"But the Mediterranean is older than history and stronger than religion"
Myth and dystopia in L. Durrell's works
an Introduction

The scene is set in a corner of the Greek Arcipelago; blue caressing waves, islands and rocks, verdant shores, a magical vista in the distance, an entrancing sunset—words cannot describe it....
Wonderful people once lived there. They lived their days from morn to night in happiness and innocence. The groves rang with their gay singing; the great abundance of unspent vigour was put into love and simple joy. The sun bathed these islands and the sea in beams, and rejoyced in their lovely children....

It is on this dream that mankind has lavished its powers; it is for this dream that they have made every kind of sacrifice...

F. Dostoevskij, "Stavrogin's Dream"

1. My acquaintance with Lawrence Durrell's works goes back to the early Seventies when I was asked to hold a seminar on the narrative techniques in *The Alexandria Quartet*.
The Durrell then presented to me by contemporary criticism was a late experimentalist, an epigone of the great modernists, a kind of "word Epicurean" indulging in a somewhat aimless technical playing which had already and profitably been abandoned by the "neorealistic school" of Snow, Powell, Wilson and the "proletarian" novelists of the Sixties. So when, in view of the Corfù conference, after so many years I began rereading *Justine* and the *island books*, my critical bibliography still unupdated, I had the pleasant, or rather the exciting surprise of finding myself facing a very different writer— different from the decadent word-spinner of the Sixties, the gatherer of flamboyant clichés in the style of Henry Miller (Steiner. 122), and the mannerist exploiter of the modes of modernism for their own sake.

If I linger on Durrell's critical image in the Sixties, it is because that stereotypical image is still substantially present in the *New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (65-6, 421-22) and, among others, in the latest Italian translation of *Prospero's Cell* (113); in the introductory essay to the latter, for example, in the span of a very short passage we find words such as "edonista", "sensuale", "individualista" whose global effect needs no deep comment: in spite of the critic showing himself aware of the most recent Durrell criticism, the portrait produced by his selective choice of words certainly remains as untrue as it is partial and incomplete.

The fact is that Durrell is a disturbing writer and, if we attend to Lionel Trilling's observation that 'the greatness of a work is commensurate to its power to offend', we may come to understand the reasons why the critical focus (the 'Durrellians' obviously excepted)

appears still so oriented as to present students and common readers with an image of the writer which may, at best, be defined as blurred and partial.

Not only is Durrell a subversive writer, but his subversiveness appears more vital and less easily neutralizable than D.H. Lawrence's and Miller's, in that it proves to be more "resistant" to the critical process of historicization which aims at setting it down as an outdated characteristic common to the English writers between the wars. I think, in fact, that justice cannot be done to Durrell's work if we keep on measuring its writing according to Bloom's western canon, that is a canon by which a powerful book such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which has indisputably entered the contemporary collective mind, could be obstinately dismissed as "a product of a vanished era", with "nothing to determine its future importance" (VII).

I agree instead with Reed W. Dasenbrock who, in his essay on Durrell's shifting reputation, considers *The Revolt of Aphrodite* as a "most intriguing, most powerful, most satisfying work of art" (515-28): indeed, in my opinion, *The Revolt of Aphrodite* provides the right focus from which to look at Durrell's work.

From my point of view, the point of view of a scholar of dystopian and fantastic literature, a lot of discordant definitions may be allowed about Durrell the writer, except the one that he is a *novelist,* neither in the traditional nineteenth-century sense of the word nor in the modernist one: it is a fact—as he himself repeatedly wrote—that at the centre of his interest there was never primarily character nor plot, but something else, such as place, or better the spirit of place, in other words, myth.

It is in consideration of this fact—his deeply-rooted involvement with myth—that we cannot but acknowledge Durrell as belonging to "the school of William Morris" (Yeats 191-2) together with W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, the early T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster, and writers apparently so different from the ones just mentioned as G. Orwell or R. Warner.
Though perceiving their social present in dystopian terms, these writers are not totally desperate or paranoic, as it is usually and superficially thought of all dystopians; rather, they cannot accept the present without protest or resistance (see Dasenbrock *C. E on L. D.*. 224-6) because, however dark and pessimistic their vision of life may appear, it invariably retains some kind of faith, some emotional link with that "version of pastoral" which, according to Robert Miles (2), is always hiding at the heart of the most authentic fantastic literature.

