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LAWRENCE DURRELL

The interview took place at Durrell's home in the Midi. It is a peasant cottage with four rooms to which he has added a bathroom and a lavatory. He writes in a room without windows, with notices of his work in foreign languages he cannot understand pinned to the bookcase. The sitting room, where the interview was held, has a large fireplace and a French window leading onto a terrace constructed by Durrell himself. From the terrace one has a view of the small valley at the end of which he lives. It is a bare rocky district, full of twisted olive trees destroyed in a blight a few years back.

Lawrence Durrell is a short man, but in no sense a small one. Dressed in jeans, a tartan shirt, a navy-blue pea jacket, he looks like a minor trade-union official who has successfully absconded with the funds. He is a voluble, volatile personality, who talks fast and with enormous energy. He is a gift for an interviewer, turning quite stupid questions into apparently intelligent ones by assuming that the interviewer meant something else. Though he was rather distrustful of the tape recorder, he acquiesced in its use. He smokes heavily, Gauloises bleues. When at rest he looks like Laurence Olivier; at other times his face has all the ferocity of a professional wrestler's.

The interview was recorded on April 23, 1959, the birthday of William Shakespeare and Scobie of Durrell's *Quartet*. Beginning after lunch and continuing that evening, it commenced with Durrell reviewing his early life, his schooling at Canterbury, and his failure to enter Cambridge.

—Gene Andrewski, 1959

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after Cambridge turned you down?

LAWRENCE DURRELL

Well, for a time I had a small allowance. I lived in London. I played the piano in a nightclub—the "Blue Peter" in St. Martin's Lane, of all places—until we were raided by the police. I worked as an estate agent in Leytonstone and had to collect rents, and was badly bitten by dogs. I tried everything, including the Jamaica police. I have been driven to writing by sheer ineptitude. I wanted to write, of course, always. I did a certain amount of stuff but I couldn't get anything published—it was too bad. I think writers today learn so much more quickly. I mean, I could no more write as well at their age than fly.

INTERVIEWER

Had you written anything before *Pied Piper of Lovers*?

DURRELL

Oh yes, since the age of eight I have been madly scribbling.

INTERVIEWER

How long did you stay in London before you decided to leave?

DURRELL

In my parents' view, only colonial office jobs or the army were then respectable; their dream was to see me as an Indian civil servant. Thank God I escaped it, but I manfully did my best to try all these things. I think I must have failed more examinations in about three years than probably anyone of my weight, height, size, and religion. But my parents, who were unwisely sending me quite large sums of money, didn't realize that I was putting it all into night clubs and fast cars and living a perfectly stupid puppy-clubman sort of life, do you see? I think the first breath of Europe I got was when I went on a reading party for one final cram for something—I think it was for Cambridge again, which I must have tried about eight times, I suppose. Mathematics—three, two, one, nought—it was always this damn thing. I was taken to Switzerland, you see, which gave me a glimpse of Paris on the way, and I went to a reading party which was conducted by a very deaf old scholar, and instead of reading I suddenly had a look at Lausanne, Vevey, and the lakes there, and on the way back managed to get three days in Paris which converted me to Europe as such. And then after this whole question of being educated failed and faded out, I made my way immediately for Paris.

INTERVIEWER

Was it then that you met Henry Miller?

DURRELL

Oh, no, that was much later. I went to Paris for a brief period and then I came back and convinced my family, who were dying of catarrh, that it was necessary to get out of England for a breath of air and see some new landscapes and places. And it was then that I persuaded them that Greece was a good idea, which my brother has recounted in his book on Greece. So then I went ahead and they all followed about a year later, and then began this wonderful period in Corfu of—oh, what? I suppose five or six years?—really

until the outbreak of the war. In the meantime I'd got married and, you know, I was trying everything.

INTERVIEWER

It seems that your writing very much improved when you got to Corfu. For instance, *Panic Spring* is very much better than *Pied Piper of Lovers*.

DURRELL

Yes, it's still a damn bad book. There's quite a gap in between there, you know. *Panic Spring* I think I wrote there, actually. I used all the color material I could get from Corfu, there's no doubt.

INTERVIEWER

And since then you have never lived in England at all, have you?

DURRELL

Well, no, I haven't, really. I have not been domiciled in England. I have had the odd six months at a time, I mean, which is just about the length of time I enjoy England for. It gives you time to see your friends, get all the free meals you can, and everyone is glad to see you, to begin with, and so on. But I must confess that I've been a European since I was eighteen, and I think it is a grave national defect that we aren't Europeans any more. We were talking today at lunch about Kingsley Amis. I was thinking about the anti-living-abroad trend or something—which implies a sort of unpatriotic attitude on my part—but, you see, my heroes of my generation—the Lawrences, the Norman Douglases, the Aldingtons, the Eliots, the Graveses—their ambition was always to be a European. It didn't qualify their Englishness in any way, but it was recognized that a touch of European fire was necessary, as it were, to ignite the sort of dull sodden mass that one became, living in an unrestricted suburban way. Things would have been vastly different if I had had a very large private income, been a member of the gentry, had a charming country house and a flat in town and

the ability to live four months of the year in Europe: I should certainly have been domiciled in London. But when you're poor and you have to face shabby boarding houses and all the dreariness of South Ken or Bayswater or Woburn Place, with only the chance of seeing Europe in snippets of a month at a time, you have to make the vital decision as to whether you live in Europe and visit England, or whether you live in England and visit Europe.

