

Lawrence Durrell's biography and oeuvre form a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He tried his hand at virtually every genre. Despite its obvious syncretism in form and ideas it is also astonishingly coherent. This is mainly because there is no fundamental difference between fact and fiction, life and reality, and the author and the text in 'Durrell.' His life, his political and travel writings, his poetry, drama and his novels form a textual (or as Durrell would say, 'heraldic') universe. This is specifically *thematized* in his last writings and especially in *The Avignon Quintet*. This essay thus follows the author's invitation and treats fiction and biography as part of the same 'textuality.' It critically evaluates the effects of Durrell's engagement with Taoism on life and fiction and develops some similarities and differences between Durrell's 'postcolonial' project and the critiques of Western metaphysics found in Derridean deconstruction and Levinasian ethics. It concludes, however, by arguing, against Durrell, that the kind of encounter between East and West that Durrell tried to perform fails because it does not engage critically with the dynamic of (ethical, cultural, linguistic, etcetera) alterity that necessarily inhabits the structure of such an 'encounter.'

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## Durrell, Encounter, Deconstruction

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Ch.1.1.I. The Tào that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tào. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. [...]

3. Always without desire we must be found, if its deep mystery we would sound; but if desire always within us be, its outer fringe is all that we shall see. (Müller 46)

Whoever makes destroys, whoever grasps loses (Durrell, *A Smile* 89; quoting Lao Tzu)

**East and West—Durrell's 'Project'**

'But I'm hoping for a materialism which is profoundly qualified by mysticism—a link between Epicurus and Pythagoras, so to speak... It would be a marvellous contribution to the future, for we can't continue with this worn-out materialism of ours, it leads us nowhere. And while we are eroding the Indian vision, drowning it in our technology, India is eroding ours, drowning Europe in all the vast meekness of pure insight!' He stopped.

'You mean the world is becoming one place?'

'Yes! It so obviously must if there is to be a future for humanity. Surely we can dream? Why should man be the only animal who knows better but always fares worse?' (Durrell, *Avignon* 1144-1145)

Lawrence Durrell's self-professed imperative was bringing East and West closer together by a mutual reading (and writing) of those two cultures by which Durrell felt himself so deeply impressed and riven—England and India. In one of his numerous autobiographical anecdotal accounts of his childhood 'trauma' he claims:

I was born, as you know, in India, and I lived there until I was eleven. Somebody has remarked that the terrible thing about life is that we have to live it forwards, but it can only be evaluated backwards. In other words, while I was in India I was not conscious of what India was doing for me or to me. I lived the life of a colonial, a typical *pied noir*, an English *pied noir*. My father was a civil engineer, and we were not very rich, but he travelled all over the place and we went with him. The result is that I've lived in tents and in jungles, and I lived a pretty wild life in India. I had not been at all conscious, being so British, that India had rubbed off on me at all, until I became about fifty years old, and I reevaluated the Buddhism in which and with which we had largely lived without being conscious of the fact. ("Overture" 11)

England and India are the two cultural, geographic and imaginary poles that determined Durrell's itinerary, which, as he pointed out, led him backwards and forwards at once.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other kinds of *pied noir* who will enter the *parcours* later, and whose own 'itineraries' might reveal some astonishing similarities but also differences are the Algerian-born and 'French' philosopher Jacques Derrida and the Lithuanian-French-Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas.

Throughout his entire life as a writer—and Durrell already knew that he wanted to become a writer at the tender age of seven—he wrote against what he called ‘the English Death,’<sup>2</sup> his father’s inheritance, so to speak, who sent him to England when he was twelve to become a perfect gentleman. Durrell himself provides a ‘Freudian’ reading of his attitude towards (his own) Englishness:

It was my father who decided to send me to England. My mother was against the idea. She said I was too young, that it was cruel to send me so far away. It was the first time I witnessed a really heated argument at home; it was so calm as a rule. Seeing my mother cry was a real body-blow. But my father wouldn’t give in: it was the colonial spirit, you see. He already had visions of me as a top civil servant, returning with full pomp and ceremony to help the country. In fact, these typically middle-class dreams weren’t entirely negative, but they meant nothing to me. It was then that the ‘transference’ happened. I attack England because I identify it with my father. I immediately sensed the hypocrisy there and the puritanism, both of which have been worked over at such length that there is no point in going on about them. But I reacted with everything I had against England, primarily in order to break my father’s will. (*Big Supposer* 25-26)

For Durrell, the unforgivable cruelty of his father lay in tearing him away from the idealised spiritual ‘light-heartedness’ of his early Buddhist influences and sending him to an unknown ‘savage’ Christian England:

But one day while passing the Jesuit chapel I found the door ajar and tiptoed inside, curious as children are. In the deep gloom I came upon a life-size figure of Christ crucified hanging over the altar, liberally blotched with blood and perfectly pig-sticked and thorn-hatted. An indescribable feeling of horror and fear welled up in me. So this was what those austere garbed and bearded priests worshipped in this dense gloom among the flowers and candles! It was hardly a logical sequence of

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Alyn in his interviews with Lawrence Durrell remarks: ‘And so your English education begins. Throughout your work you express extremely critical views on England (the English Death is, after all, the underlying theme of *The Black Book*). I quote: “That atrocious, mean little island over there, which dispossessed me of myself and tried to destroy in me all that was singular and unique...”’; Lawrence Durrell, *The Big Supposer: A Dialogue with Marc Alyn*, trans. Francine Barker, London: Abelard-Schuman, 1973, p.25.

feelings and sentiments—it was quite spontaneous and unformulated. But the horror remained with me always; and later on, when my father decreed that I must go to England for my education, I felt that he was delivering me into the hands of these sadists and cannibals, men who could worship this brutal and savage effigy on the Christian cross. Naturally I could not put this into words for many a year, but at that precise moment I knew that henceforward I would never bring myself to trust anyone who called himself a Christian and so invoke this doom-laden symbol of unhappiness!

He continues:

The main road which passed the school in Darjiling ran along the side of the playing-fields; the sight of Tibetan lamas setting off on their long pilgrimages to the distant plains of India was a familiar one. Smiling, as if sauntering through the pages of *Kim*, they whirled their small prayer-wheels. I have had them on my mind ever since and can still hear the noise of the little brass wheels as they whirled their prayers. But I had to make a wild detour to discover them, the lamas! A lion, I was thrown to the Christians! (Durrell, *A Smile* 34-35)

Western and Eastern culture are thus set against each other in highly psychological colours and are impregnated with maternal and paternal symbolism: the maternal, female, Eastern, Indian, Buddhist, 'mystic' *versus* the paternal, male, Western, English, Christian, 'rational' side. This 'oedipal' situation led to a narcissistic neurosis against which Durrell felt himself compelled to fight throughout his life/work.