As Anthony Burgess rightly sensed, Durrell was after "a new kind of fiction" (97) and it is from the point of view of his quest that his work should be assessed, although Burgess himself seemed unable to grasp what Durrell was aiming at exactly, since he could not share Durrell's underlying positive attitude, that is his engagement (Holloway 66).

The aim of Durrell's new kind of writing was to evoke myth, to give myth a voice. This was not an easy problem to solve: to use language (which is *logos*) in such a way as to force it to give myth a voice is quite a different business from the one of using myth in order to give meaning to or simply reflect the anarchy and futilities produced by *logos,* as required by T.S. Eliot and the modernists.

Durrell wanted to give myth a voice in spite of the limits of language which he considered as "inadequate"[1], that is potentially false and consequently violent, particularly in the most important of fields, that of the emotions: this is the basic aim which can explain the gigantic, vital effort of his writing or *écriture*: his *baroque novel*, his exuberant experimentalism and shameless exploitation of modernist modes and conglomeration of genres (Friedman *C. E. on L. D.* 60), his protean use of *pastiche* and quotation, and, above all, his pervasive, though more or less explicit, ironic and parodic attitude.

This kind of writing—heterogeneous and hybrid—cannot but be recognized as the very language of the fantastic (Jackson), of romance and allegory, that is to say as a language

which, on rendering *the seen,* can evoke the presence of *the unseen*. As in dystopian fiction, language is used by Durrell to express what, as *logos*, it is fit to express, that is the uneasiness, unrest and distortions of present reality; and *this* in order to call forth in the reader what language cannot adequately express: the "ancestral memory"[2] of myth and the nostalgia of its harmony and wholeness. So dystopian books such as *The Black Book*, *The Alexandria Quartet*, *The Dark Labyrinth*, *The Revolt of Aphrodite* achieve the purpose of arousing the voice of myth not less than the enchanting *island books*. After all, Durrell's whole work seems to unfold according to the structure of Frye's romance: *agon*, *pathos* and *anagnorisis*, as he himself wrote in *Sebastian* (See Carley 240).

His new kind of writing aimed at shaping a fantastic language able to reach out towards anagnorisis (which, at least in the earlier work, was not meant as a mental or a philosophical experience only). It is in his particular form of romance that his relationship with the reader is most apparent, provided we do not overlook the fact that the *influence* of R.L. Stevenson[3], the undisputed master of romance, was not less effective than the lesson of F.M. Ford, the promoter of the "new novel"[4]. "The master-string to draw for the full figure in the carpet" (Ford 327-8), which is, of course, Durrell's purpose, should be the main standard of critical judgement; a standard I refuse to identify with the coherence of characterization or the adherence to some philosophical theory or the sincerity of Durrell the man in the difficult balance of his work as a diplomat in the Mediterranean during the Second World War.

Since myth is to be seen as the magnetic force at the heart of Durrell's work, its discussion necessarily becomes a momentous subject which I can tackle here only through some introductory observations, leaving out the later works, although I suspect that it is the very conception of myth as it emerges from the later works that we have to look at in order to explain why literary histories still go on preferring the Durrell of *The Black Book* and *The Alexandria Quartet*, that is, a writer more easily readable or misreadable through modernist modes.

It is, in fact, owing to his concept of myth that Durrell holds his stand in the ongoing intellectual debate on the fate of the past in our postmodern world.

While Stephen Greenblatt (1) expresses his desire to get back and speak again with the dead (the very desire of E.M. Forster at the beginning of the twentieth century); and while the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo answers that "it's time to give up our absurd hopes in myth" (42), Durrell, on his part, devotes all his works to evoking, reflecting, propagating the need for "that something without which peoples can't live nor can't they die", to use Dostoevskij's essential definition of myth in "Stavrogin's Dream" (in Righter 7).

