

Books and Islands : Lawrence Durrell / Prospero' s Cell

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"I have escaped to the island with a few books," Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*

Safe in my cabin as the Greek-bound ship rolls gently beneath me, I look up from my book and gaze out through the porthole at a calm, cobalt sea. Mountain crests slide into view on the blurred edges of the horizon. I am on my way to an island, eagerly anticipating the pleasures of isomania, a disease once described by Lawrence Durrell, my favorite writer of islands, as a "rare but by no means unknown affliction of the spirit." "There are people" he goes on to say, "who find islands somehow irresistible. The mere knowledge that they are on an island, a little world surrounded by the sea, fills them with an indescribable intoxication."¹ Like Durrell, I seem to have caught this disease for life. Picking up my book again, I read: *Somewhere between Calabria and Corfu, the blue really begins.*² These words penned on the first page of Durrell's Corfu memoir, *Prospero's Cell*, describe the very trajectory I am making now from the heel of Italy across the Ionian sea, which he first made in 1935. I am on a pilgrimage of sorts hoping to recapture some slight traces of the atmospheres that make his books so memorable. After the sensuous shock of that first page, I pause as if to take in air before plunging deep again as the text continues: *You are aware... of islands coming out of the darkness to meet you.*³ The prose tastes so rich I have to take it in small doses. "Mirages suddenly swallow islands, and wherever you look the trembling curtain of the atmosphere deceives."⁴

As a travel writer, Lawrence Durrell has been credited with helping elevate the modern travel essay, which gained in popularity after World War II with the arising of mass tourism, once again to high literary art, in which the reader's interest is not in the place itself, but in the writer's personality and perceptions. Also a poet, dramatist, and novelist, he is best known for his tetralogy *The Alexandria Quartet*, often ranked one of the greatest works of fiction produced in the twentieth century, a culmination of postmodern narrative techniques, and a celebration of sonorous, incandescent prose. The first three volumes of this remarkable work recount the same sequence of events from different points of view, while the fourth shows change over time as masks are stripped away and characters evolve. Mingling political intrigue, sex, and metaphysical enquiry within a community of expats and local elites in Alexandria before World War II, the metafictional *Quartet* explores intricate human entanglements in a city of "five races, five languages, a dozen creeds... more than five sexes."⁵ On the formal plane, it is an ambitious fusion of Freud, Einstein, and Eastern philosophy in a masterful "word continuum."

My primary game was to write a Tibetan novel rather than a European novel. I attempted to bring together the four Greek dimensions, which are the basis of our mathematics and the five skandas of Chinese Buddhism. For us the individual consciousness of each person is filtered through five perceptions and notions. I wanted to observe what would become an ordinary novel if one changed the lighting and if individuality became blurred.⁶

Durrell here shows his astute contaminations of the great historical and intellectual traditions of Europe, Byzantium, and the Far East in creating what was perhaps one of the most influential novels of its generation. Beneath the *Quartet*, as beneath all his writings, there pulses a single obsession, the relationship between *self and place*, the idea that who we are is where we are, a concept dating back to ancient classical culture and the belief in the Genius Loci.

Traveling is, he suggests, "a science of intuitions" vital to the artist "who is always looking for nourishing soils in which to put down roots and create."⁷ We are all looking for our "correspondences," he states, for a personal landscape "where you suddenly feel bounding with ideas"⁸ -- a place where landscape

and imagination merge to make new worlds and new stories. In the early phase of his writing career, his personal landscape of correspondences was the Greek island of Corfu.

