

Dimitra Papazoglou

LAWRENCE DURRELL'S GREECE: A PERSONAL LANDSCAPE

Greece as a country has never stopped to fascinate writers, who inspired by it produced works in which its role is essential. Thus there is a whole tradition of varied literary images of Greece – images that differ not only from age to age, but also from individual writer to individual writer, and which, in most cases, reveal more about the writer than about the country. There is, however, a common element in most of these images: dazzled by the achievements of Ancient Greece, writers always looked back at it with an admiration that was so great as to make them feel contempt for the present, disregard or even ignore it. It is only in the twentieth century that we notice a breaking away from this tradition and the beginning of a new approach. In fact, it is this shift of perspective, the concern with contemporary Greece –the actual country and its people– that will distinguish the modern writer's approach from the traditional approaches to Greece.

Among the modern writers who wrote about modern Greece, Lawrence Durrell holds an outstanding position.¹ To start with, he did not simply visit Greece but stayed long enough to be acquainted with it and be able to acquire a deeper knowledge of the country and the people. Thus his is a more personal approach, less influenced by those of his predecessors. Second, Durrell himself attributes great significance to his Greek experience by devoting to it three of his early books that leave little doubt about the role of Greece in his career: the inspiration that it provided and how it helped him find his voice as a writer.

The purpose of this study then is to examine Lawrence Durrell's relationship with Greece. Through an analysis of his three Greek island books, I will trace the different stages of his acquaintance and his growing fascination with Greece and I will attempt to explain its reasons. My analysis will also try to establish the main characteristics of Durrell's approach to Greece and to point out the effects that his relationship with Greece had on his work.

The result of Durrell's encounter with Greece, that is to say, his

impressions of the several parts of Greece he stayed in and the influence that this contact had on him, is mainly presented in his trilogy of island books **Prospero's Cell**, **Reflections on a Marine Venus**, and **Bitter Lemons**.² These books are usually characterized as travel books, but they should be called «residence books»,³ since they are actually about places that Durrell did not just visit, but actually stayed in, spent a long time in and had the chance to establish a closer relationship with. But even if the term travel books is accepted, these are not ordinary travel books. Apart from a certain fictional element⁴ in them, the fact that Durrell's objective is «to evoke, not describe»,⁵ as well as the special significance that he attaches to travelling, differentiates them and adds to their value.

For Durrell travel is a self-discovering experience: «it can be one of the most rewarding forms of introspection», since journeys can «lead us not only outwards in space, but inwards as well». (BL 15) Thus for «the artist who is always looking for nourishing soils in which to put down roots and create» travel becomes of great significance. There are landscapes, according to Durrell,

where you suddenly feel bounding with ideas, and others where half your soul falls asleep and the thought of pen and paper brings out nausea. It is here that the travel-writer stakes his claim, for writers each seem to have a personal landscape of the heart which beckons them.⁷

The personal landscape that beckons Durrell is the landscape of the Greek islands.

Related to his theory about travel is Durrell's theory about landscape, a kind of «environmental determinism», in Edward Hungerford's words.⁸ Landscape for Durrell is the main manifestation of that invisible constant factor of a place that he calls «spirit of place». He claims that human beings are expressions or reflections of their landscape, which is so powerful that it dictates certain essential values to them and defines their culture. In this way, the travellers' task is to capture the spirit of the place through its more powerful manifestation, its landscape, and this can be achieved only through an inward attention to, an identification, a rapport with the place.⁹

In his trilogy of Greek island books Durrell puts into practice his theories about landscape and travel. Not only in the sense that he

manages to capture the spirit of the places he lived in and render it in an evocative and suggestive way, but also in the sense that he claims that the Greek landscape had a nourishing and inspiring influence on him and that Greece offered him knowledge of himself (PC 11).

Durrell's connection with Greece started rather accidentally and quite early in his life, when he was just twenty-three. A friend of his, George Wilkinson, had emigrated to Corfu and he wrote to Durrell describing his «idyllic life» there; thus, according to Durrell, «the island began to sound more and more evocative».¹⁰ Durrell had no bonds to keep him in England; he felt «restless»¹¹ and found the atmosphere in England suffocating and uninspiring. In an autobiographical outburst, he confessed to Miller: «that mean shabby little island... wrung my guts out of me and tried to destroy anything singular and unique in me».¹² As a result, he did not need much persuasion to decide to go and settle down in Corfu himself and in fact, in 1935 with his first wife and his family he started his new life in Greece.¹³

Most of the information concerning Durrell's stay on Corfu, his impressions of and his experience on this Ionian island are presented in **Prospero's Cell**, the first in the trilogy of island books that Durrell was to write. **Prospero's Cell**, is a rather difficult book to classify. G. S. Fraser considers it «a mosaic portrait of an island, its geography, history, characters and folklore»,¹⁴ while Alan Warren Friedman characterizes it as «a conglomeration of literary genres».¹⁵ Durrell's own subtitle «A guide to the landscape and manners of the island of Corfu», underlines those aspects of Corfu that are of greater importance to him and which will be given more emphasis in the book. Moreover, the diary form that Durrell adopts in most parts of the book gives a fragmentary compactness to the narrative and may also reveal Durrell's interest in varied material and his inability to cope with it and present it finally in a more unified whole.