Thus, Durrell saw himself in a paradoxical situation, and this paradox characterises his biography and his writings in two ways: the fundamental strife for spiritual (mystic) unity in a return to the very foundations of Eastern and Western civilisation and philosophy before their 'Greek' separation (hence the importance of Alexandria and the Mediterranean in Durrell's work), to be achieved in a kind of 'oscillation' between both sides of the East-West paradox, and thus catching a glimmer of a common 'trace' running underneath and between the two.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>3</sup> Compare the similarities with Derrida's (Joyce's) move in *jewgreek* and *greekjew* (Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge, 1990); and Derrida's 'Egyptianness' (see Geoffrey Bennington, 'Mosaic Fragment: if Derrida were an Egyptian...', in David Wood (ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp. 97-119).

'paradox' must also be taken in its etymological sense of 'para-doxa.' Durrell clearly stated that he did not merely intend to exchange Christianity for another religion—Buddhism. He was not interested in onto-theology, but rather in the 'practical' side of Buddhism:

J'ai voulu réparer le court-circuit entre l'Orient et l'Occident. Dans l'Antiquité, les philosophes grecs allaient en Inde. Et depuis, plus rien, le courant a sauté. J'essaie de colmater la brèche, comme Jung avait tenté de le faire. A notre époque, la pensée scientifique arrive à une impasse. Après la fission de l'atome, il ne reste plus rien: plus de concept, le langage devient surréaliste, aussi surréaliste qu'un poème de Pessoa. Voilà pourquoi nous avons intérêt à nous retourner vers le bouddhisme. Mais attention, le bouddhisme n'est pas une religion, c'est une pensée qui utilise la méditation comme instrument. Et ne croyez pas que je sois bouddhiste. Je suis simplement allé faire les courses chez Woolworth pour trouver la philosophie qui m'allait le mieux. (Durrell, "En Français" 20-21) <sup>4</sup>

Thus, the 'motor' that is designed to bring the hemispheres of East-West, India-England, Buddhism-Christianity, mother-father, Eastern spirituality-Western metaphysics, together onto a 'middle path' is fuelled with a concoction of highly syncretic ideas modelled or sublimated into 'art' (which in Durrell's thought subsumes writing), which itself merely awaits its own mystical 'transcendence' into meditative silence.

Major aspects of this confluence of (para-)doxai in Durrell's work are: psychoanalysis, gnosticism, yoga and tantric love, as I have discussed in my *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity*. But within these lines of thought, the same Durrellian ambition of joining 'two halves that are to make a whole'—the primordial Durrellian desire (as the result of an unbridgeable gap or maybe [Lacanian] 'lack')—can be located.

As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, Durrell, even though deeply impressed by

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<sup>4</sup> I wanted to repair the short circuit between Orient and Occident. In Ancient Greece philosophers went to India. And ever since—nothing. There's been a complete power cut. I tried to plug the hole like Jung had attempted to do. In our time, scientific thought has arrived at a dead end. After nuclear fission there is nothing left—no more concept, language becomes surrealist, as surrealist as a poem by Pessoa. This is why we should turn towards Buddhism. But make no mistake Buddhism is not a religion. It is a way of thinking that uses meditation as its instrument. And don't start thinking that I'm a Buddhist. I simply went shopping at Woolworth's to find the philosophy that suited me best. (All translations unless indicated otherwise, are mine.)

the 'Freudian revolution' (like most novelists of his time) and in particular the discovery of the unconscious, disapproved very much of Freud's 'mechanistic' and 'hierarchical' model of the human psyche. Instead Durrell advocated a more vitalist and organicist, not to say spiritualist strain of psychology found for example in Georg Groddeck's and C. G. Jung's work.

Groddeck arguably is the father of modern psychosomatics. His notion of the 'it' (*Es*) inspired Freud's 'Id' (*Es*), although the two concepts remain of course quite different. Of the 'it' Groddeck said, in his major work, *The Book of the It*—which consists of fictive letters by Groddeck (written under the pseudonym Patrick Troll) to an imaginary female correspondent (who, arguably, is taking Freud's place, with whom Groddeck, however, also had a real correspondence) asking for an explanation of his ideas:

Ich bin der Ansicht, daß der Mensch vom Unbekannten gelebt wird. In ihm ist ein Es, irgendein Wunderbares, das alles, was er tut und was mit ihm geschieht, regelt. Der Satz 'ich lebe' ist nur bedingt richtig, er drückt ein kleines Teilphänomen von der Grundwahrheit aus: Der Mensch wird vom Es gelebt... Wir kennen von diesem Es nur das, was innerhalb unseres Bewußtseins liegt. Weitaus das meiste ist unbetretenes Gebiet. Aber wir können die Grenzen unseres Bewußtseins durch Forschung und Arbeit erweitern, und wir können tief in das Unbewußte eindringen, wenn wir uns entschließen, nicht mehr wissen zu wollen, sondern zu phantasieren. (*Das Buch* 18)<sup>5</sup>

In Durrell's *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, he outlines the importance of Groddeck's 'It' as a means to communicate with the spiritual, intersubjective aspect of our unconscious and explains the difference to Freud's approach to 'pathology':

Illness, then, for Groddeck is something like bad metaphysics, and by uncovering the secrets of the It in psychoanalysis he alters, so to speak, the direction and purpose of its activity—he alters the whole fulcrum of the psyche. With Freud we penetrate more deeply into the cognitive

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<sup>5</sup> I believe that man is lived by the unknown. In him is an It, something wondrous, that takes care of everything he does or which happens to him. The phrase 'I live' is only partially true. It captures merely a small part of the phenomenon of this fundamental truth: man is lived by the It... We only know that part of the It which lies within the scope of our conscious. But by far the largest part is uncharted territory. However, through research we can extend the boundaries of our conscious and we can penetrate quite deeply into the unconscious, if we decide to let go of the idea of knowledge and instead embrace imagination.

process. With Groddeck we learn the mystery of participation with a world of which we are part and from which the pretensions of the ego have sought to amputate us. The difference is a radical one. (78)

Much earlier Durrell had already associated Groddeck's 'It' with the Buddhist concept of the 'Tao':

And what of the It? Groddeck does not claim that there is any such thing. He is most careful to insist that the It is not a thing-in-itself, but merely a way-of-seeing, a convenient rule-of-thumb method for attacking the real under its many and deceptive masks; indeed in this his philosophy bears a startling resemblance to the Tao-concept of the Chinese. The It is a way, not a thing, not a principle or a conceptual figment. ("Groddeck" 392)

Moreover, we can say that, according to Durrell's para-doxical logic, he read the It and the Tao as complementary and mutually illuminating and thus as one step towards the healing process of his 'one world.'

