

Lawrence Durrell:

Panic Spring: A Romance

Notes &c.

Objectives

1. To describe the concept of Late Modernism.
2. To recognize that Modernism occurred in a variety of locations and times, and hence, postcolonial criticism overlaps with it.
3. To relate international, racial, and imperial, and colonial discourses with those we have encountered in Modernism.
4. To describe the influence of the modernists on the generation of authors who came of age during the Second World War.
5. To demonstrate understanding of how the reader is made active in some texts.

Reading Assignment

Durrell, Lawrence. *Panic Spring: A Romance*. 1937. Ed. James Gifford. Victoria: ELS Editions, 2008. Print.

Adam, Peter. "Spirit of Place: Lawrence Durrell's Greece." BBC. 9 July 1984. <https://youtu.be/EIOjaroRfEI>

Commentary

This unit takes our readings beyond the typical end point for Modernism: 1928 or at best 1934. Many older modernist scholars prefer not to pursue "Modernism" beyond any hint of World War II even though many of the authors we have read continued to be very active well beyond this date – in fact, [Woolf](#), [Eliot](#), and [Lewis](#) published some of their major works after 1939, and [Joyce](#) published his last major novel in that year. Much recent research has been dedicated to this notion of "Late Modernism," including Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism*, Marina MacKay's *Modernism & World War II*, and Robert Genter's *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, & Politics in Cold War America*. Other scholars, like Jean-François Lyotard, have argued that postmodernism is largely a late development of Modernism itself. By advancing to 1937, we also become aware of how the so-called "High Modernists" (those whose careers began during and immediately following the [First World War](#))

influenced the generation that followed during World War II. However, this generation whose major works began to appear in the late 1930s faced a much different social situation, and unlike the modernists, many were drafted for the Second World War and could not take up positions of editorial or intellectual authority after the war ended. They were also much more likely to be antiauthoritarian in contrast with the flirtation with [Fascism](#) that still haunts the literary reputations of many of the High Modernists ([Pound](#), Lewis, Eliot, and [Marinetti](#), to name only a handful).

[Lawrence Durrell](#) was part of this Late Modernist generation, and his first novel appeared in 1935 followed by two more in 1937 and 1938, the last of which was his most experimental, *The Black Book*. Durrell's influence on later *avant-garde* writers of the 1960s and after is widely acknowledged, ranging from Julio Cortázar, Michael Ondaatje, Andre Brink, and Thomas Pynchon, to M.G. Vassanji (Sligh 118–132; Maynard 66–74; Peirce 23–29; and Gifford 28–43). Moreover, evidence for Durrell's development from High Modernism is also abundant, especially that which has an urban theme. T.S. Eliot was Durrell's poetry editor at the publishing house Faber & Faber, and Eliot was also his friend. Durrell also lectured on James Joyce's *Ulysses* at Caltech. His views on modernist poetry are made very clear from his lectures while in Argentina, later published as *A Key to Modern British Poetry*. In those lectures, he dedicates a chapter to Eliot's *The Waste Land* and gives significant attention to William Empson and Ezra Pound. Durrell is, in this way, a key author bridging the tropes of High Modernism and Late Modernism, and he negotiates the shifting trends between the early and late literary movements of the twentieth century, with many calling him a postmodern writer for the last half of his career for his novels published after 1968.

Background

Born in Jullunder, India, of parents who were born in India, Durrell's childhood was built in a nation where he was never welcomed. This began his lifelong ambivalent affiliations between nations. He was sent "home" to England for his education, which created a rift between his imagined Father England and Mother India – this trope first appears in his autobiographical first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers*. Durrell was born in 1912 and raised in India, sent to England in 1923 by a family that had never seen this "home," and then settled in Greece in 1935 until he was evacuated to Egypt via Crete during the Nazi invasion in World War II (Durrell, "Airgraph" 213). After time in Egypt, Greece, Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Cyprus, he finally settled in Southern France for the last

thirty years of his life. Moreover, Durrell was “refused British citizenship” in 1966 in an attempt to “reduc[e] immigration to Britain from India, Pakistan and the West Indies” (Ezard n.pag). More specifically, Durrell was denied free right of access to Britain under amendments to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, and he had to apply for a visa for each entry. This placed him in the difficult position of having been a career British civil servant and an awarded British author without having the rights of a British citizen. He was by definition a non-patrial without the right to enter or settle, and this is a fact he never made public.