Escape to Corfu

Lawrence Durrell, who once claimed that he had an Indian heart and an English skin, was born and raised in British India near the border with Tibet. He first traveled to England when he was sent off to school. It was a painful break from his home, where he had been pampered by a Burmese nanny, and where he could, he used to boast, sometimes see the tips of the Himalayas from the nursery window. His preschool years had been spent in an unconventional family in one of the globe's most mystic landscapes, steeped in legends, colors, and myth, all rich food for his youthful imagination, all lacking in drab old England, which he hated and named "Pudding Island." He was not brilliant at school, and despite his literary gifts, did not manage to get into Oxford. He found a job working for a real estate agency, wrote poetry in his spare time, frequented other young men who wrote poetry, and stumbled into a romance with Nancy Isobel Myers, an art student from Slade. Their friend, George Wilkinson, who had struck out for Greece on a bicycle, ended up in Corfu in 1934 from where he sent enticing descriptions of island life, inviting them to join him. Honeymooners could obtain an 80% discount on train fare from Italy, Wilkinson informed them, all the better reason for them to get married and set out for Greece by way of Brindisi, which is exactly what Durrell and Nancy did. When Durrell's mother learned that they planned to move to Greece, she decided to tag along and bring the whole family,⁹ although Durrell insisted on separate domiciles. He was then twenty-five years old and keen to find a congenial environment in which he could write.

The story of Lawrence Durrell's life in Corfu with Nancy from 1935 -1939 is recorded in his memoir, *Prospero's Cell*, the first in a series of four books dedicated to the Greek islands: *Prospero's Cell*, *Reflections of a Marine Venus*, *Bitter Lemons*, and *Greek Islands*. The latter is a collection of miscellaneous writings. The first three focusing on Corfu, Rhodes, and Cyprus, are travel memoirs of extended stays on these islands where he made his home at different periods of his life, alternating with long sojourns elsewhere while employed in the British diplomatic corps. Durrell didn't consider himself a "travel writer" but a "residence writer,"¹⁰ one who puts down roots in a foreign place, getting to know it more slowly, more deeply, than the travel writer who transcribes the fleeting snatches of an experience in which movement is the principle element. "My books are always about living in places, not rushing through them," he wrote. Paul Theroux would agree that Lawrence Durrell could not be properly called a "travel writer," for travel "is not residence," Theroux claims, "it is motion."¹¹

Durrell's foreign residence memoirs are mosaics of history, landscape, folklore, snippets of daily life—all filtered through the lens of an artist's eye, attentive to sensual detail. Corfu was the place where he "first met Greece, learned Greek, lived like a fisherman, made my home with a peasant family. Here too I had made my first convulsive attempts on literature, learned to sail, been in love."¹² Partly written in journal format, *Prospero's Cell* is a young man's paean to the senses, recording days spent fishing for octopus, watching folkloristic processions, gardening, sailing, hiking, drinking and gossiping at the local tavern, talking philosophy all night in an orange grove, lying in his lover's arms in a white-washed room listening to the sound of the sea. His descriptions of the quotidian take on mythic resonance:

In the silences between our sentences, we can hear oranges drop from the trees in the orchard – dull, single thuds above the mossy ground. The marble table is wet with dew. An owl cries and the watchdogs at the lodge grumble and shake their chains.¹³

Sleep in this still, cool room is like entering a cave."¹⁴

Owls, watchdogs, chains, groves, caves, like trappings from some fable or fairy tale, inhabit the Greek landscape of Durrell's present tense, a heightened reality strewn with archaic and symbolic fragments, where things are themselves and yet are also "correspondences," and figures of myth, from which he weaves the new myths of his own life there. One example of this myth—making process in *Prospero's Cell* is the celebrated episode of "diving for cherries"

All morning we lie under the red brick shrine to Saint Arsenius, dropping cherries into the pool – clear down two fathoms to the sandy floor where they loom like drops of blood. N. has been going in for them like an otter and bringing them up in her lips.¹⁵

In her biography of Nancy and Durrell, *Amateurs in Eden*, Joanna Hodgkin, Nancy's daughter by a second marriage, suggests that this famous scene was more fanciful than factual. Whenever she was asked about it, Nancy "responded with an all-embracing camel-like snort, a derisive dismissal of the masculine purple prose memory."¹⁶ In her book, Hodgkin never clarifies if Nancy's snort meant that the incident had never happened, that she didn't remember it, or that it did not happen exactly in the way Durrell described it. As Patricia Hampl has often pointed out, two people will have very different memories of the same event. Yet, the diving for cherries scene is a signature moment in Durrell's early work, such that attempts have been made to reenact it by members of the Lawrence Durrell Society, as Joanna Hodgkin witnessed during the 2000 Lawrence Durrell Society conference in Corfu.

