

7-15-2003

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Recommended Citation

Kersnowski, Frank (2003) "Durrell's Cockerel - Caesar's Vast Ghost," *Trickster's Way*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/trickstersway/vol2/iss4/3>

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Durrell's Cockerel: Caesar's Vast Ghost

Frank Kersnowski

The dying words of those who praise the life of the mind or the spirit over that of the body are always remembered, as with Socrates: "I owe Aesculapius a cock" or Goethe: "More light! More light!" Also distracted by purpose, we probably remember them because we too will leave life by accident or unfulfilled or in the middle of a sentence. Mostly, we lack the awareness of mind and body of Lawrence Durrell who tied up the strands of life and art with one last book and left us with a reflection, not an afterthought.

Caesar's Vast Ghost invokes the spirits of ancient Greece as surely as Durrell did, or as he implied he did in "Do Dreams Live On When Dreamers Die," his reflection in 1947 on the endurance of spirits in temples sacred to Aesculapius. In them, suppliants in ancient Greece had gone to be relieved of troubles. Durrell's experience was of dreams that had remained in the temples. Carl Jung, reading the essay, knew something extraordinary had happened: a living man had met his archetypes. He wrote to Durrell on 15 December 1947 because of his own concerns with "the rather extraordinary relations between our unconscious mind and what one calls time and space". Larry never wrote about the actual invocation, but everything he wrote recalls the force of life greater than an individual time or person and yet never more than a glass of wine or a lover's touch. He believed individual life to be directed by force fields which we see only as results, not as causes. Durrell's celebration of "the spirit of place" is a case in point. The place is a constant and determines the course of cultures and individuals whose spiritual vision is clouded by self-interest or a desire for self-determination. To become aware of the power is very similar to what Jung called the process of individuation, becoming conscious of the contents of the individual and collective unconscious, which serves well as description of the act of art.

One of the two wise ones for whom Durrell claims to be no more than an amanuensis in *Caesar's Vast Ghost* is Jerome, the tramp who left Paris and avoids bourgeois culture:

If Jerome had one fixed point from which to judge the whole subject of Provence . . . it is the oft-invoked *perennité des choses*, the feeling that all history is endlessly repeating itself, perpetuating itself, not in the form of a chronological ribbon, a linear form, but in a momentous simultaneousness. The form may change but the content hardly seems to vary. This was an article of faith which allowed him to view the whole history of the land as a sort of shadow-play dictated by the fact that Provence is simply a corridor down which, or up which, people have rushed bound for other landfalls. Yes, but underneath it all the place has a spirit of its own which starts to modify the invader if only he will stay long enough, starts to model his

Trickster's Way Vol 2

sensibility, invest him with its own secret lore. (36)

Never was Durrell more explicit in stating this view so central to his belief: not in the poem "Deus Loci" (1945): So today, after many years, we meet at this high window overlooking the best of Italy, smiling under rain, that rattles down the leaves like sparrow-shot, scatters the reapers, the sunburnt girls, rises in the sour dust of this table, these books, unfinished letters--all refreshed again in you O spirit of place, Presence long since divined, delayed, and waited for, And here me fact to face. (217)

Not in The Alexandria Quartet (1957-1960), that tale of Europeans subjected to the ineluctable modality (to steal a phrase from Joyce) of the eroticism of Egypt which was always a masked encounter for them--never fact to face. For Durrell, the place was inhospitable, providing cause for the end of his first marriage and the beginning of the second. He would marry two more times, suggesting that he must have expected an experience other than the one he had with individual women.