INTERVIEWER

There is still quite a lot of violent anti-bourgeois England in your early things.

DURRELL

I think part of it I may have got from my heroes of that time—Lawrence, as I said, and Aldington, and so on—but it's more than just a fashionable thing. I think that, as I say, in England, living as if we are not part of Europe, we are living against the grain of what is nourishing to our artists, do you see? There seems to be an ingrown psychological thing about it, I don't know why it is. You can see it reflected even in quite primitive ways like this market business now—the European Common Market. It's purely psychological, the feeling that we are too damned superior to join this bunch of continentals in anything they do. And I think that's why it is so vitally important for young artists to identify more and more with Europe. As for me, I have joined the Common Market, as it were. But, mind you, that doesn't qualify one's origins or one's attitudes to things. I mean if I'm writing, I'm writing for England—and so long as I write English it will be for England that I have to write.

INTERVIEWER

You show a great respect for England in many of your things—for instance, the General Uncebunke poems.

DURRELL

Well, of course, yes. You mustn't forget that I'm a mixed-up son of "a failed B.A. colonial of Benares University." And to a certain extent, being a colonial, you have these wild romantic dreams about "Home." I mean, Roy Campbell is another example of a mixed-up kid from another colony.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't find it difficult to write in England, did you?

DURRELL

No, I think it's a most creative landscape. It's a *violently* creative landscape. I think the only thing that's wrong is the way we're living in it.

INTERVIEWER

Can you summarize what's wrong with the way we're living in it?

DURRELL

The things one notices immediately are petty—it's the construction of a sort of giant pin-table of inhibitions and restrictive legislation and ignoble, silly defenses against feeling, really. That's what it amounts to. Of course there may be other mitigating factors which one leaves out when one is talking jolly glibly. If you put a writer in the pontiff's seat, God knows what you might expect out of his mouth—you know, there may be economic conditions. It may be just that England is too overcrowded to be able to live in a joyous—

INTERVIEWER

Mediterranean way?

DURRELL

No, not necessarily Mediterranean. One of the writers I reread every two or three years is Surtees, and I very much hoped that

England was going to be Surtees's England—a vulgar, jolly, roistering England, not especially aesthetic or cultivated or delicate in any sense, but something with its vulgar roots in food, sex, and good living. By which I don't mean fine living or refinement of values, because those are just the top dressing. It is at the roots that something's wrong.

INTERVIEWER

It is the whole attitude towards living in England that's wrong, then?

DURRELL

One says that, but what I want to say is that it is wrong for me only. I don't wish to correct it. I am not a proselytizer. I wouldn't know if you asked me tomorrow how I'd go about making that English nation over into something nearer my heart's desire. I am simply trying to explain to you why one is always an English orphan, as a writer, as an artist; and one goes to Europe because, like a damn cuckoo, one has to lay these eggs in someone else's nest. Here in France, in Italy, and Greece, you have the most hospitable nests, you see, where there's very little chi-chi about writing or artists as such, but which provide the most extraordinarily congenial frames in which a job of work can be done. Here one feels on a par with a good or bad cheese—the attitude to art of a Frenchman is the attitude to what is viable—eatable, so to speak. It is a perfectly down to earth *terre à terre* thing, you see. Yet they don't treat Camembert with less reverence than they treat Picasso when he comes to Arles; they are in the same genre of things. But in England everyone is worried to death about moral uplift and moral downfall, and they never seem to go beyond that problem, simply because they feel separated from the artists. It's the culture that separates, you see, and turns the artist into a sort of refugee. It's not a question of residence. Even the home artist has to fight for recognition; instantly, people don't recognize that he is as good as good cheddar. It's a different category to them.

INTERVIEWER

Who would you say was the first Englishman who felt this particularly?

DURRELL

It goes back all the way. The last bunch were the Romantics. And what about Shelley, Keats, and Byron and company? They all needed Europe. And now, this sinister decision on the part of the young—I sympathize with them personally—Kingsley Amis and John Wain, admirable writers both—shut up all through the war years in England, with Europe all plowed up anyhow, and by the end of the war Europe really didn't mean anything to them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the war made it worse?

DURRELL

Oh, yes. And also the financial restrictions on getting to Europe. I mean this wretched travel-allowance thing. The whole complex of "Stay out of Europe," as it were. Which is so sad. I wouldn't go so far as to say we caused the last two world wars by our indifference to Europe, but certainly Hitler wouldn't have taken six years to mow down if we'd been very much earlier on the ball and helped Europe put him down. And perhaps that might go for the 1914 thing. The Europeans themselves see us as people absolutely ready at any moment to draw stumps and clear out. I am not talking simply of politics now, I'm also talking about art.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think a young writer in England today should get out and join the Europeans?

