

LAWRENCE DURRELL: A CONVERSATION

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[This interview was recorded in 1977 at Lawrence Durrell's house in Sommières, and in its original form was published in *Fountains*, No. 1, 1978, Aix-en-Provence.]

We understand that you are shortly going to Egypt to make a film - may we ask you the subject?

They want me to do Egypt as I saw it, but I never saw it properly: I got it all out of books! I'm having to mug it all up now. It's just a documentary, so I may escape with a shy camel here and there, or a diplomat shouting "Charge!"

The awful thing is that the Egypt I described in the *Quartet* was one that wasn't available to me as I was writing it: it had vanished about ten years before. By transposition and by juggling, I got people convinced it was real, even ones on the spot. My ambassador, for example, said to me: "But Durrell, surely that brothel quarter was here in Alexandria?" I said: "No, Sir. I transported it from Cairo. It didn't exist when I arrived here. Montgomery had sent them all away - he'd put all the whores in the desert." He said: "Dash it, Durrell, I'm absolutely sure. Isn't there a little street...?" I said: "It's not been here during your time, Sir. You will find that this is a description of the street in the blue quarter just outside Cairo." "Oh," he said, "Yes, I remember - the out-of-bounds section." I said: "Yes. What were you doing there!?"

So Durrell's 'Alexandria' is a different place from the real Alexandria?

Yes - it's terrible. I keep getting letters from people asking for their money back because they can't find it. Joyce on Dublin is relatively exact, but they can't find my Alexandria because it never existed. I reconstructed it like a child who reconstructs by ear. I sat in the very cafes just empty of the people who appear as characters in the *Quartet*, and it's authentic in that sense, but the Alexandria of the *Quartet* was basically a reconstruction.

The *Quartet* put Egypt on the literary map for many Western readers, and made it appear very glamorous. How did you feel about the country yourself?

I hated Egypt. No fault of the poor Egyptians. It was a bad period: war, armies, etc. It wasn't an atmosphere that nourished me. I have a bit of an obsession about countries. Some countries nourish me, and others leave me quite dead. Argentina, for instance, left me quite, quite dead, although I made the very best friends of my life there.

How do you feel about the reputation that the Alexandria *Quartet* still has - it's probably the best-known work in your entire oeuvre.

It's the most central thing that I ever tried to do, and I'm terribly gratified that it came off to the extent that it did. It's entirely due to my wife Claude, who picked up about 4,270 mistakes in the first versions. I made numberless mistakes in the enjambment,

which had to be corrected, but I was struck by the fact that they were only little time mistakes. The situation was solved for the collected version, simply by saying: 'sometime later, instead of 'next week'. That way, without being too precise about the time, you kept the fluidity of the situation. There was nothing radically wrong, though, and when Hollywood wanted to make a film of *Justine*, they only found seven small lacunae which were really not very important. For instance, I forgot that I'd said a character had a pet cat, and said later that she lived without pets, but they didn't find any really critical holes in the general enjambment.

What did you think of the film version of *Justine*?

It was lousy. They wanted to try to get a clear story line out of it and they put a whole team of their more tired intellects onto it to iron it all out. I told them: "You're buying an anti-cinema book. You really shouldn't buy it. It's crazy to try to make a film out of it." Cinema can't handle something that contradicts itself.

The Americans had real problems with what they regarded as the crazy way I compared the philosophic by-products of space-time and all that sort of Einsteinian jargon. but then the dear old Germans came wobbling in with their theses and thoroughly verified it. The Quartet is a kind of little paper kaleidoscope made vaguely on the fall-out of the relativity principles. Do you know those lovely little kaleidoscopes you make with the basic Euclidian forms that Goethe was mad about? Well, what I was doing was like that.

Going back to the success of the Quartet you mentioned, a book must reach university level to be seriously studied, and the Quartet has now gone through to that level. It can also be terrible, though, because students come knocking at the door. They bring you their theses and you are supposed to say yes or no, otherwise they can't get their Master's degree. Often the theses are not pretty at all. You don't know what to do.

