

Lawrence Durrell and D.H. Lawrence's Legacy

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Lawrence Durrell has fascinated me ever since I read *Nunc, Tunquam* and *Pope Joan* in my youth, but I must confess that it is not unusual for me - as well as for several other scholars of D.H. Lawrence¹ - to stress that subsequent British and not only British authors could not avoid the lesson of D.H. Lawrence particularly both in relation to the theme of transgression and the tradition of travel literature. As a matter of fact, this investigation into D.H. Lawrence's influence should not be seen as in any way diminishing Durrell who, indeed, was successful in reaching his personal style and a high position as a Twentieth Century writer. In dealing with a comparison between D.H. Lawrence and Durrell, first of all it is worth noting the coincidence of the name Lawrence which seems to be a sign of destiny; a destiny which, not unlike D.H. Lawrence's, led Durrell to a sort of self-exile in those Mediterranean areas which had so appealed to David Herbert too. Similarly, for Durrell the experience of self-exile was as revelatory as it had been for D.H. Lawrence, if (almost re-echoing D.H. Lawrence's words) Durrell admits in *The Dark Labyrinth*: "Leaving England had been a revelation" (60). But, apart from these aspects which are nothing more than a curiosity, it must be said that the literary production of both authors - D.H. Lawrence and Lawrence Durrell - is characterized by a variety which is made up not only of travel books and novels, but also of poetry, essays, letters, plays and even paintings. At the same time both writers use a sort of poetical prose,

while D.H. Lawrence's "spirit of the place", renamed *genius loci* or *deus loci* by Durrell, seems to pervade their entire literary work. As Markert points out in examining Durrell's essay "Landscape and Character", Durrell's indebtedness to D.H. Lawrence can be detected through Durrell's "own theory of spirit of place and the various themes that surround it" ("Symbolic Geography", 91) although - in my opinion - Durrell re-elaborated it in a personal form. Nevertheless, one cannot but agree with Markert's idea that "Both writers, then, use geography not only to define character and symbolize personality traits; they also project more generally the immersion in place to define our relation to life" (1981, 91).

Durrell's discovery of the self described in *Prospero's Cell* is in line with D.H. Lawrence's, as can be perceived by comparing two passages from the two authors. In *Prospero's Cell* Durrell writes: "Greece offers you something harder--the discovery of yourself" (32). Lawrence's discovery of Italy was a discovery of himself, as is confessed by the writer himself in the following words from *Sea and Sardinia*:

to go to Italy and to penetrate into Italy is like a fascinating act of self-discovery - back, back down the old ways of time [...] Italy has given me back I know not what of myself, but a very, very great deal. She has found for me so much that was lost: like a restored Osiris. (6)

It is no coincidence, then, that in *Bitter Lemons* - a title which seems to echo D.H. Lawrence's chapter "The Lemon Gardens" in *Twilight in Italy* - Durrell feels the need to refer to Sardinia, or as he says: "one can enjoy [the Mediterranean way of life] anywhere between Sardinia and Crete" (34). And, as he remarks, "these Mediterranean folks lived a joyous, uproarious, muddled anarchic life of their own" (34). And, as Durrell elusively suggests, the Mediterranean way of living is linked to the archaic modes of a life measured by natural rhythms: "a rural life [...] which remained as a sort of undertow. The peasant was already becoming a quaint relic of a forgotten mode of life" (34). This is certainly in line with D.H. Lawrence's fascination for Mediterranean civilization so imbued with archaic and natural pulses.

Moreover, on his way to Cyprus, as is transcribed in the opening pages of *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell could not avoid references to several Italian places, such as Venice (15-16), Bologna (17), Trieste (20-21) and Sicily (17). Trieste - where he bought a "ticket from Trieste to Limassol" (21) - and

Venice were obviously on Durrell's way, but Venice - with its control of the Mediterranean sea in the past - is also a presence that, as he says, "will never be far from me in Cyprus--for the Lion of Saint Mark still rides the humid airs of Famagusta" (16). But, his reference to Bologna - which is inland - is perhaps reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's *Etruscan Places* where Bologna is cited as an old Etruscan town (178). The fact that Bologna recurs in *Bitter Lemons* thanks to "a Bolognese [who] is always worth listening to on the subject of wine" (17) seems to re-echo the Etruscan origins of Bologna and, consequently, that Etruscan "fullness of life [...] with wine and flutes playing for the dance", as D.H.Lawrence writes in *Etruscan Places* (109). Even Sicily, where - as is well known - D.H. Lawrence had lived for almost two years and had translated some of the writings of the Sicilian novelist Verga, had inspired most of the poems collected in his *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. In Durrell's *Bitter Lemons* Sicily seems to suggest a kind of elusive reference to D.H. Lawrence. Durrell's description of Sicily is embedded in *Bitter Lemons* with these words:

At once it became fertile, full of goddesses and mineral springs; ancient castles and monasteries; fruit and grain and verdant grasslands; priests and gipsies and brigands.... (17).