Durrell's first impressions of Greece, as expressed in the opening paragraphs of **Prospero's Cell**, suggest that as he was approaching Greece, he had the feeling that he was confronted with something different and exceptional. For Durrell this is the different blue of the sea, the islands, as well as a clear, brilliant and deceiving atmosphere that suggests «a dark crystal» (PC 11). It is this impression of his that later on will be developed into the theory of «The Enormous Eye», the sense one has in Greece that one is being recorded:

The sensation of this immense hairless recording eye was everywhere; in the ringing blue sky, the temples, the supple brushes of cypress, the sun beating in a withering hypnotic dazzle on the statues with curly stone hair and blunt sagacious noses. Everything was the subject of the Eye. It was like a lens fitting into the groove of the horizon. (PC 131)

Durrell seems to attribute all these peculiar atmospheric effects to the Greek light which is also responsible for some almost mystical moments he experienced when swimming, for example:

I feel the play of the Ionian, rising and falling about an inch upon the back of my neck. It is like the heart beat of the world itself. It is no longer a region or an ambience where the conscious or subconscious mind can play its incessant games with itself; but penetrating to a lower level still, 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. (PC 100)

The «delectable landscape» (PC22) of Corfu impresses Durrell to the degree that he attributes even dream-like qualities to it. In Corfu he could not, for example, find «any strict dividing line between the waking world and the world of dreams» (PC 11) and wondered «at the overlapping of the edges of dream and reality» (PC34). Eventually, he feels even frustrated when he realizes «how little of this can ever be caught in words». (PC 62)

The laudatory tone of the descriptions of the landscape of Corfu in **Prospero's Cell** is also supported by passages in Durrell's correspondence of that time, which clearly reveal not only his fascination with the place, but also his difficulty to capture its beauty in words. «The scenic tricks of this paragon of places are highly improbable, and I don't quite believe my eyes as yet,» he writes to Alan G. Thomas and in another letter he adds: «I'd like to tell you how many million smells and sounds and colours this place is, but my stock superlatives would give out».¹⁶ As his biographer Ian MacNiven observes, «forgetting to appear blasé or bored», Durrell writes again to Thomas «I've told you how unique it is up here..., haven't I? Well, multiply it by four». And he concludes «I'll never be able to write about it all without a sense of inadequa-

cy: positively it stuns me».¹⁷

What made Durrell be so delighted with the place was not only its beautiful and suggestive landscape but also the simple almost primitive way of life he had the opportunity to live there. He chooses to live with his wife in a remote fisherman's house surrounded by the elements of nature:

A white house set like a dice on a rock already venerable with the scars of wind and water. The hill runs clear up into the sky behind it, so that the cypresses and olives overhang this room in which I sit and write. We are upon a bare promontory with its beautiful clean surface of metamorphic stone covered in olive and ilex: in the shape of a mons pubis. (PC 12)

It is a quiet place which «offers all the charms of seclusion». (PC 12) Here Durrell learned to depend on others for his daily needs and to be satisfied with few things. He came to share the natives view that what a man needs can be as little as «an olive-tree, a native island, and a woman from his own place» and enjoyed the simple, natural rhythms of life. «Our life on this promontory has become like some flawless Euclidian statement. Night and sleep complete the day with their quod erat demonstrandum», he says (PC 34).

The seclusion of the place and the breath-taking suggestiveness of the whole ambience put Durrell at times in a highly contemplative mood, an essential prerequisite for artistic creation. The silence in the isolated house «is like a discernible pulse – the heart beat of time itself» Durrell feels (PC 21). «At such moments we never speak», he observes, «but... I am aware of a hundred images at once and a hundred ways of dealing with them» (PC 17). In fact, these last words may be seen not only as suggesting that his creative spirit was being awakened in Corfu¹⁸ but mainly as containing the germs of the book of Corfu that he was going to write.

If Corfu provided the material and the necessary state of mind, seclusion and contemplation, for artistic creation, **Prospero's Cell** may show that it also seems to be the place where Durrell formulated some of his theories on writing. This is mainly suggested through the character of Count D. who seems to express views on knowledge and book writing that are closely related to Durrell's own techniques and thematic preoccupations. In fact, the Count seems to serve as Durrell's

mouthpiece¹⁹ when he elaborates on a favorite theme of Durrell's, the subjectivity and therefore relativity of our knowledge and the consequences that such a proposition may have on the writer's effort to produce an image of the world around him. This relative only value of our views and beliefs is due, according to the Count, to «the fallibility of our minds», as well as to the fact that «each one of us [is] collecting and arranging our common knowledge according to the form dictated to him by his temperament». Thus, the Count concludes, the picture of the world that each one produces will not be the whole picture, though it will be the whole picture for the one who produced it. Being more specific and referring to the books about Corfu that each one of his friends would produce, the Count describes the books according to the special fields of interest and idiosyncrasy of the author. Thus Dr. Theodore Stephanides will write a kind of **Natural History, Geology, Botany and Comparative Ethnology of the Island of Corfu**, while Zrian with his passionate infatuation with the island would write «a ferocious and lopsided account of an enchanted island» omitting «the fact that communications are bad and that all Greeks are liars, and that the fleas during the summer are intolerable» (PC 107).

It is more interesting, however, to see what the Count has to say about Durrell's book on Corfu. He claims that Durrell's book will be «a portrait inexact in detail, containing bright splinters of landscape, written out roughly, as if to get rid of something that was troubling the optic nerves.» He also tells Durrell that he is «the kind of person who would go away and be frightened to return in case you are disappointed» (PC 107). The insight of these remarks is astonishing as they very accurately foreshadow both parts of the book that Durrell wrote and his subsequent attitude towards Corfu.

It seems, however, that these remarks also served as a warning to Durrell, because in **Prospero's Cell**, the book on Corfu he eventually came to write, he tried to overcome his subjective approach and to include in it as many different aspects of Corfu as possible and finally present a more complete image, a «whole picture», to use the Count's words, of the island (PC 107). Thus, although the impressionistic description of the landscape of Corfu and the influence it had on him is an important element in **Prospero's Cell**, the book also abounds in detailed information on specialised subjects such as Natural history, language, folklore, deriving either from other literary sources or from Durrell's friends and acquaintances, like Theodore Stephanides, Za-

rian or even the Count himself. All these eventually create a more complex image of Corfu and contribute to the objectivity of the narrative since they keep in balance with the subjectivity of Durrell's own impressions and remarks.

