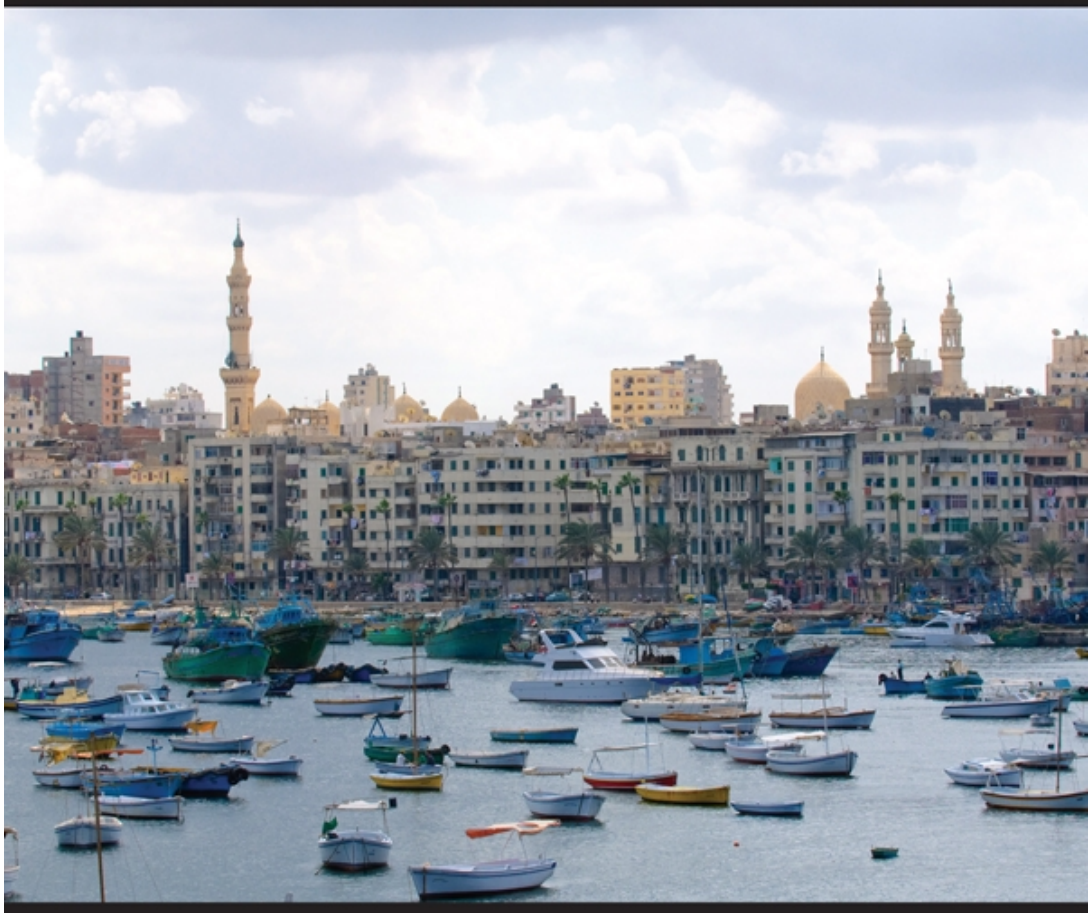
DURRELL AND THE CITY

COLLECTED ESSAYS ON PLACE



EDITED BY

DONALD P. KACZVINSKY

Durrell and the City

Durrell and the City

Collected Essays on Place

Edited by Donald P. Kaczvinsky

FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Madison • Teaneck

Published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
Co-published with The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Durrell and the city : collected essays on place / edited by Donald P. Kaczvinsky.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-61147-453-4 (cloth : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-61147-454-1 (electronic)
1. Durrell, Lawrence--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Alexandria (Egypt)--In literature. I. Kaczvinsky, Donald P., 1960-
PR6007.U76Z63 2011
823'.912--dc23
2011039246

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

There's no new land, my friend, no
New sea; for the city will follow you . . . .
—From "The City" by Constantine Cavafy as translated by Lawrence Durrell

Contents

I

The Country and the City

Chapter One
Urban Flight and Rural Reception: Modernist Refuge in *Panic Spring* and *The Dark Labyrinth*

