

DEUS LOCI

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“ . . . you remain,
small sunburnt
deus loci . . . ”



*The Tree of Idleness, Bellapais
A new tree on the site of the tree under which Durrell sat*

“FATHER OF HIS LANDSCAPE”: LAWRENCE DURRELL’S CREATION OF LANDSCAPE AND CHARACTER IN CYPRUS

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“We are the children of our landscape,” proclaims Darley in *Justine* (41). Our characters and actions are a product not so much of our own individuality but of the landscape that bears and nurtures us. This concept of a “Spirit of Place” which determines character, particularly national character, is a theme which runs through much of Durrell’s work. Its most direct expression comes in his 1960 essay “Landscape and Character”: “I believe you could exterminate the French at a blow and resettle the country with Tartars, and within two generations discover, to your astonishment, that the national characteristics were back at norm” (*Spirit of Place* 157). The actual racial stock is irrelevant beside the dominating influence of mountains and plains and islands: “human beings are expressions of their landscape” (157).

This same principle underlies Durrell’s expression of the landscape and character of Cyprus in *Bitter Lemons*. The flat and arid Mesaoria Plain, the broad range of the Troodos Mountains, the vine-clad slopes of the Paphos district, and above all the jagged Kyrenia Mountains are all assessed and the appropriate ethnic epithets ascribed: Levantine, Greek, Anatolian, Gothic. From these ascriptions, in varying proportions, the character of the Cypriots is expressed, like oil from the olive press (see “Delphi” in *Spirit of Place* 273): Levantine procrastination,

Greek argumentativeness, Anatolian indolence, Gothic contemplation. The sum of the Cypriot national character is the sum of its landscapes. Even the wine in Clito's tavern is a product of "the landscape and character of its makers" (*Bitter Lemons* 45).

There is a clear objection to this method of ascribing national character. In *Bitter Lemons* character derives not from the inhabitants but from one privileged interpreter: Durrell himself. "We are the children of our landscape," proclaims Darley, but he continues: "it dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it" (*Justine* 41). In *Bitter Lemons*, that responsiveness comes not from the Cypriots but from Durrell himself. He is the one with the poetic attunement and the powers of identification with the landscape (see "Landscape and Character" in *Spirit of Place* 158) which allow him to define the Cypriot landscape and therefore the Cypriot national character. If the Cypriots are the children of their landscape, then he is its father.

DURRELL'S CYPRUS

The astonishing variety of the Cypriot landscape means that any description must necessarily be generalizing and selective. A standard summary might divide the island into the Mesaoria Plain, the Troodos Mountains, the hills and valleys of the Paphos District, and the Kyrenia Mountains. And yet Durrell is more than selective: the first three of these areas are dismissed in a few words. The Mesaoria Plain, for example, is "dusty and unprepossessing in the extreme" (*Bitter Lemons* 27; cf. 106), and the Troodos Range "unlovely" and "extravagantly bald" (31). Apart from Panos's geography lesson and a couple of paragraphs transcribed from Durrell's notebook, these areas are almost entirely ignored. The island's only significant landscape is what he calls "the Gothic range."

"The Kyrenia range," declares Durrell, while commenting on Panos's geography lesson, "belongs to another world: the

world of the sixteenth-century print" (31). Looking solely at the landscape of the Kyrenia range, the dramatic peaks and crags do seem an appropriate setting for a Gothic novel, and Durrell's ascription not unreasonable. And yet the unconstructed landscape, before it is built upon or ascribed with meaning, can supply no real connection with a particular national group. After all, most countries have hills as well as plains, river valleys as well as mountain ridges. What makes this particular set of mountains so special that it can be termed "Gothic" and used to ascribe a definite character to a people?

All through *Bitter Lemons* it is quite clear what gives the Kyrenia range its particular character: "It is *par excellence* the Gothic range, for it is studded with crusader castles pitched on the dizzy spires of the mountains" (31). Only when the landscape is built upon does it gain historical specificity. Durrell's Cyprus—and, following Cavafy, his Alexandria—is imbued with a carefully selected history, demonstrated in visible and tangible form by architecture, monuments, and ruins. Because "history is the lamp which illumines national character" (*Bitter Lemons* 53), these monuments are directly related to the character of the inhabitants. The conceptual progression runs from Monuments, to History, to Landscape, to Character.