One of the most interesting contributions to the overall image of Corfu that Durrell tries to depict in his book is the Count's theory that Corfu was the island that Prospero lived on in **The Tempest**. The evidence seems highly arbitrary: «the state of being which is recorded in the character of Prospero is something which the spiritually rich or the sufficiently unhappy can draw for themselves out of [the]clement landscape of Corfu», claims the Count (PC 106). Nevertheless, the theory deserves to be included in an effort to have a «whole picture» of Corfu (PC 107).

Another important aspect of Corfu that Durrell thought necessary to incorporate in his book in order to complete his image of the island is some observations about Greek national character. Durrell during his stay on Corfu had the chance to meet a lot of Greeks, become friends with some and finally draw conclusions about the character of modern Greeks. The Count not being a representative Greek was not himself material for Durrell to consider, but with his remarks, he helped Durrell to create his own image of the Geek. He hints, for instance, at the Greek's ability to combine antithetical elements in his approach to life, such as the physical and the metaphysical («We never move far in our metaphysical distinctions from the body itself» (PC 98)) or the love of the pleasurable and the profitable («Poetry and profit are not separated at all. For the Greek there is only the faintest dividing line» (PC 104)). He also remarks that the Greeks are «superstitious and anarchic» (PC 103), the latter a characteristic that Durrell himself will discover in Spiro's reproachful description of the incident with the fire brigade (PC 121-2). The Greek's obsession with politics also attracts Durrell's attention:

The Greek permits himself one cerebral disturbance which from time immemorial has been capable of overturning the whole structure of the state: politics. Not the barren politics of abstractions and principles, but the warm cruel politics of the heart: heroworship, the advancement of parties and personalities. In this alone we catch a glimpse of his bitter dualism of heart – an interior anarchy, which will not let him rest. (PC 72)

For Durrell Karaghiosis, «the Laic Hero», is «the embodiment of Greek character» and that's why he devotes a whole chapter on him (PC 47). It is an original but at the same time very revealing approach to the Greek character. The Greek national character, Durrell claims,

is based on the idea of the impoverished and downtrodden little man getting the better of the world around him by sheer cunning. Add to this the salt of a self-deprecating humour and you have the immortal Greek. A man of impulse, full of boasts, impatient of slowness, quick of sympathy and inventive as well as assimilative. A coward and a hero at the same time; a man torn between his natural and heroic genius and his hopeless power of ratiocination. (PC 48)

Karaghiosis also embodies the wide-awakenedness and «the unconquerable adaptability of the Greek who has penetrated with the leaven of his mercuric irony and humour into every quarter of the globe» (PC 53). «The wide-awakenedness of the Romeos» was, in fact, more valuable than letters and knowledge for Father Nicholas, the boastful, good humoured and affectionate patriarch. Durrell's portrayal of Father Nicholas, that «great mythological character», very representative both in his looks and manners of the Corfiot peasants, shows both affection and respect. «He has the good-humoured scolding manner –the scornful affection– which is the mark of the finest Greek temperament», Durrell observes (PC 43), and in his treatment of the peasants is very cautious, trying to be realistic and not to be carried away by any idealizing or sentimentalizing tendency:

It is important when writing about the peasants, not to falsify them with sentimental humour. It is very much the fashion to represent them as comic and quaint abstractions attached to picturesque names like Paul and Socrates and Aristotle. The fact that they dress oddly seems to drive city-bred writers into a frenzy of romantic admiration. But really the average Balkan peasant is quite commonplace, as venal, cunning, or admirable, as a provincial townsman. And the sentiment which attaches to the pastoral life of these picturesque communities (which treasure amulets against the devil and believe in a patron saint), has been very much overdone. (PC 36)

Finally another aspect of Corfu that deeply impressed Durrell and which he emphasized in his book is the strong sense of continuity between the present and the past. The survival in modern Greece of characteristics that originated in ancient times strengthened Durrell's assumption that the main racial characteristics do not change, if there is no change of natural setting, since they are inspired and conditioned by the landscape and determined by what he calls «spirit of place». In modern Corfu, for instance, Durrell observes the survival of Homeric elements:

The land changes very little, and the structure of the basic self of man hardly at all. In this landscape observed objects still retain a kind of mythological form – so that though chronologically we are separated from Ulysses by hundreds of years in time, yet we dwell in his shadow... Thus Ulysses can only be ratified as an historical figure with the help of the fishermen who today sit in the smoky tavern of «The Dragon» playing cards and waiting for the wind to change. (PC 59)

He also exclaims about the **Odyssey**:

With what delightful and poignant accuracy does the poem describe the modern Greeks; it is a portrait of a nation which rings as clear today as when it was written. The loquacity, the shy cunning, the mendacity, the generosity, the cowardice and bravery, the almost comical inability of self-analysis. The unloving humour and the scolding. Nowhere is it possible to find a flaw. (PC 59)

Durrell's stay in Corfu was a very happy period of his life. It was the first time that Durrell leading a leisurely life in seclusion and contemplation managed to be inspired by that nourishing landscape and experience. As Alan G. Thomas observes,

It was not only the lyrical beauty of Corfu and the prismatic clarity of Greek light that appealed to Durrell; not even the eternal legends handed down from classical times but intimately wedded to the landscape of today; there were qualities in the character of the modern Greeks themselves which struck deep chords with his own nature.²⁰

As Count D. very correctly remarks, Durrell had «the best of [his] youth in the island» (PC 107). It is not, therefore, surprising if we see him being so enthusiastic about the place and if he tends to «regard Corfu as a special case». «After all», he explains, «this is the island where I 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».²¹ This idyllic life was interrupted though by the second World War which forced Durrell to leave Greece and settle in Egypt, where he in fact, tried to recreate «the Greek idyll he had lost»²² in the pages of **Prospero's Cell**. Thus nostalgia and the misery created by the war determined Durrell's tone in this book, as the disillusioned «Epilogue in Alexandria» suggests. «Seen through the transforming lens of memory the past seemed so enchanted that even thought would be unworthy of it,» Durrell says and cannot help ending the book wondering: «Can all these hastily written pages ever recreate more than a fraction of it?» (PC 133).