Do you read them?

No - my daughter throws them in the swimming pool! One does answer serious letters, though. Being so damned prima donnaish I do appreciate those, and I get the most remarkable articles, full of insight, in French, German and English. That's different from schoolgirls who get a crush on a character and decide to form their career and get a Master's degree out of it. It's very astute. they try to get into correspondence with me: 'Dear Sir, I have chosen you...' I reply to all those letters as politely as possible, but I've only got to write something like: 'Thank you for your thoughtful, kindly, etc. treatise...' and they go and show it to their prof and say: "I'm in contact with Durrell and he agrees with me". How can you refuse a Master's degree to somebody with whom the author agrees? It's terribly difficult - I'm not trying to influence the poor prof.

You must get pestered a lot by doting fans of one sort or another - including interviewers like us!

It happens to me all the time. For instance, you remember I was called to the door earlier? There was a boy standing there: "Sir, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I represent a society of thirty young people of different nationalities

who are doing the whole of Europe in a bus. We try to meet with a person in each town we pass through. Our bus is down there. Are you willing to talk with us?" It's always happening. Ladies with blue rinsed hair say to me: "I just want to wring your hand!" Then thirty of them just want to wring my hand, and the whole morning is gone. It is rather terrifying.

It's understandable though. There have been quite a lot of famous expatriate artists living in the south of France – it's natural for people to be interested.

Actually, this thing about expatriate writers living in Provence isn't really very interesting. Those kinds of things are best left to sociologists and photographers who collect albums of the postures of poets and ask them for a little brief text to go with them. I don't think it's very serious, because fundamentally there really is nothing in common between a poor Durrell, a poor Beckett, a poor Picasso or whoever stuck down here in the south. I like the sun, everyone likes the sun, but that's really the only common point between those expatriates. It's different for those who actually belong to Provence. There's a reason for Giono's or Delavouët's existence in the south.

Even though various expatriates may have little in common with each other, they nevertheless do share the experience of being deracinated. How significant is the expatriate status in your own life?

It's awful to have one language and live always in another one - to live and to make love in basic English or in Greek, instead of in ordinary English, or to spend your entire life with French wives, talking bad French. It's very dehydrating. When you come to construct in your own language and *en or massif*, it's much more difficult than if you're really planted and you didn't know any damn French and were happy in Sussex or wherever. Then you can get a sort of structural column.

If you're deracinated like me you can't plant your stuff properly, and your subject falls to bits and pieces - anecdotal, so to speak, on the move, on the run. I have to compensate for that by cheating on form and doing a bit of juggling here and there. It's rather mountebankey! Perhaps there's a bit too much cleverness to fill in the missing areas.

It's different for a writer like Patrick White. I loved his work long before he became famous. He's a massive writer: he's got those nice constructions. I think novels should have constructional lines and not be little bits and pieces. But he's very lucky to belong somewhere. Another man whom I adore in the constructional sense is John Fowles - thoroughly integrated, like Saul Bellow. But these people belong somewhere. I'm just a white negro on the run.

Would you liked to have been planted firmly in English soil?

No, no. But it started long before that. I'm an Anglo-Indian, and the roots that I lost were really planted somewhere near Darjeeling. Then I was cut off like Kipling at the age of twelve and banged into an English public school. From then on one is filling a hole. Look what happened to poor old Kip. He had the greatest difficulty getting Kim out of his system, and what disastrous books he wrote once he was ingested by the English leviathan and became a sort of public figure. It was tragic - tragic! He was

really a deeply wounded chap, through his separation from his family. His real home was India. It is mine, too, except I don't like cockroaches.

Has your childhood in India had a lasting influence on you?

Well, it was there that I first came across the yoga thing. It was yoga that cured me of smoking. I used to smoke three packets a day. I've been doing yoga for about eight years now, and it finally enabled me to quit smoking. Actually, it was the tobacco that left me. I'd tried everything: cutting it in half, only smoking other people's (you lose all your friends that way), but I couldn't do a thing. It put me in such a bad temper. Then one fine day, after I started standing on my head and breathing, etc., the desire left me.