For Durrell's Gothic range, the three medieval castles—St. Hilarion, Buffavento, Kantara—and above all the thirteenth-century premonstratensian abbey of Bellapais, make the entire range Gothic, medieval, and somehow European. "The very names smell of Gothic Europe," he declares (31). Together they supply some unexpected and apparently contradictory ingredients in the Cypriot national character: northern rigor, resulting from the grandeur of the mountains, and Gothic contemplation. Bellapais is constantly a symbol of peace, so much so that Durrell tries to reinvent the spelling so that its etymological associations with the Abbey de la Paix become clearer (79). This "grave contemplative calm of Gothic" (77) sits rather uneasily with the "sulky magnificence" (52) of the peaks and the dramatic positions of the castles.

With this set of associations with the European north come the more expected Anatolian and Levantine characteristics. The view from the roof of Bellapais Abbey is a "fantastic mixture of the Gothic north and the gentle alluring Levantine plains spreading out from the Kyrenia range soft as a lion's paw" (79-80). The Anatolian character is soft, dreamy, and indolent, expressed in the great theme of sleep and idleness which runs through *Bitter Lemons*. The Turkish Cypriot Sabri, sitting unmoving and unmoved in his *godown*, is an ideal type of the Anatolian with his *kayf* or meditative calm, though Durrell is careful to temper what he calls Sabri's "reptilian concentration and silence" (48) with an admiration for his wiliness and sense of drama. The notorious idleness of the villagers of Bellapais is another expression of the soft plains of Anatolia and of the northern coast of Cyprus. This is a major component of the Cypriot character: "Anatolia has touched it with sleep" (107).

These are the main ingredients of the national character of Cyprus, as defined by Durrell from the landscape and its monuments: Gothic drama and Gothic contemplation, combined with Anatolian indolence and fatalism, with occasional flashes of Levantine emotion and hot temper. What is most remarkable about this constructed character is what is missing. Nowhere in *Bitter Lemons* is Cyprus allowed to participate in Hellenic or classical civilization.

One clear example of the dehellenizing of Cyprus's classical past in *Bitter Lemons* is Durrell's bizarre description of the architecture of the Pancyprrian Gymnasium: "With its rococo-Doric portals it looked, as all Greek gymnasia do, like a loosely adapted design based on an early illustration of a Doric temple by Schliemann" (126). The Pancyprrian Gymnasium was designed in 1921 by the Cypriot architect Theodoros Fotiades, who was trained in Athens and Alexandria. With this school and many others, Fotiades set a trend for Greek Cypriot schools built in the Ionic neoclassical style. The porch is not Doric, rococo-Doric, or Schliemannesque, but pure Ionic, with architectural details modeled directly on the Erechtheum. The

Pancyprrian Gymnasium at the time that Durrell taught there was at the forefront of the Greek Cypriot nationalist campaign, as he found out in his classes. The Hellenic nature of its architecture, however, frequently referred to by the Greek Cypriots themselves, is denied by the self-proclaimed interpreter of Cypriot landscape and character.

As for the actual monuments of the classical period in Cyprus, together with the history recounted in the pages of Herodotus, Isokrates, and Plutarch, they are simply omitted from the pages of *Bitter Lemons*. Durrell needed only to look at the two standard guide books of the time to read about the fifth-century B.C. Palace of Vouni, the revolt against the Persians in 498 B.C., or Evagoras, the pro-Athenian king of Salamis in the fourth century. Or he could have listened to his friend Sir Harry Luke, who wrote about these subjects for his book *Cyprus, a Portrait and an Appreciation*, published in 1957. The island's Hellenic past is clearly omitted from *Bitter Lemons*, and therefore so is its Hellenic character. Instead Durrell creates a landscape which is a combination of Anatolian, Levantine, and Gothic.

This omission is even more remarkable in light of *Reflections on a Marine Venus*. This *Companion to the Landscape of Rhodes* is heavy with the classical associations of that landscape: the siege by Demetrius Polyorkites and the sunny Colossus to mark its repulse; the three lost cities of Trianda, Cameirus, and Lindos; the memories of Cleobulus and the orators and the Roman emperors; and, of course, the Marine Venus herself. *Reflections on a Marine Venus* was published in 1953, five years after Rhodes had been safely united with Greece. No longer was there any reason to deny its classical and Hellenic past.

THE CREATION OF LANDSCAPE

There is more to the interpretation of landscape than mere selection and omission in a literary work. One of the great themes of *Bitter Lemons* is architecture, whose symbolic importance

extends beyond the observation of historical monuments to Durrell's own active participation. If architecture gives historical significance to landscape, then by building or converting a house an individual can change or add to the character of an area. Building is a participation in the construction of landscape: it is in architecture that the physical and mental activities of "construction" coincide.

The power of the building theme extends far beyond the merely physical. In *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell does not just build a house; he builds a historical monument, and an entire landscape. The book itself is intended to be "a not ineffective monument raised to the Cypriot peasantry and the island landscape" (Preface 11). By listening to Panos's geography lesson, he says, he began "to see the island as a whole, building my picture of it from the conversations of my host" (31). The monument that he builds is one of his own design; it represents a landscape which is, just as much as his house, his own design.

