriptions of English classes in his contemporaneous, but vastly different, novel about Alexandria, *Academic Year* (London 1955). His dyspeptic poem of that period, "Why the East is Inscrutable", first appearing in 1948, throws cold water on many of the oriental visions of his fellow countrymen. It proposes, "Sometimes the East is too hot / To be scrutable", rejects exoticism, and concludes, "Now friends are specious things. Wait for winter, / Mildly trying, meanwhile, not to make / Too many enemies".⁵ Romantic Durrell and Augustan Enright would not have gotten along.

III

A literary conference devoted to a single author tends to define itself along predictable lines of academic inquiry. The focus will be on an author and his or her texts. A premium is normally placed on current or fashionable approaches to the study of literature. Happily, such was not the case with this conference, which was not really literary, rather an "event", in the sense of honouring a great writer and his vision of Alexandria, the "White City" of his novels.

As previously mentioned, the organizers of the event wanted the proceedings to appeal to a general audience, namely, whoever might walk off the street and be curious about Lawrence Durrell and his Egyptian preoccupations. The various speakers brought Durrell into focus, both as man and writer, and then transitioned into contemporary literature and the conservation of old Alexandria.

Michael Haag provided the historical context for Durrell in Egypt. Peter Porter assessed and analyzed Durrell's Mediterranean poetry. Penelope Hope Durrell presented family photographs of her father's life. Harry Tzalas and Ibrahim Abdel Meguid read from their own creative work. And Dr. Mohamed Awad discussed the attempt to save the Ambron Villa, the most important place where Durrell stayed in Alexandria.

⁵ Enright, *Collected Poems*, p. 8.

I shall not attempt to summarize these talks and readings, rather I'll comment on one part of the discussions, which drew repeated criticism: Durrell's superficial portrayal of Alexandria and its Egyptian inhabitants.⁶ Simplistic though his representation may be, I am not deeply troubled by it and do not expect writers of literature to write with the acumen of Alexis de Tocqueville when they visit foreign countries. I do expect a certain amount of honesty, however. In this regard, I find Durrell's life puzzling and contradictory and because of that, his art complex. I'll then connect this aspect of the writer's work to Alexandria and the Ambron Villa. This arc essentially follows the trajectory of the conference itself.

Honouring a writer's achievement does not necessarily mean agreeing with everything he has to say, and Durrell's poetic recreation of Alexandria as many-layered strata of memory, history, and ethnic diversity found few supporters among the discussants, in particular the Alexandrians and Egyptians themselves, who seemed to consider Durrell's work highly fanciful. Harry Tzalas, a Greek who was born in Alexandria and who is both writer and archaeologist, called Durrell's city "unreal" and said, "If you want to dream, [there's] nothing better than *The Alexandria Quartet*". Tzalas's comments may seem harsh, but Tzalas also defended Durrell's right to his own vision of the city, when someone in the audience attacked it as being unfair and unrealistic.

Durrell himself would probably not be much troubled by such personal criticism. In fact, he indulges in it himself. In his rousing assessment of Durrell's poetry, Peter Porter spoke of "On First Looking into Loeb's Horace" as Durrell's finest poem. Porter was himself a highly respected poet, and his judgment has to be taken very seriously. "Loeb's Horace" is indeed a marvellous tour de force in the tradition, as Porter noted, of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues ("Andrea del Sarto" comes to mind). Porter admires the poem for its artifice (*Sel* xv-xvii). I question its honesty.

In 1943, Durrell published "Loeb's Horace" in *Personal Landscape*, a Cairo publication that he helped to edit, along with his fellow editors, Robin Fedden and Bernard Spencer. They were all exiles who had met in Athens and then fled to Egypt before the German advance in 1941.⁷

⁶ Negative appraisals of Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria, include Mahmoud Manzaloui's "Curate's Egg: An Alexandrian Opinion of Durrell's *Quartet*". It is reprinted in *Critical Essays on Lawrence Durrell*, ed. Alan Warren Friedman (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987): 144-57. Another example is D. J. Enright's "Arabian Nights' Entertainment: Lawrence Durrell's 'Quartet'." It is reprinted in Enright's *Conspirators and Poets* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966): 111-20.

⁷ Haag, *City of Memory*, p. 203.

Personal Landscape even called itself a magazine of “exile”,⁸ and as Haag notes, Durrell’s contributions to the magazine “rarely had anything to do with Egypt”.⁹ During his years in Egypt, Durrell didn’t like either the country itself or Alexandria in particular, although his attitude later changed. He made his antipathy clear in a letter to Henry Miller, when in May of 1944 he complained about Alexandria as “this smashed up broken down shabby Neapolitan town, with its Levantine mounds of houses peeling in the sun” (*DML* 168). Like a homesick exile from the Hellenic world, Durrell turned his eyes across the Mediterranean to Greece. The theme of exile or its variant, the self-imposed removal from society, plays a big role in “Loeb’s Horace”.

The poem is many-layered and develops through the complicated interplay of an unidentified speaker, probably male, his lost love, and the Latin poet Horace. The poem also glows with Keatsian splendour: imagery and diction that quietly allude to Keats’s Great Odes, although they do so for other uses: negative in Durrell but positive in Keats. And here I’m thinking of Keats’s vines and apples in “To Autumn” (cf. Durrell’s “lover of vines” and “drying of the apples” [ll. 3, 10]); his “bride of quietness” in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (cf. Durrell’s “slave to quietness” [l. 3]); and his “Lethe-wards” in “Ode to a Nightingale” (cf. Durrell’s “deathward” [l. 11]).

