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# The Melting Mirage of Lawrence Durrell's *White City*

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1.

The hosts of the conference had set up microphones in the audience to stimulate general participation, and after a little hesitation, a boy rose to speak in a large auditorium full of much older people. The topic of discussion was the preservation of the architectural heritage of the city of Alexandria, and a panel of experts sat on the stage and fielded questions. The meeting served as a call to civic action. The boy, maybe ten or twelve, followed a number of adults who had been commenting on the difficulties of involving the people of the city and the government of Egypt in the enterprise. As many observed, common folk and governments often have more pressing concerns than undertaking aesthetic projects without immediate or tangible returns.

The young man spoke in Arabic, which required translation, and his comments were fluent, excited, and succinct. He agreed with the aims of the discussions and simply remarked that, if the work of the group was to succeed, the youth of Alexandria needed to be taught their history and the importance of preserving their heritage. It was a brave thing to do, for one so young to stand up before his elders and make such an eloquent and sensible plea. He deserved full credit for that, and the audience immediately applauded. It was a memorable moment. But credit also goes to the organizers and participants of the event that encouraged and facilitated his impassioned response: the Durrell Celebration in Alexandria, Egypt.

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*Impressions of the Durrell Celebration, Alexandria, Egypt, 29–30  
November 2007.*

2.

the durrell celebration was the inspiration of Paul Smith, Director of the British Council and Cultural Counsellor to the British Embassy in Egypt, and it commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Lawrence Durrell's *Justine*, the first novel of his great tetralogy, *The Alexandria Quartet*. Despite a little discord among some Egyptian observers, who apparently objected to the purpose of the event, I consider the conference a resounding success.

The celebration was organized primarily by the British Council, with the assistance of The Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Centre, under the direction of Dr. Mohamed Awad and his deputy, Dr. Sahar Hamouda, and with the help of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

Other organizers included Smith's highly capable colleagues at the British Council, and here I must single out Cathy Costain, Manager of Knowledge and Information Services. She and her expert staff were gracious, accommodating, and made everything work smoothly. Michael Haag, author and historian of Durrell's Egypt, assisted in the selection and planning of the program. Haag has written the best book on Durrell, *Alexandria: City of Memory*, and is working on his biography.

The two-day affair was open to the general public and took place in the conference center adjacent to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a worthy successor to the great Ptolemaic library of Alexandria. The new and beautiful library faces the Mediterranean like an open oyster and contains all the electronic equipment and bibliographic treasures one would expect of a first-class institution.

The Bibliotheca is located on the Eastern Harbor Corniche (or Sharia 26<sup>th</sup> July) at Chatby, about a mile east of the Cecil Hotel. Giuseppe Alessandro Loria, a prominent architect, designed that landmark in the Moorish-Venetian style of 1929, and Durrell used it as a centerpiece of activ-

ity in *Justine*, which he set during the years immediately preceding the Second World War. For admirers of the *Quartet*, it was obvious—the Cecil was the logical choice as the conference hub for social gatherings and functions. Inside the Art Deco hotel were mirrors, potted palms, a French elevator cage, a permanent resident in cashmere jacket and suede bedroom slippers, who always sat in a particular chair in the lobby and who was the scion of a Syro-Lebanese family, and outside before the Midan Saad Zaghloul were the waiting gharries and the clip-clop of horses, although no double-parked, “great silver Rolls with the daffodil hub-caps,” which would have been *Justine*’s car.<sup>1</sup> All that to make any good Durrellian happy, notwithstanding the incongruity of a rooftop Chinese restaurant catering to a new global clientele.

Much jumbled history—political, architectural, literary—crowds this part of Alexandria on or near the sea, where names have changed to accommodate ever-changing realities. Most recently, comparatively speaking, Gamal Abdel Nasser’s revolution of 26 July 1952 accounts for many of these resurgent sensibilities.

Until his death in 1933, C. P. Cavafy lived in a nearby flat. His third-floor apartment, now a small museum on Sharia Sharm el Sheik, once known as Rue Lepsius, is a ten-minute walk away. E. M. Forster came to Alexandria in 1915 and first stayed at the Majestic Hotel opposite the French Gardens. That hotel with its twin copulas is now a dreary office building, but it is also within walking distance of the Cecil. Durrell arrived on the scene in 1942, initially had a room in the Cecil, and later lived not far away on Rue Fuad, a street with a long history. During the Ptolemaic period, it was possibly called the Canopic Way, afterwards the Rue Rosette, then the Rue Fuad, and now the modern Egyptian Sharia Horreya (“Liberty Street”). Cab drivers, however, still know it as Rue Fuad. And today at the north-western tip of the Corniche stands Fort Qaytbey. In 1480, the Ottoman conquerors constructed it on the granite and

limestone ruins of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Pharos lighthouse. The exact dimensions of that Ptolemaic monument are unknown, but recent reconstructions have it towering over the present fortress by perhaps three hundred feet or more.<sup>2</sup> And so looms the mythos of Alexandria itself.

Alexandria makes one aware of the continual flux of things. It is a city of reused ruins and renamed streets. Conquerors and revolutions come and go, but as Cavafy says, "It goes on being Alexandria still."<sup>3</sup> True. But that requires a little imagination. Another aspect of the city requires no imagination. Urban desolation is readily visible, especially as seen from Cavafy's balcony (fig. 1). That bleak prospect Cavafy could easily have lamented, or perhaps eulogized, as the "black ruins" of his life ("The City," l. 7), and that metaphor Durrell's narrator in *Justine* interprets as the "melancholy provinces" of an internal landscape (AQ 18).