DURRELL

Well, after all, it's possible to write *Wuthering Heights* without leaving England, except for a weekend at Brussels. In fact I write

Here at least there was nothing to
quality memory, for it was all exactly as I remembered it. I had
stepped back into Clea's room as one might step back into
a favourite picture. The crowded bookshelves and the heavy
drawing boards, the tiny cottage piano, the cluttered candlesticks
desk with its papers in disorder. Against the wall a bundle
of canvases with sharing their backs. I went and turned a few
round. "My God you've gone abstract"

"I know. Balthazar hates them! I expect it is
just a phase I am going through. It's a different way of
modelling one's feelings about things. Do you hate them?"

"No. They're stranger than the last I saw."

"Hmm. Candlelight is flattering them with false
Chiaroscuro."

"Perhaps"

"Come, sit down and drink."

As if by common consent we
sat facing each other on the carpet as we had so often
done in the past, cross legged like "Armenian tailors"
as she once said; to drink our nightcap by the rosy
light of the candles which [redacted] stood unwinking in
the stale air. Here too we at last embraced with
— how shall one say — a momentous calm, the reward of
silence, as if the cups of language had silently overflowed
into these eloquent kisses which annealed the
heart. They were not aberrant, but like soft cloud
forms of a novel innocence

A manuscript page from Lawrence Durrell's novel *Clea*

perfectly well in England, but I'm always being foxed because the pubs are shut. It's just a petty symbol of the kind of limitless obstruction which is put in people's way.

INTERVIEWER

What do you find are the best conditions for writing?

DURRELL

I've never had really comfy conditions to write under. This last time I came to France I had four hundred pounds, with all kinds of impending debts like school fees and so on; I had been waiting fifteen years for this quartet of novels to form up and get ready, and when I got the signal saying the bloody thing was there and I only had to write it out, it was at the very worst period of my life, when I had no job, a tiny gratuity, and it literally was a choice—I suspected I would be driven from France and back to funds in two months, but thank God the Americans and Germans saved me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you plan to go to America?

DURRELL

I haven't really made any plans. You know I'm so travel-stained with fifteen or sixteen years of it—the great anxiety of being shot at in Cyprus, being bombed, being tormented by the Marxists in Yugoslavia—that now for the first time I've a yen for my tiny roof. Staying put is so refreshing that it's almost anguish to go into town for a movie. I haven't seen a movie for eighteen months now, and I'm only eighteen minutes away from one. So while on one hand I'd like to go to America I feel it's an experience I should preserve for my late fifties. Experiences of continents are much bigger than experiences of small countries. Since both America and Russia between them are going to determine the shape of our future, one is obliged as a traveler in visiting those countries to stop traveling and start thinking. It's different from

going to Italy, say, where it's pure pleasure. But to go either to America or Russia means going at absolute concert pitch because you'll have to bring away some sort of judgment on the whole future of humanity from both those countries. Besides, if I went to America I'd immediately start falling in love with American girls—which would blind my vision. So I'll have to go there when all my passion is spent. No, but you see what I mean. I'd like to look at it slightly detached. An official flight across America under auspices which would demand lectures and so forth is not the way I'd want to do it. I'd rather like to meet someone like Henry Miller secretly on the coast in a broken-down jalopy and take America as an anonymous person, an immigrant.

INTERVIEWER

How do you write, in fact?

DURRELL

On a typewriter.

INTERVIEWER

And are you like Darley in *Balthazar*, who finds writing so difficult? He says, for instance, "I write so slowly, with such pain . . . landlocked in spirit as all writers are . . . like a ship in a bottle sailing nowhere." Is this what you feel at all?

DURRELL

Oh, no. Well, let me tell you. In the last three years, during this awful financial trouble, I wrote *Bitter Lemons* in six weeks, and sent it off with only the typescript corrected. It was published as it stood. *Justine* was held up by bombs, but she took about four months—really a year, because the whole middle period I dropped in order to deal with the Cyprus job. I finished it in Cyprus just before leaving. I wrote *Balthazar* in six weeks in Sommières, I wrote *Mountolive* in two months in Sommières, and finished *Clea* in about seven weeks in all. You see, the beauty of it is, that when

you are really frantic and worried about money, you find that if it's going to be a question of writing to live, why, you just damn well buckle to and do it. Now none of these manuscripts have been altered, apart from *Mountolive*—the construction gave me some trouble, and I let in a hemstitch here, a gusset there—but apart from them, the bloody things have gone out of the house to the printer—apart from typing errors.

INTERVIEWER

In fact, you find writing very easy.

DURRELL

Yes. I only pray that I can do it and nothing else.

INTERVIEWER

Your prose seems so highly worked. Does it just come out like that?

DURRELL

It's too juicy. Perhaps I need a few money terrors and things to make it a bit clearer—less lush. I always feel I am overwriting. I am conscious of the fact that it is one of my major difficulties. It comes of indecision when you are not sure of your target. When you haven't drawn a bead on it, you plaster the whole damn thing to make sure. And that leads to overwriting. For instance, a lot of poems of my middle period got too corpulent.