Although the description of Sicily - this Mediterranean island - is ironically associated by Durrell to a "travel-poster" (17), it does reveal how much his wish "to live in the Mediterranean" (16) and "to say goodbye to Europe" (17) is in line with D.H.Lawrence's wishes again.

Certainly, for both authors, "self-discovery" is rooted in the archetype of the journey, related both to exploration - meaning, liberations from conventions - "a questing for knowledge" (Porter, 51) and for "naked truth" (Markert, "Symbolic Geography", 98) - and to a return "to the origins, to the primal self" (Porter 51). In the case of Durrell and D.H. Lawrence this return is "a return to something that has been lost, a reclamation of an older way of being, an immersion into unconscious desire, even a journey to repressed, archaic, and primitive forms of experience" (Porter, 51). Thus, for both writers self-discovery is not only "personal", but also "historical and mythical" (Markert, "Symbolic Geography", 99); it enlarges their vision and allows them to "come into contact with other worlds" as D.H.Lawrence says in his "Review of H.M.Tomlison's *Gifts of Fortune*":

We travel in order to cross seas and land on other coasts. We do not travel to go from one hotel to another [...] We travel, perhaps, with a secret and absurd hope of setting foot on the Hesperides, of running our boat up a little creek and landing in the Garden of Eden. This hope is always defeated. There is no Garden of Eden, and the Hesperides never were. Yet, in our very search for them we touch the coasts of illusions, and come into contact with other worlds (343).

D.H. Lawrence's words suggest that his peregrinations took the form of an endless quest, not unlike Durrell's: it is a search for Eden, or for "a golden age before history", just to use Porter's definition for Durrell's quest (52). D.H. Lawrence's search is mainly concerned with that Mediterranean Italy which is frequently described "as beautiful as Paradise", or alluded to as "the little Garden of Eden" in the chapter "The Lemon Gardens" of *Twilight in Italy*. This idea of an earthly Paradise in the Mediterranean area is shared by Durrell because, as D. Roessel says, "Durrell, like D.H. Lawrence, needed a Mediterranean peasantry that was primitive, natural and volcanic" (9). Thus, Durrell not only entitles the opening chapter of *Reflections of a Marine Venus* (1953) "Of Paradise Terrestre" (15), but he also uses the Italian word *terrestre* which means earthly. Moreover, in the opening page of *The Black Book* Durrell regrets "the loss of the Mediterranean" (19), but he also enriches the Mediterranean image with those trees, flowers and fruits, such as "cypresses", "figs", and "grapes", which also constitute the imagery of D.H. Lawrence's poetry, as his collection of poems, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, clearly reveals.

D.H. Lawrence's attraction for Italy was mainly due to his wish to penetrate into a country which was "so primitive, so pagan", as he says in *Sea and Sardinia* (123), and which was, consequently, imbued with that Mediterranean Myth so appealing to Durrell too. D.H. Lawrence himself explains his experience of plunging into the Mediterranean Myth in *Sea and Sardinia*:

Whenever one is in Italy, either one is conscious of the present, or of the Medieval influences, or of the far, mysterious gods of the early Mediterranean [...] Proserpine, or Pan, or even the strange [...] gods" of the Etruscans. (123)

Thus, Italy seems to preserve the past and to preserve the unknown, the mystery of the Mediterranean Earth Mother, or - to use Lawrence's words in *Twilight in Italy* - "the possession of the unknown, through the senses,

which happens under a superb moon” (31). Allusions to the Moon, as well as to Moon-related symbols - such as the magic of drinking wine and dances - recur throughout D.H. Lawrence’s entire literary *corpus* with references both to the different names of the Moon Goddess, such as Proserpine, Diane, Venus and Persephone, and to Bacchae, the mythical creatures linked to Bacchus and, consequently, to Moon symbolism (Comellini, *D.H. Lawrence*).