While race and perhaps ethnicity may not have contributed to Durrell’s exile from the center of empire (though his Anglo-Indian accent surely did), Durrell served in the British Diplomatic Corps yet was alienated from the metropolitan center of empire. His first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers*, recounts his childhood in rural India and his teenage return “home” to urban London before once again escaping the city for the countryside. However, he chose to recast his protagonist, Walsh Clifton, as racially Anglo-Indian with an Indian/Burmese mother, and his childhood in India dominates the novel – for our readings, this is the same character Walsh in *Panic Spring*, so his previous appearance as an autobiographical stand-in for Durrell himself should help our reading. This racial distinction for Walsh (but not Durrell himself), being Anglo-Indian, reveals Durrell’s intentions in a book that is otherwise autobiographical to such a degree that many scholars have failed to adequately distinguish between Walsh as a fictional character and Durrell himself. This revision of himself as racially distinct from the British marks Durrell’s ambiguity with regard to his ancestral home, and he is adamant in interviews that his banishment from India by his father (for education) was a childhood trauma marking his loss of mother India for Father England (*Big Supposer* 24). Walsh returns in *Panic Spring* as a key character, but he is less overtly autobiographical in this novel.

This tension over race and belonging is made clear in the first image of England in *Pied Piper of Lovers*. The Caribbean author Caryl Phillips describes, in an uncanny parallel, his vision of such a moment at sea when he writes of the immigration policies that restricted citizens of the Empire, who were constitutionally British, from entering or settling in Britain:

I have imagined the scene many times.... Crowds of West Indians are peering from the deck of a ship, eagerly securing their first view of the white cliffs of Dover.... At the moment of that first sighting I imagine that their dominant emotion would have been

Notes &c.

that of a profound sense of loss, for clearly they knew that it would be many years before they would return home to loved ones and familiar landscapes. (Phillips 106)

The poignancy for Phillips is that these “Crowds of West Indians” are British non-patrials under increasing limitations in the Commonwealth to enter or settle in Britain, in particular after amendments to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 (the same Act that restricted Durrell’s freedom to enter the UK). To expand on the scope of his description, Phillips need only have skimmed further back in Durrell’s *Pied Piper of Lovers*, a portion of which Phillips had anthologized in his collection *Elegant Strangers* for Faber & Faber only one year prior to writing the scene above.

Durrell’s vision in his autobiographical novel is equally poignant as Phillips’s when the ship from India reaches the White Cliffs of Dover. It is stated in a remarkably similar manner that points to some of the critiques that follow later in *Panic Spring*:

It would perhaps be impossible to define accurately the feeling of disappointment he [Walsh] experienced as he stood on the deck of the liner and watched the pearly cliffs insinuate themselves out of the light sea-haze... [I]t was smaller than he had imagined!... [T]his observation implied some sort of intuitive deduction... [T]hose who shouted, pointed and exclaimed were in the minority. A great number stood silent, gripping the rail, and experiencing that emotion of country-love which is occasioned in exiles. (*Pied* 109)

Walsh’s inability to identify with the British citizens who revel over the “White as white” (*Pied* 110) cliffs – cliffs that recall his ‘less than white’ skin – is enriched by his otherness from India. He turns to a “small and gentle-looking ayah... [whose] hands folded inside her sari” (*Pied* 111), and he feels “sick with an undefined regret, as though the beauty of the hills which he had left behind for ever still worked in him” (*Pied* 111). As Gordon Bowker points out, “the young colonial [was] returning ‘home’, but also setting off into exile” (18).

Despite a shared “home,” the young ayah quickly marks Walsh as foreign to India. He is doubly estranged from both homes, and in both cases for reasons of ethnicity. Walsh asks her, “You are of the hills?” to which she responds, “Yes. Of Nepal” (Durrell, *Pied* 111). When he asserts his own home in the same manner – “He said shyly: ‘I, too, am from the hills. Kurseong.’” – she becomes silent: “she seemed to regard him as yet another of the alien race with whom she had nothing in

common save the coincidence of a common dwelling; a birth-place and a country for her, for him no more than a temporary house" (111). The temporary nature of all homes haunted Durrell until his arrival in France in 1956, the country in which he spent the longest period of his life. For the previous 20 years, he had lived in Greece, Egypt, the Dodecanese (now Greece), Argentina, Serbia (the former Yugoslavia), and Cyprus with only brief residencies in Britain.