The proceedings were held in a large auditorium with a seating capacity for several hundred people. The turnout was remarkable and enthusiastic—almost all the seats were taken. People responded with lively questions and sometimes-lengthy expostulations. The audience itself was diverse: educators, students, citizens, reporters, and the stray foreign visitors, such as my wife and I, who had traveled from California. The students were mainly young women, most of whom wore the colorful *hijab*, the headscarf now widely favored in Islam as a sign of piety. They either had an interest in Durrell and his legacy or were conscripts from the Department of English at Alexandria University. Dr. Sahar Hamouda, moderator and professor of English, joked about familiar faces and required attendance.

I was reminded of D. J. Enright's descriptions of English classes in his contemporaneous, but vastly different, novel about Alexandria, *Academic Year* (London 1955). His dyspeptic poem of that period, "Why the East is Inscrutable," first appearing in 1948, throws cold water on many of the oriental visions of his fellow countrymen. It proposes, "Some-

times the East is too hot / To be scrutable," rejects exoticism, and concludes, "Now friends are specious things. Wait for winter, / Mildly trying, meanwhile, not to make / Too many enemies."<sup>4</sup> Romantic Durrell and Augustan Enright would not have gotten along.

3.

a literary conference devoted to a single author tends to define itself along predictable lines of academic inquiry. The focus will be on an author and his or her texts. A premium is normally placed on current or fashionable approaches to the study of literature. Happily, such was not the case with this conference, which was not really literary, rather an "event," in the sense of honoring a great writer and his vision of Alexandria, the "white city" of his novels.

As previously mentioned, the organizers of the event wanted the proceedings to appeal to a general audience, namely, whoever might walk off the street and be curious about Lawrence Durrell and his Egyptian preoccupations. The various speakers brought Durrell into focus, both as man and writer, and then transitioned into contemporary literature and the conservation of old Alexandria.

Michael Haag provided the historical context for Durrell in Egypt. Peter Porter assessed and analyzed Durrell's Mediterranean poetry. Penelope Durrell Hope presented family photographs of her father's life. Harry Tzalas and Ibrahim Abdel Meguid read from their own creative work. And Dr. Mohamed Awad discussed the attempt to save the Ambron Villa, the most important place where Durrell stayed in Alexandria.

I shall not attempt to summarize these talks and readings; rather I'll comment on one part of the discussions, which drew repeated criticism: Durrell's superficial portrayal of Alexandria and its Egyptian inhabitants. Simplistic though his representation may be, I am not deeply troubled by it and do not expect writers of literature to write with the acumen

of Alexis de Tocqueville when they visit foreign countries. I do expect a certain amount of honesty, however. In this regard, I find Durrell's life puzzling and contradictory and because of that, his art complex. I'll then connect this aspect of the writer's work to Alexandria and the Ambron Villa. This arc essentially follows the trajectory of the conference itself.

Honoring a writer's achievement does not necessarily mean agreeing with everything he has to say, and Durrell's poetic recreation of Alexandria as many-layered strata of memory, history, and ethnic diversity found few supporters among the discussants, in particular the Alexandrians and Egyptians themselves, who seemed to consider Durrell's work highly fanciful. Harry Tzalas, a Greek who was born in Alexandria and who is both writer and archaeologist, called Durrell's city "unreal" and said, "If you want to dream, [there's] nothing better than *The Alexandria Quartet*." Tzalas's comments may seem harsh, but Tzalas also defended Durrell's right to his own vision of the city, when someone in the audience attacked it as being unfair and unrealistic.

Durrell himself would probably not be much troubled by such personal criticism. In fact, he indulges in it himself. In his rousing assessment of Durrell's poetry, Peter Porter spoke of "On First Looking into Loeb's Horace" as Durrell's finest poem. Porter is himself a highly respected poet, and his judgment has to be taken very seriously. "Loeb's Horace" is indeed a marvelous tour de force in the tradition, as Porter noted, of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues ("Andrea del Sarto" comes to mind). Porter admires the poem for its artifice.<sup>5</sup> I question its honesty.

In 1943, Durrell published "Loeb's Horace" in *Personal Landscape*, a Cairo publication that he helped to edit, along with his fellow editors, Robin Feddin and Bernard Spencer. They were all exiles who had met in Athens and then fled to Egypt before the German advance in 1941.<sup>6</sup> *Personal Landscape* even called itself a magazine of "exile,"<sup>7</sup> and as Haag notes, Durrell's contributions to the magazine "rarely had anything to do with Egypt."<sup>8</sup> During his years in Egypt, Durrell

didn't like either the country itself or Alexandria in particular, although his outlook later changed. He made his antipathy clear in a letter to Henry Miller, when in May of 1944 he complained about Alexandria as "this smashed up broken down shabby Neapolitan town, with its Levantine mounds of houses peeling in the sun."<sup>9</sup> Like a homesick exile from the Hellenic world, Durrell turned his eyes across the Mediterranean to Greece. The theme of exile or its variant, the self-imposed removal from society, plays a big role in "Loeb's Horace."

The poem develops through the complicated interplay of an unidentified speaker, probably male, his lost love, and the Latin poet Horace. The poem also glows with Keatsian splendor, imagery and diction that quietly allude to Keats' great odes, although they do so for other uses, negative in Durrell but positive in Keats. And here I'm thinking of Keats' vines and apples in "To Autumn" (compared to Durrell's "lover of vines" and "drying of the apples," ll. 3, 11), his "bride of quietness" in "Grecian Urn" (Durrell's "slave to quietness," l. 3), and his "Lethe-wards" in "Nightingale" (Durrell's "deathward," l. 12).