INTERVIEWER

Do you take longer over your poems than your prose?

DURRELL

Yes—except the lucky ones which seem to come out on the back of an envelope when you are not ready for it. It's rather like spilling egg on your tie. They're written straight out, but I'm afraid they are terribly rare—about a fifth of the total

amount. And the rest—I do them in handwriting—I do go over a good deal.

INTERVIEWER

It's impossible to write a poem on a typewriter, isn't it?

DURRELL

Well, the only amazing exception to the rule is George Barker, who always composes on a typewriter. In London he used to slip in and borrow mine, and I thought he was writing letters to his family. But no, he was composing.

INTERVIEWER

Have you written a lot of anonymous and pseudonymous stuff?

DURRELL

I've done hundreds and thousands of words of feature articles, all buried in remote periodicals. Some under my own name, some under initials. In Cairo I ran a comic column. And then I've written millions of words of foreign-office dispatches—a much harder job than any foreign correspondent's because I was the buffer state between, say, four and four hundred correspondents in a situation where a statement of policy was expected on a split-second basis and so water-tight that it wouldn't fall apart under analysis. Of course, to make that kind of statement you have to have a policy, and in most of the places where I worked we didn't. In fact, I was selling a pig in a poke most of the time, living on my wits. Or, as Sir Henry Wotton said, "lying abroad for my country." But I mean it's an incomparable training, and by rubbing shoulders with a vast variety of journalists I learned most of the tricks of the trade—most of them rather shabby tricks, mind you, and magpie tricks and easy to learn. But one of the lessons, writing as you do under pressure in the journalistic world, is that you learn concision, which is invaluable, and you also learn to work for a deadline. Whenever the deadline is you've got to do it and you've got to have

the will to do it. Well, you do it. Of course, the element of luck is very great. I might have written all my things and not had a publisher, or I might not have written them well enough to sell them . . . I have to admit in my heart of hearts that I could have written books twice as good as the quartet and not have sold three hundred copies. The element of luck is absolutely mixed up with the whole thing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regard any of your writing as potboiling?

DURRELL

I have had to do a lot of potboiling in my career. Let me say this: If one stays absolutely sincere and honest towards a form—even when I'm writing this Antrobus nonsense, I'm writing it with a reverence to P. G. Wodehouse. I mean every form thoroughly exploited and honestly dealt with is not shameful. So that potboiling as an idea of someone writing with a typewriter in his cheek or something—I can't say I do that. I mean I put as much hard work into a dull Antrobus story, which may or may not come off, as I put into the next chapter of the book I have to get on with.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you publish *Panic Spring* under a pseudonym?

DURRELL

The appallingly bad trade record of my first novel. It was so hideously bad that when I shifted publishers from Cassell to Faber, Faber made it a condition to wipe out my past and start me off with a new name. They had the grace after they saw *The Black Book* to say that I was a good enough writer to deserve having my own name, and allowed me to go back to it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider *The Black Book* important to the evolution of the *Alexandria* series?

DURRELL

Only in the sense that it was important for my evolution, you know, my inside evolution. It was my first breakthrough. I don't regard it as a good book. In fact, I wince at it a bit, and there are parts of it which I think probably are a bit too obscene and which I wouldn't have written that way now . . . but, how shall I say, I turned myself inside out in that book. Mr. Eliot is kind enough to praise it very highly, and what he is praising is not the book —which is more a curiosity of literature than a contribution to it— but that as a boy of twenty-four I had to undergo a sort of special crisis even to write the book at all and *that* was what was truthful, not the book itself, not the paper with stuff on it. It was the act of making the breakthrough and suddenly hearing your own tone of voice, like being reborn, like cracking the egg all of a sudden. And that's what it was for me. I cracked the crust in that book and the lava was there, and I had only to find a way of training the lava so it didn't spill over everything and burn everything up. I had to canalize it. That was the problem of the next ten years. Poetry turned out to be an invaluable mistress. Because poetry is form, and the wooing and seduction of form is the whole game. You can have all the apparatus in the world, but what you finally need is something like a—I don't know what—a lasso . . . a very delicate thing, for catching wild deer. Oh, no, I'll give you an analogy for it. To write a poem is like trying to catch a lizard without its tail falling off. Did you know that? In India when I was a boy they had great big green lizards there, and if you shouted or shot them their tails would fall off. There was only one boy in the school who could catch lizards intact. No one knew quite how he did it. He had a special soft way of going up to them, and he'd bring them back with their tails on. That strikes me as the best analogy I can give you. To try and catch your poem without its tail falling off.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your books do you like most? Which are you most satisfied with?