If we could only understand, he seems always to have said, the actual nature of reality, we could find stability in flux, the eternal in the ephemeral, and move beyond perception to knowledge. The desire for such understanding led Durrell into arcane philosophical and religious inquiries, which he extended to modern psychology and science. Is not Einstein's essential understanding based on the degree of distortion in our varied perceptions? And do we not find our own perceptions as distorted by passion or its absence as was Darley, the narrator of three of the four volumes of The Alexandria Quartet when he mistook the shadow of a British spy for that of a jealous husband? Given a near debilitating blow to his armour-propre, the solar plexus of the libido, Darley begins his search for the nature of things with that ancient formula: "Once upon a time . . .". Like Durrell, and like the novelist Blanford in Monsieur, he will write what we will read "on and on into the momentous night" (305). And none of them will ever give us more than provisional truth, as in "Why Wait?," which appeared in Caesar's Vast Ghost

A vessel in full sail
With a weird mystical rig
Will tell you once and
for all
What the Greek proverb says is true: 'Happiness is just a little
scented pig.' It's not enough but it will have to do. (60)

Homer's Odysseus said much the same, as did Joyce's. To say this and even to act as if it is true is far more difficult than actually believing it. Most people who query the nature of things, have doubted the substance of human happiness. But to accept incompleteness as the condition of life is to posit a condition that demands action other than our daily accommodation of chance misfortune. Durrell never accepted just what "will have to do," that shifting bedrock of accident, as the site and foundation for his art; but he could never stop wondering if he had felt a tremor.

Perhaps frightened by the threat (or promise) of such cosmic instability, Durrell consumed food, wine, books, women, stifling doubt with action. As he said in an interview with Chilie Hawes, he lived an adventurous life and never drew back from physical confrontations or danger. His flight from Corfu, with Nancy and

Trickster's Way Vol 2

daughter Penny, before the advancing German army is the stuff of adventure novels, as is his employment by the British in such tinder spots as Egypt, Yugoslavia, and Cyprus. Ironically deprecating England, which he called "Pudding Island," he was of the Empire though a colonial with an Anglo-Indian heritage. Never comfortable in the Home Countries, he was of the Frontier and no more English than the Provençaux were Roman. Yet if he were to choose an empire to serve, he would seem to have preferred Rome to England. That tipping over into excess for the mere delight of excess that is so Roman Durrell understood. Recall the banquet set before that Roman architectural excess, the Pont du Gard, that ends his last novel, *Quinx or The Ripper's Tale* (1985):

This creation had been confined to the great chef of Nîmes Tortoni, who amidst a multiplicity of highly comestible cakes and pates' had prepared the pedestal for the most important of his creations, a recumbent woman fashioned in butter with trimmings uttered in caviar of several different provenances and helpings of saumon fume' and an archipelago of iced potato salad to round out the offering. (188)

Prince Hassad, an Egyptian Colonial who unintentionally parodies English taste, and who is incongruously fond of both the English and French, observed about the centerpiece: "It's a Mouton-Rothschild world with far too little merriment in it. As for me I'm dying to plunge my spoon into the buttery buttocks of the Tortoni Venus; but I think we will have to wait for the Prefet, no?" (189). Such a gastronomic excess is a monument to great wealth, spent with neither taste nor accountability: a sign of power, of empire. And not to have tasted some buttery variation of it is to have lived a life of poverty, to have been absent from the table of luxury. Durrell knew the fare at such fetes.

Contrasted with this garish banquet are the simple meals Durrell himself preferred. As he said when we met at Le Dome in 1986: "Brasserie food is quite to my liking, but we can eat anywhere you like." But neither *Quinx* nor *Caesar's Vast Ghost* is simply about Durrell. The memories and resonances are of what affected the region and the writer; the identities of both are found in a voice underlying the vowels and diphthongs of Empire. To have read Durrell and then to hear his voice, shaped by the Foreign Office, tempted me to raise a "lukewarm eyebrow," until I remembered how Durrell pilloried an English reviewer who had considered the gesture:

And doest thou then, Roderick, once more raising

In Blackfriars that traditionally O but so lukewarm Eyebrow, which doubtless thou spellest highbrow, chide me, And from the frugal and funless fund of thy native repository Of culture, lay thyself once more open O literary mooncalf, To a creative's friendly but well-aimed suppository? (262)

To understand Durrell's complex and paradoxical voice seemed wiser, and safer, than any simplistic critical summing up. The same is true of Provence.