Despite these appealing qualities, "Loeb's Horace" is also unsettling. Durrell's twist on the title of Keats' famous sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," is not an act of homage, as the poem eventually reveals. Nor does Durrell appear to hold the poet John Keats in high regard. In the *Quartet*, Durrell will later create a character called John Keats, a nosy journalist, and have his narrator say this about him, "There was nothing wrong with John except the level on which he had chosen to live his life—but you could say the same about his famous namesake, could you not?" (AQ 220). That snide remark, which I take as neither ironic nor playful, applies equally to Durrell's portrayal of Horace, for Durrell's poem is a severe critique of Horace the man, as he presents himself in his poetry.

The poem turns in a way similar to Horace's Cleopatra ode (1.37), but in just the opposite manner. At the end of the ode, Cleopatra, the mad queen, the "regina dementes" (7),

the enemy of the Roman empire, abruptly changes and becomes a proud, formidable woman, whom Horace allows a measure of triumph through juxtaposing “non humilis mulier” with the poem’s final word, “triumpho” (32).<sup>10</sup> Durrell, on the other hand, delivers Horace another kind of reversal. His poem begins in muted praise:

I found your Horace with the writing in it;  
Out of time and context came upon  
This lover of vines and slave to quietness,  
Walking like a figure of smoke here, musing  
Among his high and lovely Tuscan pines.

All the small-holder’s ambitions, the yield  
Of wine-bearing grape, pruning and drainage  
Laid out by laws, almost like the austere  
Shell of his verses—a pattern of Latin thrift;  
Waiting so patiently in a library for  
Autumn and the drying of the apples;  
The betraying hour-glass and its deathward drift.  
(1–12)

The poem then ends in harsh criticism, which describes Horace as the man

Who built in the Sabine hills this forgery  
Of completeness, an orchard with a view of Rome;  
Who studiously developed his sense of death  
Till it was all around him, walking at the circus,  
At the baths, playing dominoes in a shop—  
The escape from self-knowledge with its tragic  
Imperatives: *Seek, suffer, endure*. The Roman  
In him feared the Law and told him where to stop.

So perfect a disguise for one who had  
Exhausted death in art—yet who could guess  
You would discern the liar by a line,  
The suffering hidden under gentleness  
And add upon the flyleaf in your tall  
Clear hand: ‘Fat, human and unloved,



And held from loving by a sort of wall,  
Laid down his books and lovers one by one,  
Indifference and success had crowned them all.'  
(53–69)

The condemnation is strong, total, and destructive: Horatian ode as Juvenalian satire. We also see in Durrell's charge of "forgery / Of completeness" an effort to expunge Horace's "Exegi monumentum," the Latin poet's claim to immortality, his assertion that he has completed a lasting monument (*Odes* 3.30.1). A previous reference to Horace's "mason's tongue" (l. 49) sets up this allusion.

I suppose, were I to be critically correct about such matters, I should differentiate between the "voice" of the speaker in a dramatic monologue and the "voice" of the poet. They are usually not the same. But I won't. For the voices I hear in "Loeb's Horace" are the same as Durrell's own, and for this reason I hear the speaker as being male, though he need not be. I see Durrell as basically a lyric poet. I don't see him as whimsically creating various personae.

Now, Horace is undoubtedly a very great poet, who also has a very high opinion of himself. In the last ode of book 3, he even thinks his poems more imposing than the Pyramids of Giza ("regalique situ pyramidum altius," 2), and perhaps more enduring, although that race is too early to call. As Porter rightly pointed out, Horace is a favorite among the British, who consider him the "epitome of poets," and young Durrell, during his days in an English public school, probably had a good dose of the Latin poet. An older Durrell, however, strikes one of his anti-British poses and takes Horace to task for various peccadilloes in his personality—those foibles bear a suspiciously close resemblance to those of the stereotypic English squire, that favorite target of English satire. So, Durrell describes Horace as a "landed man" on his Sabine farm (46), separated or walled off from society, a country gentleman who was too prissy, too superficial, too sedentary, too constrained, too complacent and easily satisfied, besides being fat and obviously pompous, in sum,

too full of himself—those sorts of things. None of which, by the way, detracts from Horace's greatness as a poet.

Durrell's criticism of Horace is, in short, petty, trivial, and unfair, especially when measured against his own habits, for the pattern of Durrell's living arrangements closely resembled Horace's. In 1943, he found a tower in a quiet part of Alexandria and then, in a letter of May 1944, complained to Miller about the city, "No, if one could write a single line of anything that had a human smell to it here, one would be a genius."<sup>11</sup> In 1953, he changed his mind about Alexandria as a fit subject for a mature writer or, possibly, a budding genius. In that year, he bought his own Sabine retreat, a Turkish house in the beautiful village of Bellapaix, overlooking the city of Kyrenia, Cyprus, and there, in a place whose very name embodied peace and that was also "a testimony to the powers of contemplation which rule our inner lives,"<sup>12</sup> he began writing *Justine*. In 1958, he moved to the south of France and lived in Mazet Michel, a farmhouse with "22 acres of garrigue and olive groves,"<sup>13</sup> outside the small town of Sommières, and there he again looked back at Alexandria, his "capital of Memory" (AQ 152), completed his *Quartet*, and found time to relax by building his own stone walls.<sup>14</sup> Durrell had much in common with the Latin poet he strenuously decried.

As Walt Whitman observes in *Song of Myself*, or nearly so, great poets don't have to worry about contradicting themselves, for they "contain multitudes." Durrell certainly had his full share of contradictions and even wrote twice in *Balthazar*, the second novel of the *Quartet*, that "Truth is what most contradicts itself" (AQ 216, 277)—which is probably best understood as a subjective and not an objective statement. We don't read poets for consistency in their positions or not read them for flaws in their character. Rather, I think, we read them for their unique vision, which may be as elusive and tantalizing as Keats' summation at the end of his Grecian ode, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Durrell is entitled to his own complex vision of Alexandria, a



Fig. 1. Rue Lepsius, from Cavafy's balcony (Photo: Michael Haag © 2004).