I was much more concerned about smoking than I was about drinking. I had a bad patch a few years ago when I used to hit the gin very, very hard and I gave myself rather a fright. I was doing a bottle a day, which is really too much for anybody, and not ever being drunk or joyous, and I was all alone. I wrote *Tunc* and *Nunquam* under very awful ginny circumstances and that's why they're not really well massed up. However, I finally got off whisky and gin easily enough, thanks to yoga.

It's not an obsession, you know. When my brother comes here we sometimes stay up all night, get drunk and don't do any yoga for a day. But you always come back on the beam. It's not a religion - it's just a seduction. It's delicious. The older you get, the better tonality you get. I'm mad about being able to swim fast, and I can now do a quick length in the swimming pool thanks entirely to giving up cigarettes.

Is the practice of yoga purely a physical exercise?

No. To get the maximum out of it, you must push through to the meditation side a little bit. Otherwise it becomes Swedish drill: you might as well go and play rugby.

Truth to tell, the subject is so immense, and one is so pitifully tiny beside it, I suppose what I call 'my yoga' would have made the sages laugh like hell - crawling about on the ground, standing on my head, and so on. However, one does feel it is like the practice slopes when you're learning to ski. Not everybody can do ski jumping, but it does give wonderful breath control and composure and a sense of fun.

A sense of fun, in fact, is a major ingredient in many of your books. In *Nunquam*, for instance, you recounted the story of a strange epidemic somewhere in Asia, during which the men became convinced that their sexual organs were going to retract into their bodies: they went around holding anxiously onto their penises to stop them disappearing! You added a footnote assuring the reader that this was a true story. You obviously thought people were going to say: "Durrell has gone too far this time!".

Yes. "He's at it again!" The amazing thing is that it was true, and it was written up in the *British Medical Journal*. An old friend of mine read it in Kathmandu, and he sent it to me by air. It was such a lovely story, I felt I couldn't waste it. You can't invent things as good as reality. That's one of the sad things about being a writer. Who could invent a thing like that!

Do you feel scruples about stealing stories from real life like that? Shouldn't a writer try to be original?

You can't and you shouldn't have scruples about borrowing material, either from real life or from other books. I'm not talking about silly things. I'm very careful about libel. More importantly, I don't like hurting people's feelings. I'm not like Ben Jonson, who would rather lose a friend than a good joke. I prefer to keep the friend and can the joke.

Apart from that, almost everything has already been written, and God knows to what extent our memory, the sort of subliminal threshold, isn't already impregnated. Perhaps one is rewriting, having totally forgotten it, The Brothers Grimm. So who the hell is original – and in what sense? I've never felt any scruples about that. The important thing is paying back. If you can pay it back with a bit of soufflé, your own soufflé, that is the obligation. It is really quite hard to do it, but it's wonderful if it comes off.

My attitude to life may seem rather frivolous, but in fact if you take life easy, it tends to give itself more richly. Blake had an idea, didn't he? 'Damn braces. Bless relaxes'.

Of course, your novels are not all just fun! There is often something mysterious and dark lurking below the surface in many of them. For instance, in a recent radio interview, you mentioned in passing that what differentiated the Lanquedoc from Greece was the sense of mystery, almost of tragedy, that could be found here and which doesn't exist to the same extent in Greece. Could you tell us a bit more about that? It would give us an opportunity to probe into the depths of your work, and also to introduce into this interview your most recent novel, *Monsieur or the Prince of Darkness*, which is set down here in the south.

Of course, you do feel the sense of blood and despair terribly strongly in Greece too, in Mycenae and places like that, but the antiquity of the situation, and the antiquity of the Greek plays and the mystery surrounding them, puts Greece into a different category. Here, the game at issue is mysticism: St. John of the Cross – Christianity in a word. Bloodshed, yes, but it is bloodshed which really starts with St. Augustine. Everything ghostly that happens on these Garrigues is Moors, its Saracens, its mediaeval history.