James M. Clawson

With good reason, Lawrence Durrell's cities figure among his most memorable characters. From Alexandria's numerous sexes and religions to Avignon's windblown streets, Durrell's cities have their own gravity. Nevertheless, Durrell had characters before these major fictions, and he had characters before his cities. Balthazar's often-quoted description of Alexandria as a city "half imagined (yet wholly real)" continues to explain that the city "begins and ends in us, roots lodged in our memory" (*AlQ*, 209), suggesting that we, this "us"—*us characters*—needed to have existed in order to have memory as the soil in which the city could lodge its roots. It is a particular construction of the metropolis-as-nexus-of-shared-experience

increasingly common in fiction in the later half of the twentieth century: a city is less understood as the place where people live so much as the concept lived in common by those people. We see the primacy of the people over the product in various contemporary understandings of the philosophy of place: in the cultural humanization of place described by Edward Relph in the 1970s; in the understanding of space as practiced place described by Michel de Certeau in the 1980s; in the creation by Salman Rushdie of India as an "Imaginary Homeland," written of in *Midnight's Children* in the 1980s and further theorized in the 1990s. The trend is nevertheless realized by earlier writers, too: Martin Heidegger writes of place as a function of human involvement, and Edward Said takes as understood that properties of place are constructions.[1]

Durrell's own philosophy of place is not a consistent one, especially as his writing develops over time. For one reason or another, we often overlook this development, instead enjoying the convenience of eliding Durrell's fifty-five productive years into one cohesive vision. For example, "The Elephant's Back," published in 1982, helps us understand fabulism in *Pied Piper of Lovers*, published forty-seven years earlier.[2] Likewise, *The Black Book* raises similar questions of metafiction and authenticity as those found in *The Avignon Quintet*. These works demonstrate artistic momentum across Durrell's oeuvre; nevertheless, we only need to look at his treatment of the Urban Landscape in earlier novels to see how significantly it differs from that in later works.

Durrell's earlier novels—*Panic Spring* and *The Dark Labyrinth*—are important first because they show unusual consonance in their respective treatments of rural spaces as preferred to the urban. Secondly, this respect for the rural differs from prevailing trends in earlier modernist novels by foregrounding the individual over the collective. Finally, these rural spaces are important in the study of Durrell's works because they mark a distinction —though more subtly—between his earlier works, which turn to the countryside, and his later, which turn instead to the city.

First published in 1937 by Faber under the pseudonym Charles Norden, *Panic Spring* is Lawrence Durrell's second novel. The novel describes the island-limbo of a group of characters from all walks of life. Each of these characters has come to the island Mavrodaphne for different reasons, but each seeks restorative effects in their isolated location.The first we meet, the

Englishman Christian Marlowe, is a teacher who, after the war, is left with "the legacy of a wrecked nervous system" (*PS*, 6). Accompanying these mental problems are bouts of uncontrollable rage. He quits his teaching job to become someone who "strikes a trail for a Thule" (5):

> Don't ask me why. I must go my own way from now. . . . There was a weight pressing on my brain. Then snap, and I exploded. . . . Where am I going? I don't know. Why? I can't clearly say. For how long? At the moment I feel, forever. . . . Southward ever southward. (*PS*, 9)

Marlowe's uncertain journey is marked with at least one element of specificity: "southward ever southward." In this regard, Marlowe's quest matches that of Baird in *The Dark Labyrinth*.

The Dark Labyrinth, first published as *Cefalû* in 1947 (ten years after *Panic Spring*), follows another group of travelers as they take a cruise through the Mediterranean and stop off on Crete to visit what might be the labyrinth famed in myth. For John Baird, a writer, travel signifies something like rebirth: "Baird began his travels . . . gradually emptying his ambitions one by one into the slow wake of a life which, curiously enough, seemed only now to be beginning [and which] confirmed the first fugitive feelings of happiness at being alone" (*DL*, 56). One of his fellow passengers describes what she feels has driven him on his journey: "I think that it is only in the south that they warm themselves at life instead of transforming it into literature" (57). When he has sufficiently traveled, she declares he has "discovered the south" (59).