Fig. 2. Alexandria, the White City (Photo: Michael Haag © 2004).



Fig. 3. Chatby necropolis (Photo: Michael Haag © 2004).



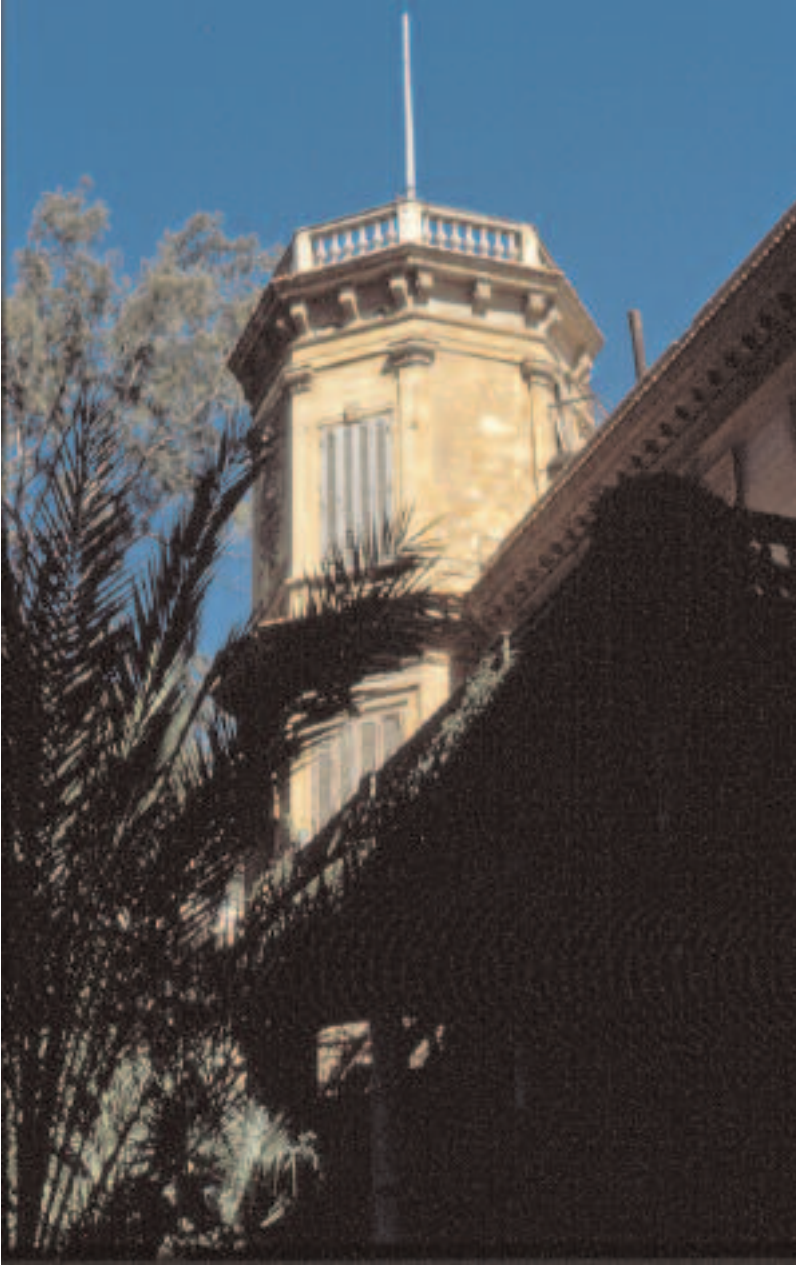


Fig. 4. Ambron Tower (Photo: Michael Haag © 2004).

city which he often describes as dirty and unappealing and in which he often portrays its Egyptian inhabitants unflatteringly.

Writers of fiction are conjurers. They create their own worlds, whether or not they really believe in them, and readers enter them at their own risk.

Durrell's Alexandria is indeed a seductive depiction of a great city, unreal and yet real. Early in *Balthazar*, Pursewarden, the writer-diplomat, provides a famous description of Alexandria, as it is approached from the sea:

We were still almost a couple of hours' steaming distance before land could possibly come into sight when suddenly my companion shouted and pointed at the horizon. We saw, inverted in the sky, a full-scale mirage of the city, luminous and trembling, as if painted on dusty silk: yet in the nicest detail. From memory I could clearly make out its features, Ras El Tin Palace, the Nebi Daniel Mosque and so forth. The whole representation was as breath-taking as a masterpiece painted in fresh dew. It hung there in the sky for a considerable time, perhaps twenty-five minutes, before melting slowly into the horizon mist. An hour later, the *real* city appeared, swelling from a smudge to the size of its mirage. (AQ 211)

Bewitching as this mirage may be, it is deliberately unsubstantial. The "melting" image dissolves into the "*real* city," and the two are difficult to distinguish in Durrell's imagination.

Moreover, as William Leigh Godshalk has noted,<sup>15</sup> Durrell's evocation is itself a rendition of a passage from another source, R. Talbot Kelly's *Egypt: Painted and Described*, which reads,

My first introduction to Egypt was in 1883, and was ushered in in rather a startling manner. We were still two or three hours' steaming distance before land could possibly be in sight, when suddenly we saw, inverted in the sky, a perfect miragic reproduction of Alexandria, in which Pharos Light, Ras-el-Tin Palace, and other prominent features were easily distinguishable. The illusion continued for a considerable time, and eventually as suddenly disap-

peared, when, an hour or two later, the *real* city slowly appeared above the horizon! A good augury, surely, of the wonders I hoped to discover on landing!<sup>16</sup>

Durrell's version is superior. He is far better with words than Kelly, but he does not attribute his source, as he does elsewhere (AQ 203, 390, 882–84). Instead, he passes off the mirage as his own invention, and he can be faulted for that, at least as severely as he faults Horace, whom he calls a "liar."

