The Corfiot Landscape
and Lawrence Durrell’s Pilgrimage:
The Colonial Palimpsest in
‘Oil for the Saint; Return to Corfu’

JAMES GIFFORD
University of Alberta

Tomorrow I should see for myself whether the old Greek ambience had survived the war, whether it was still a reality based in the landscape and the people – or whether we had simply invented it for ourselves in the old days, living comfortably on foreign exchange, patronising reality with our fancies and making bad literature from them. (Reflections 17)

Few landscapes can make as strong a claim to an overt colonial influence as the island of Corfu in Greece. ‘Beautified’ by a replica of the Rue de Rivoli, kindly donated by the French, two Venetian fortresses (and a Venetian cityscape), British government buildings and a church, and even an Austrian mansion, Corfu offers up a cosmopolitan palimpsest of urban landscapes to countless tourists every year. Of significance to this paper, this overlaying of histories, cultures, architectures, and even personal experiences is the crux on which pivots Lawrence Durrell’s pilgrimage tale, ‘Oil for the Saint; Return to Corfu’ (1966), which is itself a kind of palimpsest over his earlier book Prospero’s Cell (1945), and later succeeded by Blue Thirst (1975). The middle work describes ostensibly biographical events in the 1960’s, while

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the earliest draws on invented diaries and persons to narrate Durrell's experiences in the 1930's. The third is an amalgamation of the two, derived from lectures in California. The result is three works of 'biographical-fiction' that sit overtly the material actuality of the island itself and that make claims to material factuality while reconstructing the real landscape. I suggest that Durrell, as the 'returning native', subverts the colonial mindset that allows him to define and delineate a foreign landscape for foreign readers, while nonetheless engaging in an attempt at reconciliation—a pilgrimage quite literally—between his various adopted 'homes'. Focussing on 'Oil for the Saint', I argue that by drawing on a close examination of the physical landscape of Corfu in comparison to the landscapes of the various texts (which also site overtly of each other), as well as biographical information about Durrell's actual 'home-ward journey' in 1964, Durrell 'dupes' the trusting reader into a series of logical fallacies and material misconceptions. In effect, by performing the role of the colonial traveller weekly fulfilling his conciliatory pilgrimage to an imagined home and real shrine, Durrell's narrator (who goes by Durrell's name) gives a disturbingly exact rendition of the tourist-reader's expectations of such a voyage and place, even to the point of creating glaringly obvious contradictions that are oddly difficult to perceive. In so doing, the text subverts the reader's easy acceptance of the travel narrative as a means to 'knowing' a place or people, while it leaves the reader with an uncanny perception of himself or herself mirrored in the foreign 'deus loci'.

To begin, since it would seem inattentive to discuss travel literature without considering colonialism, I must acknowledge that Durrell's place in colonial literatures is debated and currently seems to be undergoing a critical transformation; as positions are taken, we can see clearer readings of 'Durrell the colonial' taking up their not unfounded arguments1, while at the same time articles and conference papers are appearing that use Durrell to subvert the stereotypic colonial text2. To an extent, this kind of conflict comes naturally to an author with Durrell's confused nationality and political history, being a British official but not a British citizen and an apolitical author writing oddly political books. Moreover, his works are rich in colonial exoticism, denunciations of Empire, and narrative techniques based on the juxtaposition of limited perspectives. While my

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1For example, see Terry Eagleton's review of the recent biography on Durrell by MacNiven, 'The Supreme Trickster; Lawrence Durrell: A Biography', Soad Sobhy's 'The Fabulator's Perspective on Egypt in The Alexandria Quartet', and Mary Massoud's 'Mahfuz's Miremar: A Foil to Durrell's Quartet'.

2Representative works include Paul Lorenz's 'From Stat Story to a Story of Civilization: The Evolution of Lawrence Durrell's Egypt', James Gifford's 'Forgetting a Homeless Colonial', and Salwa Ghalay's excellent 'Durrell's and Istrati's Alexandria'.
purpose is not to give a summary or conclusion to this critical debate, nor
to suggest that Durrell’s intentions can be stated with any degree of cer-
tainty, this does not mean that his texts are not without effects independ-
ent of any supposed intentions, nor that such effects cannot be discussed
on their own. For these reasons, as well as the series of personal coinci-
dences that have made my writing this article possible, I will primarily
focus on the unique travel narrative ‘Oil for the Saint’: unique in that this
short pilgrimage genre is not common in Durrell’s oeuvre and unique in
that it frames my personal experiences with the places depicted.

I owe a great deal of its production to the exigencies of my own
travel and pilgrimages, namely those involving conferences and schools.
I first visited Corfu during the eleventh conference of the International
Lawrence Durrell Society, complete with a pilgrimage to the Shrine of
Saint Arsenius, and again to teach at the Durrell School of Corfu. ‘Oil for
the Saint’, therefore, is a text I have both engaged with as a means to
exploring landscapes both familiar and new. In line with these experi-
ences that led to this current research, I will ‘tour’ the text to an extent, so
as to emphasise its relationship to factual places and the nature of the
reader’s exploration of both text and place. The story encourages the
reader to create an imaginary land, or to imaginatively recreate familiar
terrain, hence acting as a tour guide, but with what appears to be the tan-
gential purpose of castigating tourists. Nonetheless, since I have not been
a typical a tourist to the island, perhaps I can escape condemnation or at
least solicit reprieve for tracing my subject’s footsteps in the typical
fashion. I have, however, seen the text in question used as a tour guide, a
biographical source, and a means to claiming knowledge of the sites it
describes, and for this reason my analysis is based doubly on the work’s
literary playfulness with the pilgrimage-travel genre and its role as a de-
ceptive ‘archive’ in the colonial tradition while seeming to perform this
tradition mockingly.