Another important incentive for Durrell came from C. G. Jung's work. Jung, in his evaluation of *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, also put forward the possibility of a conjunction of Eastern and Western 'psychological' insights:

It seems to me that we have really learned something from the East when we understand that the psyche contains riches enough without having to be primed from outside, and when we feel capable of evolving out of ourselves with or without divine grace. But we cannot embark upon this ambitious enterprise until we have learned how to deal with our spiritual pride and blasphemous self-assertiveness. The Eastern attitude violates the specifically Christian values, and it is no good blinking this fact. If our new attitude is to be genuine, i.e., grounded in our own history, it must be acquired with full consciousness of the Christian values and of the conflict between them and the introverted attitude of the East. We must get at the Eastern values from within and not from without, seeking them in ourselves, in the unconscious. We shall then discover how great is our fear of the unconscious and how formidable are our resistances. Because of these resistances we doubt the very thing that

seems so obvious to the East, namely, the *self-liberating power of the introverted mind*. (483-484)

Privileged moments of self-liberation are often experienced by Durrell's characters in the acts of tantric love and yoga meditation. Durrell's novels openly reject the Western concept of romantic love in favour of a Buddhist (tantric) perspective (Woods 93-112). Instead of 'puritan priggishness'—the Western and Christian repression of the sensual/sexual/emotional—Durrell's novels champion a concept of love that seeks to examine and embrace one's personal carnal nature. However, sex, for Durrell, was always meant to be 'psychic,' as he claimed: "I am convinced that there is a profound link between sexual and psychic energies" (*Big Supposer* 33), and in his *A Smile in the Mind's Eye*, Durrell insisted that:

the ancient Taoist view of sexuality suggested that they considered it to be the basic mechanism upon which the happy and healthy functioning of the whole man depended. Hence the role of the Love-Masters whose field of investigation was the whole psycho-physical situation. It is after all not so far from the psycho-somatic approach of modern medicine—only that contains no built-in cosmic doctrine designed to pull out the thorns of the ego. (27-28)

But for Durrell, it seemed clear that the ultimate goal of self-liberation and non-attachment could only be reached by yoga. The first step is to overcome the Western fear of death:

I suddenly realized without formulating the fact that the basic factor, the basic neurosis, the heart of distress, was the repression about the nature of death. When I came on to Buddhist practice, I realized that that's their point of departure. They realized that, unless you get on top of the distress caused by the fear of death, you cannot advance creatively in your business of self-realization. You start with the notion of impermanence, and the necessity of impermanence, and you turn it into something positive. And this clears the way for every kind of positive emotion, for love, for abstract thought, and for everything. I hadn't realized the force of death. ("Overture" 14)



Yoga is, for Durrell, the means to reach his inner 'India' and thus to accomplish some kind of unification at the roots of Eastern and Western civilisation:

But then I discovered that the Greek philosophers had all taken their degrees in India, that there had been a continuous message coming through on some sort of wavelength. India had been informing Europe, and this transmission had been broken, like you break an electric current. I suppose historians will be able to explain it to us. I suspect one of the big earthquakes that destroyed Santorini and destroyed the entire Cretan culture might possibly have broken the continuity. Perhaps we could read some of the symbols into the Roman remains of Provence today. For me it was a personal discovery, and I realized with it that what I was trying to do was to find my way back to India, in my personal life to restore the broken context. One couldn't do this because the war was coming, and it was not possible. I took refuge in yoga, and I suddenly realized that India had never left me, and I had never left India. ("Overture" 17)

But at the same time, for the artist and writer, yoga has even deeper implications. Durrell's novels taken singularly or as a whole life/work project exemplify the self-consciousness of the writer-narrator coming to writing. It is as if Durrell's whole writings were only to be understood as a kind of 'tuning in,' some 'inner self' clearing its throat, so to speak, while the important but forever deferred, because unutterable, message always remains to come. The artists/writers of the novels act out their own *Bildungsroman*, a process in which, finally, writing/art as therapy has to be transcended. Yoga and writing, for Durrell, simply cannot be kept apart:

In some curious way, I made the conjunction in my mind between what was taking place in the yoga world and what was taking place in myself as somebody evolving towards a nature of poetry. I hadn't learned to write then. I started writing poetry at the age of eight, doggerel really, but I was grateful for Kipling as somebody in the same subcontinent who was exercising the function of a poet, and I offered myself as a sort of student to him. But the Buddhist and yogic function seemed to me to tie in somehow with this poetic function, and I suddenly realized—I hadn't conceptualised the whole matter—it seemed to me that the whole poetic

function, the poetic equation, was what, in fact, my yoga teacher was trying to sell. ("Overture" 12-13)

However, Durrell is certainly wary of turning yoga into something like a new religion. If pushed, Durrell would give a definition of yoga simply as 'breathing':

Effectivement du point de vue tibétain on peut se détacher de l'enveloppe charnelle par une respiration correcte. On peut être mort-vivant comme moi. Je suppose qu'on commence à mourir avec la première respiration au moment de la naissance. Le complexe de vivre c'est de devenir refoulé et de refuser de penser à la mort. Mais on est un jour ou l'autre obligé d'y penser parce que les gens crèvent autour de vous: votre enfant, votre femme... et tout d'un coup on se trouve face à face avec la mort. On se met alors à réaliser à quel point on a réprimé la notion de la mort. Un peu de respiration yogique permet de reprendre conscience de notre absence d'ouverture au monde... C'est en incorporant la mort dans notre respiration et dans notre vie quotidienne qu'on arrive à ce point d'équilibre que les poètes (un Rilke, un Valéry) connaissent par intuition: le moment où l'on peut vivre la mort tranquillement parce qu'elle a toujours été là. (Montalbetti 84-85)<sup>6</sup>

Seen as a whole, Durrell's work, from *The Black Book* to *The Alexandria Quartet* and finally *The Avignon Quintet*, is therefore structured like a spiritual quest, as he himself outlined:

L'idée est classiquement grecque. Les trois stages d'avancement vers une réalisation sont l'agon, le pathos et l'anagnorisis. *Le Carnet noir* est mon agon, c'est-à-dire le stade de bataille. Le pathos est un genre de recognition et l'anagnorisis c'est la réalisation et l'acceptation totale. Il est évidemment souhaitable d'achever les trois stades pour purger le

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, from a Tibetan point of view you can detach yourself from your mortal frame by breathing correctly. You can be a living dead like me. I guess one starts dying with one's first breath, the moment you're being born. The life complex is to repress and to reject the thought of death. But one day or another one is forced to think about it because the people around you start disappearing: your child, your wife... and suddenly you're face to face with death. That's the moment one realises to what extent one has repressed the idea of death. A little yogic breathing allows you to regain consciousness of our lacking opening onto the world... It's by incorporating death into our breathing and our daily life that one arrives at this point of equilibrium that the poets (like Rilke or Valery) know intuitively. The moment one can calmly live death because death has always been there.

carburateur de sa névrose. Le *Quatuor d'Alexandrie* a été pour moi un pathos. Je suis en train d'achever avec le *Quintet d'Avignon* mon anagnorisis avec l'espoir de bientôt tout accepter. Mais comment? (Montalbetti 80)<sup>7</sup>

Although this certainly constitutes a progression towards self-liberation, its ideal itself, however, can never be achieved, or at least consciously named, for it lies beyond language and writing:

So it's a great consolation to be responsible for your own feelings, for your own theatre of operations, in the world, especially if you're a creative artist, and you want to confer—what? You don't want to confer theology. It's perfectly terrifying. At the same time, language is totally inadequate to deal with this particular thing, this particular notion, this inspired view which transcends the given logic of the day, and which infuses oxygen into you, and which, as they say, changed my whole life in a matter of a breath. ("Overture" 14-15)