Durrell's stay on Corfu and his infatuation with the place had two lasting effects on him. First, it marked the beginning of a love affair with Greece which will continue for his whole life. During the War in Egypt Durrell felt miserable and homesick for Greece and he so much longed to return that as soon as the war was over, he managed to secure a post in Rhodes and eventually arrive there in June 1945 feeling as great «elation» as Ulysses returning to Ithaca, according to his biographer.²³

The second effect that Durrell's stay on Corfu had on him was to make him develop a kind of theory about islands and island life in general and a passion for islands that he calls «islomania». Durrell, however, realized the existence of this affliction only after he had left the island of Corfu and started suffering away from it. Thus his second Greek island book, **Reflections on a Marine Venus**, the book about Rhodes, will significantly start with Durrell theorizing about islomania:

Islomania [is] a rare but by no means unknown affliction of the spirit. There are people... 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. (R 15)

The first pages of the book describe Durrell's voyage from Alexan-

dria to Rhodes and the nostalgic lyricism of the opening descriptions betrays his emotions at the sight of the Greek elements of nature:

With the suddenness of an axe falling, we hit the pure Mediterranean blueness of the true Aegean: a sea with depth and tone, that swallowed and gave back the sky; a sea that belonged to the waterless islands and grey windmills, to the olive trees and the statues. (R. 18)

He tried, however, to be realistic, and had his own reserves, particularly because he was afraid that the war could have destroyed the idyllic Greek world he had known on Corfu:

Tomorrow I should see for myself whether the old Greek ambience had survived the war, whether it was still a reality based in the landscape and the people – or whether we had simply invented it for ourselves in the old days, living comfortably on foreign exchange, patronising reality with our fancies and making bad literature from them. Tomorrow I should know whether I must relegate my feelings about Greece to the dusty corners of memory along with so many other mad vagaries of the heart. (R. 18)

Again as in **Prospero's Cell**, a character of the book, Doctor Mills, «decreed the shape of it», as Durrell indicates in the following scene:

I remember (Mills) repeating in his clear voice: «I do so hope you'll write a book about the island sometime when you feel like it... Not history or myth – but landscape and atmosphere somehow. A companion is the sort of idea. You ought to try for the landscape – and even these queer months of transition from desolation to normality». ...I realize now that he was pleading for some sort of effective monument to all the charm and grace of our stay there in Rhodes. (R 36)

In fact, Durrell adopted his friend's suggestion and subtitled the book «A companion to the landscape of Rhodes». The form of the book is again peculiar. Durrell admits he has sacrificed form «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» (R 16). Apart from adding to the liveliness of the book, this variety of material also suggests Durrell's effort, as in **Prospero's Cell**, to present a more complete image of the island. Thus apart from the highly evocative descriptions of the landscape of Rhodes, Durrell devotes whole chapters to the history, legends and customs of the island, some of which had survived from ancient times. He derives material from different sources – first hand information from the peasants, arbitrary conjectures from his friends, different historical sources – or with his unique acuteness and sensitivity he interprets landscape and character and connects them with history. Durrell renders all this information in an original and creative way as, for example, the chapters on «The Sunny Colossus» or «The Age of the Knights» show. It is worth noticing, moreover, that besides the similarity of form and method of narration, another characteristic that **Reflections on a Marine Venus** shares with **Prospero's Cell** is that we again find here the same pattern of friends-mentors serving the same functions, providing the author with information or being his mouthpiece.

Although Durrell on his way to Rhodes was afraid that his return to Greece might be a disappointment, the view of Greece that he had formed during his stay on Corfu was actually verified on Rhodes. Rhodes did not betray him; it appeared equally attractive to him as Corfu. In Rhodes Durrell found again all those familiar from his stay on Corfu elements that constituted his image of a Greek island: the magnificent and inspiring landscape, the friendly, emotional and controversial people, the useful for the artist isolation, as well as the enjoyment of living in the company of good friends, kindred spirits, a simple close-to-nature life.

The Rhodian landscape is very successfully evoked and its suggestiveness carefully elaborated in several passages in the book. The mere sight of Lindos, for example, brings poetic associations to mind:

Doubling back a quarter of a mile before Galato you come upon Lindos through a narrow galley of rock. It is as if you had been leaning against a door leading to a poem when suddenly it swung open letting you stumble directly into the heart of it. (R 128)

The view that Durrell was sometimes faced with appears so difficult to recreate because of its breathtaking beauty that Durrell again realizes

the inadequacy of both words and painting:

The Aegean is still waiting for its painter – waiting with all the unselfconscious purity of its lights and forms for someone to go really mad over it with a loaded paint brush. Looking down upon it from the sentinel's tower at Castello, from the ancient temple at Lindos, you begin to paint it for yourself in words... An impossible task when all is said and done. (R 39-40)

On another occasion, during a visit to Kalymnos, Durrell again declares: «The mind runs up and down the web of vocabulary looking for a word which will do justice to [the landscape]. In vain» (R 60).