DURRELL

[*Pause*] I suffer from terrible nausea about my own work, purely physical nausea. It sounds stupid, but the fact is I write at a terrific speed, and . . . you cross inner resistances like you cross a shoal of transmitters when you are fiddling with the dial on a radio. By the time the thing is in typescript, it is really with physical nausea that I regard it. When the proofs come back I have to take an aspirin before I can bring myself really to read it through. Occasionally when I'm asked to correct or edit a version, I always ask someone to do it for me. I don't know why. I just have a nausea about it. Perhaps when one day I get something I really do like, I won't have to take aspirin.

INTERVIEWER

Once you've finished one thing you want to get on with the next?

DURRELL

Well, yes. It is sort of peeled skin, you see, and anything you let into that skin is just patching something already thrown aside. It's rather like assaulting the damn thing once and for all. If it comes off, well, you're in luck. If it's a failure, no amount of niggling is going to do it any good. That's how I feel. I know it's a wrong attitude, because some people can, with patience, resurrect and retailor things. But I can't. I write very fast, I throw away.

INTERVIEWER

Have you thrown away a lot?

DURRELL

Hundreds of books, yes. No, that's an exaggeration. No,

I mean hundreds of passages. What I do is try and write a slab of ten thousand words, and if it doesn't come off, I do it again.

INTERVIEWER

How long does it take you to write ten thousand words?

DURRELL

Ten thousand? Two pages a thousand, twenty pages . . . oh, two days. It varies, of course, according to different circumstances, but in general, when one is in good form one can really pour it out.

INTERVIEWER

Have you written any short stories?

DURRELL

I have, yes, three or four, but the length worries me. There are two things which feel uncomfortable and awkward to me . . . like a wooden leg. One is the short story of about four thousand words, and the other is the feature for the *Times*. I could easily give them five thousand words or eight thousand words, but I'm damned if I can do anything under one thousand. So what I have to do is overwrite, give them eight thousand, and let them cut it down to their required size. As for the short story, I've done, as I say, several, but I've never felt happy in the form. Either I've felt it should be another forty pages, in which case it becomes a junior novel, a concertina novel, or else I've felt it should be two pages . . . O. Henry and finish, you know. I admire the form, but it doesn't come easily to me.

INTERVIEWER

You said you had fifteen years waiting for your quartet to arrive. You said you had signals saying it was coming. Could you explain that a little?

DURRELL

Well, it's simply a sort of premonitory sense that one day one was going to put one's whole shoulder behind a particular punch. But one had to be patient and wait and let it form up, and not catch it in the early jelly stage before it had set properly, and ruin it by a premature thing. That explains why I have hung around in the Foreign Service for so long—keeping the machine running by writing other sorts of things, but waiting patiently, and now I suddenly felt this was it, and this was the moment, and bang—at least I hope, bang.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to use the same kind of material, and often the same characters again and again, in your novels, in your poems and in the travel books. One of your critics has said, "Durrell has never made any proper distinction in his writing between real people and imaginary persons." Would you agree with that?

DURRELL

Yes, certainly.

INTERVIEWER

Are these characters that reappear as personae or real people?

DURRELL

No, they are personae, I think. They are not real people. There is hardly a snatch of autobiography. Most of the autobiography is in places and scenes and ambiances. I think it is not understood to what a limited extent artists have any experience at all, you know. People imagine them to have absolutely boundless experience. In fact I think that they are as nearsighted as moles, and if you limit your field to your own proper capabilities it is astonishing how little you know about life. It sounds a paradox, but I think it's true. I think the magnification of gifts magnifies the defects as well. One of the things I have strongly is the defect of vision. For example

I can't remember any of the wild flowers that I write about so ecstatically in the Greek islands, I have to look them up. And Dylan Thomas once told me that poets only know two kinds of birds at sight; one is a robin and the other a seagull, he said, and the rest of them he had to look up, too. So I'm not alone in the defect of vision. I have to check my own impressions all the time.

INTERVIEWER

In spite of that I understand you're also a painter.

DURRELL

Yes, but I'm a dauber.

INTERVIEWER

Well, it's always seemed to me that you have a very visual imagination. Even if you don't remember things accurately, at least you imagine them very vividly.

DURRELL

I think that's the juggling quality I have. This gentleman who has just been dissecting me astrologically tells me that, apart from the evasion and the flight and noncomprehension of what I really am and what I really feel, I am the supreme trickster. Which is probably why my unkinder critics always seize on something like "sleight-of-hand" or "illusionist," which are actually the words this chap uses. But fortunately I'm not to blame. I gather it's something to do with the Fishes, to which I belong. In other words he says quite plainly that Pisceans are a bunch of liars, and when you add to that an Irish background, you have got some pretty hefty liar.

INTERVIEWER

Wouldn't you say this was true of all artists probably—that they lie all the time?

DURRELL

Well, they fabricate, I suppose. They're all egotists, you see, fundamentally, I suppose. It's a form of self-aggrandizement, writing at all, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

Do you pay any attention to what your critics say?

