

Classic Poetry Series

**Lawrence Durrell**  
**- poems -**

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## Lawrence Durrell(1912 - 1990)

Durrell was born, in Nepal, at the foot of the Himalayas.

He went to school in England at the age of twelve and, after attending preparatory schools and subsequently failing the entrance exam for Cambridge on multiple occasions, played in jazz clubs in London for a time. It was during this period that he met Nancy Myers, who was to be his first wife. He and she attempted several ventures in England before moving at the same time as Durrell's family to Corfu (as recounted rather amusingly, if somewhat inaccurately, in Gerald Durrell's autobiographical *My Family and other Animals, Birds, Beasts and Relatives, and Fauna and Family*, and in more Lawrentian style in *Prospero's Cell*).

From that time his career was varied and interesting: he served in the British Foreign Service in the Mediterranean during the Second World War, having only just escaped from Greece before the descent of the German Army upon Athens. From here he moved with Nancy and their daughter Penelope to Alexandria, where he gained a posting with the British government. Some of his experiences would later serve as the basis for his works of fiction, most noticeably the *Alexandria Quartet* and, many years later, the *Avignon Quintet*.

In 1948, Durrell spent what was by all accounts a miserable year in Argentina in the service of His Majesty's Government. Following this, he was only too glad to return to Europe (although one product of his time there was 'A Key to Modern British Poetry', for the most part he found himself completely unable to write). The return to Europe was one of the happiest of his life, but his pleasure at the posting to Yugoslavia would quickly fade, and, when offered a choice between Turkey and Russia after his time in Belgrade had ended, Lawrence elected to leave the Service, and set up with his second wife Eve on the island of Cyprus. Here, he judged (however incorrectly), would be a place where he could settle, purchase a house, and write in peace. Unfortunately, the Greek movement for enosis, or 'freedom', caught him up, and Durrell finished as a part of the British Information Service, desperately attempting to defend an order in which he himself did not necessarily believe. When it became clear that life in Cyprus would no longer be tolerable for a British national, Durrell emigrated to France.

Durrell's fiction grew in complexity and character as he himself did. From the early published works (those that remain comparatively easily available include *The Black Book* and the elegant *Cefâlu*, also titled *The Dark Labyrinth* in later releases) to the wild plunge back into the world of the *Alexandria Quartet* in the five books of the *Avignon Quintet*, Durrell retained his power to instill wonder and force the reader to think in such a way that few authors have done. Durrell

forecast the advent of the computer in a way that seemed most curious to readers in 1969 in *Tunc and Nunquam*, and strangely familiar to those reading his works closer to the end of the twentieth century. It is with some justice though that the majority of critical attention is focused on the two major series' of novels, and particularly on the better known (and more readily available) Alexandria Quartet. On a more general note, it is somewhat ironic that Durrell's work, which is perhaps better known and better respected abroad than at 'home', is out-of-print in countries like the United States, but still readily available in Britain. Of course, Durrell's attachment to England is problematic, for he did not appear to be any more English than Irish, or French, or Greek. He claimed to detest 'Pudding Island' and the culture that brought about 'the English Death', yet remained closely attached to many elements of English culture.

Durrell was much more than a novelist. His work also includes books of reflections on various parts of the world in which he had lived, and these are often considered some of his best writing, for which he was recognised well before his merit as a novelist was recognised; such critical favour would come with the Alexandria Quartet.

He was the author of a wide corpus of poetry (often inspired by the French, Greek, Alexandrian and Mediterranean landscapes to which he devoted so much time), which began in small, extremely limited printings and eventually won him acclaim and a representation in the well-known Faber Book of Modern Verse. In addition, he was the author of and various drama and diversions, including the Antrobus stories of the British civil service, which seem to some commentators to be the obvious precursor to the 'Yes, Minister' and 'Yes, Prime Minister' BBC-TV series of the late seventies and early eighties. Durrell himself took part in a variety of media appearances throughout his career, particularly for British, French, and German television. He gave countless interviews, not only on his work as a writer but on his later love of painting, which he had begun under the pseudonym of Oscar Epfs. His talent seems to be familial, to judge from the success of his brother, the naturalist Gerald Durrell, as a writer and commentator specialising in endangered species the world over and curator of the Jersey Zoo, which appeared recently, along with Gerald's widow Lee, in a BBC programme featuring John Cleese and lemurs in the story of an attempted release into the wild of captively-bred lemurs.