In impressionistic passages like the following he tries to capture both a specific view and the impact it had on him:

It was not a view that one «saw» in the strict sense; it radiated over one, dancing in that brown heat, pouring into the eyes and spreading within the five senses – as light enters the pin-hole of a camera's lens but floods the whole gelatine surface of the negative; so that we sat in a kind of dark inebriation, tasting the sweat and wine mixing in our mouths, and breathing in the whole landscape with every breath we drew like a perfume. (R 118)

Again as in Corfu the artist's sensibility derived special pleasure from and attributed a kind of magical quality to such commonplace, everyday activities as swimming, when they took place in a suggestive and influential landscape (R. 150) whereas the impressive atmosphere of such places as Cameirus with the magnificent view and its ruins cast a spell over Durrell who, together with Mills, experienced once again one of those

isolated moments existing in a peculiar dense medium of their own which was like time but not of it. Each moment to itself entire, populating a whole continuum of feeling... Separate moments, quite loose, not stitched together except by their parentage in the same quality of feeling. (R 123)

Moreover, in **Reflections on a Marine Venus** Durrell makes a point of showing the influence that the landscape of Rhodes had not only on

himself but also on the each time inhabitants of the island. He claims, for instance, that the mild Rhodian landscape «had converted Islam and made it part of the island's green and gentle self» (R53) or that «the delicious air of Rhodes had begun to etiolate» the characters of the Knights and that «the patient landscape [had] almost succeeded in domesticating the gothic north» (R 105).

He also hints at a kind of close interaction between landscape and history. Finding out that in Rhodes history repeated itself, he wonders if «history conditioned by place, repeats characteristic and familiar gestures, as a friend might» (R 157). This hypothesis, of course, supports his theory about the spirit of place and the power of landscape over people, and thus over history. It may also constitute an effort to explain the sense of continuity that Durrell experienced on Rhodes, where he noticed the survival and integration of older elements in more recent times, as, for example, when he observed the pagan origins of the Aegean saint (R. 154).

In fact, this sense of continuity between present and past seems to be a very important element in this book and more emphasized than in **Prospero's Cell** because, as his biographer observes, Durrell on Rhodes had the feeling that «the past was more intrusively present than in Corfu». ²⁴ Thus Durrell cannot help acknowledging its presence and dedicating whole chapters on Demetrius the «Besieger» and the Colossus of Rhodes, «The three lost cities» of Cameirus, lalysos and Lindos, and on the Knights. He also pays tribute to the complex and many-layered history of Rhodes by calling his house, which is situated in the garden of the Mosque of Murad Reis, adjoining an old Turkish cemetery, Villa Cleodolus, after the intellectual tyrant of Lindos. ²⁵

Again as in **Prospero's Cell**, in **Reflections on a Marine Venus** Durrell completes his image of the island by offering his views on Greek character. «The Greek is a terrible fellow», he claims. «Mercuric, noisy, voluble and proud – was there ever such a conjunction of qualities locked in a human breast? Only the Irishman could match him for intractability, for rowdy feckless generosity» (R 41). Being now more familiar with Greek island life and society, Durrell seems more confident in his generalizations and even able to distinguish certain representative types which for him are an integral part of island life as «they have furnished Greek islands since the beginning of history»:

The old sea-captain with his knotted hands and shaggy whiskers, the village schoolmaster in his dignity and European clothes, the mad boy who plays the violin outside the tavern door – the island poet whose wits, says tradition, have been turned by the Nereids. (R 68)

But if Durrell's contact with the living inhabitants of Rhodes was important for his realization of its spirit, it was an inanimate inhabitant of the past, the statue of Venus, that marked his stay to such an extent as to become for him «the presiding genius of the place» (R 37).

In Rhodes [he explains] we have been the willing bondsmen of the marine Venus – the figure that sits up there alone in the Museum, disregarded, sightless; yet somehow we have learned to share that timeless, exact musical contemplation – the secret of her self – sufficiency – which has helped her to outlive the savage noise of wars and change, to maintain unbroken the fine thread of her thoughts through the centuries past. Yes, and through her we have learned to see Greece with the inner eyes – not as a collection of battered vestiges left over from cultures long since abandoned – but as something ever-present and ever-renewed: the symbol married to the object prime – so that a cypress tree, a mask, an orange, a plough were extended beyond themselves into an eternity they enjoyed only with the furniture of all good poetry. In the blithe air of Rhodes she has provided us with a vicarious sense of continuity not only with the past – but also with the future. (R 179)

And the book ends with a last reference to the Marine Venus and the «wound» that she gives and which «one must carry to the world's end» (R 187). The wound, as Friedman observes, is «obviously a consequence of love»²⁶ and in fact in Rhodes we see Durrell very clearly admitting his attachment to the place and even specifying the aspects of Greece that he came to love:

the naked poverty that brings joy without humiliation, the chastity and fine manners of the islanders, the schisms and treacheries of the townsmen, the thrift and jealousy of the small-holders ... the taverns with their laurel wreaths, the lambs turning

on the spit at Easter, the bearded heroes, the shattered marble statues. (R 76)

A comparison with Italy, brings out his preference for «the wild pang of the Greek landscape» and makes him explain what Greece represents for him:

the vertical, masculine, adventurous consciousness of the archipelago, with its mental anarchy and indiscipline touched everywhere with the taste for agnosticism and spare living: Greece born into the sexual intoxication of the light, which seems to shine upwards from inside the very earth, to illuminate these bare acres of squill and asphodel. (R 183)

The enthusiasm reflected in these passages and Durrell's approving tone in the whole book reveal that Rhodes, far from disappointing him, as he was afraid it would happen at the beginning, enabled him to relive the idyll of Corfu. Thus Durrell's Rhodian experience verified and reinforced the views created on Corfu and in general strengthened his love for Greece, «a country which [he now has] come to recognize as [his] second home» (R 180).

