

# A Study on the Oriental Influence on Lawrence Durrell's Attitude to the Sketch of Spiritual and Sexual Etiolation in His Novels

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## Abstract

Lawrence Durrell is one of the twentieth century writers who threw overboard the nineteenth century thrust on rationalism and materialism. In his work, he pays more attention to philosophy and religion, doing away with narrative conventions to acquaint us with the roots of personality and imagination. He is in pursuit of the nature of truth with its many faces. In his attempt to transmit the essential, he provides the readers with a cluster of ideas to be reworked. He goes on "exploding ideas" into the readers' minds, "then curling up with cat-like unctuousness and refusing to take any blame for the consequences".

**Keywords:** Critic, Readers, Philosophy, Minds, Writer, Traditional

Many a critic has pointed out that Lawrence George Durrell, poet, novelist, playwright, critic and travel-writer defies traditional placement. Ian S. MacNiven and Carol Peirce, remark about Durrell:

*It is clear that his work continues to excite admiration and study. Both magical and realistic, both poet and novelist, both immediate and approachable in his work and yet deeply philosophic in his inner core, he defies traditional placement and standards of literary criticism. As his roots in Elizabethan drama and song, nineteenth century Romanticism, and the evolving psychology and science of the twentieth century emerge, we begin to see a figure who is both modern and post-modern and yet who cannot be evaluated entirely by norms of either category. Nor is he a writer of only one culture. His world encompasses not the English heritage alone but that*

*of France, of Languedoc and Provence; of Greece and Egypt, ancient and modern; and of the Far East, in its philosophy and mysticism. His reputation in literature seems to grow not as a provincial but as an international writer.*

Durrell is one of the major creative writers of the twentieth century with a particular affinity with the work of Anais Nin, Henry Miller, Richard Aldington and William Gerhardie. As Richard Pine notes, Durrell cannot be characterized as a 'religious' writer and as a 'non-joiner', he was not capable of submitting to any order. However, he places Durrell between Yeats and Joyce:

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*Where modern literature had been dominated by two Irishmen, Yeats and Joyce, one looking over his shoulder at the past and the classical, the other looking over his shoulder towards the future and the modern, Durrell, the third Irishman, stood between them like a juvenile Buddha who had just stolen the cream, content to inhabit the fleeting present and to live with contradictions and paradox.*

Durrell occupies an anomalous position in twentieth century letters and the reason for this can be traced back to the circumstances of Durrell's birth. Duffell, born in India in 1912 of Irish and English descent and coming to England at the onset of puberty, was multiply marginalised. He could not qualify as 'Indian' or even as an 'Anglo-Indian' writer though he would like to believe that his thinking was shaped by the presence of Buddhist priests passing his schoolhouse door on their way to and from Tibet. As Earl.G. Ingersoll observes, Durrell was the "ultimate expatriate, on expatriate without patria or country to begin with", in the midst of twentieth-century writers usually classified as expatriates - Conrad, Joyce, Eliot, Pound and Hemingway.

Durrell did not have any university education. But the breadth of his reading was such that there was hardly a subject beyond his reach. His artistic consciousness has been shaped by distinct influences of varied natures. He has been influenced by persons and places. He owes to Henry Miller for the tremendous prose style of *The Black Book*. Miller's courageous refusal to do anything except what he feels has always been an example to Durrell. He admires Miller, the artist, for his sense of vocation who was ready to die in the streets more than once, rather than turn his hand to compromises like journalism, teaching, B.B.C, diplomacy and so on. To Durrell, Miller was one of the three wise men in his life, the others being T.S. Eliot and George Seferis, the Greek poet. A very interesting incident introduces Durrell to Henry Miller. One afternoon, Durrell discovered Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in a public toilet of Corfu. Reading that book, he sent a letter to Miller for which he got a reply and thus correspondence started between them. Durrell observes: "I would never have been able to write *The Black Book* had I not been in a public urinal in Corfu in 1935." Thus it was Miller who "invented" Durrell in a certain manner. Durrell's friendship

with Miller provided him with the impetus he needed to analyse his motives and his potential.

## DISCUSSION

According to Pine, Durrell is indebted to his predecessors in the sense that he inherited ideas about time from Proust, about structure from Joyce, about plot from Conrad, and about psychology from Hesse and Mann. Durrell has been influenced by Chuang - a philosophic comedian, who is really the basis of early Chinese religion. Another Chinese philosopher who influenced Durrell is Lao Tze, who is described by him as a "Chinese Heraclitus". Durrell even wonders if Freud himself wasn't a sort of Lao-Tze. Lao Tze's *Tao Te Ching* had a lifelong influence on the thinking of Lawrence Durrell. The small book stands behind Durrell's *A Smile in the Mind's Eye* and *The Avignon Quintal*.

Durrell has been influenced not only by persons but also by places. The places, the spirit of which Durrell imbibed are Greece, Tibet and India. He describes Greece as his "second birthplace" :

*It's my second birthplace. You know, the old Iridinn notion that one's born twice, once physically and then once you sort of wake up to reality. I think it's particularly true of poets or writers. Here it's exactly the place where I finished off *The Black Book* and got my first poems together, and where I discovered my own voice, in a way.*

Greece was a sort of revelation for Durrell, and also the ancient Alexandrian Egypt of Oriental Greece, where he found the country and the philosophy which were the hinge between East and West on which he wanted to be located. Durrell reiterates the Greece brought him the confirmation that could write.