Durrell's *anagnorisis*, *The Avignon Quintet*—which allowed him to recover his inner 'India' through self-liberation—must thus be seen as the attempt to take the middle path that leads to an encounter between East and West. It contains a glimpse of the unthinkable paradox suspended for a moment in the unthought—without any dialectic reduction involved—which makes a mutual 'otherness' become *flou*:

Mon jeu principal était d'écrire un roman tibétain plutôt qu'un roman européen. J'ai voulu tenter de faire la jonction entre les quatre dimensions grecques qui sont la base de notre mathématique et de notre vue de la matière, et les cinq skandas des bouddhistes chinois. Pour nous la conscience individuelle de chaque individu est filtrée à travers cinq perceptions et conceptions. J'ai voulu voir à travers mon expérience ce que devenait un roman ordinaire, conçu selon les quatre dimensions

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<sup>7</sup> It's a classic Greek idea: the three steps towards recognition are *agon*, *pathos* and *anagnorisis*. *The Black Book* was my *agon*, the battling stage, so to speak. *Pathos* is a kind of recognition and *anagnorisis* is the realisation and total acceptance. It's obviously desirable to achieve all three stages in order to purge the carburator of your neurosis. *The Alexandria Quartet* was my *pathos*. I'm in the process of finalising *The Avignon Quintet*, my *anagnorisis*, and I hope that I'll soon be able to accept everything. If only I knew how!

comme un roman européen, si on change l'éclairage et si l'individualité devient floue. (Montalbetti 80)<sup>8</sup>

### Deconstruction and/or Taoism

How can a path pass through an aporia?

What would a path be without aporia? Would there be a way [voie] without what clears the way there where the way is not opened, whether it is blocked or still buried in the nonway? Would there be a way without the necessity of deciding there where the decision seems impossible? Would there be a decision there where the decision is possible and programmable? And would one speak, could one speak of this thing? Would there be a voice [voix] for that? (Derrida, "Post-Scriptum" 320)

Taoism is such a privileged brand of eastern philosophy that one would be right to regard it as an aesthetic view of the universe rather than a purely institutional one. A Taoist was the joker in the pack, the poet on the hearth. His angle of inclination depended upon a simple proposition, namely that the world was a Paradise, and one was under an obligation to realize it as fully as possible before being forced to quit it. The big imperative in the matter was that there should be no waste, not a drop, in the course of this great feast of innocent breath. In an obscure sort of way the concept of human *bonheur* had crept into the Taoist mind. They chose to leave the grand question of supreme bliss, of perfect beatitude, to the higher grades of the religious hierarchy, and stick to the world as IS—or that is what they seemed to say. But how was this desirable state of immortality in this life to be brought about?... The realization comes at the point where the Taoist experiences inside himself a new state of pure heed—the notion that the whole eternity could be compromised by a careless word, by a mere inattention, by the untimely trembling of a leaf! (Durrell, *A Smile* 19-20)

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<sup>8</sup> My principal idea was to write a Tibetan rather than a European novel. I wanted to create a connection between the four Greek dimensions that form the basis of our mathematics and our views of matter, and the five skandas of Chinese Buddhism. For us consciousness is individual and every individual is filtered through five senses and conceptions. I wanted to see how through my experience an European ordinary novel built on merely four dimensions develops if one changes the lighting and individuality becomes fuzzy.

There has been very little critical work on Durrell and deconstruction. One notable exception is Lee Lemon's "Durrell, Derrida, and the Heraldic Universe." Lemon's main aim, however, is to demonstrate a similarity between Durrell's and Derrida's work on the basis of their 'conceptualisations of textuality.' However, my argument here will be quite different in two respects: while Lemon concludes in a rather celebratory fashion that Durrell's 'Heraldic Universe' is something like an 'application' of deconstruction, my view is rather more sceptical and focuses on the differences between Durrell and Derrida's 'projects.' Also, in this essay the basis for a comparison between Derrida and Durrell is not so much 'textual' but conceptual and ethical. It is rather an evaluation of the different philosophical implications at stake in relation to the (inevitably ethico-political) cultural encounter with otherness that sets Durrell's Eastern spirituality against the question of the deconstruction of 'Western' metaphysics in Derrida and also in Emmanuel Levinas's work.

There have been many attempts to recuperate the Derridean deconstruction of 'Western' metaphysics and establish some form of link with 'Eastern' philosophy or spirituality. It seems, however, that all these comparative studies of deconstruction and the various forms of Eastern and especially Buddhist thought share one common feature: in comparing deconstruction and Eastern thought both are inevitably assumed to form some kind of 'doctrines,' or at least 'methods' in the vaguest sense. At some point in the argument one then inevitably arrives at a statement like: 'deconstruction/buddhism is X or Y.' Just like 'Tao' for example, Derridean terms like '*différance*,' '*trace*,' '*hymen*,' etcetera, are dealt with as 'concepts' or ideas that are more or less transferable or translatable from and into Buddhist 'philosophemes.' The tendency to end up reading a final equation like: 'deconstruction is (like) Buddhism (or certain techniques or aspects anticipated by it, etcetera)' finally is all too tempting, but it quite obviously goes against the very idea of Derridean deconstruction:

All the sentences of the type 'deconstruction is X' or 'deconstruction is not X' a priori miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know, one of the principal things at stake in what is called in my texts 'deconstruction' is precisely the delimiting of ontology and above all of the third person present indicative: S is P. (Derrida, "Letter" 275)

There always is thus a remainder (or surplus) after this comparison of the incomparable that comes back to haunt the comparatist, and in most cases, it is, of course, this remainder—usually a little surplus value attributed to Buddhism—that is most interesting. Compare, for example, Robert Magliola's admirable study, and arguably still

the most comprehensive attempt at a critical rapprochement between deconstruction and Eastern thought:

I found that Derridean deconstruction and Nagarjunist Buddhism, the former to dismantle the principle of identity, the latter to dismantle an initiative theory of *dharmas*, resorted to the 'same' logical techniques. But in the Nagarjunist 'text'—as rational and off/rational discourse and as meditative experience—there is an 'excess,' a 'surplus,' which continues *dissémination* and still 'preserves' organic theories. (ix)

Thus, Derrida's 'project,' the deconstruction of 'Western' metaphysics—always resisting a dialectical reconciliation between 'constructed' opposites into final sublation (*Aufhebung*)—in this kind of comparative approach, is constantly in danger of being invaded by an 'Eastern' metaphysical (or spiritual) surrogate. Despite his own biographic situation, at the point of intersection of various religious or lay cultures—Judaic, Arabic and European—Derrida himself, quite contrary to Durrell, remains extremely wary of such comparative approaches to and encounters between 'Western' and 'non-Western' philosophy.