Thus, Italy, the country of music and wine - elements belonging to Moon symbolism - seems to keep the Mediterranean Myth alive, together with all its underlying symbolic meanings, such as for instance Pan, the emblem of the vitality of phallus consciousness. By re-evoking the perfect balance of spirit and senses, the Mediterranean Myth offers Lawrence that ideal fulfilment which is figuratively represented as the ecstasy of light and dark together.

An analogous use of the Mediterranean Myth is easily retraceable in Durrell not only thanks to the titles of some of his works such as *Reflections on a Marine Venus*, or *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, but also thanks to direct references to Venus both in *Prospero’s Cell* and in *Reflections of a Marine Venus*. Moreover, in line with D.H. Lawrence, Durrell’s search was related to those vital elements which can contribute to fighting against the sterility of contemporary society: they seem to be inborn in the way of living of the southern Mediterranean areas, as he writes in *The Dark Labyrinth*:

I think that it is only in the south that they warm themselves at life instead of transforming it into bad literature. (57)

These vital elements, which are rooted in the Mediterranean Myth, lead back to the triple Mediterranean goddess. The Mediterranean Myth, which recurs in *Reflections of a Marine Venus*, is figuratively expressed through references to “wine”, drinks and dances, together with allusions to the Mediterranean Moon Goddess both in the aspect of Venus - to whom the book is dedicated (16) - and in that of creatures associated with her such as Pan and the Nereids (57). As in D.H. Lawrence’s literary corpus, all these references to Venus in Durrell’s book (179, 184) indirectly suggest the celebration of the body (Porter 52).

D.H. Lawrence’s idea of renewal is deeply rooted in a pre-flood or apocalyptic vision, which is imbued with anthropological, mythological,

biblical and esoteric sources leading back to the Mediterranean Myth², as is testified by D.H. Lawrence's late works such as *The Man Who Died* and *Apocalypse*. In *Apocalypse* (1931) he makes clear that the Apocalypse attributed to the Apostle John had actually been written by John of Patmos. Certainly Durrell not only had the same cultural background as D.H. Lawrence, but he also knew that, in his *Apocalypse*, D.H. Lawrence was attributing the book of the *Apocalypse* to John of Patmos: instead of discussing or rejecting Lawrence's theory, in *Reflections of a Marine Venus* Durrell ambiguously says that *Apocalypse* was written in the Monastery of St John in Patmos (69).

It is also worth adding that Durrell does not simply feel an identification with D.H. Lawrence as Markert says in dealing with Durrell's essay "Landscape and Character" where D.H. Lawrence is cited ("Symbolic Geography", 90); in fact, D.H. Lawrence is cited in *The Dark Labyrinth* too (258). As a matter of fact, I would say that even in his first book, entitled *The Black Book* and published in 1938, Durrell insinuates the presence of D.H. Lawrence's works in his background. In fact, in *The Black Book* Durrell even cites D.H. Lawrence, ironically stressing the stereotypes used in the attacks against D.H. Lawrence, with these words: "esoteric subjects. Sex, sex, sex [...] his manner closely modelled on the style of Lawrence's letters" (35). D.H. Lawrence is quoted again by Durrell when he writes in *The Black Book*: "Lawrence knew this world" (56). Obviously Durrell refers to the world of the imagination and says:

I live only in my imagination which is timeless. Therefore the location of this world which I am trying to hammer out for you on a blunt typewriter, over the Ionian, is the location of space merely. I can only fix it with any certainty on the map (56).

Moreover, in his "Preface" of 1959 to *The Black Book*, Durrell admits that there is a strong connection between exploration/ "self-discovery" (9) and writing: it is a connection that implies the process of "expressing" the inside talking about "self-discovery"; he also recognizes that the "way towards self-exploration" had already been opened by D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley*, although he mentions the Joycean Molly Bloom as well (9). Durrell himself explains the interplay between the archetype of the journey and the art of writing when he compares journeys to artists in the opening lines of *Bitter Lemons*:

Journeys, like artists, are born and not made. A thousand different circumstances contribute to them, few of them willed or determined by the will-whatever we may think. They flower spontaneously out of the demands of our natures--and the best of them lead us not only outwards in space, but inward as well. Travel can be one of the most rewarding forms of introspection...(15)

A similar idea of "the adventure of writing" was rooted in D.H. Lawrence's works and particularly in *Kangaroo*, which is his most experimental novel, where he writes:

Man is a thought adventurer, Man is more, he is a life-adventurer. Which means he is a thought-adventurer, an emotion-adventurer, and a discoverer of himself and of the outer universe. A discoverer. [...] Now a novel is supposed to be a mere record of emotion-adventures, floundering in feelings. We insist that a novel is, or should be, also a thought-adventure. (307-308)