Durrell lived the last years of his life in southern France, in the village of Sommieres in south-central France. The last house in which he lived still stands, and was rumoured recently to have been put up for sale by his last love, Ghislaine de Boysson. His last book, *Caesar's Vast Ghost*, was published in 1989. It was a celebration of Provence its landscape, mythologies and people: all

of which had an enormous impact upon him, particularly on his final great work of fiction, the Avignon Quintet. In the moderately humble opinion of this reviewer, it is this book that is perhaps the most poignant which Durrell wrote about any of the many places in the world which he knew: a book about an old man, one who has finally realised that he is old, reflecting on the place that has been his adoptive home for more than twenty years. It is a fitting testament to the life of one of the twentieth century's greatest authors.

Lawrence Durrell died in 1990, at the age of 78.

# Acropolis

The soft *quem quam* will be Scops the Owl  
conjugation of nouns, a line of enquiry,  
powdery stubble of the socratic prison  
laurels crack like parchments in the wind.  
who walks here in the violet dust at night  
by the tower of the winds and water-clocks?  
tapers smoke upon open coffins  
surely the shattered pitchers must one day  
revive in the gush of marble breathing up?  
call again softly, and again.  
the fresh spring empties like a vein  
no children spit on their reflected faces  
but from the blazing *souk* below the passive smells  
bread urine cooking printing-ink  
will tell you what the sullen races think  
and among the tombs gnawing of mandolines  
confounding sleep with carnage where  
strangers arrive like sleepy gods  
dismount at nightfall at desolate inns.

Lawrence Durrell

# Delos

<i>For Diana Gould</i>

On charts they fall like lace,  
Islands consuming in a sea  
Born dense with its own blue:  
And like repairing mirrors holding up  
Small towns and trees and rivers  
To the still air, the lovely air:  
From the clear side of springing Time,  
In clement places where the windmills ride,  
Turning over grey springs in Mykonos,  
In shadows with a gesture of content.

The statues of the dead here  
Embark on sunlight, sealed  
Each in her model with the sightless eyes:  
The modest stones of Greeks,  
Who gravely interrupted death by pleasure.  
And in harbours softly fallen  
The liver-coloured sails -  
Sharp-featured brigantines with eyes -  
Ride in reception so like women:  
The pathetic faculty of girls  
To register and utter desire  
In the arms of men upon the new-mown waters,  
Follow the wind, with their long shining keels  
Aimed across Delos at a star.

Lawrence Durrell

# Strip-Tease

Soft toys that make to seem girls  
In cool whitewash with two coral  
Valves of lip printing each others' grease ...  
A clockwork Cupid's bow. Increase!  
Their cherry-ripe hullo brims the open purse  
Of eyes washed white by the marmoreal light;  
So swaying as if on pyres they go  
About the buried business of the night,  
Cold witches of the elementary tease  
Balanced on the horn of a supposed desire...  
Trees shed their leaves like some of these.

Lawrence Durrell

# This Unimportant Morning

This unimportant morning  
Something goes singing where  
The capes turn over on their sides  
And the warm Adriatic rides  
Her blue and sun washing  
At the edge of the world and its brilliant cliffs.

Day rings in the higher airs  
Pure with cicadas, and slowing  
Like a pulse to smoke from farms,

Extinguished in the exhausted earth,  
Unclenching like a fist and going.

Trees fume, cool, pour - and overflowing  
Unstretch the feathers of birds and shake  
Carpets from windows, brush with dew  
The up-and-doing: and young lovers now  
Their little resurrections make.

And now lightly to kiss all whom sleep  
Stitched up - and wake, my darling, wake.  
The impatient Boatman has been waiting  
Under the house, his long oars folded up  
Like wings in waiting on the darkling lake.

Lawrence Durrell