Despite these appealing qualities, “Loeb’s Horace” is also unsettling. Durrell’s twist on the title of Keats’s famous sonnet, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, is not an act of homage, as the poem eventually reveals. Nor does Durrell appear to hold the poet John Keats in high regard. In the *Quartet*, Durrell will later create a character called John Keats, a nosy journalist, and have his narrator say this about him: “There was nothing wrong with John except the level on which he had chosen to live his life — but you could say the same about his famous namesake, could you not?” (*Quartet* 220). That snide remark, which I take as neither ironic nor playful, applies equally to Durrell’s portrayal of Horace, for Durrell’s poem is a severe critique of Horace the man, as he presents himself in his poetry.

The poem turns in a way similar to Horace’s great Cleopatra ode (*Carm.* 1. 37), but in just the opposite manner. At the end of the ode, Cleopatra, the mad queen, the “regina dementes”,¹⁰ the enemy of the Roman empire, abruptly changes and becomes a proud, formidable woman, whom Horace allows a measure of triumph through juxtaposing “non humilis

⁸ Thomas and Brigham, *Illustrated Checklist*, pp. 76-77.

⁹ Haag, *City of Memory*, p. 203.

¹⁰ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, p. 98.

mulier” with the poem’s final word, “triumpho”.¹¹ Durrell, on the other hand, delivers Horace another kind of reversal. His poem begins in muted praise:

I found your Horace with the writing in it;
Out of time and context came upon
This lover of vines and slave to quietness,
Walking like a figure of smoke here, musing
Among his high and lovely Tuscan pines.

All the small-holder’s ambitions, the yield
Of wine-bearing grape, pruning and drainage
Laid out by laws, almost like the austere
Shell of his verses—a pattern of Latin thrift;
Waiting so patiently in a library for
Autumn and the drying of the apples;
The betraying hour-glass and its deathward drift. (ll. 1-12)

The poem then ends in harsh criticism, which describes Horace as the man

Who built in the Sabine hills this forgery
Of completeness, an orchard with a view of Rome;
Who studiously developed his sense of death
Till it was all around him, walking at the circus,
At the baths, playing dominoes in a shop—
The escape from self-knowledge with its tragic
Imperatives: *Seek, suffer, endure*. The Roman
In him feared the Law and told him where to stop.

So perfect a disguise for one who had
Exhausted death in art—yet who could guess
You would discern the liar by a line.
The suffering hidden under gentleness
And add upon the flyleaf in your tall
Clear hand: ‘Fat, human and unloved,
And held from loving by a sort of wall,
Laid down his books and lovers one by one,
Indifference and success had crowned them all.’ (ll. 53-69)

The condemnation is strong, total, and destructive: Horatian ode as Juvenalian satire. We probably see in Durrell’s charge of “forgery / Of completeness” an effort to expunge Horace’s “*Exegi monumentum*”, the

¹¹ Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, p. 100. For Cleopatra’s special triumph, see Commager, *Odes of Horace*, p. 93.

Latin poet's claim to immortality, his assertion that he has completed a lasting monument (*Carm.* 3.30.1).

I suppose, were I to be critically correct about such matters, I should differentiate between the "voice" of the speaker in a dramatic monologue and the "voice" of the poet. They are usually not the same. But I won't. For the voices I hear in "Loeb's Horace" are the same as Durrell's own, and for this reason I hear the speaker as being male, though he need not be. I see Durrell as basically a lyric poet. I don't see him as whimsically creating various personae.

Now, Horace, is undoubtedly a very great poet, who also has a very high opinion of himself. In the last ode of Book 3, he even thinks his poems more imposing than the Pyramids of Giza ("regalique situ pyramidum altius" [2]), and perhaps more enduring, although that race is too early to call. As Porter rightly pointed out, Horace is a favourite among the British, who consider him the "epitome of poets", and young Durrell, during his days in an English public school, probably had a good dose of the Latin poet. An older Durrell, however, strikes one of his anti-British poses and takes Horace to task for various peccadilloes in his personality — those foibles bear a suspiciously close resemblance to those of the stereotypic English squire, perhaps a perverse version of Squire Allworthy in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). So, Durrell describes Horace as a "landed man" on his Sabine farm (l. 46), separated or walled off from society, a country gentleman who was too prissy, too superficial, too sedentary, too constrained, too complacent and easily satisfied, besides being fat and obviously pompous, in sum, too full of himself — those sorts of thing. None of which, by the way, detracts from Horace's greatness as a poet.

Durrell's criticism of Horace is, in short, petty, trivial, and unfair, especially when measured against his own habits, for the pattern of Durrell's living arrangements closely resembled Horace's. In 1943, he found a tower in a quiet part of Alexandria and then, in a letter of May 1944, complained to Miller about the city, "No, if one could write a single line of anything that had a human smell to it here, one would be a genius" (*DML* 168). In 1953, he changed his mind about Alexandria as a fit subject for a mature writer or, possibly, a budding genius. In that year, he bought his own Sabine retreat, a Turkish house in the beautiful village of Bellapaix, overlooking the city of Kyrenia, Cyprus, and there, in a place whose very name embodied peace and that was also "a testimony to the powers of contemplation which rule our inner lives" (*BL* 78), he began writing *Justine*. In 1958, he moved to the south of France and lived in Mazet Michel, a