With the closing sentences of **Reflections on a Marine Venus** the reader is left with the impression that Durrell's experience on Rhodes being so perfect and unique could not be repeated. This is, however, a false assumption, because his Greek isomania had by now become such an obsession and passion that it could not leave him at rest but urged him to repeat the happy life of Corfu and Rhodes. Thus, in 1953, almost six years after he had left Rhodes, Durrell decided to return again and make his home another Greek island, Cyprus this time. During his absence from Greece he was feeling again so «homesick for the Mediterranean»²⁷ that he returned determined to spend the rest of this life there, insisting, as he confesses in a letter to Henry Miller, «on dying somewhere along this holy and pre-Christian shore».²⁸

Durrell's decision at his maturity and at a crucial stage in his life and career to settle on a more permanent basis in Cyprus,²⁹ having yet no job, was a big and risky step and leaves little doubt about his feelings for Greece and its importance for him. Being disappointed because of the war, two unsuccessful marriages and an unsatisfactory attempt at a diplomatic career and having to look after his little daughter, Durrell

again sought the seclusion, peacefulness, consolation and artistic inspiration that the life on a Greek island could offer him. Although there is a certain irony in choosing Cyprus as a peaceful island at that time, one cannot ignore the fact that at least at the beginning Durrell found in Cyprus that peace of mind that seemed to be important for his art and he conceived and completed part of his major work **The Alexandria Quartet**.

Durrell's stay in Cyprus is the subject of his third island book, **Bitter Lemons**, which, although as Durrell explains in its Preface completes the trilogy, is very different from the previous two. To start with, **Bitter Lemons** is less of a travel book and closer to an autobiographical novel. If in **Prospero's Cell** Durrell seemed overwhelmed by the landscape of Corfu and in **Reflections on a Marine Venus** by the past of Rhodes, in **Bitter Lemons** the political crisis in Cyprus made it inevitable for him to focus on the present. As Friedman aptly puts it, in this book «the sense of place... is brilliantly and appropriately subordinated to the sense of the moment».³⁰ Furthermore, it seems that the political crisis in Cyprus provided the necessary material for a more conventional plot and characters. Finally, although in this book too Durrell tries to be impartial and unbiased, the point of view of the account becomes more personal and subjective. The different sources, for example, that Durrell uses are not incorporated in his narrative but sometimes appear as mottoes or introductions to chapters, serving usually as a kind of commentary on the chapter. Friedman, in fact, characterizes **Bitter Lemons** as «Durrell's most profoundly personal work, for it concerns nothing if not his physical and spiritual return to the Greek world».³¹

Being aware that a big part of the book deals with the political crisis in Cyprus, Durrell in the Preface warns the reader that his purpose was not to write «a political book, but simply a somewhat impressionistic study of the moods and atmosphere of Cyprus during the troubled years 1953-6» (BL 11). «I would like to think», he continues, «that this book was a not ineffective monument raised to the Cypriot peasantry and the island landscape» (BL 11). But this focus on the people and the landscape becomes later on even more limited to the people when he explains that he wished to experience Cyprus

through its people rather than its landscape, to enjoy the sensation of sharing a common life with the humble villagers of the place; and later to expand my field of investigation to its history –

the lamp which illuminates national character – in order to offer my live subjects a frame against which to see themselves. (BL 53)

And it is in fact this emphasis on people that makes **Bitter Lemons** more of a novel than a travel book.

His first impressions of Cyprus and the Cypriots was that «a vague and spiritless lethargy reigned» all over the place, and he «was beginning to think that the successive occupations had extirpated any trace whatsoever of the Greek genius» (BL 22). This impression was verified later on by his acquaintance with Bellapaix and the Tree of Idleness, where he found himself obliged to conform to the spirit of the place, the Levantine belief that «nothing must be done in a hurry» (BL 32). Little by little, however, he will come to recognize signs of liveliness and determination both in his students in Nicosia, for example, and his neighbors in Bellapaix. The comparison with the metropolitan Greek is inevitable: «the island temperament ... is very different from the prevailing extrovert disposition of the metropolitan Greek», he observes, and finds that although hospitality is a common characteristic between Greeks and Cypriots, there is a «thoughtful reserve» in the Cypriots (BL 29). Finally Durrell is particularly impressed by the Cypriots' attitude towards the British which he considers «so contradictory and so paradoxical». He describes it as a

quixotic irrational love of England which no other nation seems to have, and [which] in a fantastic sort of way ... flowered in blissful co-existence with the haunting dream of Union. (BL 127)

Durrell's ability to speak Greek put him in an advantageous position among his compatriots and his acquaintance and affinity with the Greek temperament enabled him to be more successful in communicating with the Greeks and even handling them as he wished, while at the same time he was being loved by them. The scene with Frankos in Clito's tavern (BL 38-43) and the scene with Morais (BL 83-4), for instance, are good illustrations of Durrell's manipulative attitude towards the Greeks showing his «delicate combination of respect for the peasants and the ability to keep, if not ahead, then at least abreast of their chicanery with tricks of one's own», as John A. Wiegel remarks.³²

At the beginning of his stay in Cyprus Durrell's life was similar to the

one he had led during his stay on the previous Greek islands. He enjoyed «the full isolation of time» (BL 20) and the beautiful and suggestive landscape, which generated some evocative descriptions again in this book. Durrell, for example, could not restrain his enthusiasm when he was confronted with «the breath-taking congruence of the little village» of Bellapaix for the first time (BL 55) or when he discovered the «indescribable» and awe-inspiring view that his new house would have (BL 58). Actually on such occasions he even felt «quilty of an act of fearful temerity in trying to settle in so fantastic a place. Could one ever do any work with such scenery to wonder at?» he asked (BL 79).