When reading *Monsieur*, it's not always easy for the reader to tell how seriously you intend the reader to take the 'ghostly' element you just mentioned. Are the mysteries in that book – notably the Gnostic element – just part of a literary game, or do they point to occult truths that lie beyond such games?

It's in the form of an enquiry. I'm simply posing the one question: "Is the ego a viable concept? Is there such a thing as a stable ego? Now watch!"

We feel secure in our work and our life and our breathing, but, in fact, are we just like a piece of old film, twenty-eight frames to the second - flicker flicker flicker flicker -

or are we a frozen frame? This question is what I get from the East, which I think is legitimate. As I said before, I smelled the whole yoga thing when I was a baby in Darjeeling, so it's not something I've acquired out of books in the British Museum. I feel I was oriented that way, and the minute I ran up against the Christian thing it didn't interest me for *deux sous*. I couldn't confirm anything about it. It was only when I suddenly rediscovered Lao Tzu and the Chinese, and also Gnosticism, that I realized that I belonged much more intellectually to that side of the counter than this.

What is the essential difference between Eastern and Western thought?

It goes back to what I was just saying about the reality of the ego as a stable entity. The self is a mere intellectual contrivance. We take it for a reality and feel jolly comfy with our nice little ego, but the trouble really starts there. With meditation you're trying to undo the hooks and eyes which attach you to the ego concept. Part of the fun about yoga is that you can do it physically or you can do it mentally, but it's being done anyhow. It puts a huge question into your mind about the stability and the reasonableness of what you call your ego - Mr. Me.

Getting back to your question about the difference between the West and the East - Western philosophy has given us all those marvellous things like the atom bomb and all that stuff. No criticism! I suppose we could have got it from the East too, because they must have had the same sort of morbid diversionary intellectual activities as us. India is certainly as guilty as anyone. But I think if you had to define the basic difference of attitude, you'd find it based on the notion of the ego. What is fun now is that, apart from Western physicists having broken the atom, our psychologists and psychiatrists have broken the ego as a stable concept. This has opened a path to healing and repose, which comes very close to yogic notions, in a sense. In fact, I see both systems advancing onto a common point where the East will be able to profit by drains, and we'll be able to profit by repose. I'm very optimistic!

You mentioned the parallel between physicists splitting the atom and psychologists splitting the ego. Are you steeped in the works of the Grand Masters of psychology?

Yes - I'm conscious that I'm a rotten psychologist, so I always have an open Jung in my left hand and an open Freud in my right. You know, since Freud it hasn't been possible to write a work like *Hamlet* any more. Even if his theory about *Hamlet* may be completely wrong, its influence is so pervasive, every time you start writing a latter-day *Hamlet* you have to stop and say: "Now, listen, Mum, this won't work!"

How does the Freudian splitting of the ego link up with *Monsieur*?

I am using the enquiry into the ego there in a bloody and localized way. Avignon is the axis. The Gnostics - the Cathars and the Templars - were the last Monseigneurs, and they were butchered by the Catholics down here in the south.

The Gnostic heresy was stamped out in the Languedoc by the genocide of the Cathars back in the thirteenth century, and then by the wholesale slaughter of the Knights Templar at the start of the fourteenth. Surely, though, they were asking for it?! After all, as the latter-day Egyptian Gnostic Akkad explains in

Monsieur, the core belief in Gnosticism is that the Judaeo-Christian god is a usurper, an interloper - a demonic demiurge who has displaced the true God of Love. If you tell Jews, Christians or Moslems that the god they worship is actually the Prince of Darkness, you are asking for trouble!

But the Judaeo-Christian version of God is simply not conceivable in Eastern terms. That's the cause of all the terrible historical mess-up and confusion in monotheistic societies. Such an idea is obscene. Obscenity begins at the bottom of the garden here with this appalling Christianity.

Christianity is an obscenity?