DURRELL

No. Because then I get blocks. This won't sound very reasonable to you, either; I have discovered quite recently that the characteristic Freudian resistances to confessions of any sort, which are very well represented in all the writing blocks one goes through—the dizzy fits, the nauseas, and so on and so forth, which almost every writer has recorded—are a standard pattern for all kinds of creative things. They are simply forms of egotism. And egotism can be inflamed very easily by a good review, or a bad review for that matter, and you can get a nice tidy block which will cost you two days of work. And when you've got to get the money for the work, you can't afford it. So I don't read reviews unless they're sent to me. Usually they go to my agent because they help to sell foreign rights. And it sounds very pompous, but really I think they have a bad influence on one, and even the good ones make you a bit ashamed. In fact I think the best regimen is to get up early, insult yourself a bit in the shaving mirror, and then pretend you're cutting wood, which is really just about all the hell you are doing—if you see what I mean. But all the Jungian guilt about the importance of one's message, and all that sort of thing—well, you get a nice corpulent ego standing in the way there, telling you that you're so damn clever that you're almost afraid to write it down, it's so wonderful. And the minute you get that, where are your checks going to come from for next month's gas, light, and heat? You can't afford it.

INTERVIEWER

What a splendidly pragmatic view of writing.

DURRELL

I'm forced to it, you see; I'm writing for a living.

INTERVIEWER

Are you conscious of any specific influence in your writing?

DURRELL

You know, I'm not quite sure about the word, because I copy what I admire. I pinch. When you say "influences" it suggests an infiltration of someone else's material into yours, semiconsciously. But I read not only for pleasure, but as a journeyman, and where I see a good effect I study it, and try to reproduce it. So I am probably the biggest thief imaginable. I steal from people—my seniors, I mean. And in fact, *Panic Spring*, which you said was a respectable book, seemed to me dreadful, because it was an anthology, you see, with five pages of Huxley, three pages of Aldington, two pages of Robert Graves, and so on—in fact all the writers I admire. But they didn't influence me. I pinched effects, I was learning the game. Like an actor will study a senior character and learn an effect of make-up or a particular slouchy walk for a role he's not thought of himself. He doesn't regard that as being particularly influenced by the actor, but as a trick of the trade which he owes it to himself to pick up.

INTERVIEWER

It has been said that in your poetry you were considerably influenced by Auden.

DURRELL

Well, there again I pinched. Yes, of course. He is a great master of colloquial effects which no one before him dared to use.

INTERVIEWER

Did you consciously develop your own style of writing, or did it just come naturally?

DURRELL

I don't think anyone can, you know, develop a style consciously. I read with amazement, for example, of old Maugham solemnly writing out a page of Swift every day when he was trying to learn the job, in order to give himself a stylistic purchase, as it were. It struck me as something I could never do. No. When you say "consciously" I think you're wrong. I mean, it's like, "Do you consciously dream?" One doesn't know very much about these processes at all. I think the writing itself grows you up, and you grow the writing up, and finally you get an amalgam of everything you have pinched with a new kind of personality which is your own, and then you are able to pay back these socking debts with a tiny bit of interest, which is the only honorable thing for a writer to do—at least a writer who is a thief like me.

INTERVIEWER

You said you admired Norman Douglas?

DURRELL

I admire him because he was a European.

INTERVIEWER

But stylistically?

DURRELL

Both as a man *and* a stylist. His was a writing personality that I admired and still admire very much. You see, he was unsnobbish, and yet he was the extreme stylist of the silver age . . . and in my day it is a very rare quality to have someone who is a good stylist without being snobbish. The delicacy and tact and the stylish gentlemanly thing was so well matched in Douglas that it carried

no affectations; he was not trying to be pompous or anything. He is the happy example of the style perfectly married to the man. I never met him, but I'm sure his speaking tone was exactly like his writing tone. That easy informal Roman Silver-Age style is something everyone should be able to enjoy and appreciate. It wouldn't do if you were going to tackle a large-scale work like *War and Peace*, or the later Dostoyevsky, or even the sort of thing that Henry Miller is doing. It would just not be adaptable enough for it. It's a finished, delicate thing. It's like chamber music. But style is in a separate box, you know. I have never really been a stylist deliberately. The stylists have taught me economy, which is what I very badly needed. Being naturally over-efflorescent, I have always probably learned more from the sort of writers I have never really imitated. They taught me just as feature journalism told me to put the most important fact in the first sentence—a simple gimmick, as it were. You can learn from Lytton Strachey, for example, to write something balanced and pointed, as shortly as possible. It is condensation I admired in them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regard your *Quartet* as your magnum opus?

DURRELL

It is for *me*, so to speak. It's as high up the ladder as I can climb at this moment, you know, and it cost a good deal of effort to write. I am particularly proud of it because I have been able to write it under these difficulties. It gives me more pleasure for that reason, even though I probably won't ever read it again. Of its relative importance, I don't know. The most interesting thing about it for me is the form, and those ideas are not mine.

INTERVIEWER

You say at the beginning of *Balthazar* that the "central topic of the book is an investigation of modern love."

DURRELL

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Justine and *Balthazar* bear this out, but there is a complete change of focus in *Mountolive*.