Across two novels, this repeated romancing of the south might not seem important, but it is. For starters, both books are highly symbolic. Ray Morrison points out that *Panic Spring* is a romance; as such, Mavrodaphne is a symbol.[3] In *Panic Spring*, not only does Mavrodaphne represent a kind of limbo for the characters, but they gladly explain to the reader that unreal role of the island: "It's a bloody limbo . . . It doesn't exist for any of us really. . . . Yes, he supposed there was some truth in it. Perhaps Mavrodaphne was some kind of limbo between lives."(*PS*, 171-72). In *Dark Labyrinth*, too, the labyrinth represents the passage from one world to another, leading characters to similar questions of ontology: "'What is reality?' said Fearmax aloud. . . . 'Suppose, then, that all this were simply an apprenticeship . . . towards a new degree of self-knowledge'" (*DL*, 193-4). The limbo manifests as a loss of time in both *Panic Spring* ("No, there was

no future, as there was no past") (*PS*, 169) and *Dark Labyrinth* ("Past tense, present tense—what does it mean?") (*DL*, 239).

Moreover, the novels explore the limitations and effects of ideology and expectation, both for the characters and for the reader. Morrison explains, too, that as a romance, *Panic Spring* operates in the realm of forms, types, and expectations.[4] In some cases, these explorations are obvious from the surface of the text: Mavrodaphne is "more than an idea, . . . It's, it's . . . a Figure, that's what it is" (*PS*, 172). In other instances, they are more subtle. It is only in such a context, for example, that it makes sense for a psychoanalyst in *Dark Labyrinth* to describe his "theory of psychic union between two essentially polar types . . . named . . . 'dominant' and 'recessive'"—and the manner in which his relationship with another character "fulfilled" that theory (*DL*, 34). And it is not a coincidence that, when John Baird's wife acts up, she does so in a way that she can be recognized from a limited list of categorizations—for, after all, as Baird explains, "people (an irrational part of his mind kept interjecting) are products of their experience. Alice was now behaving rather like Lilian Gish in—what was the name of the film?" (DL, 49). Nor is it out of place for Christian Marlowe to describe his arrival at the island of Mavrodaphne by noting precisely what it is not: "There were no dolphins leaping to be sure. No sleek vine tendrils wreathed the mast. There were no solemn dances trod to the flutter of Attic flutes" (*PS*, 21) This first-impression description of what the scene *lacks* contrasts vividly with Marlowe's second impressions, describing what the island *has* two paragraphs later: "If ever afterwards he chose to reconstruct from memory the very moment of their anchoring, the hundred images of things would leap out at him, dazzling. The place lay, like a toy, in a sort of hard shining trance." From the sand to the rocks and water, everything natural here stands out for the way it fits in. But the jetty, the thing unnatural to the landscape, is "bright in a new coat of paint." (*PS*, 22).

In these descriptions, it is obvious to see that the travelers are new additions to an already-established place. The things that are notably absent from the arrival—dolphins, vines, and evocative music—are things that depend on conditioned expectations. If Alice acts up in a way that reminds Baird of Lilian Gish, then it is fair to say Marlowe was expecting an arrival at Mavrodaphne to match sets in the film *The Blue Lagoon*. That it fails to meet his expectations emphasizes problems of *expectations*, rather than

problems of *place*; that it nevertheless delights him suggests that the island is able to liberate him from these expectations. It is perhaps for this reason that the island's dolphins make an appearance later, only when Marlowe's thoughts turn northward. Confronted by a letter from England, Marlowe is forced to consider returning: "As he put [the letter] in his pocket he felt the whole weight of his England press down on him, like a sentence." Feeling the weight of "his England," he looks over the island's landscape, down to the sea, where "a couple of dolphins slipped westward into the night" (*PS*, 174-5).