Most notable in *Bitter Lemons* is the house itself, and Durrell's obsession with it: "I was beginning to be seized by the most intoxicating of all manias—that of building for oneself" (84). This mania gives the house a heightened significance in the first half of the book: it is not just a nice house, but an expression of the peaceful landscape and character of Cyprus before the outbreak of the EOKA struggle on the first of April, 1955.

In architectural terms the house is a standard village design, its plan defined by its constricted site and its facades—plain, apart from a certain amount of emphasis on the door and windows. Durrell's initial description of it as "a large box-like house" (58) seems fair enough. When it is treated to his craftsmanship, literary rather than architectural, it begins to take on the character of the local landscape. It is described, for example, as being "in the Turkish Cypriot mode" (58), even though such village houses are just as characteristic of Greek Cypriot villages, including Bellapais itself. To make it specifically Turkish, however, is important, as this allows it to partake in the Anatolian qualities of sleepiness and *kayf*.

The view from the balcony of the house is crucial, as it includes all elements of the Cypriot landscape and character: the soft Anatolian plains of the north coast, the "ragged outcrop and mouldering turrets of Buffavento" (59), and the contemplative calm of the Gothic abbey. The modern, Westernized interior that he puts into the house, with its books and bric-a-brac from abroad, shrinks in importance and is barely mentioned.

This use of architecture to construct landscape and character helps to explain the role of the architect Austen Harrison, to whom *Bitter Lemons* is dedicated. In the 1920s and 1930s Harrison was the Chief Architect to the Public Works Department of the British Mandate in Palestine. By the 1950s he was running a private practice based in London, but spent much of his time in a renovated house in Lapethos, a village some fifteen kilometers west of Bellapais.

In stylistic terms, Harrison was committed to using local elements in his designs for public buildings, so that they would be appropriate to their landscape and would express something of the country (Fuchs). An example is the Paedagogical Institute, or Teachers' Training College, in Nicosia, whose design he was working on when Durrell knew him. The broad eaves and projecting kiosks are Ottoman, while the pointed arches come from the Cypriot vernacular, ultimately deriving from the foreign Gothic architecture of medieval Cyprus. More eloquent of the island's historical past, which for Harrison as much as for Durrell defined its present character, are the series of roundels between the arches, taken from the ancient coins of Cyprus. The lion pouncing on the deer and the majestic ram's head belonged to two of the ancient city-kingdoms, one of them Phoenician; the symbol of the crescent and disc is characteristically Phoenician, rather than Greek. In a cultural institution through which all future teachers would pass, the Hellenic background of Cyprus's culture and education is excized, and all Ionic columns and classical pediments strictly forbidden.

Harrison and Durrell, in their different mediums, were

both constructing a very specific image of Cyprus's landscape and history, and through those of the character of its people. While he was editing the government cultural magazine the *Cyprus Review* in 1954 and 1955, Durrell was doing the same thing, using other people's writing and art to construct a very Cypriot but non-Hellenic national character (Roessel). Unsurprisingly, most of the contributors were, like Durrell and Harrison, foreigners to Cyprus. For all Durrell's claim about the identification of landscape and character, it is still the outsiders who do the identifying.

CONCLUSION

By the judicious interpretation of landscape and reworking of history, Cyprus was given a new character which was apparently grounded in its own landscape and history, and therefore undeniable. Cyprus was not Hellenic, as the freedom fighters claimed, but a combination of Anatolian, Levantine, and North European. The landscape, whether Anatolian or Gothic, was tinged with sleep, contemplative calm, idleness: the frenetic excitement, dynamism, and commitment of the EOKA campaign were a mere aberration.

Durrell, Harrison, and others like them claimed that the landscapes, histories, and architectures they produced were authentic expressions of the country itself, not inventions of their own artistic imaginations. And yet it is clear that they were as much the fathers of these landscapes as the children. This may have been a conscious and deliberate manipulation of history for political ends, or else a genuine expression of the worldview of historically situated individuals. What is clear is that Durrell's construction of the landscape and character of Cyprus radically contradicts his own claim that human beings are an expression of their own landscape. From *Bitter Lemons*, it seems that both people and landscape are expressions of the writer.

And yet, for Durrell at least, this is not so great a con-

tradiction as it might appear. Landscape, like life, is "the raw material . . . only lived *in potentia* until the artist deploys it in his work" (*Justine* 66). The landscape of Cyprus is inherently without significance, an unbuilt village, until the artist constructs the houses and invents the history which give it a meaningful reality.

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