Spirit of Place

Durrell's homelessness was deeply rooted, and it is reflected in *Panic Spring* in several ways as the characters all flee urban England for rural Greece, only to be scattered again at the close of the novel. Durrell was in Greece during the German and Italian invasions in World War II, initially on Kerkyra (Corfu), then in Athens and Kalamata, and finally evacuated by caique to Crete. As with his good friend George Seferis, who was part of the Greek government that eventually fled to South Africa via Egypt, Durrell was again evacuated to Cairo during the bombardment of Crete. He then relocated to Alexandria where he served in the British Foreign Office throughout World War II, which gave him fodder for his novel *Justine*, which is set in the same city. In the post-bellum period, Durrell rapidly returned to Greece where he continued to work for the British Foreign Office on Rhodes during the accretion of the Dodecanese islands to Greece. He was then in Argentina during President Juan Péron's first term, in Yugoslavia under Marshall Tito, and on Cyprus during Enosis where he finished the major preparatory work for his major novel series *The Alexandria Quartet* while working as the Director of Public Relations for the British Government. He subsequently completed and published the four books of *The Alexandria Quartet* between 1957 and 1960 after a final move to the south of France in 1956.

Method & Style

Durrell's method is complex in *Panic Spring*. The reader is drawn between decontextualized allusions to other texts, frequent citations, changes in perspective, and the confusion of a shifting narrative voice and shifting focus on different characters. This confusion is compounded by the several different styles and references to other texts that shape how we understand each character. Durrell did not choose to use fragments and an incomplete form due to social pressures or expectations from his milieu – this decision was entirely his own. The plurality reflects his notebook composition method to a degree, but the

fragmentation is itself a major aesthetic (and perhaps ethical) component of the novel's aim.

In addition to the textual fragmentation, which we might find akin to Eliot's fragments in *The Waste Land* (which Durrell has a character reading in *Panic Spring*), Durrell returns to several modernist themes. In the context of his historical moment, we as readers have several questions we must answer for ourselves:

1. Do we side with the life of the city or the life of the country? Our characters flee the city for a rural island, but not all are happy with this change.
2. Do we prefer the sensuality of London or the introspection of the novel as a document of rural life on the Greek island?
3. Is there a politics to the novel's performance? Is it [Marxist](#), capitalist, imperial, sexist, or anti-authoritarian? Before making a final determination, consider the role in which it places the reader? Is the reader made into a community, and stakeholder, and colonizer with a power-laden gaze, or is the reader refused the easy victory of a predetermined resolution? Does the reader need to function individually or collectively? Does the novel resist foreclosing on the reader's various potential understandings, or does the novel implicitly endorse multiple ways of seeing the world?

Our answers to these questions are the ethical outcomes the novel drives us toward. It is easy to ignore this ethical imperative at the outset of the novel and simply enjoy its exotic and erotic imagery, but we are warned on the very first pages to aim for higher goals.

Late Modernism

As a critical category, Late Modernism has challenged standard approaches to modernist studies by asking how Modernism could change without breaking into something different. As a general trend, much modernist literature has been widely understood as part of an "Inward Turn." This means it has relied on techniques like [stream of consciousness](#) and a focus on individuals rather than amorphous or diverse large social groups. In other words, Modernism may have dealt with large-scale social change, but it did so by looking to the individuals who experienced it. Furthermore, it did this not only by focusing on the individual but more specifically the personal inward psychological workings of this individual. "Stream of consciousness" is typically held up as the representative technique of this inward turn of Modernism.

By contrast, Thomas S. Davis has argued that Late Modernism is characterized by an opposing “outward turn” to social processes rather than individual interiority (4).