Durrell was so happy with the perfect beauty and peacefulness of the place that it was impossible for him to understand «how such a sun-bruised world could be transformed, be any different» (BL 138). So when the first signs of the impending crisis appeared, he seemed as if he was awoken from a wonderful dream only to be faced with an awful reality. He found all the warnings out of tune with the beauty and quietness of the place and wanted and tried to ignore them. He thought it «distasteful in such scenery... to have to turn one's mind to the shallow bickerings of nations» (BL 117). Later on the little pistol that he has to carry seems to him an «anachronism in all [that] pastoral blue and yellow – the young barley struggling to its feet upon the tobacco-coloured winter fields» (BL 219), and he agrees with his friend Panos saying: «on places like these, what does it all matter? Nationality, language, race?» (BL 225)

Durrell really appreciated the Cypriots love of the British, but he was baffled by their demand for political freedom. He could not understand how these apparently contradictory attitudes did not appear contradictory to the Greeks and he felt nonplussed when he was confronted with the argument «We don't want the British to go; we want them to stay; but as friends, not as masters» (BL 26). His description of his students at the Gymnasium of Nicosia is revealing of a more general condescending attitude:

They were admirable children, each wrapped in the bright silken cocoon of a dream; sleepwalkers who were awakened only by the crash of a pistol or a bomb, and who then gazed about them wonderingly to find that all these words and thoughts had a resonance only in death, and that the stark geometrical designs

of commerce and policy cared nothing for these flowing free-hand poetical designs of a perfect world where Union with Greece meant something not unlike the mystic's Union with the universe. (BL 128)

His inability to understand the political crisis prevailing in Cyprus is also revealed in the irrationality that he attributes to the whole situation. «The spirit of the irrational which always hovers over the Greek scene kept brushing us with its wings... [and] ... the whole thing had the air of a good-natured farce», (BL 178) he observes and adds: «The grotesque, the unreal, was rapidly becoming the normal» (BL 202). Being puzzled about its causes he eventually attributes the whole crisis to «the vagaries of fortune and the demons of ill luck [that] dragged Cyprus into the stock-market of world affairs» (BL 101).

Durrell warns us that this is not a political book.³³ Thus the views that Durrell expresses about the political situation in Cyprus should not be taken as political statements revealing a lack of political perspicacity at best or subconscious conservative colonialism at worst.³⁴ They should rather be taken as expressing his emotional response, his pain and his egoistic unwillingness to come to terms with the fact that once again his idyllic life could be destroyed by world politics. They actually reflect his disappointment, disgust and exasperation.

Durrell's feelings about the situation in Cyprus are also very effectively suggested in a symbolic scene towards the end of the book. The writer was walking with his friend Panos along a beach. The setting was almost perfectly idyllic, apart from a detail in it, a scene that caught their attention rather late. A sea-turtle having been washed out by the sea, was found by a dog and a vulture and was being eaten by them. The cruelty and violence of the scene cannot but be suggestive of the cruelty and violence that reigned over Cyprus during that time, while the emotions of horror and disgust that the scene aroused in Durrell were not different from his reaction to the whole situation in Cyprus (BL 170-1).

Although the village of Bellapaix retained its peacefulness longer than any other place in Cyprus and the villagers' «obstinate and unwavering friendship [towards Durrell] had not faltered» (BL 217), at the end Durrell came to realize that his presence «pained them», that, as he explains, «the sight of an Englishman had become an obscenity on that clear honey-gold spring air» (BL 249). It is then that he decides to

leave the place and his comments on what the taxi-driver who takes him to the airport says are characteristic of his confusion, disappointment and indignation:

It was one of those Greek conversations which carry with them a hallucinating surrealist flavour – in the last two years I had endured several hundreds of them. (BL 251)

Durrell's last impressions of Cyprus are not at all typical of his impressions of Greece in general, and it seems ironic that he had to end up the trilogy of island books in a tone so different from the approving one that mostly prevails in these books. «We had all become bitter», Durrell observes at a point in his narrative (BL 217), and it is this bitterness, symbolically emphasised in the title of his last book,³⁵ that determines the tone of the closing chapters. It seems that Fate had once again played a trick on Durrell. If the second world war interrupted his Corfu idyll, he soon managed to relive it on Rhodes which he recognizes as a «Paradise Terrestre» in the first chapter of **Reflections on a Marine Venus**. But this Paradise is very soon «lost» and the feeling of a «Paradise Regained» prevails in the beginning of **Bitter Lemons** when Durrell settles in Cyprus.³⁶ The political crisis of Cyprus, however, destroys for a second time, and this time for good, his effort to search for a paradise in Greece and the frustration and disillusionment that this failure caused seems eventually to have cured him of his isomania, as Friedman suggests.³⁷

If we want to generalize about Durrell's image of Greece we may say that, as Goulianos points out, «Durrell pictures Greece mainly in terms of the Greek islands»,³⁸ their impressive and suggestive landscape, their lively people and their rich historical and cultural background being their main attractions for him. Durrell finds Greece full of contrasts. The land varies from barren to fertile, the scenery from mild to wild, while the people can be both peaceful and turbulent, practical and irrational, lovable and irritating. He is puzzled but also fascinated by these discrepancies and seems to attribute much of the power and magic the place has on them. He is, however, unable to specify the spell that Greece casts over him, as he confesses in a 1971 interview: «Greece is so strange... I do not know precisely what makes its charm. There is something genuine, but hard to describe precisely».³⁹

In his approach, Durrell tries to get rid of the traditional idealized

image of Greece that focused on the Ancient Greek past and was disdainful or ignorant of the present. The illustrious past again has its role in Durrell's work, but it acquires its importance only through its connection with the present. What is significant for him is the «presentness» of the past and the sense of continuity that it offers. There is, however, still a romanticizing and idealizing tendency in Durrell this time deriving from the present, as his emphasis on the spirituality of the Greek landscape charged with historical memories, his glorification of the people and the almost exotic element that he attributes to Greece reveal.