Shhhhhhh - don't say a word! You know, the Copts had a perfectly okay Jesus from my point of view. Have you read the Gnostic treatises? Well, they postulated the existence of another Jesus who was talking much more like Paul Valéry than is comfortable for anyone. The Christian anti-propaganda has simply ruled all those Gnostic boys out of court. They called them long-haired hippies, shot them out of Alexandria, and chased them into the Balkans. The fifteenth century poet Villon belonged to them, and they say he disappeared around here in the Roussillon. In a big ballad that has just been deciphered it's quite clear that he belonged to a sect of a sort of Gnostic persuasion, and it's not astonishing that he should leave his last traces in Roussillon. But all this is folklore.

Does your exploration of the splitting of the ego explain the bewildering end of *Monsieur*, where characters who had appeared to be solid, stable, flesh and blood realities earlier in the novel begin to disintegrate and disappear? We are left with a set of figments within figments, and can't figure out which of them has created the others. What started as a conventional novel seems to have turned into playful metafiction – which is why we mentioned 'literary games' earlier.

It's more than just a game. It's cancer - cancer of the novel. I hope to redress and save the situation in the second novel, *Livia or Buried Alive*, which will be coming out next year. You will see that the first novel was written by two members of the cast - the novelist Blanford and his invented alter ego Sutcliffe - and now you will come to see how it got to be written.

Livia will look like a big commonplace novel, but then you realize that Blanford and his idiot child, his Sancho Panza, who wrote *Monsieur* between them, got the whole thing into a double focus which was quite wrong, and was why the book was a ruin. This is what emerges in the second novel. The characters in *Livia* have to start reliving the fictional events of *Monsieur* in the real world. as I said, it now looks really commonplace, but it refers back.

Eventually I want to write five in the Avignon series - a pentacle or quinx. In a sense, the novel proper hasn't really started yet. *Monsieur*, whatever its demerits or merits are, is rather like the *Moralités Légendaires* of Laforgue. I deliberately wanted to create the suffocating feeling of a garden in Huysmans' sense. Then with *Livia* I start again with the history of some young people who have been at Oxford and come for their summer holiday to Provence on the eve of World War II, and the writing

suddenly goes all pastoral. There are a whole lot of new characters you haven't met yet, like an Egyptian prince who wants to take Blanford off to Egypt, and who gives a dinner party on the Pont du Gard in Avignon. It's getting more and more complicated. I do hope I can keep its tail in its mouth otherwise it won't be homogeneous, but it is giving me a chance to throw it in and out of focus the whole time, and to pose the central question, which is the old question: 'how real is reality?'

Do you wander around Avignon to gather local colour?

Yes, in the winter, but actually I tell such lies that wandering around Avignon is really not necessary. I could write about it if I was wandering around town here. I get everything from that indefatigable reference book, the *Guide Bleu*, which is much more accurate than I shall ever be.

Will one way of keeping the series' tail in its mouth be to continue the Gnostic theme introduced in *Monsieur*.

Yes - there will be all sorts of Gnostic echoes, like the pentagram.

Did you have much difficulty digging up that Gnostic material? Gnosticism has been so detested for so long by the orthodox churches, they not only exiled or butchered the Gnostics themselves, but tried to destroy all written traces of their doctrines.

I started my exploration of Gnosticism in Egypt, where I had some access to remaining documents. I discovered Hermes Trismegistus and all that in Egypt. I used to pillage the old patriarchal library in Alexandria, so that I was pretty well abreast with it.

It's all such scattered stuff, though. I was helped enormously by a professor who has just written a short article on the Gnostics and the defects in *Monsieur*. He came to have lunch with me, and put me on to a book that I didn't know which has assembled all the stuff I've been scraping up here and there.

What that brilliant chap has done is to assemble and co-ordinate it all, and in one afternoon he was able to save me months of groping around. That is the virtue of people who take one look at something and know what you're writing about. The book that he put me onto is called *The Gnostics and Their Remains* by the Reverend C.W. King. It's about the absolute basis of all Gnostic beliefs. The author retraced the whole tradition through the markings of master masons on stone, which apparently was one consistent system. Peter Gower (the English form of the French Pythagore - Pythagoras) was the master mason who re-introduced it into England. It came from France and was the Templar's secret system. Obviously there's a great deal of rubble I mixed with it, but there is a line of argument there which is quite basic and quite viable.