Both novels operate in a symbolic realm when characters speak of going "southward ever southward." *South* is a symbol of something greater. The opposite of south in these two works is not north, but "England." And it might be fair to say that "England" is not *England*, so much as the kind of English culture exemplified in places like *London*. Durrell's first novel in part clarifies this distinction. *Pied Piper of Lovers* ends with a letter from Walsh Clifton, now living with his partner Ruth in the English countryside seclusion of Devon: writing to a friend in London, Walsh describes his house as possessing a standoffish face whose "nose and mouth (used as a porch) . . . express the most terrific contempt for everyone and everything."[5] *Panic Spring* finds Walsh having traded Devon for Mavrodaphne (*PS*, 29, 63-78). Also in *Panic Spring*, before Marlowe is determined to go "southward ever southward," he first stops in Cumberland in the north—the farthest one can get from London while remaining in England—before realizing that it is not far enough and that he instead needs to "get out of England" (*PS*, 8). And Campion in *The Dark Labyrinth* projects the kind of defensive regionalism that reminds Baird of D. H. Lawrence, who, "refused to talk to him [Baird] except in an outlandish Derbyshire accent" (*DL*, 54). Neither Lawrence nor Campion nor Baird belongs to London society. Baird travels "southward ever southward," to get as far away as he can from expectations of the ever Big-City English; Marlowe and Walsh travel, too, to escape others' expectations, seeking refuge in the rural. And other characters also discover welcome relief in the rural—whether it is John and Elsie Truman growing into the seclusion of "the roof of the world," or what seems to be the ghost of Ruth teaching them the ways of happiness. Only the seclusion of their respective rural landscapes can shield these characters from *ideologies* they must "fulfill." Rather than describing roles, the rural landscape receives them

in the same way it has received the alien jetty, now "bright in a new coat of paint."

It is common to read Durrell in a context of modernism. From Joyce's Dublin to Eliot's unreal London, the cityscape is a familiar theme in modernist works, and it is this theme we often take up when speaking of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Though he publishes his major "city" works over thirty years after the arguable zenith of literary modernity, Durrell takes on many of its considerations. After all, Balthazar's city, which "begins and ends in us, roots lodged in our memory" (*AlQ*, 209), echoes modernist anxieties of control, and his truth that "most contradicts itself in time" (*AlQ*, 216) reiterates modernist concerns of knowledge. As for the English novel, Peter Kalliney convincingly suggests that some of these anxieties are tied to the fall of Britain's imperial power. With this fall, Kalliney suggests, Britons increasingly looked for some other hook on which to hang their national hat. The opaque class structure of England's city centers, he continues, offered refuge from the fallout of cultural insecurities.[6]

Reading Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, just one of many modernist city novels, Kalliney finds an "attack on English imperialist ideology and its commitment to modernist narrative strategies,"[7] though he also acknowledges the novel's celebration of London's "sheer vivacity."[8] As such, reading Durrell against Woolf is revealing. Most strikingly, the characters within Woolf's novel have different relationships to the city from which Durrell's characters flee. For Elizabeth Dalloway, the city offers freedom, because she knows she belongs to it and she can navigate within it, boarding omnibuses at will.[9] For Clarissa Dalloway, too, walking in London is "better than walking in the country" (5). Clarissa moreover sees the city as providing something to which she can belong: "Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived . . . like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist" (8). Sonita Sarker has placed Woolf among a group of intellectuals for whom "the city was itself a demonstration of what I call an ethno-nationalist Englishness."[10] And fittingly, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's connection to the city is one that is withheld from those outside this "ethno-nationalist" identity: Miss Kilman cannot enjoy Clarissa's or Elizabeth's mobility, and Lucrezia is angered at having to live in "this awful city."[11]

The connection Elizabeth and Clarissa feel with London (and Westminster) is one of justified expectation. Big Ben's many interruptions throughout the novel might signal to recent transplants the capacity for the city continually to intrude and to overlay its own order. But for Clarissa, at least, the peals both establish and fulfill the expectation of those who belong to the city:

> For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? over twenty,—one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense . . . before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. (3-4)

For Richard Dalloway, too, the city presents and fulfills a set of expectations matching those of his wife: "Big Ben was beginning to strike, first the warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable" (99).

By its mechanisms, the city establishes a common set of expectations that connect those who belong, touching all Londoners alike as Clarissa's mist touches all the branches in a tree. Even Peter Walsh, while recognizing a feeling of disconnection in his return from India, nevertheless finds room for "moments of pride in England" (41), in the "splendid achievement" (47) of London. Though five years absent from his city, he muses on this ability of the city to impel its inhabitants to a common end: "it seemed as if the whole of London were embarking. . . . Cabs were rushing round the corner, like water round the piers of a bridge, drawn together, it seemed to him because they bore people going to her party, Clarissa's party" (139).

