

My Acceptance of Lawrence Durrell as a Japanese

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Our Lawrence Durrell never visited Japan, although his interest all through life was directed eastwards. His main concern in the Orient was with India and Tibet. My country is still beyond, at the far end of the Orient.

In spite of this distance and the slightest concern from Durrell's side,⁽¹⁾ I have a distinct affinity with him, and find in his work parallels with those in our literature that I have never noted in other modern or contemporary British writers.

My small island country is now changing very quickly. What might be called our traditional features have been uprooted. We are losing our past identity with great speed; or perhaps it would be better to say that our past identity no longer exists.

Our natural environment have been ruined, and the climate has changed. The seasonal shift used to be regular, gradual and gentle, which we cared and appreciated so much. Recently the change is abrupt, harsh and with the difference of temperature so big.

Those who know our past – our natural environment together with human mentality, morality, and the whole culture – find that they all gone. I may belong to the last generation of Japanese who have witnessed what has happened during this last half century.

If Durrell had visited Japan in his lifetime he might have found remnants from the past, somewhat like those of Greece. We still have ancient shrines whose origins merge into the world of myth, with rituals and ceremonies from times unknown, side by side with temples devoted to the Buddhism that was imported since the sixth century AD.

The object of our ancient worship is nature itself – mountains, hills, rocks, plants, water, fire, thunderbolts, and so on. We have never climbed mountains to conquer them, and “the mountaineering faith”⁽²⁾ is a kind of religious sect in

Japan. Our main traditional industries, agriculture and fishing, have been supported by the old faith since ancient times.

This old faith – so called animism – has nothing to do with our modern life, and we have retained it with reverent cares but somehow unreflectively. However, it might have something to do with our closeness to nature.

Perhaps we had been superficially modernized, but deep in our minds there still might have been some reverence or awe towards it, which generally went unrecognized.

The complete denial of the old faith and the relentless destruction of all its institutions might cause us confusion and be obliterating our culture and identity.

For me, the great message from Durrell is his issue of “beyond ego” which is shown early in his book of critical essays *Key to Modern Poetry* and the idea about “landscape and character” stated in his travel essay *Spirit of Place*.

As a whole they mean denial of modern western civilization, a declaration to transcend the modern ego which has had suzerainty in the modern novel. Disbelieving in individualism or personal character, which is the basis of the modern novel, he presents “the architype” instead.

Part of fascination about Durrell for me, besides his brilliant ideas and techniques, is his sensibility – his awareness of seasonal change, and the way he describes nature, like the beginning of *Justine*. He evokes natural scenery – plants, wind, colour of air, waves, as moving, undulating – sensations without logical explanation; the whole environment embracing human life flowing away.

Of course, one can find awareness and descriptions of nature, or even of the seasons in other British novelists – as in Victorian fiction and modern or contemporary novels – but I feel that the natural scenery in them tends to be used to represent the human characters or situations. In them I see the coarseness of logical description insisting too often on ‘self’ and the ego of human being.

Durrell says that he reached to the notion that the most important is the landscape itself, and characters are only function of it, after experience of many travels that shocked his American friend. But for us that idea is rather a matter of fact.

Traditionally in Japanese literature and culture “Spirit of Place” or “Deus

Loci” are just ordinary notion that convey our outlook on life. Our life and literature cannot be discussed without taking that into account.

For instance, the place names ‘Suma’ and ‘Akashi’ are associated with *The Tale of Genji*, Japanese classical romance so familiar for us, although not many of us read it through⁽³⁾. The hero of the tale goes into exile there by the sea, far removed from the flowering life of the Capital.

For us, these place names therefore evoke the image of the noble man’s lonely life in exile on a moonlit beach with handsome pine trees in autumn evening – the hero’s feeling or sentiment is associated with the landscape, which must have somehow elegant refined touch, not just wild.

Moreover, our fondness for places can be seen even in our present popular songs; many evoke the characteristics of particular places – ‘the rainy day of Nagasaki’, ‘the Tokyo Desert’⁽⁵⁾ – are among those of the popular. In fact, one of such songs is almost the list of the names of port towns, entitled ‘the Blues of port towns’⁽⁶⁾.

Our small country, an archipelago, consists of images of places – people have never tired of visiting and making poems of familiar places with familiar scenery and landscapes since ancient times.

Landscapes somehow reflect layers of images with which human beings endowed them. The interaction between nature and the human spirit creates the small cosmos of a cultural entity.

Our everyday life used to be affected and regulated by awareness of the shifting seasons, as reflected in clothing, food, customs, and all sorts of minute aspects of human life.

Not only seasons but every month has its light and colour and fragrance of the air with specific plants and flora of its own. Haiku in its traditional regular form therefore cannot be made without allusion to the season.

Durrell’s own conception of his life and writing involved creative travel and wandering from one place to another, and this outlook is also very familiar to us.

Matsuo Bashō⁽⁷⁾, the great master of haiku poetry, spent most of his life in travelling; especially in the later part of his life he tried a long trip in the north district of the country. The travel essay beautifully conveys the spirit of his wanderings: as an old man he was “lured by the demon of poetry to wander

through rain and storm merely to catch here and there a moment of beauty of the places." His death bed poem evokes his dreams of still roaming about wintry fields.