We've been talking quite a lot about the spiritual aspect of your writing. Changing gears, have you been intellectually influenced by that great secular religion of the 20th century – Marxism-Leninism.

No – I think it's an escape, frankly. I had about four years in a socialist paradise after the war. When I was sent to Yugoslavia, the first thing I did was to spend an entire winter reading the holy books. I was vaguely sympathetic – a sort of woolly liberal. I thought it was a kind of empirical belief. "If things are malorganized this way, let's use a bit of nous and put them right that way. If it's juster to have this, that and the other, let's do it". I had an absolutely open mind about the matter.

Then I looked around me and found that it doesn't work economically, and morally it's a mess. I hadn't realised that anthropologically I was dealing with a religion. I was among the dervishes. It was dreadful. They were whirling night and day, repeating all these dreadful phrases, and things were clearly not working. So, in that sense, I'm anti-com. It doesn't work.

How did you find Yugoslavia otherwise?

Most of it left me just stone dead, and that wasn't because of the communism or the system - although it was a bit boring having a police dick you had to keep losing in a fast car. There's one little corner, though, which I've always had a hankering for. It's called Slovenia. They're Catholic, and the language is not intelligible to the other Yugoslavs. It's a string of lakes, and is rather like the north of Scotland. I've had happy moments there, and I felt that I could work there. I think the test of a place is that you can say to yourself: "Okay, I can work here. I'm going to write something."

You just used the two words 'work' and 'write' in the same breath. Clearly, for you they are synonymous. However, although you are now writing creatively full-time, you have had other work, such as press attaché. How does being a self-employed writer compare with regular paid employment? Does it give you enough to live on?

I'm not a millionaire, you must realize that. It took me thirty years to break even on writing and during those thirty years I guess I must have made about 2,000 pounds. It's only possible to live on your writing if you have four countries publishing you, so that the advances total up to a modest income per year until the books start rolling – and you never know whether the damn things are going to roll or not. It's like saying you're going to make a living betting on horses. As a poor little bourgeois, terrified of running into debt, it's a most precarious way to live. I can't think how the hell I ever got into it. I think of the comfort of having a salary on which the income tax is pre-paid, and I think of the glory of knowing where I am financially. Really, I feel like a croupier. I just don't know what's coming in and what's going out. If only I could find a simpler way of making a living! It is no good being a press attaché, because you get exhausted.

The awful thing is that I hate novels – loathe writing them, never read them. Actually, I'm a failed poet. I didn't make the grade as a poet, you see. I do the novels as honestly as I can, but being a sort of peddler too, on the move the whole time. I had to do novels to keep some bread in the house, and to keep the baby from screaming. It's true!

Talking about screaming babies – how many children do you have?

I have two daughters. Sappho, the youngest, is a feminist. The other day she started saying something about: "Husbands never..." I said: "Listen, I've changed your bloody nappies so don't come here yelling about the Mouvement de libération des femmes!" In fact, I've changed napkins under enemy fire. My damned daughter Penelope had dirty napkins when we had to get to shore on the Greek island of Cythera during the evacuation of Greece in 1941. Sappho said: "You didn't change mine!" I said: "I damn did - go ask your mother!" She said: "Well, you're an exception." I said: "Not at all. Husbands are actively interested in their babies."

Moving from babies to wives – do you like the married state?

No. I mean yes. I don't know! I think it's an ideal state, and I'm an idealist, but often it doesn't work on the ground floor. I get very bad press sometimes about being impossible to be married to or to live with, but I notice that my former wives would be quite happy to come back and resume the torture. I've never had brief, Hollywood-type marriages. Each of them was around eight years, which is not a weekend at Bournemouth. I think they really worked very well.