DURRELL

It was simply a shift from subjective to objective. *Mountolive* is an account of the thing by an invisible narrator, as opposed to somebody engaged in the action.

INTERVIEWER

One critic has said, "The novel is only half secretly about art, the great subject of modern artists." How do you feel about that?

DURRELL

The theme of art is the theme of life itself. This artificial distinction between artists and human beings is precisely what we are all suffering from. An artist is only someone unrolling and digging out and excavating the areas normally accessible to normal people everywhere, and exhibiting them as a sort of scarecrow to show people what can be done with themselves.

INTERVIEWER

You have got a lot of writers in your books—Pursewarden, Darley, Arnauti, Balthazar, the author of *Mountolive*—which does seem to show a particular concern with the artist's view of things.

DURRELL

I see what you mean, but I think it comes from this artificial distinction of artists as something qualitatively different from ordinary human beings.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about Proust's name being mentioned in most critics' analyses of the *Alexandria* series?

DURRELL

It's tremendously flattering, but I don't think I've done anything to cause the comparisons to be made. But the Proustian comparison does interest me from another standpoint. He seems to have summed up a particular air pocket, a particular cosmology really, and one of the things I was trying to get at was this: it seems to me in every age we are all trying . . . we're all, as artists, attacking as a battalion on a very broad front. Individual and temperamental personalities are incidental to the general attack and what we as artists are trying to do is to sum up in a sort of metaphor the cosmology of a particular moment in which we are living. When an artist does that completely and satisfactorily he creates a crisis in the form. The artists immediately following him become dissatisfied with the existing forms and try to invent or grope around for new forms. Proust, I think, in his work exemplified the Bergsonian universe—the universe of his time—and then you find a complete breakdown in the form. The big artists who followed him, Joyce, Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, went off hunting frantically for a new form . . . . I mean, Joyce even goes so far as Homer—it's ridiculous, why Homer? Anyway you see forms becoming psychic. *Finnegans Wake* begins and ends with the same words. The word cycles became obsessional, and in Joyce, of course, there is such an emphasis on time as to literally block the drains: If you get too much time into works of art you stop the process—so that the focus in the works of Joyce, Woolf, and the rest seems like a colossal blown-up image of an incident, which, of course, *is* the Bergsonian eternity.

Now, *I* oppose to this the Einsteinian concept, trying to see if I can't apply Einsteinian time instead of Bergsonian time. A mathematical friend of mine says I'm crazy, an idiot, that you can't create a continuum of words. Of course it sounds crazy, doesn't it?

I mean you can't apply scientific hypothesis to the novel. On the other hand, is it so crazy? Just as I see artists as a great battalion moving through paint, words, music towards cosmological interpretation, I see them linked on the right and left hand by the pure scientists. Ideas are sort of biological entities to me. Now, my mathematical friend says that the Einsteinian concept of welding time to matter is purely mathematical and cannot be expressed in any other way; if you try you're simply violating the concept. That to me seems the reverse of Keats drinking damnation to Newton because he explained the rainbow. And, besides, I don't pretend what I'm doing is a continuum exactly. What I'm saying is that Mercator's projection is not a sphere but it does give you a very good impression of what a sphere is like. It serves its purpose, and that's how I regard this continuum idea of mine. It may be that I'm violating sacred territory, and indeed that I'm seeing the whole thing in the wrong set of terms, but for the moment it seems valid. If in the *Quartet* my people tend, as some people complain, to be dummies, it's because I'm trying to light them from several different angles. I'm trying to give you stereoscopic narrative with stereophonic personality, and if that doesn't mean anything to anybody at least it should be of interest to radio engineers.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say how some of these ideas are motivated in the *Quartet*?

DURRELL

Well, let me think. Let me explain it to you this way: The ideas behind this thing, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the fun of it as reading matter, are roughly these. Eastern and Western metaphysics are coming to a point of confluence in the most interesting way. It seems unlikely in a way, but nevertheless the two major architects of this breakthrough have been Einstein and Freud. Einstein torpedoed the old Victorian material universe—in other words, the view of matter—and Freud torpedoed the idea of

the stable ego so that personality began to diffuse. Thus in the concept of the space-time continuum you've got an absolutely new concept of what reality might be, do you see? Well, this novel is a four-dimensional dance, a relativity poem. Of course, ideally, all four volumes should be read simultaneously, as I say in my note at the end; but as we lack four-dimensional spectacles the reader will have to do it imaginatively, adding the part of time to the other three, and holding the whole lot in solution in his skull. I call it a continuum, though in fact it can't be quite accurate in the sense that Mercator projection represents a sphere; it's a continuum but *isn't* one, if you see what I mean. So that really this is only a kind of *demonstration* of a possible continuum. But the thoughts which followed from it, and which I hope will be sort of—*visible*, as it were, in the construction of the thing, will be first of all, the ego as a series of masks, which Freud started, a depersonalization which was immediately carried over the border by Jung and Groddek and company to end up—where . . . but in Hindu metaphysics? In other words, the nonpersonality attitude to the human being is a purely Eastern one; it is a confluence that is now approaching in psychology. Simultaneously, this fascinating theory of indeterminacy —which I'm told you can't demonstrate except mathematically— is precisely the same thing in space-time physics, so to speak. So that I regard those two things as the cosmological touchpoints, as it were, of our attitude to reality today. In other words, I see Eastern and Western metaphysics getting jolly close together. And while I'm not trying to write a thesis—I'm just trying to write a series of novels which are good fun whether you look deep or shallow, but which keep their end up as an honest job of work— nevertheless, basically that's the sort of mix, that's the sort of soup mix, I'm at. And I'm just as much in the dark as the reader, in the sense that I undertook this thing in good faith, I didn't know what the results would be, and I still don't know. It might be a muck-up, do you see? But those are the ideas I would have liked to indicate, without writing a thesis on them or expressing them in any more clarified form.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you think that, in publishing *Justine* first, you gave a false impression of the series as a whole?