And Durrell's faith in the power of myth is so deep that he has no need to metaphorize or personalize it. Indeed, Dostoevskij's Greek Islands correspond to a classical, yet conspicuously outdated version of myth[5]; Orwell himself (in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) updated the myth of the *Golden Country* into Mr Charrington's room, while reducing it to the dimension of a glass-paperweight. But Durrell never doubted of its vitality nor feared its death. As with Forster looking at the hills of Wessex, for Durrell "The force is still there, buried in the rocky cliffs" ("Delphi", *S. P.* 275)[6], "It will never die" (Forster 131). Rather it's *we* who *are the dead*[7], who can no longer hear the voice of the past nor "il sospiro che dal tumulo a noi manda natura"[8].

So the *agon* must be against all that prevents us from seeing and hearing, from listening and watching ourselves in myth ("Delphi" 158); against all that is debarring us from "the magnetic fields" (*Ibid.*) of "dear, old Mother Earth"[9], be it the English death, the muddy island, the Hegelian West (*Constance* 288), the god Mammon (*Livia* 48), the spirit of gain (*Monsieur* 140-1), the gold bar, […] the new ruler of the soul (*Ibid.*), the destructive dualities of the Fallen world (Carley 234), and so on.

It is this sort of subversive criticism, deeper and deeper in the later works, that must be neutralized; and much more so since it is expressed in the language of literature, and literature, as Lyotard wrote of Orwell's *NEF*, is more *resistant* to neutralization than theory, in that it communicates through the language of emotions and instincts on a ground that is both collective and absolutely personal.

If the writer or the artist has appeared to more than one critic as the real hero in Durrell's fiction, it is certainly due less to his narcissism than to his heart-felt consciousness of the important task the artist has to fulfil: the artist must put the reader into contact with Truth, he must arouse a "wordless" "feeling that the world we live in is founded in something too simple to be overdescribed as a cosmic law—but as easy to grasp as, say, an act of tenderness, simple tenderness in the primal relation between animal and plant, rain and soil, seed and trees, man and God."(*AQ* 380)

2.

These born 'islomanes'…are the direct descendants of the Atlanteans, and it is towards the lost Atlantis that their subconscious yearns throughout their island life…

Reflections on a Marine Venus.

A telling instance of how subtly the critical perspective may be oriented and distorted is supplied by the introduction to the latest Italian edition of *Prospero's Cell:*

> Nel 1937 Orwell parte per la Spagna per combattere come volontario per la causa repubblicana; nello stesso anno Durrell sbarca volontariamente sull'isola greca di Corfù in compagnia di una giovane donna amorosa[10].

Both young writers[11] were in search of a way to overcome a dystopian present which each of them would describe in a *Book of the Dead* of his own[12]. Both were in quest of a way to come into contact with true reality, with Truth.

Orwell pursued this aim through that great body of mankind which is the working class, but, as he will confess later in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he could never really reach it (and he contented himself with the dream of a "golden country" more easily accessible through a Lawrencean key, "fucking in the style of *Lady Chatterly*", as Evelyn Waugh put it (302)). In Spain, instead of finding truth, Orwell met with its systematic betrayal, with lying; but, still willingly hopeful, he wrote his *Homage to Catalonia* (1937).

Durrell's *homage* to Corfù is *Prospero's Cell*, which is not a travel book nor fiction proper, but an original kind of prose poem, a very successful form, from which we can easily

understand that, luckier than Orwell, Durrell thought he had found in the mythical island what he was looking for.

For a variety of reasons, *Prospero's Cell* would be the most suited and rewarding work where to trace the main features of the young Durrell's conception of myth. But, considering that a very perceptive study has already been written by Carol Peirce on the subject (*PC* xi-xxii), I will limit myself to referring to it, together with three well-known short essays in *Spirit of Place*, which have the advantage of coming directly from an Author who was then (1961-65) in his maturity: "Landscape and Character" (1960), "Delphi" (1965) and "Women of the Mediterranean" (1961). Durrell "admits to seeing 'characters' almost as a function of landscape", "realizing that the important determinant of any culture is after all the spirit of place" (156), and suggests how to feel and come into contact with it.