In fact, Durrell's fascination with and glorification of Greece seem to be due mainly to personal reasons. Apart from the psychoanalytic reason that Goulianos offers that Greece reminded him of his childhood experience in India,⁴⁰ an examination of Durrell's writings on Greece cannot but suggest that Greece suited Durrell's own idiosyncrasy and temperament and that in Greece he found refuge from the conventionalities of western society that Durrell found so oppressive.⁴¹ The almost primitive and easy-going life he led in Greece was for him an antidote to the malaise created by modern reality and civilization. Greece, in fact, soothed his spirit and fulfilled his spiritual need for a home and eventually, as he suggests in **Prospero's Cell**, offered him the discovery of himself (PC 11). Most importantly, however, Durrell's trilogy of island books shows that Greece helped him find his voice as a writer by providing the necessary conditions for artistic creation and supplying inspiration and material for his work.⁴²

NOTES

1. See Anna Lillios, «The Blue of Greece: Durrell's Images of an Adopted Land», *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 24.1 (Spring 1991): 72-5 for a survey of 19th century travellers' «stock responses» to Greece and the contrast with Durrell.
2. *Prospero's Cell* was first published in 1945, *Reflections on a Marine Venus* in 1952 and *Bitter Lemons* in 1957. All page references to these works will follow the abbreviations PC, R and BL, respectively and will be to the following editions: Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), Lawrence Durrell, *Reflections on a Marine Venus* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1978) and Lawrence Durrell, *Bitter Lemons* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978).
3. See Durrell's distinction between «travel-writer» and «residence-writer» in Lawrence Durrell, *The Spirit of Place*, ed. Alan G. Thomas (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) 156.
4. See Joan Susan Goulianos, *Lawrence Durrell's Greek Landscape* (Ph. D. Thesis, Columbia University, 1968) 8. Goulianos also claims that *Prospero's Cell* is a projection of how Durrell wanted «to see himself on Corfu» (9).
5. See John A. Wiegel, *Lawrence Durrell* (New York: Twayne, 1965) 122.
6. *Spirit of Place* 160.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Edward Hungerford, «Durrell's Mediterranean Paradise», *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 24.1 (Spring 1991): 57.
9. *Spirit of Place*, 156-63.
10. *Ibid.* 26.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller, *A Private Correspondence*, ed. George Wickes (London: Faber & Faber, 1963) 60.
13. Economic reasons and the superiority of the Greek climate also affected Durrell's decision. See Ian MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998) 101 and Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980) 16.
14. G. S. Fraser, *Lawrence Durrell: A Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973) 74.
15. Alan Warren Friedman, «Place and Durrell's Island Books», *Critical Essays on Lawrence Durrell* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987) 60.
16. *Spirit of Place* 32, 34.
17. MacNiven 113, 111.
18. On Corfu Durrell wrote *Panic Spring* and *The Black Book* and most of the poems that appeared in *A Private Country*. See MacNiven 115, 277.
19. For the identity of the Count see MacNiven 293.
20. *Spirit of Place* 27.
21. *Ibid.* 286-7.
22. MacNiven 280.
23. *Ibid.* 306.
24. *Ibid.* 309.
25. *Ibid.* 328.
26. Friedman 63.
27. MacNiven 347, 355.
28. *Private Correspondence* 298.
29. He actually bought a house in Bellapaix (BL 16-7).
30. Friedman 64.

31. Ibid.
32. Wiegel 124-5.
33. MacNiven disagrees with this view (465).
34. For some severe criticisms of Durrell's views on the Cyprus crisis see MacNiven 404, 412-3, 414, 418-9, 464.
35. In a letter Durrell characterized the book as «very bitter indeed» (MacNiven 437).
36. This view is also suggested by the titles of chapters 7 and 9 of MacNiven's biography of Durrell.
37. Friedman 69.
38. Goulianos 62.
39. See Claudine Brelet, «Interview with Lawrence Durrell», *Twentieth Century Literature* 33.3, 4 (1987) 377.
40. See Goulianos.
41. This can also account for the strong escapist element in Durrell's Greek books.
42. Except for the trilogy of island books that were inspired by Greece, on Corfu Durrell produced *The Black Book*, his first important novel and most of the poems of his first volume of poetry *A Private Country* (see MacNiven 277) and in Cyprus he wrote *Justine* the first part of his most important contribution to modern fiction, *The Alexandria Quartet* (see MacNiven 401-37).

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Δήμητρα Παπάζογλου,
Η Ελλάδα του Lawrence Durrell: Προσωπικό Τοπίο

Σκοπός αυτής της μελέτης είναι η διερεύνηση της σχέσης του Lawrence Durrell με την Ελλάδα, μέσα από μία ανάλυση των τριών βιβλίων του για τα Ελληνικά νησιά: του **Prospero's Cell** (1945) που αναφέρεται στην σχεδόν τρίχρονη διαμονή του στην Κέρκυρα λίγο πριν τον δεύτερο παγκόσμιο πόλεμο, του **Reflections on a Marine Venus** (1952) που αναφέρεται στα δύο χρόνια (1945-7) που πέρασε στην Ρόδο και του **Bitter Lemons** που περιγράφει τις εμπειρίες του στην Κύπρο τα χρόνια 1953-56, κατά την διάρκεια της πολιτικής κρίσης. Συγκεκριμένα, θα μελετηθεί η εξέλιξη της σχέσης του με την Ελλάδα, τα διάφορα στάδια της γνωριμίας και ο αυξανόμενος ενθουσιασμός του και θα περιγραφούν τα κύρια χαρακτηριστικά του τρόπου προσέγγισης και απεικόνισης της Ελλάδας από τον Durrell, βασικότερο των οποίων είναι μία τάση εξιδανίκευσης της χώρας και των ανθρώπων. Τέλος θα αναφερθούν οι συνέπειες που η γνωριμία του Durrell με την Ελλάδα και η γοητεία που άσκησε επάνω του είχαν στο συγγραφικό του έργο. Πώς, δηλαδή, η Ελλάδα, απελευθερώνοντάς τον από την καταπιεστική ατμόσφαιρα της πατρίδας του, όχι μόνο του παρείχε ευνοϊκές συνθήκες για να γράψει, αλλά υπήρξε και πηγή έμπνευσης στην αρχή της καριέρας του.