Critical vigilance always demands to spell out the motives behind any *rapprochement* between deconstruction and Buddhism, which, in many cases, is based on some form of anachronism. Often, parallels are merely drawn to show the lack of 'originality' in Derridean (which usually ends up classified as siding with 'Western') thought, pointing out the 'precedence' of similar movements in Eastern philosophy. Or, and often related, there is an intention to demonstrate deconstruction's ultimately 'orientalist' rootedness in Western logocentrism. Deconstruction is then criticised for its unwillingness to 'go further' and reject the tradition of the enlightenment altogether, and to transcend 'Western' philosophy as a whole (i.e. to 'overcome' its own tradition), in order to demonstrate its own contamination with the very metaphysical and logocentric viruses it claims to have debunked in the texts it pretends to 'deconstruct.'

The challenge in this article, which wants to compare the similarities and differences between Durrell's and Derrida's 'anti-eurocentric' projects, is thus to escape, on the one hand, orientalism's self-fulfilling prophecy and, on the other, the 'metaphysical' trap of setting up some kind of dialectic between East and West. Given this problematic the question is whether anything like a Durrellian *rapprochement* between East and West is in fact possible or even desirable. How is one to encounter this ubiquitous but always ventriloquised 'other' that must be situated somewhere between 'orientalism' and 'occidentalism'? This questioning leads directly to the often denounced

(presumably nihilistic) 'void' at the (non-existent) 'centre' of deconstruction, and thus, in fact, to the fundamentally ethical concern in relation to encountering 'otherness.' This is precisely the ground on which Derrida and Durrell may be distinguished, namely in relation to an ethics of alterity and in particular the kind of ethical questions raised in the work of Levinas (Herbrechter *passim*).

Derrida's starting point from within the 'margins of philosophy' already indicates the ethico-political stance that is always at work in his philosophical undertaking. Working from the margins against the centre and spelling out the violent exclusionary foundations on which the latter's identity and 'selfsameness' is grounded—by exposing the arbitrariness and the self-contradictions on which this process is based—cannot help but bring about a re-evaluation of the entire relation between centrality and marginality. The procedure, obviously, without being simply 'destructive'—for, neither is the centre annihilated, nor do the margins replace the centre, nor are they to form a new 'whole' in some kind of dialectical *Aufhebung*; what happens instead is that a difference 'older' than their difference [i.e. *différance*] is teased out—lends itself very easily to the opening-up of any closed system based on binary oppositions and exclusions. Both Durrell and Derrida are thus concerned with (neurotic) self-centredness in a way, or with a radical critique of identity.

But what if there is no apparent centre and exclusion? Is there any 'need' to deconstruct difference (itself), especially in the situation of an encounter (with its inevitable involvement of otherness)? A comparative approach that necessarily depends on the idea of an encounter between 'others,' especially if linked with Levinasian ethics, also contains a 'responsibility' and thus ultimately presupposes an absolute 'idea' of justice that is located in the 'arrival' of an otherness as 'event,' as Derrida claims:

If anything is undeconstructable, it is justice. The law is deconstructable, fortunately: it is infinitely perfectible. I am tempted to regard justice as the best word, today, for what refuses to yield to deconstruction, that is to say for what sets deconstruction in motion, what justifies it. It is an affirmative experience of the coming of the other as other: better that this should happen than the opposite (an experience of the event that cannot be expressed simply as an ontology: that anything should exist, that there should be something rather than nothing). The openness of the future is worth more than this: that is the axiom of deconstruction—the basis on which it has always set itself in motion, and which links it, like the future itself, to otherness, to the priceless dignity of otherness, that is to say to justice. ("Deconstruction of Actuality" 36)

This does not, however, invalidate the other famous and often travestied Derridean injunction, namely that there is no *hors-texte*, or that there never simply is a neutral ‘metalanguage’ in an encounter. Orientalism in ‘our’ encounter with the East is ubiquitous and maybe insurmountable, and no ‘we’ can delude itself by referring to some hypothetical neutrality or good will, open-mindedness or whatever good intentions (Said 4ff). Instead it is the very distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that calls for a deconstructive movement—a constant effort to evaluate and embrace their *différence* and not their transcendence, as Durrell’s project somehow seem to suggest. Under these premises, maybe a tentative *rapprochement* between deconstruction and Buddhism can make a contribution to the undoubtedly well-intended goal underlying Durrell’s work.

Of course, the danger in any encounter, as Zhang Longxi states, in his comparative study of the *tao* and the *logos* and their respective ‘logocentrism,’ is to remain within a traditional paradigm of representation that *creates* the other, based on a myth of ‘pure’ difference:

myths which have always presented the Other as pure difference, a foil to the West, either as an alluring and exotic dreamland, a utopia where the West has its ideals imaginatively realized, or the land of stagnation, spiritual purblindness, and ignorance, against which the higher values of Western progress and civilisation stand out for everyone to see... for the different Other is evoked by and for the West to facilitate its self-knowledge or self-critique, and the [Foucault’s] heterotopia is created only to be metaphorically colonised from the very start... insofar as Western theory dictates the ways and terms in which critical discourse invariably speaks of the non-Western Other as pure difference, understanding of truly different, non-Western cultures and literatures is virtually impossible. (Longxi xvi-xvii)

This counts for both ways however. The Derridean (and to some extent also the Levinasian) logic of the encounter with the other rather resembles the movement of *différance*, or of the trace which always differs (from itself) and is always deferred: “Since the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure,” as Derrida explains (*Margins* 24). Thus, to escape the desire for or the phantasm of ‘capturing’ the radically other in some kind of ‘pure signifier’ (be it ‘tao,’ ‘It,’ or ‘art’) is what must be most resisted. Instead, understanding the other as trace means placing this ‘otherness’ ‘beyond’ absolute knowledge:



As for what ‘begins’ then—‘beyond’ absolute knowledge—*unheard-of* thoughts are required, sought for across the memory of old signs. As long as we ask if the concept of differencing should be conceived on the basis of presence or antecedent to it, it remains one of these old signs, enjoying us to continue indefinitely to question presence within the closure of knowledge. It must indeed be so understood, but also understood differently : it is to be heard in the openness of an unheard-of question that opens neither upon knowledge nor upon some nonknowledge which is a knowledge to come. In the openness of this question *we no longer know*. This does not mean that we know nothing but that we are beyond absolute knowledge (and its ethical, aesthetic, or religious system), approaching that on the basis of which its closure is announced and decided. Such a question will legitimately be understood as *meaning nothing*, as no longer belonging to the system of meaning. (Derrida, *Speech* 102-103)

It is the very negation of any possible articulation of this kind of knowledge that, at once, seems to move Derrida’s thought towards negative theology and Eastern spirituality, but at the same time also separates it radically from both. For what Derrida and philosophy in general want to illuminate, has to remain within (philosophical) discourse and therefore excludes any form of ‘mystical’ transcendence, which must always ultimately renounce language. Like Durrell, Derrida is interested in the ‘path,’ so to speak, and its associated ‘apocalyptic tone,’ but not the apocalypse as such, or onto-theology itself, which, however, inevitably threaten at the end of ‘the process of negativity.’ But otherness as such is not a matter of absence or presence but what deconstructs that very opposition:

What *differance*, and so on ‘mean’—which hence does not mean anything—is ‘before’ the concept, the name, the word, ‘something’ that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from some hyperessentiality. Yet the onto-theological reappropriation always remains possible—and doubtless inevitable insofar as one speaks, precisely, in the element of logic and onto-theological grammar. (Derrida, “How to Avoid” 79)