The outward turn means a shift from the relations between individuals to the social conflicts at work in society, in particular “society” understood as a global or world-system. In other words, *Jacob’s Room* has shown readers the horrors of World War I only indirectly in its closing, made visible in the empty shoes in Jacob’s room (as a metonym), shoes that will never be worn again after he has been killed in combat. These are personalizations of global conflicts, and we encounter them through the stream of consciousness of individual characters. Likewise, in High Modernism Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus lives in the shadow of the Irish Famine and under the brutalities of British colonialism, but we only see these forces of the global British Empire primarily through the experiences and thoughts of an individual whose interior life we explore as readers. In contrast, the “outward turn” of Late Modernism shifts attention from interiorities to exterior life. It is very often everyday or quotidian life that becomes a representation of these social conflicts, and into which radical change imposes itself. For Davis’ examples, [George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*](#) about the Spanish Civil War and W.H. Auden and [Christopher Isherwood’s *Journey to a War*](#) about the Sino-Japanese War, show everyday life as it is disrupted (and then restored) by conflicts far beyond the scope of the individual. More importantly, these large social forces are invisible when seen at the scale of the everyday – we may know why a battle during war erupts suddenly and destroys a village or city, but for the people going about daily life within it, this is an irrational and inexplicable event caused by forces that are invisible to them. Put in slightly differently terms, literature shifts from minds to surfaces or from people to things, and this shift is a reflection of the conditions of late modernity.

These changes in Late Modernism suggest that the stylistic innovations continue but alter slightly to serve different purposes. We may read in Stephen Dedalus a young man making his own decision within the context of British colonialism in Ireland, but for Late Modernism we would expect most of our attention to be on the colonial legacy, under which Stephen is more limited and perhaps even exists only as a by-product of colonialism. Tyrus Miller uses Orwell as his quintessential example of the late modernist moment, and he stresses Orwell’s criticism of Auden’s poetry about the Spanish Civil War – Orwell complained it was too “Boy Scoutish” and prone to slogans and jingoism rather than a real confrontation with the global conflict between liberalism and fascism. Orwell was probably right, but the effect for readers is to shift attention away from Auden’s personal experience of

the war and toward the war's redefining of everyday life for all involved. That is, the world imposes on the individual rather than the individual transforming the world.

Durrell & Late Modernism

Durrell's novel *Panic Spring* sits uncomfortably in this concept of Late Modernism. We recognize in it echoes of narrative techniques we have previously seen in Joyce and Woolf, but at the same time Durrell opens with a discussion of "Revolution." Still, rather than engaging with the Greek Revolution or the Spanish Revolution, the characters retreat from the experience of urban modernity to a rural pre-modern life shaped by the village and seemingly aristocratic values imposed by a single character. Durrell also stresses the conflicted morals between the Victorian character Rumanides as a force from the past and the more modern Walsh who seeks to change things.

In the end, the rural idyll cannot hold. The group breaks up and falls to pieces as "Revolution" imposes itself (this is the "panic" of the book's title). However, we as readers are unsure if this is an overarching moral to the novel (world systems will disrupt the individual) or if it is a call to extend the pre-modern, nostalgic life of the individual dedicated to interior experiences. Perhaps it is a call to return to the life of the rural village rather than the urban metropolitan city. Durrell leaves the closing of *Panic Spring* ambiguous, so we do not know if the characters find something better or something worse, and this ambiguity may be precisely his point: the reader must make decisions rather than relying on the author. What is particularly striking is that Durrell's decision to end his novel in this way, and to depict a return to pre-modern peasant life in Greece, comes in 1937, followed in 1938 by his decadent and erotic novel *The Black Book*. Orwell's quintessential examples of the outward turn to surfaces and social consciousness rather than interior consciousness followed in 1938 in *Homage to Catalonia*, and then Auden and Isherwood's likewise outward-oriented *Journey to a War* in 1939. Lest we see this as an accident of Durrell's early status in the list, appearing two years before the outbreak of WWII, the journal he co-edited during the war while he was in Egypt defied the standard set by Auden and Orwell: *Personal Landscape* (the poetry magazine) emphasized the personal and only rarely alluded indirectly to the war that raged all about them and from which Durrell (and the other journal editors) had fled as refugees to Egypt. *Personal Landscape* instead emphasized the individual's experience, and it was the opposite of Orwell and Auden – and very deliberately so.

The same conflicts emerge in *Panic Spring*. The shifts from

chapter to chapter between individual characters seem to suggest that the individual is the most important unit of value, yet they are all thrown together by the pressures of revolution and the demands of transnational capital. The reader is ultimately unsure if the characters teach us that the individual exists distinct from overwhelming social demands, or that the individual exists conceptually because this is how late modernity works economically and socially: with alienated and isolated individuals who are incapable of the kinds of solidarity and collective action necessary for creating real social change. Durrell frustratingly leaves most of his novels this way, as if to suggest that each reader must make his or her own interpretive decision at the ending without relying on the author to tell the reader which is correct. And of course, that is itself a tactic very much a part of late modernist aesthetics.