...the more aquatic delegates tried to replicate Nancy's fabled accomplishment of diving through the clear water to bring the cherries up in their teeth...but the only successes were due to the ones that helpfully floated up to the surface.¹⁷

The seeming unrepeatability of this ritual in no way lessens the beauty or truthfulness of Durrell's text, for Nancy, with her elongated, sinuous, suntanned body in the water, the red cherries in her red lips, is truly a mythological creation summoned from the Genius Loci as much as she is a person in flesh and blood. But it is power of *the place* itself that conjures this magic; it is the waters of Corfu viewed through Durrell's imagination that transform N to a muse. Beneath the surface of ordinary things, Durrell probes for the patterns of myth and archetype, seeking the "correspondences" between environment and consciousness; setting and character, places and persons. Much of his fiction, poetry, and nonfiction is concerned with the ways the soul of place expresses itself through characters and consciousness, physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually. This indeed, is one of the themes of *Prospero's Cell*, and ultimately of Durrell's masterpiece *The Alexandria Quartet*, in which the characters enact destinies plotted by the city of Alexandria itself: "the city which used us as its flora – precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own..."¹⁸

Justine would say that we had been trapped in the projection of a will too powerful and too deliberate to be human -- the gravitational field which Alexandria threw down about those it had chosen as its exemplars...¹⁹

All great works of fiction, he argues in his essay, *Landscape and Character*, are as much concerned with PLACE as they are with character or incident.²⁰

Durrell, *The Tempest* and the Power of Place

Prospero's Cell opens with an incipit from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "No tongue, all eyes, be silent."-- a reference to the enchantment that Prospero has spun over the characters and their imaginations: the mesmerizing power of art. But it also evokes the power of place, for Prospero's island and its spiritual geography are inextricably bound up with his magic. In the *Tempest*, the very ground on which the characters tread is shaped through Prospero's will. Every character on Prospero's island perceives its landscape according to his inner nature and projects upon it the contents of his unconscious mind. It was perhaps this adaptability of the island

to the psyche of its visitors [and of the visitors to the island] which inspired this allusion to *The Tempest* when Durrell titled his memoir. Like the characters in the *Tempest*, while on Corfu, Durrell often felt that the borderline between sleeping and waking was blurred, that he and N. were moved by forces emanating from the place itself, of which he, like all its other inhabitants, was receptacle and enactor.

It is a sophism to imagine that there is any strict dividing line between the waking world and the world of dreams. N. and I for example are confused by the sense of several contemporaneous lives being lived inside us; the sensation of being mere points of reference for space and time.²¹

Darley, the narrator of *Justine*, volume I of *The Alexandria Quartet* describes a similar experience: "Days became simply the spaces between dreams, spaces between the shifting floors of time, of acting, of living out the topical."²²

Durrell notes early on in *Prospero's Cell*, "*The books have arrived by water.*"²³ This may be a reference to the "huge small library"²⁴ he assembled to take with him to Greece so that, as he confides in a letter to George Wilkinson in 1934, "we'll have food for study & delight."²⁵ Durrell's Greek-bound library, culled from the volumes he owned in England, was an eclectic one full of reprints of Elizabethan texts, including "a huge facsimile Shakespeare...which ought to sink the boat, lots of poetry, too, some philosophy, some art-books" but very little "modern reading."²⁶ The Elizabethan readings were not only for entertainment, but research. He was preparing an essay on the Elizabethans, an uncompleted project to which he would return from time to time over the years. On more than one occasion, he acknowledged his debt to the Elizabethans as a major formative influence on his prose style and praised their freedom from medieval moral conventions.²⁷ As for eschewing modern writers, Durrell's boasting wasn't quite exact. While in Italy he had obtained a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, banned in England but published in Florence. He had also got hold of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, published in Paris, which he greatly admired. Later he and Miller would meet and become close associates.²⁸