Durrell has been heavily stamped by Greece, ancient and modern and it comes across in his poems. Before one can understand him, one must first appreciate Greece. The Greek poet Cavafy strongly influenced Durrell. Cavafy is described by him as the "expresser of the essence of the city" of Alexandria in the novel *The Alexandria-Quarter*, who expressed the "amorality", the "irony" and the "cruelty" of it. What Durrell had in mind when he went to Greece was to return to India, because he sensed that he'd lost something and he

wanted to recover the thread of it. He discovered that the ancient Greek philosophers (Pythagoras and company) are really Indians. He "experienced a philosophic relief in rediscovering the Indians through the Greeks".

According to him art is a sort of "maturing of the psyche" which has "no intention, that is to say, no theology" and by means of nourishing the psyche, it helps it to find its own level, which is "original innocence".

Like you, I have two problems which interconnect: my art and my life. Now in my life I am somewhat irresolute and shabby, but in my art I am free to be what I most desire to seem - someone who might bring resolution and harmony into the dying lives around me. In my art, indeed, through my art, I want really to achieve myself by shedding the work, which is of no importance, as a snake sheds its skin. Perhaps that's why writers at heart want to be loved for their work rather than for themselves.

An artist does not live a personal life as we do, he hides it, forcing us to go to his books if we wish to touch the true source of his feelings. Underneath all his preoccupations with sex, society, religion, etc. all the staple abstractions which allow the forebrain to chatter) there is, quite simply, a man tortured beyond endurance by the truck of tenderness in the world.

According to Purse warden, the pain that accompanied composition was due to the fear of madness, "force it a bit and tell yourself that you don't give a damn if you do go mad, and you'll find it comes quicker, you'll break the barrier". Durrell is confident about the ability of the writer to cement the apparent gaps in our actions with his interpretations.

Commenting on Durrell's popularity as a poet, David Gascoyne says: "Though no doubt it is as a novelist and travel-writer that Lawrence Durrell will be best remembered, I have always thought of him as first of all a poet, and know that his paramount ambition to be considered a good one". Durrell's sensibility is at its best in his lyrics. He exhibits a sense of landscape and history and deals with subjects that are exotic, yet circumstantial. He had a passion for poetry as is evident from the poems scattered in his novels and plays. He is a "sensuous" poet and writes with utmost economy yet in full

detail. Durrell his literary reputation first as a poet. His originality, precise use of words and clarity of thought make his poems unique.

A spokesman of antinationalism, Durrell thought that time and ego were the two determinants of the style of the twentieth century. Durrell was "a poet who had stumbled into prose". Durrell's earlier novels *Pied Piper of Lovers* (1935) and *Panic Spring* (1937) have not been very successful. The third novel, *The Black Book* was able to fetch popularity. As Peter G. Christensen points out:

*In Pied Piper of Lovers love is the most important. Then in Panic Spring art and religion (as no dogmatic spirituality) become more important. Finally, in The Black Book, art, religion and love all seem to be of equal importance. Thus there is a progression, which may also represent the deepening of Durrell's sensibilities.*

*The Dark Labyrinth* (1947) and *White Eagles over Serbia* (1957) are the two minor novels which come between the novels of the 1930s and *The Alexandria Quartet*. In *The Dark Labyrinth*, history appears in the form of World War II and in *White Eagles over Serbia*, politics appears and British democracy is pitted against Ugoslavian Communism. *The Dark Labyrinth* combines some of the realism or naturalistic character of his first two books with the questing thrust into the interior of *The Black Book*. With the publication of *The Alexandria Quartet* - a tetralogy comprising of *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958), *Mountolive* (1958) and *Clea* (1960) - Durrell came to be accepted as an established novelist. George Steiner observes that Durrell was more appreciated in France than in England, the French among others recognizing that "The Alexandria Quartet is the highest performance in the modern novel since Proust and Joyce". Durrell's later fiction includes *Avignon Quintet* comprising of *Monsieur or The Prince of Darkness* (1974), *Livia or Buried Alive* (1978), *Coristance or Solitary Practices* (1982), *Sebastian or Ruling Passions* (1983) and *Qzlriz or The Ripper's Tale* (1983) and his two volume *Revolt of Aphrodite*. The three island books, *Prospero's Cell* (1945), *Reflections on a Marine Venus* (1953) and *Bitter Lemons* (1957) show Durrell's growth as a writer over a period of nearly twenty years.

## CONCLUSION

The setting of Prospero's Cell is the life of Lawrence and Nancy Durrell in Corfu in the years just before the Second World War and just after the completion of *The Black Book*. Reflections on a Marine Venus records Durrell's experiences as an Information Officer in Rhodes in 1945 and 1946. The Durrell of Prospero's Cell is a young man without responsibilities and the Durrell of Reflections on a Marine Venus is one caught up in the aftermath of war and misery. For *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell got the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize.

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