I like to think writers of fiction can get away with telling white lies. That's part of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief"—how a reader enters poetry or fiction, not expecting things to be as they actually are. This submission tacitly acknowledges the misrepresentation of facts.

I also used to think Durrell's "white city," one of his favorite epithets for Alexandria, was another one of those white lies (AQ 57, 254, 280, 300, 314, 616). I wasn't sure if he was referring to a color or an ethnicity, as implied in the official Roman designation for the city: *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum*, Alexandria *by* Egypt, not *in* Egypt.<sup>17</sup> And so, by extension, we have a white European city situated against the backdrop of a dark African continent. As one character in *Justine* says, "This city has been built like a dyke to hold back the flood of African darkness" (AQ 59). That possibility would provide ammunition for those detractors eager to charge Durrell with racial prejudice (an argument, by the way, that I did *not* hear at the conference). Such an interpretation may still exist, but there is a simpler explanation. White means white. For the city is indeed white when seen from afar.

Stand on the Corniche (fig. 2), the esplanade stretching along the Eastern Harbor—which Durrell occasionally and inaccurately calls, the "Grande Corniche" (AQ 209, 223, 301), thus making it his artistically—stand there and view the city across the blue harbor and see its irrefutable whiteness. (Or get a copy of Michael Haag's *Alexandria Illustrated* and see its beauty in photographs.) The quality of that light is not a hard, dazzling white, bright as enamel, rather



it's chalky and friable, as though the substance could easily rub off. I assume the distinctive color can be attributed to the limestone used in the plaster of its buildings. It's the same limestone which is found throughout Lower Egypt, which is the bedrock of Alexandria itself (fig. 3), and which went into the construction of the pyramids, whose outer casing of fine Tura limestone later got removed and recycled into plaster and other materials.

Up close, however, the white surface of the buildings turns dingy, and its substance does rub off. Walk the crowded streets of Alexandria, and you see merchants continually washing their sidewalks. They're not simply rinsing off the dirt and pollution generated by a metropolis of over six million people. The cause is more subtle than that. It's the sand. It's the dust in the air. You feel that fine grit on your skin, in your hair, on your teeth, and after trudging through the streets, you too have the urge to wash.

At the beginning of *Justine*, the narrator speaks of Alexandria's "lime-laden dust" and "the taste of quicklime" (AQ 17, 18). This is an accurate description of the residue left after the erosion of limestone. So, Durrell's poetic evocation of Alexandria, "painted in fresh dew," is not so far-fetched. The city is, in a sense, literally melting away, but very slowly, like Horace's lofty pyramids, which are also being devoured by rain, the "imber edax" (*Odes* 3.30.3). Durrell knows his Horace, although he doesn't seem to like the man, and maybe he doesn't because they were too similar.

#### 4.

it gets cold in Alexandria during the winter. The morning was bright and chilly, and many people had on sweaters and jackets. Not a single woman in our group wore the *hijab*. We got in the first bus, found it packed with over sixty people, and had to find separate seats. A second bus carried the rest of the crowd. Across my aisle sat an older woman, who was exquisitely coifed and wrapped in a damask cape. She

was carrying on multiple conversations: chatting with her young female companion in French, arguing with someone up front in Arabic, and answering her husband's questions in Italian. He sat next to me and answered my questions in English. I asked him where he was from, and he said Alexandria. He was born in the city. Casually dressed in slacks and Irish-knit pullover, he was retired and always welcomed new and diverting experiences.

The scene was surely not one Durrell would have noted and bothered to mention in his *Quartet*, but it was illustrative of a small, wealthy, cosmopolitan, and polyglot culture, although disconcertingly so. My wife and I felt at a definite disadvantage since we have only two languages between us, and all the other occupants in the bus had at least three or four at their command—Arabic, French, Italian, English, and quite possibly one or two more—and they easily switched among them, something done frequently. Fortunately, for the sake of visitors such as ourselves, the tour was being conducted in English.

On the second and last day of the conference, Gordon Smith, a member of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, led a "walking tour," which was primarily a bus tour, through Durrell's favorite haunts in Alexandria. Voluble and energetic, Smith had the librarian's eagerness to impart information. He had painstakingly produced a beautiful brochure and map. He selected passages from *Justine* that identified places in the old city and illustrated some of these with Paul Hogarth's magnificent watercolors (*The Mediterranean Shore: Travels in Lawrence Durrell Country* [London 1988]).

I was surprised at the turnout and had thought the tour would appeal to only a few tourists, such as my wife and myself, neophytes completely unfamiliar with Alexandria. But I was wrong, and so were the planners of the Durrell event. The tour was a big hit. It was oversubscribed, required three buses, and had to be extended an additional day. As we soon discovered, many of the people eager to see what remained of Durrell's Alexandria were not wide-eyed,

foreign sightseers, rather they were the Alexandrians themselves—or, more accurately, their remnants—who are perhaps the direct descendants of those inhabitants whose city once had “five races, five languages, a dozen creeds” (AQ 17). But unlike Durrell’s original “inquisitors of pleasure and pain” (AQ 350), they rarely, if ever, visited some parts of their own city. They needed a foreign guide, another Englishman, to explain things to them.