Unlike Durrell's Baird or Marlowe, Woolf's protagonists belong to this city that helps to define the boundaries of their respective selves. Shannon Forbes explains that London provides Woolf's characters a stable, national identity. Not only does the city offer surrogate stability to Clarissa, who would otherwise lack a sense of validation, but it has also "sustained itself structurally throughout the War," synecdochically standing for a nation that has done the same.[12] But if Baird and Marlowe reject Forbes' stability and Sarker's ethno-nationalist validation, they may—mistakenly—be excused for a sense of conservatism. After all, it is only "in the face of imperial collapse," Kalliney notes,[13] that "England" began to know itself less for its martial might and its impressive empire. As the empire wanes, "English literature draws more and more frequently upon images of the urban

landscape—and less often upon rural England and depictions of country life—to mark the boundaries of national culture."[14]

Before this turn to the cities, the English novel liked to spend a day in the countryside, where it could still find demonstrable evidence of English brawn. Witness E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, where at the country house "men had been up since dawn. Their hours were ruled, not by a London office, but by the movements of the crops and the sun. . . . They are England's hope."[15] On the contrary, one of Forster's characters feels that "London only stimulates, it cannot sustain" (172). Forster defines England against the city of London. The rural space offers Margaret the opportunity to "settle down" in a way that Helen hopes will be "permanent," keeping alive England's hope for eternity, but the city looms on the horizon: "London's creeping" (388). Jon Hegglund explains that the country house offers refuge against the pace of modernity found in urban centers.[16] Where Forbes finds in Woolf a sense of urban sustainability, Hegglund finds in Forster that same national identity in the rural. Nevertheless, the encroaching of the city at the end of the novel suggests that, in the battle between urban and rural, the latter is destined to lose: "Suburbia appears as an undifferentiated mass, a creeping 'rust' that threatens . . . Howards End as an incarnation of national place."[17]

It is most telling that, though Forster and Woolf choose opposing means, their ends are the same: connection. In Forster, rural England allows individuals the opportunity to "live in fragments no longer," satisfying the novel's dictum to "only connect!"[18] Aziz and Fielding seek similar connection in *A Passage to India*, too, but that locale "didn't want it."[19] In Forster, the English countryside alone can reward with connection, but in Woolf, connections come from the city. Shared sights and sounds connect Londoners in a shared mist, and the recognizing of connections imparts humanity and a sense of wholeness. Likewise in Woolf's *Orlando*, the titular character, who belongs to London several centuries over, finds her various selves coalescing as she travels through the city until she is finally, "rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self."[20] For Woolf, the city offers connection both between and within those who belong to it.

For Forster, London rejects a connection to something realer—and it does so in a way that begs the question of "England's hope." For Woolf, the city is something communal to be part of—but which nevertheless chooses carefully

whom it allows to belong. Thus, Forster's earlier depictions of rural life present "Englishness" unbridled, while Woolf's city hosts the class tensions through which that Englishness gains a voice. Both authors focus on the formation of a shared identity. The juxtaposition of immigrant and Englishman, the juxtaposition of classes, the acknowledgment of those juxtapositions, and the symbolic treatment thereof: these treatments in English city novels in the early part of the twentieth century all concern themselves with identifying and justifying what it means to be English in the face of a declining empire.

On the contrary, with their retreats to foreign islands, Durrell's early works concern themselves more with a self-identification and self-exploration. Durrell's early works mark a change from nation to citizen, from society to self. While Orlando fully recognizes herself upon collecting her selves among the city's many boroughs, it is only after taking refuge in the rural spaces of Greece that Baird recognizes himself in the mirror: "The face that stared back at him was certainly the face of a person. It was good, very good, to feel at last a responsibility for his own mind and body: to be rich with increase" (*DL*, 59). By moving these considerations to disenfranchised once-colonial locales, Durrell forefronts the change from nation to self. By removing his rural landscapes from the very English Devon to the unplaceable Mavrodaphne,[21] Durrell is able to avoid the regionalism inherent in works by the likes of Forster and D. H. Lawrence. After all, and this is unusual for Durrell, place plays second fiddle to the characters in *these* novels.[22]

These works are not unusual for having protagonists who take rural retreats; Isabelle Keller has already pointed out this motif in both *The Black Book* and *The Alexandria Quartet*,[23] and we can see it variously in other works as well. But Darley's island does not preclude his belonging to and continued infatuation with Alexandria, nor did Corfu stop Lawrence Lucifer from imaginatively inhabiting Herbert Gregory's London. And maybe, after all, it is unfair to read place in Durrell's first novels alongside later ones. As Donald Kaczvinsky notes about *Panic Spring*, "Durrell had not yet discovered how to effectively and imaginatively render the 'spirit of place'—whether it be England, Greece, Alexandria, or Avignon—that would organize his themes and distinguish his mature fiction."[24] All this said,

while Durrell expressed hopes of having left a consistent "*oeuvre,*"[25] there are discrepancies that need exploring.