The connection between sinking ships, books and islands is intriguing, as Durrell well knew, when he paid homage to *The Tempest* in titling his memoir. In the *Tempest* books are the only possessions, besides his magic staff and cloak, which Prospero takes with him when he is banished from his dukedom. Books, those mobile bits of culture, have always been to island inhabitants as vital as medicines, a fresh water supply, or a weather station. Books may be voraciously consumed, never used up, and can easily be shared infinite number of times. They are akin to the other absolute necessity for island dwellers: good conversation.

Durrell's choice of title --*Prospero's Cell*-- is partly explained in the book through the character of Count D. whose orange grove is the site of many memorable conversations in which Durrell participates. The count, who shares Durrell's self-exiled status and resides in a sumptuous, rotting villa with dilapidated green shutters and filled with tarnished silver and antique Venetian portraits in moldering frames (perhaps a symbol for the literary tradition Durrell would help shatter with his multiple points of view narrative technique) contends that Shakespeare drew his model for his island from Corfu and may have even visited there.²⁹ To support this theory, the count supplies several geographical, meteorological, topographical, historical and etymological arguments which might indeed be plausible enough. Claiming to have reached a certain detachment from the tempestuous passions and appetites of youth, he identifies himself with the figure of Prospero, after all he too is an exiled, widowed, aristocratic Italian in decline whose bedroom is full of well-thumbed philosophical tomes. Thus, in one sense, the title *Prospero's Cell* celebrates Durrell's friendship with this enigmatic character, one of the four persons to whom the book is dedicated, while corroborating his theory identifying Corfu as Prospero's isle.

But Durrell's homage to *The Tempest* reaches for more than a mere evocation of the magical "Eden-like" beauty of Corfu or an allusion to Shakespeare's notion of Mediterranean geography and topography. It suggests Durrell's own personal identification with Prospero, consummate artist and illusionist. As a creative writer for whom Shakespeare was a major influence, Durrell found in *The Tempest* one of the prime themes with which he would wrestle throughout his work, the core concept of the *Quartet*: the multifaceted nature of reality. Prospero's island is both a metaphor for the artist's medium – in Durrell's case, for fiction, and for consciousness itself. Like the author of a novel, the good Duke manipulated the consciousness of the other characters and shaped their destinies. His cell, both library and illusionist's laboratory; is an emblem for the artist/writer's room of one's own. Durrell was to find his ideal cell, his writing room, on Corfu upstairs in the house of a fisherman. This was the white house in Kalami where his "breakfast table looks plumb out over the sea, and the fishing boats go swirling past the window."³⁰ It was from this room that he announced in a letter to his friend Alan G Thomas in 1936, in all caps. "I HAVE BEGUN TO BE A REAL WRITER"³¹

Durrell's ongoing identification with Prospero is also evident in the opening pages of *Justine* Volume 1 of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Darley, the narrator who would seem to be based on the young Durrell himself, has "escaped to the island with a few books, and the child," which echoes Prospero's arrival on his island with his magic books and his infant daughter, Miranda. Darley intends to reconstruct Alexandria from memory while writing his novel, allowing for shifting angles of point of view. Although the island is not named, it bears strong resemblance to Corfu, with its fragrant orange groves, "glowing in the arbors of burnished green like lanterns"³² where Durrell felt he had come into his own as a serious writer.

The Spirit of Place

According to Durrell, echoing a belief of D.H. Lawrence, the spirit of place is a conscious force operating in landscape with which one may enter into contact through a process he describes as "inner identification."