Smith proved to be an excellent architectural historian and was more informative than Durrell, whose descriptions of the city are usually poetic but sometimes careless:

Streets that run back from the docks with their tattered rotten supercargo of houses, breathing into each others’ mouths, keeling over. Shuttered balconies swarming with rats, and old women whose hair is full of the blood of ticks. Peeling walls leaning drunkenly to east and west of their true centre of gravity. (AQ 26)

“Shuttered balconies” and “peeling walls” are accurate, so too tottering structures, but a “supercargo of houses” is hard to visualize. Indeed, the metaphor doesn’t make much sense, unless “supercargo,” a person, perhaps a drunken sailor, is taken as an error for “cargo,” a thing, immediately personified and sent reeling, open-mouthed, into back streets. Either option is odd. Unlike the poetry of Horace, Durrell’s language does not always benefit from a little scrutiny.

Nevertheless, Smith probably knew the city better than Durrell did and was able to point out features not mentioned in the *Quartet*: the Venetian and Moorish façades, decorated with ornate balconies and louvered shutters, usually painted green, or the zigzag of Arab buildings, designed to bring light into their interiors as the day progresses. He also mentioned the Italian-Alexandrian architect of the city’s greatest period of expansion along the Corniche: Giuseppe Alessandro Loria, architect of the Cecil Hotel and many other buildings of the 1920s and 1930s. Loria’s name does not earn a spot in the *Quartet* among the city’s “exemplars” (AQ 22), its historical

figures, like Cavafy and Forster, but it should have, for Durrell lived and worked in a house that was partly of Loria's design, the Ambron Villa on Rue Maamoun, in the Moharrem Bey district of Alexandria.

## 5.

the tour made its way slowly through the noisy city. After maneuvering through the congested avenues, packed tight with clanking trams and honking cars, the bus pulled into a side street, lined with lush Egyptian sycamores (those same trees still visible in the ancient tombs along the Nile), and stopped halfway up the block. The area was quiet. The clamor of Alexandria had completely dissipated.

We all disembarked and stood around staring at the Ambron Villa and snapping photographs. The two-story villa was a sad ruin, but still majestic, a dignified widow in tattered weeds the color of café au lait. Ben Jonson's poem came to mind, the one about Penshurst Place, home of the Sidney family in rural Kent. The Ambron mansion stood like an Alexandrian version of another "ancient pile" in a pastoral setting. The two places are by no means a close match—but close enough in terms of rusticity, peacefulness, and symbolism.

The villa's architecture was grand baroque, like a piece of Durrell's own prose, and recalled a great age of Alexandria's past: a palatial entrance with staircase, portico, balcony, balustrade, ornamental pilasters. At the corner was an octagonal tower (fig. 4) and in the back a detached atelier, the one which Loria designed and the artist Clea Badaro occupied. Blonde Clea Badaro would later appear as blonde Clea Montis in the *Quartet*.

Smith had cautioned everyone not to trespass onto the property. The new owners were very touchy about that. But, of course, one intrepid adventurer did, climbing up the rickety stairs and taking photos of the dark, empty interior. He was Raymond Stock, translator and biographer of Naguib

Mahfouz. The attraction of history and its relics is too great: the impulse is always to touch, in spite of the signs warning not to.

As noted earlier, Durrell found this haven in 1943. He rented the top floor from the Ambrons, a wealthy Jewish family, and moved in with Eve Cohen, who would become his second wife and the model for Justine.<sup>18</sup> Durrell immediately took possession of the tower as a work area. "I have furnished myself a Tower," he writes to Miller on 8 February 1944 and emphasizes the fact with a small, idealized drawing of a bastion with crenellations (the Ambron tower has none). Then, on 23 May 1944, he again writes, "I am sharing a big flat with some nice people, and atop it I have a tower of my own from which the romantics can see Pompey's Pillar, Hadra Prison, and the wet reedy wastes of Lake Mareotis stretching away into the distance and blotting the sky."<sup>19</sup>

From his solitary tower, which good Romantics may discern as another Pharos with a lamp radiating seaward, Durrell could see more than some sights of Alexandria and the marshy lake separating the city from the rest of Lower Egypt. From that secluded spot, which recalls the Roman designation of *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum*, he also turned his back on Egypt, directed his brilliant "mind's eye" northwest (AQ 17), and recollected his experiences on the island of Corfu. In that tower, he wrote his memoir, *Prospero's Cell*, which is his first and most celebrated travel book.

*Prospero's Cell* recounts his formative years on the Greek island with his first wife, Nancy Myers. It is magical, eerie, and unreal. It purports to describe the encounters of the young couple as they explore the Ionian coast and meet the people of the island. Right out of the pastoral tradition begun by Theocritus, another exile who probably lived in Alexandria for a while, the bucolic pair roam the countryside like carefree shepherds, although ones who also have a fondness for sailing and skinny-dipping. Corfu becomes an "Eden,"<sup>20</sup> a pleasance, a kind of *locus amoenus*.

Unlike the pastoral tradition, however, Durrell's Corfu is

also an epiphany of strange light and blue water, as an opening passage announces:

You enter Greece as one might enter a dark crystal; the form of things becomes irregular, refracted. Mirages suddenly swallow islands, and wherever you look the trembling curtain of the atmosphere deceives. (*PC* 11)

The image of Greece as a "dark crystal" recurs elsewhere. At the end of his book, Durrell again refers to Corfu as "the inner heart of the dark crystal" (*PC* 133), and three decades later he returns to the island and speaks of experiencing the light as "moving about in the heart of a dark crystal."<sup>21</sup> The image is a peculiar variant of a common observation, indeed a *topos*, on the unique clarity of Greek light.<sup>22</sup> But Durrell finds darkness in the heart of clarity and gives the figure a subjective meaning, for in that luminous landscape, he declares, "Greece offers you something harder—the discovery of yourself" (*PC* 11).