Your family relationship that is best known to the general public, of course, is with your brother Gerald. You appear, for instance, in his *My Family and Other Animals* as a wild, wine-soaked bohemian. How do you feel about being rather disrespectfully turned into a character in your kid brother's books?

We've actually appeared in each other's books. I've killed him in several of mine, and he has made mincemeat of me in some of his. I believe there's something very nasty just coming out which he won't show me. On my side, there were four messages in the Quartet directed personally at his weakest quarter. He pretends he has never read the Quartet, but I know he has. Such is the perfidy of brothers. These are just family teases - in the family everything is permitted.

Actually, he's not really interested in books: he writes them to buy monkeys for his zoo in Jersey. He doesn't regard himself seriously as a writer. He plunges all his dough into that zoo. What he really does value as his life's work is the recuperation of endangered species. You know, he has reinvented four species in the last two years. He's like Noah. It's extraordinary! He goes to China and gets the last pair of pink geese or something and comes back, and the damn things start breeding. He gets forty or fifty of them, and then he distributes them to other zoos. It's become a trust now - the little public zoo of Jersey. It's a most beautifully run breeding centre for the dying species.

I think he stakes his real claim, and justifiably, on that. The books are jokes for him. He's a wonderful Irish raconteur, he never misses - there's always a laugh. The readers feel that he's a friend. Of course, the fool sells much better than I do. It's awful. I'm going to write a book about elephants: that will fix him!

Earlier in our conversation, you were talking about your expatriate status here in France, and you also mentioned that some countries nourish you more than others. You've actually been living here now for around twenty years, so presumably you put France in the 'nourishing' category. What do you think of the French themselves?

France is in a tottery state, like everyone is. The safety in France is that the French are so much more interested in ideas than in reality, and they're so hysterical, they are likely to do everything over-night and come back like a kayak right side up before morning. They have extraordinary delusions about themselves. They continually inform me that they're Cartesians, but they're the most romantic people I've ever met, apart from the Italians, and the French are a good deal more solid than them. I think there's a depth of good sense and sensuality and metaphysical enquiry here, which is disguised by slogans and catch phrases and journalism, and takes quite a while to penetrate. Finally, though, what France has to give one is absolutely independent of anything that you read in the papers. There's something extremely nourishing here: it's accompanied by a lot of bad sense, but it is quite unique.

One is always in danger of falling into Anglo-Saxon sanctimoniousness about people who live too well. There is a certain disguised jealousy of French people's open sensuality among Anglo-Saxons. The French are so damn amoral that it's really wonderful.

Does your relish for France include Paris?

Kayslerling wrote a wonderful essay on the necessity of going to Paris, like in the ancient world it was necessary to go and spend a year in Athens. He was talking about how the big cities and their women form the thinking and the poetry of an age. Now, everyone, in a subtle, dim sort of way, feels they must have a year in Paris. They don't quite know why: they've got nothing particular to study, but Paris gives off a steady, heady flavour which, however touristified, always comes up to scratch and is not given off by Geneva. Henry Miller said something rather apt. I wrote to him at the end of the war, very depressed, and said that France was dead. I'd just seen a letter from Valéry saying 'La France est finie'. Miller replied to me from California: 'On the contrary. Paris has a very tiny, indefinable thing, but it's capital. It's like musk.'

So why is Henry Miller finishing out his days in California?

He's doing a metaphysical thing there. I think France wouldn't be good for him now. He came and spent two summers here with his children and his then wife, and he thoroughly enjoyed the Midi. But he was exhausted, and he has remained a tremendous Californian, a rangy American, and California hit him right - apart from the bores and the annoyances. He loves comfort, he's lazy, he keeps his pool flaming at about 87 degrees the whole time, and then he worries why he has no money. It's all going to heat a pool he never gets into.

He's also a bit timorous about doctors and things like that. He's in a bad way at the moment. He's got one leg that doesn't work, and he's got one eye that's gone. But he said to me: "I've been painting much better watercolours since I've only had one eye. If only I'd known sooner!"