I see the same, hard struggle, and the same severe experiences of life lie through the careers of both Bashō and Durrell. Both held life to be uncertain, unstable. For both, who spent their lives passing from one place to another, travel itself was their only home.⁽⁸⁾

Durrell's concepts of "spirit of place" and the idea of "transcending the ego" which are familiar or common in Japanese culture or literature may have been universal before modern civilization intervened.

We can recognize the same ideas in D. H. Lawrence and others, too. However, it was Durrell who proved and developed them through his own experience and all the experiments.

Durrell returned to Europe – European setting in his last series of novels, the *Avignon Quintet* – from his wandering among alien cultures, mediterranean islands, Greece and Egypt. But one finds in the work an increasing concern in the Orient as well as in ancient western mysticism.

He graduated from brilliant modernism of all kinds of avant-garde experiments to enter postmodern world, more free and rich, which embraces diversity of thoughts and ideas from Freudianism, Nazism, the legend of Templars, Secret Death Society of ancient desert religion, together with Oriental mystic haziness and fantasy.

It is a positive change, not to suggest decline in his creative energy. Durrell meant to go into mysticism not only more deeply but with full maturity and light casual humours, and in this he succeeded as well as any other modern western writers.

The last scene of the last chapter of *Monsieur*, Chapter Five, is entitled "Dinner at Quartilas"⁽⁹⁾. This part of the first volume of the *Quincunx* is a kind of the finale to the coming novels. All of the main characters are no longer alive except for the narrator who appears here to give a kind of conclusion to the story.

One of two attendants here is Aubray Blanford who begot this huge story and another Aubrey's interlocutor, so called Duchess or Constance is a phantom whom Aubrey has called back to this world.

The two talk about the dead. Later, Branford leaves the restaurant, and the waiters respectfully see off this famous old gentleman who haunts it and talks to the empty alcove all through the night in whispers.

This story is the story of the Second World War, although it is not simple modern reality of the war it contains, suggesting continuation from times unknown. It may be a requiem for the characters who died during the period. The narrator weaves the huge tapestry of stories of the war time and characters who lived in this period.

This scene reminds me of the Japanese Noh play.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Noh theatre reached its classic form in Japan's medieval period. In a typical Noh play, the central figure is a phantom, the ghost of someone long dead, who talks about its life in this world and eternal torment in the other.

The second figure or by-player is alive. This figure represents the audience, which watches and listens to the phantom. The play is a dialog between a living person and one from the world of the dead. The Noh theatre is based on the idea of Zen Buddhism and emphasizes the ephemerality of this world.

This particular scene in *Monsieur* also reminds me strangely of the last scene of *The Decay of the Angel*, the last volume of a Japanese writer Yukio Mishima's Quartet, *The Sea of Fertility*⁽¹¹⁾ The two scenes seem strikingly parallel.

Both involve a pair of an aging man and a woman who are not exactly lovers, but who are close to their lovers. Branford, in "Dinner at Quartila's," was in love with her sister, Livia, while Constance's love was for Sam, his friend, and later Affad a Syrian.

In *The Decay of the Angel*, it is not Honda himself but his late friend, Kiyooki that loved the Abbess, whose lay name is Satoko. Kiyooki died young because of the forbidden love for Satoko who was to marry some Royal prince.

Honda, Kiyooki's closest friend, has always been a bystander, keeping watch on his fragile friend, and now, in the last stage of his life, visits the heroin in the Convent, on behalf of, or as a sort of agent of his friend to find a conclusion to his lifelong preoccupation.

On reflecting we notice one of the pairs in the two stories is not real: as the Duchess is a phantom, so the Abbess in Mishima's story who has left this world

to serve Buddha is no longer just a common, ordinary woman.

As for these places or stages, too, have some unreal character; the restaurant has somewhat phantastic atmosphere like some palace, so the convent, with its real buildings and gardens, belongs to outside this world.

Both the heroines' beauty of appearance, is described fairly in detail. Their bygone beautiful visages and figures still remain in spite of their advanced age. Durrell speaks of "a beauty famous in her day... the celebrated swan-neck and eyes of sapphires..." and so on, while Mishima stresses the beauty of the old Abbess. "The same beautiful eyes that have been kept from young days... her bygone beauty has been "purified and crystalized into a perfect jewel in the age".

In both scenes the woman has the leading role in the scene. Constance has read and given advice on this famous writer's works. Aubray has always relied on her for mental guidance. She knows all about what happened in the past and understands or interprets it in both modern professional and theoretical ways.

Satoko, the Abbess, has now attained such a high Buddhist enlightenment that Honda feels a sentiment near to awe towards her. In the course of quiet conversation, Abbess denies the passionate love affair with Kiyooki in their young days and even the existence of Kiyooki himself. Honda is shocked.