It is from conceiving myth in terms of *spirit of place* and *genius loci* that Durrell's concept derives its power to resist on the contemporary intellectual scene.

My first observation stresses so elementary an aspect that its importance may be easily overlooked: it is a fact that Durrell perceives and conceives myth primarily and essentially in terms of space, and space has always been the only, true dimension of myth. Authentic myth is always a Golden *Country*: the Golden *Age* is the version of myth produced after the triumph of linear time. As James Brigham has shown (*C. E. on L. D.* 106), in *Panic Spring* Durrell was already framing this problem. In dreams myth reasserts its presence as instinct and ancestral memory. Linear time logically turns into a nightmare in which space is annihilated, while the true time of myth— the reassuring one of natural rhythms and recurrences—exalts human space, that is, place.

It is to myth as place that the particular kind of *islomania* Durrell acknowledges in *Reflections on a Marine Venus* is to be related. Islomania must be a national disease: from More to Wells, from Bacon to Swift, from Defoe to Ballantyne, to Stevenson, to Golding, to Huxley, to Ballard, to mention just the most illustrious "patients". Even old Rose Macauley, a visitor to Durrell in Cyprus, had written an island book of her own, *Orphan Island*. Might it be Robinson's "utopian" instinct the force driving Durrell in search of an island to his liking where he could master the anxiety of influence from the fatherland? D.H. Lawrence had passed his judgement on such a "love of islands". But this does not seem to be the case with Durrell. Durrell is attracted, almost absorbed by the island which, stronger than he, is "irresistible". The panic moment when he lets himself merge with the island is a moment of life at its fullest.

Such panic contact with life does not necessarily take place through the sexual act as it did for Lawrence and the Lawrenceans. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* clearly enables us to realize how illusory Lawrence's overcoming of bourgeois culture was. And, like the great mystics, in *Prospero's Cell* Durrell seems to place himself beyond the beginning of bourgeois history: of course, you can come into contact with myth only through "the five portals through which we can alone apprehend" (Forster 145), but *place* is larger than sex; older than history, which is but a human fiction; stronger than religion, since place is the bearer and repository of the spirit of the God, of which religion is but a human recognition and celebration.

Islands are like enchantresses to Durrell: like sirens, children of the sea, giving, instead of oblivion and ruin, as feared by the bourgeois Ulysses, panic immersion and anagnorisis:

> Greece offers you… the discovery of yourself (*PC* 11).
>
> I feel the play of the Ionian, rising and falling... It is like the heart-beat of the world itself...

> ... the sun numbs the source of ideas itself, and expands slowly into the physical body, spreading along the nerves and bones a gathering darkness, a weight, a power. So that each individual finger-bone, each individual arm and leg, expand to the full measure of their own animal consciousness... this sense of physical merging with the elements around one... the hanging body—now no longer owned; a providential link with feeling, like the love of women, or the demands of the stomach... (*Ibid.* 100)[13]

> Islands are living and eery entities like the women of the Mediterranean, "children of the mysterious sea, occupying its landscapes in human forms which seem as unvaryingly eternal as the olive, the asphodel, the cypress, the laurel, and above all the sacred vine." (*SP* 369)[14]

While I feel thankful to Durrell for his engrossing poetical homage to the island of Corfù and the Mediterranean sea, I happened to read some recent piece of postcolonial criticism about "a mythological reconceptualisation of place; …he [Durrell] subjects the notion of place to a stereotypical vision which sees the characters as function of an unchanging "spirit of place" (Herbrechter 252).

The tone of this kind of criticism—which seems to take the death of myth for granted while disregarding the fact that the continued existence of a *stereotype* is the very indicator of the persistence of some deep need—sounds to me as a confirmation of the subversive vitality of Durrell's concept of myth and of its power to resist the flattening work of globalization. The "Spirit of place" may indeed express the most effective protest against the "spirit of the Machine", as Forster had clearly anticipated[15].

But if "the Mediterranean is the capital, the heart, the sex organ of Europe", what about its Spirit of place, in which we are "to watch ourselves" in order to recapture life and strength against the triumphant spirit of the new God, the Machine?