"It is there if you just close your eyes and breathe softly through your nose; you will hear the whispered message for all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper: I am watching you – are you watching yourself in me? Most travelers hurry too much. ...Ten minutes of this sort of quiet inner identification will give you the notion of the Greek landscape which you could not get in twenty years of studying ancient Greek texts."³³

For Durrell, places have an indwelling consciousness, an awareness of their own. Writing of Greece while trapped in Egypt during World War II he recalls, "Walking in those valleys you knew with complete certainty that the traveler in this land could not record. It was rather as if he himself were recorded. ...Nowhere else has there ever been a landscape so aware of itself, conforming so marvelously to the dimensions of human existence."³⁴ In such a place, the writer is himself a player in the landscape and a mirror for its recondite forces.

Patrick Leigh Fermor, John Fowles, and other writers have evoked this sense mythic presence and otherness that springs from the Greek landscape. It is born of the sublime beauty of its sea and mountains, and of the quality of light that envelops its rugged, often solitary terrain, as well as of the many narratives and myths sedimented in its territory throughout history. Greece is the ideal landscape narrative, story/place and storied place, where layers of narratives have accumulated over the millennia. Fermor writes, "There is hardly a rock or a stream without a battle or a myth, a miracle or a peasant superstition, talk and incident, nearly all of it odd or memorable, thickens round the traveler's path at every step."³⁵

In traditional cultures, people make sense of themselves, their lives, history, communities, and landscapes through the art of story-telling. Durrell observed this process at work in Kalami. It was through the

stories attached to people and places that villagers constructed their history, and reinforced their identity as a community, not from the great events that had unfolded around them.

Here the chronology was different. Strangers had come from outside, there had been wars, deprivation, and famine, but inside the spectrum they remembered when the children of Jani had been struck by lightning, or when Socrates severed his thumb with a knife while cleaning a fish, or when the mason lost an eye through a pinch of quick lime. This was the truth...³⁶

What Durrell didn't expect, perhaps, was that the stories of his own life observed and remembered by others would end up thickly interwoven into the landscape along with his own myths, memories, and stories, as he would later discover.

The outbreak of World War II had obliged Durrell to flee his paradise, "on the edge of a cataclysm"³⁷ in 1939. He found his way to Cairo, then Alexandria as a press attaché for the British diplomatic service, and after the war was posted to Rhodes, Argentina, Yugoslavia, and eventually moved to Cyprus in 1952. Although he was back in the Mediterranean area from the early nineteen fifties, he did not return to Corfu until 1966. Having seen so much devastation during the war, which took a grave toll on the Greek civilian population, perhaps he feared the wounds would still be too raw, the encounter with loss too overwhelming. After his flight from Corfu to Egypt in 1939, he had envisaged the destruction they had left behind.

"We never speak of it, having escaped: the house in ruins, the little black cutter smashed. I think only that the shrine with the three black cypresses and the tiny rock pool where we bathed must be left."³⁸

Instead, returning, he found his old house and old friends almost as he had left them nearly thirty years previously. The little white house was by no means a ruin but a thriving tourist accommodation. Moreover, he was astonished to discover that his young taxi driver, who turned out to be the son of a friend, could recount episodes from his own life with Nancy on the island, as if they were local legends. "In small islands, where people do not read very much," he muses, "the powers of memory never seem to fail, and individual actions take on semi-mythological proportions."³⁹ Even more remarkable, he learned that the room where he used to write had become a shrine, a place of pilgrimage for writers and admirers, devoutly tended by his former landlord who assures him that his books have brought swarms of British and French tourists to Corfu and to Kalamí.

'They swim and make a great noise. Then they come and look at the house and we show them your picture and make them drink Coca-Cola...Already we have many who rent your room --- remember where you used to work?' She moved her fingers on an imaginary typewriter and went *pock pock* to illustrate how I used to work...⁴⁰

Among the many writers who followed in Durrell's footsteps is novelist Deborah Lawrenson, author of a fictionalized account of Durrell and Nancy's life on Corfu, *Songs of Blue and Gold*. She gives this telling glimpse of Durrell's writing room.