While Durrell's yogic secret of self-liberation remains entangled in the onto-theological grammar, Derrida attempts to 'reveal' the logic at work in any attempt at revealing a secret or enigma, as an ultimate denial (or as a denial of denial):

There is no secret as such; I deny it. And this is what I confide in secret to whomever allies himself with me. This is the secret of the alliance. If the theo-logical necessarily insinuates itself there, this does not mean that the secret itself is theo-logical. (Derrida, "How to Avoid" 95)

So, to come back to the specific 'secret' this essay is concerned with—the encounter with the other—it should not be forgotten that when talking of a *rapprochement* between East and West in Durrell's sense, the implication always seems to be that of a 'mutual encounter' whereas both Derrida's and Levinas's encounters are distinctly 'assymmetrical' in that the other always takes (temporal but not ontological) 'precedence' (there is always already 'some' other). In a mutual encounter there is necessarily a *dédoublement*: i.e. at least two 'selves' (or Wests) and two 'others' (or Easts) and thus plenty of possible 'thirds' (or all kinds of hybridities) are at stake. This is what David Loy hints at in his "The Deconstruction of Buddhism":

What is interesting about Buddhism, from a Derridean point of view, is that it is both ontotheological (therefore what needs to be deconstructed) and deconstructive (providing a different example of how to deconstruct). What is interesting about Derrida's type of deconstruction, from a Buddhist point of view, is that it is logocentric. (227)

Loy's is one example of these texts that see Buddhism as providing a possibility to 'go beyond' the (still too) 'logocentric' approach of deconstruction of the '*il n'y a pas de hors texte*,' mentioned earlier. Loy, rather like Durrell (who admittedly only wrote to 'overcome' writing and start meditating), seeks to arrive at the very deconstruction of the material (and phenomenal) world:

What might a Buddhist teacher, concerned to help his students realize this freedom [of self-fulfilment], say about Derrida's deconstruction? That Derrida's freedom is too much a textual freedom, that it is overly preoccupied with language because it seeks liberation through and in language—in other words, that it is logocentric. The danger is not only that he will try to find a 'fully meaningful' symbol to settle down with, but

that we will live too much symbolically, inscribed within an endless recirculation of concepts even if we do not grasp at the ones that are supposed to bring Being into our grasp. This remains a source of *dukkha* [suffering] because we still try to retain a ground: in language as a whole. It is the difference between a restricted and a general economy. (239)

Buddhism, Loy claims, follows a kind of double strategy to overcome the ultimate logocentrism, the dependence upon language by which deconstruction is purportedly captured (240-241). This would constitute a rejection of language and of the concept of truth based on (binary, linguistic, etc.) oppositions, as Durrell did not hesitate to point out:

The imposition of the iron scheme is a violence from which [Lao Tzu] utterly dissociates himself; his method is a wingless flying—an act which operates along a line where the mere mechanics of the act is lost; is irrelevant. His refusal to *transform* the flora and fauna of his world is a direct challenge to the world of dogmatic relations, where good is balanced against evil, black against white, being against non-being; the world of opposites from which alone flowers the ethic, the canon, the principle. In the refusal to accept the limited concepts of language, he shows his wariness against destroying, limiting effect of definition. (*Smile* 90)

Buddhist thought, at least as advocated by Durrell, is directed against the idea of a material reality as set against spiritual reality—it is rather this opposition it ventures to overcome (or in Loy's terms 'deconstructs'):

the 'objective' world of material things, which interact causally 'in' space and time, is metaphysical through and through. It is this metaphysics that most needs to be deconstructed, according to Buddhism, because this is the metaphysics, disguising itself as commonsense reality, that makes me suffer—especially in so far as I understand myself to be such a self-existing being 'in' time that will nonetheless die. (Loy 249)

What could come closer to an 'application' of this insight than the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality as exercised in Durrell's novels and their characters: the narrator-writer being written by his own 'characters,' or characters so *flou* that they become interchangeable?

Nevertheless, however careful one progresses in this critical comparison (or

indeed encounter) between Durrell and Derrida (via Levinas), one inevitably arrives at a point where it seems necessary to 'transcend' deconstruction if mystical 'meditation' is to take over, as Loy explains:

another strategy is necessary: a discontinuous, irruptive one that does not constitute a different philosophical approach but a nonphilosophical one because it lets go of thoughts. I refer, of course, to the various meditative practices that are so important in Buddhism. Are such practices the 'other' of philosophy, feared and ridiculed because they challenge the only ground philosophy knows? When we are not so quick to grasp at thoughts... there is the possibility of another praxis besides conceptualisation, a more unmediated way of approaching that issue. I do not see how, within language, it can be proven or disproven that we remain inscribed within the circulations of its signifiers. Derrida shows only that language cannot grant access to any self-present meaning; his methodology cannot settle the question whether our experience of language and the so-called objective world is susceptible to a radical transformation. The other possibility is that what all philosophy seeks, insofar as it cannot escape its apocalyptic tone, may be accessible in a different fashion. The fact that other, nonconceptual forms of mental discipline and concentration have been so significant, not only in Buddhism but in many other non-Western and Western traditions, suggests that we need to find out what they may contribute to these issues. (Loy 250-251)

### Encountering Critique

[Sutcliffe] thought: 'To commingle and intersperse contingent realities—that's the game! After all, how few are the options open to us—few varieties of human shape, mental dispositions, scales of behaviour: hardly more numerous than the available Christian names used by the race. How many coats of reality does it take to get a nice clean surface to the apprehension? We are all fragments of one another; everyone has a little bit of everything in his make-up. From the absolute point of view—Aristotle's Fifth Substance, say—all persons are the same person and all situations are identical or vastly similar. The universe must be dying of boredom. Yet obstinately I dream of such a book, full of not completely

discrete characters, of ancestors and descendants all mixed up—could such people walk in and out of each other’s lives without damaging the quiddity of each other? Hum. And the whole book arranged in diminished fifths from the point of view of orchestration. A big switchy book, all points and sidings. A Golgotha of a book. I must talk to Aubrey about it.’ He bowed his head while an imaginary audience applauded lengthily. (Durrell, *Avignon* 693)

Faut-il, pour un dérangement absolu, que dans le Même fasse irruption une altérité absolue, celle d’Autrui? Un inconnu a sonné à ma porte et a interrompu mon travail. Je lui ai fait perdre quelques illusions. Mais il m’a fait entrer dans ses affaires et ses difficultés, troublant ma bonne conscience. Le dérangement, le heurt de deux ordres, aboutit à une conciliation, à la constitution d’un ordre nouveau qui, plus vaste, plus proche de l’ordre global—et, dans ce sens, ultime ou originel—luit à travers ce conflit. (Lévinas, “Enigme et phénomène” 206) <sup>9</sup>

Comparing the two conceptions of the ‘encounter’ at work in deconstruction and Durrell’s Taoism leads to the more encompassing question of how to locate and evaluate Durrell’s work in the context of ‘postmodern’ ethics and the all-important question of pluralism (Herbrechter 16-57)? What could a deconstructive reading of ‘postmodern’ literature possibly hope to achieve? To take Durrell as an example: fiction that attempts to dissolve the notion of discrete characters, provides interchangeable ‘subjectivities’ for them; fiction that intermingles with reality to such an extent that it is impossible to know who is the narrator and who the narrated; fiction in which the principle of causality is suspended, dichotomies pushed to extremes, parodied, already ‘deconstructed’; fiction that is ‘rhizomatically’ structured rather than hierarchically; fiction that follows the ‘logic’ of play and chaos; in short, fiction that seemingly deconstructs (itself).