You may also want to consider how in contrast [Hemingway](#) refuses any form of interiority for his characters (he shows what characters do but never tells how they think, and so forth) while at the same time he insists on the readers' interpretations of such interior states (the depth beneath the tip of the iceberg). That is to say, in Hemingway, we know that the characters have deep inward experiences, and we see how they manifest themselves, but we do not have access to their consciousness in Hemingway's work. Durrell in contrast gives much access to the interior experiences of his characters while at the same time showing their choices and where they live are merely whims of larger social forces. Durrell is both similar to and very different from the authors we have read so far, but more troublingly, he appears to be so for different reasons. Reasons he does not reveal to us...

Questions for Self-Review

1. How do form and content relate to each other in *Panic Spring*, and how is this different from what we have seen in Woolf and Hemingway?
2. How would you describe Modernism and Late Modernism as similar and different to a friend taking another course?
3. Does *Panic Spring* critique the revolutions of its moment, or does it propose a different kind of revolution in the face of the imminent breakout of World War II?
4. How do allusions work in the novel, and does your approach change when you think of T.S. Eliot as Durrell's editor?
5. In what ways is *Panic Spring* a modernist novel, and in what ways does it move outside of the forms of Modernism?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings

- Bowen, Roger. *"Many Histories Deep": The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940-45*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995.
- Bowker, Gordon. *Through the Dark Labyrinth: A Biography of Lawrence Durrell*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1997.
- Clawson, James M. *Durrell Re-Read*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2016.
- — —. "Urban Flight and Rural Reception: Modernist Refuge in *Panic Spring* and *The Dark Labyrinth*." *Durrell & the City: Collected Essays on Place*. Ed. Donald P. Kaczvinsky. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2011. 3–11.
- Davis, Thomas S. *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015.
- Durrell, Lawrence. "Airgraph on Refugee Poets in Africa." *Poetry London* 2.10 (1944): 212–215.
- — . Interview with Marc Alyn. *The Big Supposer*. Trans. Francine Barker. Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1972. London: Grove Press Inc., 1974.
- — . *Pied Piper of Lovers*. 1935. Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2007.
- Ezard, John. "Durrell Fell Foul of Migrant Law." *Manchester Guardian* 29 April 2002.
- Gamache, Lawrence B. and Ian S. MacNiven. Eds. *The Modernists: Studies in a Literary Phenomenon*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1987. 234–248.
- Genter, Robert. *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*. U Pennsylvania P, 2010.
- Gifford, James. "Hellenism/Modernism: Negotiating Modernisms and the Philhellene in Greece." Ed. Tatiani Rapatzikou. *Anglo-American Perceptions of Hellenism*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars P, 2006. 82–97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6WC9D>
- — —. *Personal Modernisms: Anarchist Networks and the Later Avant-*

- Gardes*. Edmonton: U Alberta P, 2014.
- Kaczvinsky, Donald Ed. *Durrell & the City: Collected Essays on Place*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2011.
- MacKay, Marina. *Modernism, War, and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017.
- MacNiven, Ian S. *Lawrence Durrell: A Biography*. London: Faber & Faber, 1998.
- . "Lawrence Durrell Discovers Greece." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 24.1 (1991): 83–99.
- Peirce, Carol. "Pynchon's *V.* and Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*." *Pynchon Notes* 8 (1982): 23-29.
- Phillips, Caryl. "A Dream Deferred: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain." *Kunapipi: Journal of Post-Colonial Writing* 21.2 (1999): 106–118. Text of: Arthur Ravencroft Memorial Lecture. University of Leeds. 11 May 1998.
- Roessel, David. *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Sligh, Charles. "Riding the Divergent Weave: A Note and Some Speculations on Durrell and Cortázar." *Deus Loci: The International Lawrence Durrell Journal* NS 6 (1998): 118–132.
- Stewart, Jack. "Objects in Space and Time: Metonymy in Durrell's Island Books." *Style* 34.1 (2000): 78–91.

Author: James Gifford
Editor: Lucie Kotesovska