The ringing assertion is almost as bold as Whitman's opening declaration in *Leaves of Grass*: "I celebrate myself." Moreover, this kind of self-proclamation is the characteristic voice of Romantic poets like Byron and Wordsworth, and it is precisely what is uncharacteristic of pastoral poetry. As Thomas G. Rosenmeyer notes, "detachment" is a "unique pastoral mood," that is, the poet usually suppresses or conceals himself, as Milton does in "Lycidas," and this process Rosenmeyer calls the "expunging of the ego."<sup>23</sup>

Durrell's ego, on the other hand, is anything but expunged. It dominates *Prospero's Cell*, even to the exclusion of his wife's. She is simply referred to as "N.," rarely speaks, and has little, if any, personality in the narrative. In a famous bathing scene at the shrine of Saint Arsenius, Nancy dives "like an otter" into a seaside pool and retrieves "in her lips" the cherries her husband drops into "two fathoms" of the limpid aquamarine (*PC* 16). The scene has great power: it transforms ordinary experience into something numinous

and allows a glimpse into Durrell's private world of shimmering light and trembling images. That is one aspect. But there is another: Nancy is a trained seal, and Durrell is her master.

During her talk at the conference, Penelope Durrell Hope, the daughter of that first marriage, mentioned her mother's reaction to reading *Prospero's Cell*. Nancy said it was "all lies." Her anger was so great that she refused to read any more of her former husband's books. Penelope did not elaborate on her mother's feelings. Perhaps Nancy felt some residual bitterness over the divorce, and that affected or clouded her judgment. Perhaps she resented being reduced to the letter *N* and the diminution of her role during their years on Corfu. Nevertheless, the charge remains emphatic, sweeping, and plain enough. So, the Horatian analogy persists, which Durrell, a great lover of irony, may or may not have enjoyed.

Like Horace, Durrell also had a need to withdraw and retreat into himself. They both sought out rural places. Durrell had his Greek islands and villas. Horace had his Sabine farm and enjoyed describing it, but, as Rosenmeyer again notes, Horace's pastoral descriptions do not make him a pastoral poet, for his "emphasis is on his own sensations, not on the responses of a small set of characters unrelated to himself."<sup>24</sup> Horace's ego stands out—and so does Durrell's. The "dark crystal" of *Prospero's Cell* is not the Greek landscape and its mysterious, refractive light; rather, it is Durrell's extraordinarily inventive imagination, where he recreates and expands himself.<sup>25</sup>

## 6.

the ambron villa is Durrell's "white city" in miniature, and it too is threatened with extinction. The villa now belongs to a land-development company, which bought the property in a "secret sale" from the Ambron family.<sup>26</sup> The company then planned to tear it down, build an apartment

complex, and turn a good profit, which is a good tradition in a city where, as Durrell writes in May of 1944, "Even love is thought of in money terms."<sup>27</sup> Those plans, however, have been forestalled by the efforts of a few dedicated citizens, who have appealed to the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and temporarily placed the property under its protection. Dr. Mohamed Awad, architect and academic, is a leader of those conservationists trying to preserve Alexandria's urban heritage.

The last meeting of the Durrell event focused on the architectural conservation of the city that Durrell later came to describe so movingly. This is not an easy task, for as Awad has remarked elsewhere, Durrell's polyglot and cosmopolitan Alexandria no longer exists as he once envisioned it:

Today Alexandria is a monoglot city: one race, one creed, fundamentally Islamic. The remains of cosmopolitanism are marginal, its society is extinct or on its way to extinction, and its physical heritage is hedged in and threatened. Yet something still remains. She is still recognizable, despite the circumstances and the effects of age.<sup>28</sup>

Alexandria is no longer *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum*; it has almost become *Alexandrea in Aegypto*.

On the face of it, the prospects of saving the villa are not sanguine, and the meeting served more as a forum to discuss problems than as a vehicle to initiate solutions. If the fate of the Ambron Villa can be taken as exemplary, then the larger situation is indeed tenuous, for the villa has been granted no more than a stay of execution. The company that bought the property has to be fairly compensated. And Awad has not yet been successful in convincing the government that the villa deserves to be listed as a monument as worthy of preservation as those of Egypt's Islamic and Pharaonic past. Sadly, what is true of the villa is also true of the city.

I do see hope, however. The largely enthusiastic reception of the Durrell event itself demonstrates an increasing awareness of the need and desire to save Alexandria's historical character before it literally "melts away." When a youth can



stand up and speak up for his city, I am encouraged that there will be many others to carry on these struggles. A young Alexander of Macedon surely rose to similar occasions millennia ago.

As he would have readily acknowledged, Lawrence Durrell did not discover the mythos of Alexandria. The city has always been there as a source of inspiration for over twenty-three hundred years, and Cavafy and Forster had already begun to develop that potential long before Durrell arrived. Nor can he be credited with any particular foresight in the rediscovery of a forgotten or overlooked culture—which he may not have been so eager to admit—for he didn't immediately appreciate the city after his flight from Greece during the Second World War. In 1941, he didn't fully understand what he'd stumbled upon. His initial response was to reject the land in which he sought refuge. It took time for him to reflect on his Egyptian experiences and to reshape his views about that environment.

Durrell likes to say in prominent passages of *Justine* that landscape or environment shapes and determines character. So, his narrator Darley can say, unflinchingly, in the novel's poetic preamble, "It is the city which should be judged though we, its children, must pay the price" (AQ 17). Or he can also say, in a bit of philosophical discourse, "We are the children of our landscape; it dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it" (AQ 39–40).