The distinction this essay seeks to make between Durrell and Derrida occurs at a conceptual rather than a formal level—it therefore cannot provide a detailed formal and textual analysis but merely a thinking through of the ethical implications of the different notions or structures of the encounter in Durrell, deconstruction, and Levinasian

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<sup>9</sup> For an absolute disturbance to happen, does an absolute alterity, that of the Other [*Autrui*] have to irrupt within the Same? An unknown knocked on my door and interrupted my work. I made him lose some of his illusions, but he shared his concerns and his problems with me and managed to disturb my good conscience. The disturbance, the clash of two orders, leads to a conciliation, to the constitution of a new order which is vaster, closer to a global (that is ultimate or more original) order that shine through this conflict.

thought. The question is: what are the conditions for an encounter (for example between East and West) that is symmetrically dialogic as in Durrell's case? In such a context, is it actually possible to receive the other as 'other' as the only chance of an absolute 'arrival,' e.g. of the 'new,' of 'justice,' etcetera as Derrida would understand it?<sup>10</sup> The difference is that while in Derrida (and Levinas) this justice remains an injunction or a horizon, Durrell's promised encounter is intended to be 'performative,' as happening in Durrell's writing. Durrell—in his writing—is this encounter, where East and West should meet, where the other is thus fused with the one and identity as principle is sublated. The problematic point here is the question of language: namely, in what language to speak of the other (as other)? Would doing justice to a true encounter not require that justice be outside (any) language? And, would there still be justice possible 'outside' language? Or, in short, how to speak the *language* of the other?

To address oneself to the other in the language of the other is, it seems, the condition of all possible justice, but apparently, in all rigour, it is not only impossible (since I cannot speak the language of the other except to the extent that I appropriate it and assimilate it according to the law of an implicit third) but even excluded by justice as law (*droit*), inasmuch as justice as right seems to imply an element of universality, the appeal to a third party who suspends the unilaterality or singularity of the idioms. (Derrida, "Force of Law" 17)

The condition for an encounter with the other as 'other' is that the other be received like a 'gift' without exchange. If there is to be any justice in this encounter, 'the other's coming' is the singularity of the 'always other' [*tout autre est tout autre*] (Derrida, *Donner* 114ff). The event of such an encounter is of course un(re)presentable as such, but it must always remain a possibility in the futurity of the '*à-venir*,' because 'justice as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history' (Derrida, "Force of Law" 27).

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority,"' in Durrilla Cornell (ed.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 14-15:

Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice. (...) deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of *droit* (authority, legitimacy and so on). It is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist (or does not yet exist, or never does exist), *there* is justice. Wherever one can replace, translate, determine the x of justice, one should say: deconstruction is possible, as impossible, to the extent (there) where *there is* (the undeconstructible).

How does one evaluate Durrell's fiction (and the *Avignon Quintet* in particular) in relation to the ethics of the encounter? In Durrell's own words, *The Avignon Quintet* seeks not only to accommodate the other but rather constitutes the 'third' (the textual territory) on whose terrain two others are supposed to meet. Do West and East really come together in Durrell's 'Tibetan' novel that, after all, is of course written in English, presumably for a 'Western' (implied) reader? Is there more to it than the nostalgia, exoticism and the orientalism/occidentalism paradigm in which the postcolonial writer-subject is captured? It appears at first that Durrell's Taoist undertaking in terms of its absolute desire for 'alterity' is not unrelated to Levinas's work—which, in turn, is as close to an ethics of deconstruction as possible.<sup>11</sup> What Levinas's work shares with Durrell's is a questioning of the 'discreteness' and the preexistence of the (free) ego, an ego that always tends to reduce the difference of the other to sameness—to a 'like-me.' The concept of the free ego instead is based on this appropriation and representation of the other, or the constant slippage of otherness into paradigms of difference and sameness on which the ego can establish its identity. Levinas's target—just as Derrida's and, it seems, also Durrell's, at least to some extent—is 'Western' metaphysics and its ontological principles which have always folded the other back onto the same (in order to protect the 'selfsameness' of identity), a procedure that, according to Levinas, attaches being to some 'totality' of 'common experience.' It thus necessarily excludes any possibility of radical plurality and exteriority/otherness of the other from an actual encounter:

La philosophie occidentale coïncide avec le dévoilement de l'Autre où l'Autre, en se manifestant comme être, perd son altérité. La philosophie est atteinte, depuis son enfance, d'une horreur de l'Autre qui demeure l'Autre, d'une insurmontable allergie. C'est pour cela qu'elle est essentiellement une philosophie de l'être, que la compréhension de l'être est son dernier mot et la structure fondamentale de l'homme. C'est pour cela aussi qu'elle devient philosophie de l'immanence et de l'autonomie, ou athéisme. (Lévinas, "La trace de l'autre" 188)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The best account of the 'chiasmic' relation between deconstruction and ethics still remains Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction*; Derrida has 'deconstructed' Levinasian ethics in 'Violence and Metaphysics,' in *Writing and Difference*, and 'En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici,' in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. François Laruelle, Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980, pp. 21-60. He again insists on a 'problematic proximity' in *Adieu—à Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: Galilée, 1997, and on 'an untranslatability of two language games,' in *Magazine littéraire* 419 (April 2003): 32. But this should not detract from the fact that Derrida, from his earliest writings onwards has been a careful and caring reader of Levinas's work.

<sup>12</sup> Western philosophy coincides with the unveiling of the Other in which the Other manifests himself as being and thus loses his alterity. Philosophy ever since its early childhood has been stricken with a

Thus, to experience the exteriority and heteronomy of the other can only be achieved via the idea of 'infinity' (*l'infini*), which breaks through this 'totality' and questions the primacy of the ego. Levinas claims that it is only the idea of the infinite that gives access to the other as a primordial 'responsibility' and hence the only truly ethical choice:

Le Moi devant Autrui est infiniment responsable. L'Autre qui provoque ce mouvement éthique dans la conscience et qui dérègle la bonne conscience de la coïncidence du Même avec lui-même, comporte un surcroît inadéquat à l'intentionnalité. C'est cela le Désir: brûler d'un autre feu que le besoin que la saturation éteint, penser au delà de ce qu'on pense. A cause de ce surcroît inassimilable, à cause de cet au delà, nous avons appelé la relation qui rattache le Moi à Autrui—Idée de l'Infini. L'idée de l'Infini—est Désir. (Lévinas, "La trace de l'autre" 196)<sup>13</sup>