If Greece and Rome but left traces of accents, flavors in cooking, and edifices of

Trickster's Way Vol 2

their own glory in Provence, what chance have the new barbarians brought to the south of France by autoroutes and the airplanes? We, too, will be changed if we stay long enough in the shadow of Petrarch, de Sade, and Mistral, but especially Mistral: ". . . the Provençal Dante, whose historic and linguistic importance makes him the foremost literary representative of the Provençal ethos--somewhat like Tagore is for the Indian. (It is no accident that both poets became Nobel prize winners, as much for what they represented as for what they actually wrote.)" (34). The mention of Mistral by Durrell in this last book indicates how he had earlier used the poet as a code, a reference outside the intimate fictive value of a novel--in this case *Livia* (1978). The Oxford undergraduates are swept down the Rhone by the verse of Mistral recited by the poet Brunel, hearing for the first time the language and the verse of the great poet, whose death is announced by the poets who meet the ship in Avignon

A mysterious scene for me then--yet I scented that there was something momentous about it, though I could not tell what. Much later I read a modern history of the Felibre, the poets who have been the lifeblood of the region's literature, and discovered the names of that little sad group waiting under the ramparts of the city of Brunel. Their welcoming embraces were long and loving--one felt in them a sort of valedictory quality, perhaps for their dead fellow. (48)

For Durrell, the poetry as well as the olive oil and wine signal a region and a culture that remains Provençal: not Greek, Roman, or Christian. Durrell would, of course, agree that his Provence is the one he sees: warm in manners, subject to weather, caught in a class system of peasant, artist, aristocrat. After all, did not the butcher's wife cut the chops thicker when she heard that Durrell was a famous writer?

Provence is the European result of all that Durrell had known and been. In this last willful and whimsical book, we have him paying his debt to place and spirit in the coin of his own realm: the passion and obsession of the quick and the dead. So many of his old friends and querulous concerns return or are buried in this book that it evolves less as the story of Provence than a sign of the writings and obsessions of Lawrence Durrell. Provence was for Durrell as Dublin was for Joyce, a medium for philosophical and historical concerns, especially those arising from his awareness of the tenuousness of life and happiness, the unpredictability of reality, and the certainty of death.

Love and death, those often identical muses, seemed at home in Durrell's Provence both in war and peace. When Anais Nin died, his friend Marie was the messenger:

But I knew the measure of her love because once she woke me long after midnight with a phone call, arriving almost at once in a taxi with a bottle of champagne and flowers to tell me: 'Darling Anais is dead. I didn't want you to hear the news from anyone but me.'
(175)

Trickster's Way Vol 2

Wherever Durrell had been, the news would have been the same; but he was in Provence so that and other deaths were comforted when possible and endured when not by its ambiance. As the death toll grew, he would become known as the hermit of Languedoc, which he would reluctantly leave even when winter cold brought depression. He wrapped himself in garlicky food, his fiery chicken curry, and the red wine of the South--sometimes too much of the last-- and lived within his rambling and crumbling chateau, kept as comfortable as possible in his last years by Françoise Kestelman, to whom he dedicated *Caesar's Vast Ghost*: "magnificent in generosity and beauty". These are traits Durrell celebrated in Provence as well; and as I reached the end of the book, I began to think that Durrell, *le homme sensual*, the Irish poet who lived to put the wind up the English, the dark comedian with a fascination for the perverse and obscene had been overcome by his subject. My expectations salivated when in speaking of "inquiry into the natural origins of Provençal love," he ended a paragraph as he approached "the ruined chateau of the Marquis de Sade," only to turn to cotton in my mouth as he described de Sade a "ungallant," "rather a shallow specimen of libertine and intellectual coxcomb," and "a poor stylist and a pitiable dramatist" and to bite the matter off with: "And I should accuse him of lacking both humour and humanity" (185). What are we to do with this Durrell who is surely not the same one who sent us into dusty and flea-infested bookshops looking for the works of de Sade because he began each volume of *The Alexandria Quartet* with a quotation from the Marquis and even named his first great female character Justine?