Both an answer to this question and an example of that "unfailing sense of continuity with which the Mediterranean invests the present" (*SP* 371) may be provided by many a poetical voice which in anticipating Durrell can give us the sense of the tradition to which he belongs and in which he may be said to appear as a "last romantic".

Suffice it to think of Ann Radcliffe's sea-nymphs in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)—those fascinating embodiments of the Tyrrenean sea or the Venetian sea, which deeply influenced the subsequent poetic generations, from Byron to Browning to Pound, not to quote the novelists, from James to Proust to Sartre. But there is a sonnet (Durrell would have certainly liked it) which, like a magic and precious emblem, just in one long sentence, can express the everlasting spirit of place of the Mediterranean.

The sonnet (1802) by Ugo Foscolo—a great romantic poet born on a Greek island—is a homage, through memory, to the island of his birth, Zakynthos.

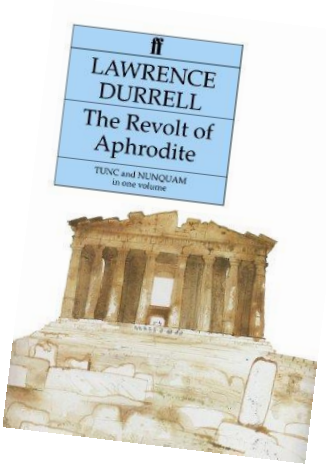
From its first line an oneiric vision of the Mediterranean landscape—shores, clouds, foliage, rocky islands, sea waves—unfolds and gradually fills the whole scene: then the Spirit of the Mediterranean materializes in the image of Venus, the Goddess of Beauty and Love, as well as Love and Fertility. It is she who inspired Homer to sing the beauty of the place and the magnetic

power which drew Ulysses back to his "holy" and "maternal" Ithaca. It is she who is now inspiring the poetic vision through which the younger poet, Foscolo, can join in the vitality of myth.

The key words—Beauty, Love and Fertility, that is to say poetical inspiration—are contained in the image of Venus or Aphrodite, which is, as it will be to Durrell, the incarnation of the Female Principle and Poetry. As proven in the myth of Orpheus, as shown in Foscolo's poem, it is only Poetry who can bring the past back to life. Analogous concepts and ideas, repeatedly expressed by Durrell over the years, are to be found in the *Conversation:*

> I think really I'm a poet (55) … a poet who had stumbled into prose 45). Poets are simply handers of the sound like sea shells; and, yes, it is always the sound of the sea… (72). Greece hits you with its long association with the past. It reverberates like a seashell the whole time… It's a great seduction because you really do feel the presence of Aphrodite and the spirit of place (164). It's one of the charm of Greece that one does feel the ancient Gods are there, sometimes under another name… It's the continuity—what the French would call the *perennité des choses* (168).

I am not going to enlarge on Durrell's poetical art and masterful "picturesque" technique by which the spirit of the Mediterranean is evoked in all its vital beauty; I will just point out that it is from this very concept of *continuity* Durrell so often stressed that his view of myth draws its potential subversive power. It is the symbiotic union between place and past—that is to say place perceived and felt as a "body" through which the past keeps living and breathing—that makes us to realize the very important fact the destructive anxiety towards the past which characterise our culture is not aimed at something dead, which no longer exists or never existed, a mere fiction; it aims instead at the root and source of our human vitality and energy. No wonder that the present world of the Machine (by relegating him among the great "lesser ones") tries to neutralize a writer who always and passionately spoke his awareness that the Machine would try to reproduce Aphrodite, and warned that it would not do:

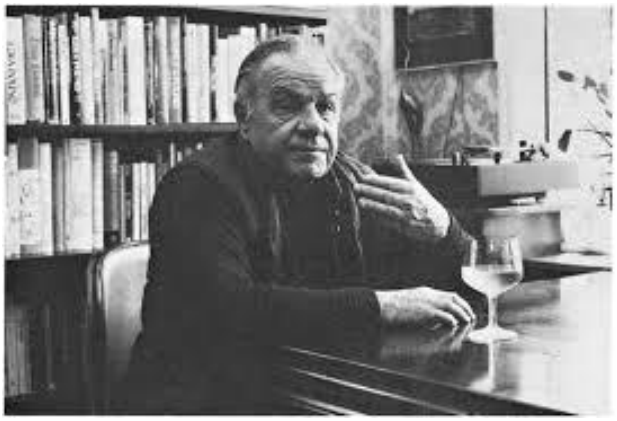


> they suddenly find in this novel [*The Revolt of Aphrodite*] that what is really missing in their whole pattern of life is a notion about beauty, abstract beauty. And as they can only visualize beauty in terms of womanhood, they have to build it technologically, and it doesn't work. It goes out of control. So it's a bit of a Frankenstein story… (*Conversations*, 158)

This reference to the Frankenstein story is very significant as it reveals the constant awareness throughout Durrell's works of the great sin against myth and the origin which has haunted Western consciousness ever since the Renaissance.

NOTES

[1] See L. Durrell, *Personal landscape—A Magazine of Exile*, vol. 1, n. 4, (1942): "since words are inadequate, they can only render all this negatively—by an oblique method…". See *A Key* 157.
[2] This is a recurring phrase for "myth" in G. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
[3] L. Durrell would have some reservation about this word: (See J. Mitchell and G. Andrewski, "The art of Fiction XXIII: Lawrence Durrell", *Paris Review*, 1960, 33-61) "I steal from people—my seniors I mean…all the writers I admire. But they didn't influence me. I pinched effects. I was learning the game".
[4] L. Durrell, always communicative about his literary borrowings, seemed to have mentioned Ford just to say: "I am so glad I didn't read 'The Good Soldier' before writing 'Justine' or I might have never finished her!", so aknowledging a deep affinity with this "major talent" (*Encounter*, Dec. 1959, repr. in *Conversations* 49). See K. Rexroth referring to Ford (*C. E. on L. D.* 29): "I know of no modern novelist more like Durrell". From R. Pine (419) we learn that Durrell read a lecture on Ford in 1974. (On L. Durrell—F. M. Ford relationship see my "L. Durrell—F. Madox Ford and R. L. Stevenson» in *Ford Madox Ford and the Republic of Letters* (V. Fortunati e E. Lamberti eds.), Clueb, Bologna, 2002).



[5] The passage in the epigraph (to this essay) describes a picture by Claude Lorraine, known as "Aci and Galathea" Dostoevskij saw in Dresda.
[6] In fact the problem with Durrell will be how to render the continuity and persistence of myth: "If I have sacrificed form it is for something better, sifting into the material now some old notes from a forgotten scrap—book, now a letter: all the quotidian stuff which might give a common reader the feeling of life lived in a historic present" *(Reflection on a Marine Venus* 16).
[7] This is the well-known sentence we find in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (see Battaglia, 1998, 33) and in *The Black Book*.
[8] Foscolo, Ugo. *I Sepolcri*. vv. 49-50: the sigh nature sends us from the burial place (transl. mine)
[9] See Hudson, W. H. *A Crystal Age*, 1886.
[10] *La grotta di Prospero* 171: In 1937 Orwell leaves for Spain to fight as a volunteer for the republican cause; in the same year Durrell voluntarily (sic) lands on the Greek island of Corfù in the company of a young loving woman (transl. mine).
[11] G. Orwell was eight years older than Durrell, as he was born in 1903 in. Motihari (India)
[12] As Orwell wrote in his unpublished Notebook (in the Orwell Archive in London), *The Book of the Dead* was one of the possible titles for *1984*. For Durrell's *Book of the Dead*, see J. Brigham (*C. E .on L. D.* 109) and C. Pierce (*Ibid.* 200)
[13] The passage describes the triumph of the Body over the Mind: *the source of ideas* is numbed by the sun, whose power spreading through the body sets it free (*no longer owned*) giving it back its full *animal consciousness*.
[14] About Durrell's landscapes as female see J. Lagoudis Pinchin in *Deus Loci*, 5, no 1 (April 1980): 24-39.
[15] For Forster's *Machine* as representing both Technology and the Market, see my "Losing the sense of space: Forster's "The Machine Stops" and Jameson's 'Third Machine Age'" (Sandison 51-69).

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