Durrell's desk, effectively a large pine dining table, still stands in the White House apartment. It is surprisingly low, and a nudge to recall that he was a very small man.⁴¹

Through *Prospero's Cell* and other writings, Durrell continues to transmit the allure of Greece to readers and writers eager for adventure, and in so doing, has himself become part of its mystique, an inspirer of pilgrimages. A similar fate befalls one of the *Quartet's* most beguiling characters, Scobie, a cross-dressing alcoholic who is transformed by legend to a local saint, El Scob, honored with his own feast day. Willingly or

not, Lawrence Durrell, like Scobie in Alexandria, has left behind in Corfu a part of himself which has mingled and merged with the spirit of place, ready to nourish all those who seek to know his essence.

¹ Lawrence Durrell, *Reflections on a Marine Venus*, London: Faber and Faber, 1960, p. 11.

² Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, New York: Dutton, 1960, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet, Justine*, New York: Dutton, 1961, p.14

⁶ Lawrence Durrell, Earl G Ingersoll, *Conversations* Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1998, p. 197 -198.

⁷ Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character," *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*. London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p 160.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ The story of the Durrell family on Corfu would be told in his brother George Durrell's memoir, *My Family and Other Animals*. Lawrence's wife Nancy has been omitted in his account.

¹⁰ Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character," *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*. London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p. 156.

¹¹ Paul Theroux, *Introduction to the Best American Travel Writing 2001*, New York: Mariner Books, 2001, p.xx.

¹² Lawrence Durrell, "Oil for the Saint," *The Lawrence Durrell Travel Reader*, New York: Carol and Graf, 2004, p.74.

¹³ Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, New York: Dutton, 1960, p. 88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁶ Joanna Hodgkin, *Amateurs in Eden: The Story of a Bohemian Marriage* London: Little Brown, 2012, p.155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.327.

¹⁸ Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet, Justine*, New York: Dutton, 1961, p.13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.19.

²⁰ Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character," *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*. London: Faber and Faber, 1971, p. 163.

²¹ Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, New York: Dutton, 1960, p.7.

²² Lawrence Durrell *The Alexandria Quartet, Justine*, New York: Dutton, 1961, p.18.

²³ Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, New York: Dutton, 1960, p.9.

²⁴ Durrell, "Letter to George Wilkinson," *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p.29-30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lawrence Durrell, Earl G Ingersoll, *Conversations* (Cranbury, N.J.:Associated University Presses, 1998) p. 50-55, p. 116.

²⁸ Durrell and Miller began corresponding in August 1935 after Durrell wrote him a fan letter. They subsequently met in Paris, and in 1939, Miller visited the Durrells in Greece. The story of their disastrous three-day trip through the Peloponnese is recorded in Miller's *The Colossus of Maroussi*.

²⁹ Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, London, pp. 88 -89.

³⁰ Lawrence Durrell, "Letter to Alan G Thomas," *Spirit of Place, Letters & Essays on Travel*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p.12

³¹ Lawrence Durrell, "Letter to Alan G Thomas" *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p.50

³² Lawrence Durrell *The Alexandria Quartet, Clea*, New York: Dutton 1961, p. ii.

³³ Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character," *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p 161.

³⁴ Lawrence Durrell, "Epilogue in Alexandria," *Prospero's Cell* p.145.

³⁵ Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Mani, Travels in the Southern Peloponnese*, London: John Murray, 1958, p.3.

³⁶ Lawrence Durrell, "Oil for the Saint," *The Lawrence Durrell Travel Reader*, New York: Carol and Graf, 2004, p.85-86.

³⁷ Lawrence Durrell, "Letter to Anne Ridler," *Spirit of Place: Letters & Essays on Travel*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p.53.

³⁸ Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, New York: Dutton, 1960, p. 133.

³⁹ Lawrence Durrell, "Oil for the Saint," *The Lawrence Durrell Travel Reader*, New York: Carol and Graf, 2004, p.81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 88.

⁴¹ Deborah Lawrenson, "Songs of Blue and Gold: Lawrence Durrell's Island of Corfu," *The Literary Traveler*, Feb. 17, 2009.