In the same essay in which Durrell calls his characters "functions" of his landscapes, he also explains that the purpose of travel is to understand the exotic: "We travel really to try and get to grips with this mysterious quality of 'Greekness' or 'Spanishness.'"[26] His essay concerns itself primarily with landscape as something affective to individuals—ideas Durrell cites as borrowed from D. H. Lawrence and which we certainly see in the two novels. But in these novels, travel is not a means to the other; it is a means to the self. Baird remarks that "travel [is] only a sort of metaphorical journey—an outward symbol of an inward march upon reality" (*DL*, 59). Something in these earlier novels, written in 1937 and 1947, differs from the essay published in 1960. And the refuge from expectations these characters find in the rural is not far off from the kind of refuge cities like Alexandria and Avignon offer their inhabitants—all discussions of flora and fauna aside. So something in these earlier novels differs, too, from Durrell's later works.

As is always true with Durrell's work, Alexandria and his other cities have hidden depths. The city "begins and ends in us, roots lodged in our memory." But the city also compels Darley to consider it, and he cannot help asking, "Why must I return to it night after night . . . ? Have I not said enough about Alexandria? Am I to be reinfected once more by the dream of it and the memory of its inhabitants?" (*AlQ*, 209-210). By the time Durrell is writing *The Alexandria Quartet*, his city has outgrown its roots. But in *Panic Spring* and *The Dark Labyrinth*, at least, it is not yet clear that it will.

NOTES

1. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books / Penguin Books, 1992), 9–21; Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 145–61; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

2. Lawrence Durrell, "From the Elephant's Back," *Poetry London / Apple Magazine* 2 (1982): 1–9.

3. Ray Morrison, *A Smile in His Mind's Eye: A Study of the Early Works of Lawrence Durrell* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 157–158, 162.

4. Morrison, 160–61.

5. Lawrence Durrell, *Pied Piper of Lovers*, edited and with an introduction by James Gifford and afterword by James A. Brigham (Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2008), 250.

6. Peter J. Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 6.

7. Kalliney, 30.

8. Kalliney, 76.

9. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114–15.

10. Sonita Sarker, "Locating a Native Englishness in Virginia Woolf's *The London Scene*," *Feminist Formations* 13.2 (2001): 4.

11. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway,* 112, 56.

12. Shannon Forbes, "Equating Performance with Identity: The Failure of Clarissa Dalloway's Victorian 'Self' in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 38.1 (2005): 41.

13. Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger*, 6.

14. Kalliney, 9.

15. E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Knopf, 1921), 370.

16. Jon Hegglund, "Defending the Realm: Domestic Space and Mass Cultural Contamination in *Howards End* and *An Englishman's Home*," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 40.4 (1997): 6.

17. Hegglund, 10.

18. Forster, *Howards End*, 214.

19. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Penguin, 1998), 288.

20. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 299.

21. The island is unplaceable on maps (see Gifford's note 23 in Durrell, *Panic Spring*, 216).

22. Except in specific instances in some works (*Bitter Lemons*, especially), Durrell's locales—early and late—allow the Briton to discover himself as being no different from non-Britons. To that end, many of the main characters are not even British but instead must qualify their identities with awkward hyphenations.

23. Isabelle Keller, "A Portrait of Durrellian Cities: The Anamorphic Blurring of Cityscapes," in *Lawrence Durrell Revisited: Lawrence Durrell revisité*, edited by Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Confluences 21 (Nanterre, France: Université Paris X, 2002), 151.

24. Donald P. Kaczvinsky, "*Panic Spring* and Durrell's 'Heraldic' Birds of Rebirth," in *Lawrence Durrell: Comprehending the Whole*. Julius Rowan Raper, Melody L. Enscore, and Paige Matthey Bynum, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 44.

25. Lawrence Durrell, "Looking Back Now on the Whole Thing," interview by Desmond Christy, in *Lawrence Durrell: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 227.

26. Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character" in *Spirit of Place: Letters and Essays on Travel*, ed. Alan G. Thomas (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1969), 156, 157.