Talking about people with one eye, your novels are heavily populated by people who are mutilated or seriously ill in one way or another.

I use that as a sort of castration thing. The castration complex is much more terrifying and much more powerful than any of the other listed complexes. It takes a great deal of acquaintance with psychiatry to realize this. It sounds such a farce, but it is actually a very, very powerful thing. That's why I lop off an eye, lop off a hand, lop off a leg here and there.

Talking about lopping, on a bridge in Egypt I once saw a chap knocked over and both legs cut off by the daily tram. While he was lying there, covered in puddles of blood, a crowd gathered round him like flies around a wound or an open eye – that's Egypt! - and a woman of about forty threw up her skirts and mounted him. It is a folk belief that if you could get impregnated by a dying man you could become fertile again, and she must have been sterile. So there were the police trying to get the woman away, the man groaning out his life, blood all over the damn place, crowds yelling and screaming - and then they say: "Durrell is exaggerating." But I saw it with my own eyes! And I've seen camels being cut up on the street. Sure - that's all perfectly normal. Nobody notices except me.

Going back to what we were saying about your long sojourn in France – are you here now for the duration, or would you like to end your days somewhere in Greece, which is another country that has clearly nourished you?

I don't really know at the moment. I'm not sure whether I can keep this wretched old house on any longer - this Charles Addams house as Sappho calls it. It's very agreeable, but it's really getting too expensive, and I live locked up in here like an old crow in the winters. My ideal would be to spend four months in Greece and the rest of the time here. If I can keep this ramshackle old Dracula house, I think that's what I'll do.

Greece is very nourishing, but not in the upper storey. Physically, Greece is for young people. It would be miserable to come to France too young: you'd simply drink too much and you'd founder. It's a very mature civilization. You need to come here when you're a bit slowed down and you've learned how not to drink too much and not to eat too much and how to savour things. But for young people Greece is marvellous. There are the islands for swimming, and it's full of absolutely undiscovered books and people, all situated in a lovely bright space.

I've got a little Zodiac with a ten-horse motor which I carry on the van roof. I can plant myself anywhere on a Greek island and I'm perfectly at home. I always go to Corfu. The whole Durrell family has such a bad record there, of course, that I'm the only member who is always welcome! Paleocastrizza has been ruined, but when you think that the kilometrage of the Greek coastline is equivalent to that of the whole of the rest of Europe, it will be a long, long time before they butch the whole thing, even with the assistance of the Greeks, who are enthusiastically helping with juke boxes at every corner. But if you know three words of Greek, everyone falls madly in love with you. They go around breathing at you and you can do anything you want.

At the risk of finishing this conversation on a rather morbid note, could we ask about your attitude towards death, which to judge from *Monsieur* is shaping up to be a central metaphysical issue in the Avignon novels.

Death? Well, you can't really do anything about it, can you? Have you tried?

Is there anything after?

In a sense, yes, because death doesn't really exist. It's one of those intellectual abstractions. We've ruined things with our whole attitude: our entire intellectual structure is wrong. I think this is what you feel when you're standing on your head and getting the axis of your breathing right by concentrating on the end of your nose.

The Eastern approach is not discontinuous like the Western one, which ends with hell fire or abrupt cessation of breath. In the West, we live by a time-bound chronology. Death sets in with conception. In terms of purely chronological time, we're dying at a certain pulse rate which we could easily write down on a piece of paper. That is complete illusion, though, because we're not really here at all in the context that we think we are. Sorry, that was a dirty one - have another glass of wine!

So far as my own biological death goes, though, I've already bought my grave. There's a most delicious little chapel here. It's the oldest one in the area and it hasn't got any religion at all. Thanks to the mayor, I've got thirty quid's worth of ground there. It's rather narrow, and I'll have to stand up - it's a cocktail party affair - but it goes right down to Australia, he assures me. I hope my ashes will be there one fine day. It's awfully pretty. At the moment there are only bulrushes growing on the place where I hope to grow myself some time, but the view is absolutely wonderful. There's no tomb like it in the region.