DURRELL

Ideally, had I not been short of money, I would have written the four, and matched them properly, because there are still quite a lot of discrepancies which will have to be tidied up if the thing is gathered. But shortage of money made me compose them one after the other. There is also another thing I must confess to you: While I was tackling this idea, I didn't know whether it was possible, humanly possible, to do. I didn't know whether I was barking up the wrong tree, and I was quite prepared to abandon the whole series as a failure, at any point, if I felt I couldn't compass them, or if I felt they were coming out wrong, and the thing was an abortion. I simply approached the three sides of space and one of time as a cook will open a recipe book and say "Let's cook this gigot." I had no idea what sort of gigot was going to come out of it. I still haven't, and we won't have until the critics get a chance to have a look at the four, and tear them all apart. But sometimes you have to take these colossal chances when you see a ray of light that beckons to you particularly.

INTERVIEWER

How far in advance do you plot your novels?

DURRELL

Very little deliberate plotting as such. I have a certain amount of data, but the great danger of this sort of thing is a mechanical exercise in a form; and having a clear form in mind, I wanted the books to be as alive as possible. So that I was prepared at any moment to throw all the data overboard and let it live its own life, you see. So that I should say only about a third of the incidental matter was advance plotting. It's like driving a few stakes in the ground; you haven't got to that point in the construction yet, so

you run ahead fifty yards, and you plank a stake in to show roughly the direction your road is going, which helps to give you your orientation. But they are very far from planned in the exact sense.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you go from *Clea*, or, more comprehensively, from the *Alexandria* series?

DURRELL

I haven't any clear idea of what I'm going to do, but whatever I do will depend upon trying to crack forms. You see, I have a feeling about forms that they are up in the air in the Shelleyan way. If the damn things would come down like soap bubbles and settle on my head I'd be very grateful. If the form comes off, everything comes off.

INTERVIEWER

I understand you're also contemplating a comic novel.

DURRELL

I have an idea for one. I see some amusing characters in the shadows, but if I attack the book I don't want to attack it in an inhibited frame of mind which might make it *pawky*—do you have that word? It means a kind of schoolmasterish, donnish intent to be funny. That I want to avoid like the plague. But one of the problems is that it is hardly permissible for me to be as vulgar as I would like. You see, I don't really think a comic novel is any good unless it's as vulgar as it is satiric. It's only with great vulgarity that you can achieve real refinement, only out of bawdry that you can get tenderness. For example, if you rule out bawdry entirely, it's astonishing how anemic your love lyric becomes. It wouldn't please me at all to write a mildly smiling book which was just witty, though, of course, there have been astonishing strides in that vein: Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* is a masterpiece that Swift would have been proud to write had he lived in our age. But

I want to stay nearer Rabelais; I want to be coarse and vulgarly funny. Like the Jacobeans. I don't know whether that's permissible, whether it would come off, or whether the results might be in appalling bad taste with no redeeming feature. I'd have to face all those problems. But then again, for me they're problems of form. The exciting thing would be to conquer them inside a form or frame. Yes, that's a project I have for this winter. And also I'd like to write another play. I'm a fated dramatist in a sense. My only play was such a shambles. It's taken about fifteen years to find people who can cut it up and put it on the stage. Now for the first time the Germans are going to give me a chance to see what it looks like. Until you've had that experience you can't really become a dramatist. It's possible I shall be so disgusted that I shall never write another one, but on the other hand it's possible I shall be so fired up watching someone play it that I may fall passionately in love with the play as a form and go on to write much better plays.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned form again. That is your primary interest, isn't it, whatever the art?

DURRELL

Yes, I think so. More than most people. It may be that I haven't as much personality to deploy. My interest in form might be—I'm talking seriously now, not modestly—an indication of a second-rate talent. So one has to face these things. It doesn't really matter whether you're first rate, second rate, or third rate, but it's of vital importance that the water finds its own level and that you do the very best you can with the powers that are given you. It's idle to strive for things out of your reach, just as it's utterly immoral to be slothful about the qualities you have. You see, I'm not fundamentally interested in the artist. I use him to try to become a happy man, which is a good deal harder for me. I find art easy. I find life difficult.