How true is this? Does landscape or *deus loci*, the spirit of place, really have such a dominant role in the formation of character? I would think that the process is far more complicated than that, and I would argue that for many, and certainly for Durrell, it is actually the other way around: personality shapes place. The complexities of personality largely determine how one responds to a given environment. Were it true that landscape shapes character, we should expect more homogeneity in artistic responses, but that is clearly not the case in Alexandria itself.

What Durrell really offers in *The Alexandria Quartet* is a highly poeticized and personalized vision of a city, and sometimes he even acknowledges that, albeit unobtrusively, for Darley also says, "A city becomes a world when one loves one of its inhabitants" (AQ 57). Durrell is probably at his best when he's least self-conscious, and that casual remark is closer to his big truth: the intensity of some strong emotion or need can turn a place into a highly charged world of poetic beauty. And that is no mean accomplishment. Immanuel Kant has a similar insight at the beginning of his essay on the beautiful and the sublime: "The various feelings of enjoyment or of displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain."<sup>29</sup> Beauty does lie in the eye of the beholder.

Durrell's vision of Alexandria is not the world of contemporary Alexandrian writers. Their voices are many, unique, and diverse. His vision of the "white city" is more like a mirage, an unsubstantial, distorted, and alluring depiction of something real. But beyond its intrinsic appeal, a mirage also has its usefulness, when it creates excitement and incites people to act. The city of Alexandria is real. It has a long history, and now many of its citizens are actively trying to protect and preserve that heritage. I cheer their efforts and hope they succeed.

## notes

1. Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet: Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, Clea* (London 1962, 1968), 29. Hereafter cited as AQ in text.

2. Michael Haag, *Alexandria Illustrated* (Cairo 2004), 33; John and Elizabeth Romer, *The Seven Wonders of the World: A History of the Modern Imagination* (New York 1995), fig. 9.

3. C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, rev. ed., trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis (Princeton 1992), 200: "Exiles," l. 1.

4. D. J. Enright, *Collected Poems, 1948-1998* (Oxford 1998), 8, ll. 5-6, 12-14. "Why the East is Inscrutable" was first published in *Season Ticket: Poems* (Alexandria 1948).

5. Lawrence Durrell, *Selected Poems of Lawrence Durrell*, ed. Peter Porter (London 2006); for Porter's full explication of this poem, see his introduction, xv–xvii.

6. Michael Haag, *Alexandria: City of Memory* (New Haven 2004), 203.

7. Alan G. Thomas and James A. Brigham, *Lawrence Durrell: An Illustrated Checklist* (Carbondale 1983), 76–77.

8. Haag (note 6), 203.

9. *The Durrell-Miller Letters: 1935–80*, ed. Ian S. MacNiven (New York 1988), 168. This is not an isolated remark. Durrell expressed similar sentiments about Alexandria in letters of 8 February 1944, 23 May 1944, and 22 August 1944, on pages 160, 171, and 174.

10. For Cleopatra's special triumph, see Steele Commager, *The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study* (Bloomington 1967), 93.

11. *Durrell-Miller Letters* (note 9), 168.

12. Lawrence Durrell, *Bitter Lemons* (New York 1957), 78.

13. Brewster Chamberlin, *A Chronology of the Life and Times of Lawrence Durrell: Homme de Lettres* (Durrell School of Corfu 2007), 59.

14. Chamberlin (note 13), 60.

15. William Leigh Godshalk, "Some Sources of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*," in *Critical Essays on Lawrence Durrell*, ed. Alan Warren Friedman (Boston, 1987), 170, n. 57.

16. R. Talbot Kelly, *Egypt: Painted and Described* (1902; rpr. London 1903), 5.

17. P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972), 1.107.

18. Haag (note 6), 261–64.

19. *Durrell-Miller Letters* (note 9), 160, 171.

20. Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell* (London 1970), 19. Hereafter cited as *PC* in text.

21. Lawrence Durrell, *The Greek Islands* (New York 1978), 21.

22. In 1911, Sophie Atkinson remarks on "the absorbing loveliness of its [Corfu's] light and colour" (*An Artist in Corfu* [Boston 1911], 2). In 1943, Dilys Powell describes Greece as "a land of cool brilliant colours and austere contours seen through an atmosphere of miraculous clarity" (*The Traveller's Journey is Done* [London 1943], 33). And in 1957, C. M. Bowra has perhaps the fullest expression of this idea: "What matters above all is the quality of the light. Not only in the cloudless days of summer but even in winter the light is unlike that of any other European country, brighter, cleaner, and stronger . . . The beauty of the Greek landscape depends primarily on the light, and this had a powerful influence on the Greek vision of the world" (*The Greek Experience* [Cleveland 1957], 11). I thank Michael Haag for providing the example from Powell's work.

23. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric* (Berkeley 1969), 15, 63. Rosenmeyer credits John Crowe Ransom for analyzing Milton's anonymity as a poet. See Ransom's

## 46 the melting mirage

"A Poem Nearly Anonymous," in *Milton's Lycidas: The Tradition and the Poem*, ed. C. A. Patrides (New York 1961), 64–81.

24. Rosenmeyer (note 23), 15.

25. I am indebted to Michael Haag for numerous discussions on this aspect of Durrell's personality, as well as to other comments and corrections he has made throughout this essay.

26. Mohamed F. Awad, "The House Revisited, the City Remembered," *Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal* 7 (1999–2000), 42.

27. *Durrell-Miller Letters* (note 9), 168.

28. Awad (note 26), 39.

29. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley 2003), 45.