In order to 'experience' the other, an ontological approach is utterly inadequate for it always already reduces the other to being and phenomenological form. One, therefore, needs to think a new form of being, not as 'being otherwise' but 'other than being,' in an encounter (which, in Levinas takes the form of an enigma, an asymmetrical face-to-face 'interpellation' which opens onto the absolute Infinity of the *Il*). But what is this 'otherwise than being' and can there actually be an encounter with 'it'? Here, crucially, according to Levinas, the asynchronicity of *illéité* has to be acknowledged:

cette façon de sortir des alternatives de l'être—nous l'entendons sous le pronom personnel de la troisième personne, sous le mot *Il*. L'énigme nous vient de l'illéité. L'énigme est la façon de l'Ab-solu, étranger à la connaissance, non pas parce qu'il lui rait dans une lumière démesurément forte pour la faible vue du sujet, mais parce qu'il est déjà trop vieux pour le jeu de la connaissance, parce qu'il ne se prête pas à la

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loathing of the Other who remains Other, an insurmountable allergy. This is why it has fundamentally remained a philosophy of being and that the understanding of being is its final word and the basic structure of man. And it is also the reason why it is a philosophy of immanence and autonomy, or indeed atheism.

<sup>13</sup> The Ego is infinitely responsible before the Other [Autrui]. The Other who provokes this ethical move within conscience and which upsets the good conscience of the coinciding of the Same with itself, contains an inadequate surplus to intentionality. This is Desire: to be consumed by another flame than mere need (which can always be saturated), a thought that goes beyond thinking. Because of this surplus which cannot be assimilated, because of this beyond, we called the relation that links the Ego to the Other the Idea of Infinity. The idea of Infinity is Desire.



contemporanéité qui fait la force du temps noué dans le présent, parce qu'il impose une tout autre version du temps... dans la trace de l'*illéité*, dans l'Enigme, le synchronisme se désaccorde, la totalité se transcende dans un autre temps. Ce mouvement extra-vagant de dépassement de l'être ou de transcendance vers une immémoriale ancienneté, nous l'appelons idée de l'infini. L'infini est altérité inassimilable, différence et passé ab-solu par rapport à tout ce qui se montre, se signale, se symbolise, s'annonce, se remémore et, par là, se 'contemporise' avec celui qui comprend. (Lévinas, "Enigme et phénomène" 214)<sup>14</sup>

Thus it is by remembering the Infinity and the temporal asymmetry at stake in the encounter with the other that one would have to judge the itinerary marked out in Durrell's work if one wanted to evaluate the place or rather '*non-lieu*' (Levinas, *Autrement* 21) of the encounter between East and West.

The primordial problem for any writer invoking such an encounter remains the question of 'expressibility'—how to write (of) the other, how to do justice to the '*illéité*' and the idea of infinity present in an encounter? For Durrell, as for Levinas, the only hope lies in a kind of self-detachment which comes close to Durrell's understanding of yoga meditation—or an 'expiation' of subjectivity:

The infinite does not signal itself to a subjectivity, a unity already formed, by its order to turn toward the neighbor. In its *being* subjectivity undoes *essence* by substituting itself for another. Qua one-for-another, it is absorbed in signification, in saying or the verb form of the infinite. Signification precedes essence. It is not a stage of cognition calling for the intuition that would fulfill it, nor the absurdity of nonidentity or of impossible identity. It is the glory of transcendence. Substitution is signification... The subject which is not an ego, but which I am, cannot

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<sup>14</sup> We understand this attempt to escape the alternatives of being through the third person pronoun *He*. The enigma lies in the *illeity*. The enigma is the way of the Ab-solute which is a stranger to knowledge, not because it shines in a light too strong for the limited vision of the subject but because it is too old for the play of knowledge, because it does not lend itself to the kind of contemporaneity which constitutes the strength of time anchored in the present; instead it imposes a completely other version of time...; in the trace of *illeity*, in the Enigma, synchronicity goes out of tune and fatality transcends into another time. We call this extra-vagant movement that tries to surpass being or to transcend it towards a immemorial ancientness, we call it the idea of infinity. Infinity is an alterity that cannot be assimilated, difference and ab-solute past with regard to everything that shows, signals, symbolises, announces, remembers, and in doing so, 'makes it contemporary' with the one who understands.

be generalized, is not a subject in general; we have moved from the ego to me who am me and no one else. Here the identity of the subject comes from the impossibility of escaping responsibility, from the taking charge of the other. Signification, saying—my expressivity, my own signifyingness qua sign, my own verbality qua verb—cannot be understood as a modality of being; the disinterestedness suspends essence. (Levinas, *Otherwise* 13-14).

This may be the only possibility for a 'responsible' encounter between my-self and the other; it may also be the only way for any self to express it(s)self because this encounter for Levinas is *constitutive* of the subject. The subject's identity is the result of his or her responsibility for the encountered other.

How is Durrell's project of an encounter to be evaluated in relation to Levinas's infinity—'illéité'? The ambitious hypothesis of a reading of Durrell's work parallel to deconstruction and Levinasian ethics would obviously need a much closer analysis than can be provided here (Herbrechter 1-16, 303-316). But it is clear that the question of how alterity may be respected in a discourse about that alterity (Critchely 12) will have to be taken as a touchstone not only for Durrell's project but for postmodern theories of pluralism, multiculturalism and (im)migration (of people and ideas) in general.

A critical reading of Durrell's fiction may yield some answers to these questions but it is clear that there are at least two major 'flaws' in Durrell's encounter between East and West, from the start, which become apparent if read alongside deconstruction and Levinasian ethics: first, the neglect of the question of language, dialogism and multilingualism that would be at the heart of a 'just' encounter; and second, the question of subjectivity, or whether an encounter without a self is thinkable as such. Both points are ultimately related to Durrell's Taoist mysticism, and also his Gnosticism (Herbrechter 58-122). On the one hand, Durrell's 'multicultural' project disappoints at the level of language. Despite its conceptual experimentalism *The Avignon Quintet* remains stubbornly monolingual, monological and monostylistic. The plurality it advocates in content is not realised in form, or one could say, it does not practise what it preaches. And second, Durrell's thought is not merely critical of subjectivity but 'postsubjective' and even 'postindividual.' In fact, Durrell's Taoist-inspired transcendence of the self rather seems to foreclose a possibility of an actual encounter with the other (which, to speak with Levinas once more, leads not to an abandoning but rather a 'belatedness' of the subject, or a subject in its 'nascent state'). Durrell's writings seem to point not so much towards an encounter or dialogue with some otherness, after all, but rather to a dialectic transcendence of self and other somehow 'beyond' the scope of justice.

Underlying Durrell's project, instead of a 'just' encounter, is an unfulfillable nostalgic desire for an other 'inside,' which is ultimately related to the mystical 'overcoming' of language (and difference and signification altogether). In this his project must rather be seen as a continuation of (Western) cultural imperialism which, in a time when the only conceptualisation of an encounter between 'East' and 'West' envisageable seems to be a(nother) 'clash of civilisations,' seems all too familiar.

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