To complete this short *excursus* on the similarities between D.H. Lawrence and Durrell, it is worth adding that *The Black Book* is imbued with a correspondence between seasons and writing which is reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's symbolism. Thus, that book - *The Black Book* - which Durrell could not have begun in Summer can be only started in Winter, as he admits: "This is the day I have chosen to begin this writing" (20), in "the Winter of our discontent" (20). The season can only be Winter, "Winter, winter everywhere in these nude, enervate symbols", because only Winter can suggest a metaphorical reference to our society made up of those "dead-alive" people of D.H. Lawrence's poem "Immortality" (*The Complete Poems*, 528) - or of the "dead among the dead" as Durrell says in *The Black Book* (20). In *The Black Book* images of death are pervasively interwoven with recurring references to psychological disorders and diseases and to the correlated figures of nurses and doctors. Disease is a recurring motif which pervades Durrell's fiction as *The Black Book* and *Reflections on a Marine Venus* brilliantly exemplify. Especially significant is not only the correspondence between Durrell's despair - which is "symbolized as 'the English death' " in his "Preface" to *The Black Book* (9) - and the book itself, but also the analogy between his therapy (through the act of writing his book) and doctors' diagnoses; this analogy is enriched by a comparison of spiritual birth (his novel) with physical birth which implies "a good deal of mess and blood" (11). Or, as Durrell writes:

I knew that a sensitive reader would find that the very excesses of the writing were an organic part of the experience described; and indeed a friendly critic of the book once wrote to me: "[...] I have never understood why writers should not be regarded by the reader as enjoying much the same rights as doctors. You do not suspect indecency in a doctor who asks you to strip in order to examine you. [...] As for your novel--you can't have a birth without a good deal of mess and blood. The labour pains, the groans, sounded quite genuine to me; I suppose because I regard [...] spiritual birth as something like the analogy of physical" (10-11).

This kind of symbolism, imbued with the theme of death and disease, is also used by D.H. Lawrence to stress our sterile and sick society: examples are offered by Aaron's sterility in Lawrence's novel *Aaron's Rod* as well as by Lawrence's poems, particularly the poem, "Trees", where a "disease has attacked the Cypress trees in Italy/ and they are all dying" (*The Complete Poems*, 295). Another significant example is given by *Lady Chatterley's Lover* where Lord Chatterley not only suffers from paralysis, but also needs a nurse. As is well known, in D.H. Lawrence's vital conception, corruption and decay are seen as necessary steps in the process of renewal, as Winter is the necessary step for the subsequent arrival of Spring. This vital renewal, which permeates D.H. Lawrence's quest and, consequently, his literary work, is linked to a return to an ancient past where life was based on that natural cycle which is figuratively expressed by the Mediterranean Myth. It is not out of place, then, to detect a correspondence between D.H. Lawrence and Durrell in the use of the Mediterranean Myth: like D.H. Lawrence's dying trees, the "vitality" of Durrell's cypresses seems to have "been rinsed out", or to have become "nude, enervate symbols", as Durrell says in *The Black Book* (20). Nevertheless - like D.H. Lawrence who hopes to revitalize society by going back to the past, to the archaic Etruscans - in *The Black Book*, Durrell offers a glimmer of hope to humanity when he writes: "we can recreate a bit from the past" (20). Thus, Durrell alludes to a possible revitalization of humanity and society through the Mediterranean Myth, as his own words testify:

There is a correspondence between the present, this numbness, inertia, and that past reality of a death, whose meaning is symbolic, mythical, but real also in its symptom. As if, lying here, in this mimic death at morning, we were recreating a bit from the past: a crumb of the death we have escaped (20).



- 1 This can be considered my first critical approach to Durrell's literary *corpus*, if one excludes my short analysis of the inescapable influence of D.H. Lawrence which appears in the "Introduction" to my book on D.H. Lawrence (1995, 25). Moreover, it must be added that D.H. Lawrence's legacy is attested by several other scholars, such as: Markert, 1981; Dickson, 1984; Markert, 1987; Porter, 1994. An indebtedness to D.H. Lawrence is also underlined in some of the essays collected by Alan Warren Friedman.
- 2 At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Europe and U.S.A. were imbued with these ideas, thanks to J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and H.P. Blavatsky's esoteric studies, such as *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, and, later, thanks to Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.



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