In the concluding chapter of *Caesar's Vast Ghost*, Durrell returns to us with a love who is more than expected, less than desired: Cunegunde, named after Voltaire's favorite niece, a philosopher, a witty conversationalist, "half-paragon and half-witch, initiate and symbol" (188). In her, the modern world finds its epiphany. She brings with her the careless ease to wound of the Justine of Durrell and de Sade, the detachment from expected emotions of Livia. As Durrell first describes her, she is the passion and test of love, of human aspiration: In fact she turned out to be a latex doll of great beauty, resilience and simplicity. For a while she seemed a bit strange and equivocal--until you realized her superiority over a real woman, woman of the flesh. For she was totally submissive. Her warmth and peristalsis were secured by electricity and she was denied all possibility of answering back. She was perfection! Sapient Cunegonde! She rejoiced in real power, i.e. silence. (188)

We have met her before as *the homunculi* in *An Irish Faustus*, as the robot Io in *Nunquam*, creations of the discrete ego needing to see itself repeated, expressions of desires that life itself cannot fulfill. From such creators as these, Durrell separated himself with an irony not always noted. Without laughter, he gave us the homicidal robot Io to show the horrible wrongs done to woman in Western culture, as he told me a few years ago. Cunegonde is his laughing comment on what he sees in the world today, even in Provence. Only Durrell's delight in the variety of love keeps the tale of Cunegonde from being as bitter as that of Io or of Livia, both of whom were destroyed by men who could not tolerate the merely human, Io by the impotence of modern business and Livia by the perversity of Nazism. In each case, the dominance of a single truth rejected diversity, for Durrell a sure path to lonely death.

Trickster's Way Vol 2

When laughter did not break in to leaven the words, his sympathy and despair could be poignant for those who would live or die holding only a single truth, rejecting all else as less. Even the greatness of art does not justify this rejection, as he wrote in "A Patch of Dust" about Van Gough and Goethe:

Your great canvas humming like a top.

But the terror for me is that you didn'trealise
That love, even in inferior versions, is a kind
Of merciful self-repair.
O Vincent you were blind. Like some great effluent performer

Discharging whole rivers into hungry seas.I do
not mean the other kind of love, Born in
newspapers like always exchanging Greasy false
teeth. Not that kind.

In these shining canvases I commend
A fatal diagnosis of light, more light;
Famous last words to reach the inessential(338)

The spirits of place, those comfortable household gods, do not live in the brightness of monomania nor does humanity find sustenance there. BuDurrell would not have written so well of those dominated by the search for a single truth if he had not shared their nervousness with flux as a basis for belief.

What Durrell did was to celebrate the frailty of vision and of belief as human. Not meant to live by pure uncontestable truth, our species must accept what of truth it can have: fact or ineluctable modality that eludes a clean summing up. Cunegonde is the fact he gives us, a grotesque yet hospitable and safe future, inevitable in a time of plague—the HIV virus. Yet as knew ass too well, life has a way of enduring, as does love and the smell and taste ofProvence, immediately known and indescribable, which I saw clearly in the bar of my hotel in Sommieres. I had left Larry earlier that evening, gone across the river to the hotel, and stopped for a drink. Standing at the bar, asking*un vieux marc*, I was given instead soft conversation by the young barman, too soft and colloquial for me to respond to with other than "Pardon?" Finally, and old man in beret, blue serge jacket and vest, grey moustaches following the droop of jowls, roared out: "Asseyez-vous." The very spit ofProvence

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Trickster's Way Vol 2

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