As the interview finished, what is reflected in his eyes is only the vain flood of effusion of light of broad mid-summer high noon in the convent garden. And he feels that he has come to a place where you have no longer any memories, nothing — his life-long pursuit only to leads to a void.

Here the reader see the idea of the Buddhist theory of Vijnaptimatratra⁽¹²⁾ expressed as a novel. Also the author might have been aware of the void of his own ritual suicide that was to follow immediately on the completion of this novel, his last work.

In spite of superficial contrasts, Durrell and Mishima are mentally twins in their deeper nature, I feel. Their theme is about death and what comes after — in pursuit of an ultimate philosophy. Their concern is metaphysical, and their conclusion amounts to a kind of nihilism. In "Dinner at Quartila's" the dark night outside the restaurant stretches away into death with ancient western mysticism, Gnosticism and Oriental religions.

The idea of transmigration, or the cycle of rebirth, is another parallel between the two writers. Durrell used it as a technique of his metafiction.

Melissa, the hapless Greek dancer who had been buried under the sands of the Nile at the beginning of *Justine* in *The Quartet*, reappears to intercourse with some character in *The Quintet*.

On the other hand Reincarnation is the chief theme of Mishima's quartet, *The Sea of Fertility*. The central figure returns to life as a new character in each volume of the four.

Durrell's position in the history of the British novel is on the line towards internationalism and the experience of alien cultures that E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence took. This trend in Durrell let him further to get over the boundaries of nations and countries through exile and cosmopolitanism.

Durrell's genius transcends abyss of cultural alienation easily and reached the world beyond. Durrell killed his western ego, buried and reconstructed himself through his art. He thus attained cosmopolitanism through his mental death.

Mishima, who was born in Japan, non-European, succeeded in attaining to western standard in his literature. Most of his work of novel which deal with Japanese society are written 'under western eyes', not from Japanese view point.

In literature Mishima was mentally convertible to a British or a French, but in real life he remained Japanese and hurried to traditional ritual death in the way he did. He married just once, kept being a good faithful husband, father and son, though always ventured eccentric behaviours in ways not disturbing private normal life.

The two geniuses, prophetic writers, representatives of our age, each started from his own base in the West and East, but then transcended boundary, succeeded in reaching the opposite sphere.

At the cost of their own lives, they produced works of universal value. They experienced the wheel of rebirth in their own life, and in this world.

Note

- (1) "She had left him the new Huxley, his favourite writer, with the first essay on the nature of Zen Buddhism in it, the very first mention of Suzuki, which had opened like a shaft of light in the depths of his skull." (Constance p. 11 l. 31-34) This is the only place where Japanese name is mentioned. Suzuki Taisetsu (1870-1966), a most well-known Japanese scholar of Zen Buddhism.

In *Esprit de Corps: Sketches from Diplomatic Life* (Faber & Faber 1957) behaviour of a couple of Japanese diplomat is caricatured which is the only case Japanese appear in Durrell's work.

- (2) Dr. Carmen Elizabeth Blacker (1924-) is the first Western scholar who pursued this ancient religious institution in her book "*The Catalpa Bow* (1975)"
- (3) "*The tale Genji*" completed around 1004-11, written by a court lady, 54 volumes of romance with generations of three or four Emperors, a few hundred of characters, story unfold around Prince Genji.
- (4) Nagasaki: A port town in Kyushu Island, popular for its special exotic quality with Western people and things to be seen, since it had been the only port open for the Western trade through Holland during closed and isolated period before Meiji reformation.
- (5) The song reflects the image of the huge city of Tokyo, lacking human touch, where a young woman can endure living just for the sake of love to her love.
- (6) Listing the names of port towns along the coast of the whole country from north to the end of the south with light sketch of some fragmental human episode in specific landscape, the song recalls nostalgic pleasant sentiment to the heart of Japanese.
- (7) Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) elevated the quality of the shortest form of Japanese poem Haiku to high artistic value. Left several excellent collections of Haiku poetry, and a few fine travel essays.
- (8) those people we meet every day are all travellers... day to day they live in travel itself which is their dwellings as well – the main idea of the travel essay *The Inner Most Narrow Lane*.
- (9) *Monsieur* (Faber and Faber) p. 286-295 (end)
- (10) Noh Play: one of Japanese classic theatrical arts, originally with strong ritual overtones, establishing its form attained its high flowering around 1300-1400, in which mime dance, poetry, and song and music combined to evoke in audience images accompanying with strong emotion.
- (11) *The Decay of the Angel*, the fourth and last volume of *The Sea of Fertility* by Mishima Yukio, 1970 Shincho-sha. *The Decay of the Angel, the fourth volume of The Sea of Fertility*, in translation by Edward G. Seidensticker, Tuttle 1974
- (12) Vijnaptimatratna, one of Buddhist theories, belonging to the middle or later period of Mahayana. The theory insists that all phenomena exist only when they are clearly and purely conscious of.
- (13) Mishima having completed the last part of his quartet, *the decay of the Angel*, the previous night to give to the publisher just before the incident he planned to make hurried to the place of his ritual suicide, at Ichigaya Hall, the office of the Defence Army.

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