The palimpsest, as a concept, brings together all these levels in the
text, where the colonial ‘genre’ performs, the text interacts with its fel-
low (Prospero’s Cell, Blue Thirst, and various letters and manuscripts),
and the reader encounters an unsettling re-enactment of real and imagi-
ned landscapes. While this idea of the literal palimpsest in the manu-
script is engaging, more important to my present task is Durrell’s por-
trayal of landscape and its relationship to a figurative palimpsest where
archaeological layers compile and texts sit over this material actuality.
Nonetheless, the palimpsest is a key theme in his two larger works, the
Alexandria Quartet and the Avignon Quintet. In this way, by applying the
palimpsest to the landscape, I am not stepping too far outside of the

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3 See Hillary Whitton Paipetti’s In the Footsteps of Lawrence Durrell and Gerald
larger context of Durrell’s oeuvre. Durrell makes the significant claim at the beginning of the work that

This island was where I first met Greece, learned Greek, lived like a fisherman, made my home with a peasant family. Here too I had made my first convulsive attempts on literature, learned to sail, been in love. Corfu would have too much to live up to. (‘Oil’ 287)

The word ‘peasant’ is not necessarily as derogatory as one would think at first, although Durrell’s choice of the word is telling for his audience. More important is the last line of this passage; if ‘Corfu would have too much to live up to’ (287), then the reader is notified that there is a previous impression in the narrator’s mind and this impression may even influence new perceptions that build on top of it. This suggests — and it soon becomes obvious — that the aesthetic of the landscape is being compared to a work of art; Kalami ‘ha[s] a formal completeness’ ‘whose confines were all there to be enjoyed and measured’ (‘Oil’ 296). Moreover, like a painting, the surface of the landscape of memory (or a real landscape) can be repainted, while like a palimpsest there is an inevitable, archaeological ‘bleed-through’ from one layer into another. Each layer partially covers the previous, but allows us to see its predecessor and its influence. Memory bleeds through into experience just as expectations shape the reading experience and the foundations of an older building can determine the dimensions of the new. In this way, the narrative’s reflection of a palimpsest in the preceding Prospero’s Cell and proceeding Blue Thirst, as well as the significance of the palimpsest in Durrell’s works as a whole, becomes a highly appropriate way to approach the cross-hatched colonial landscape that he narrates and demonstrates as a returning ‘native’.

The primary contention of this paper relates to the juxtaposition of Durrell’s text against the fact of the place it depicts. In first binding the Durrells to Corfu, Prospero’s Cell, along with his brother Gerald’s My Family and Other Animals, secured a literary connection between the Durrell family and the landscape of Greece. Even the narrator’s new experiences in Corfu and the action of ‘Oil for the Saint’ constantly juxtapose against these earlier texts, often with the assumption that the reader is familiar with these previous works. This memory is re-invoked shortly after the quotation above, but now mixed with direct perception and representation:

But now the town was approaching and here once more the early sunlight traversed to pick up the curves of the Venetian harbour, the preposterous curvilinear shapes of its bellfries and balconies. We docked to the boom of the patron saint’s bell — Saint Spyridon of holy memory. (‘Oil’ 288)

Significantly, like Durrell’s own foreignness on the island, the patron saint mentioned here, Saint Spyridon, is also a foreigner. He was
brought to the island after death and mummification, only to become a part of the ‘native’ landscape. Corfu has long been a crossroads in the Mediterranean world, and Durrell’s problematizing of the colonial implications of his own ‘return’ must be put in this context in order to be fully appreciated. Also important to my approach is the fact that Durrell negotiates major aspects of the island’s architecture in his narrative, and specifically grounds the pilgrimage tale in references to material objects and sites, as if to render authenticity to his fiction. The ‘belfries and balconies’ tell the reader that this is not a Santorini-like Greek island, but one with a different architecture; in fact, the first lighted shape is the ‘Venetian harbour’. In this way, Durrell anchors his story in the colonial history that is carved into the very rock of the island, since this architecture makes the centuries of occupation, combat, and cultural hybridity as readable as his own text: a ‘preposterous’ series of sights for a Greek island (288).

In his first specific mention of the colonial architecture of Corfu Town, Durrell again draws on the artistic metaphor that I have noted is implicit in his references to memory. Moreover, this overview of the cityscape foregrounds the concept of the palimpsest:

Though the town is a series of unfinished intentions, Venetian, French, British, it remains a masterpiece; I doubt if there is any little town is as elegantly beautiful in the whole of Greece. Each nation in turn projected something grandiose to beautify it—and then fell asleep. (‘Oil’ 289)

These ‘unfinished intentions’, which is a rather careful phrase, also reflect the numerous colonial occupations of Corfu, such as the Venetian Empire that controlled it for 401 years, as well as the French and the British Empires. Durrell is an author who is rarely careless in his wording, as his continually reworked notebooks and corrected proofs attest, and his choice of terminology on matters of political and aesthetic concerns should be examined closely. In particular, I would highlight Durrell’s phrase ‘Each nation in turn projected something . . . and then fell asleep’. (‘Oil’ 289). Given his longstanding interest in psychoanalysis, observable as early as his first novel in 1935, ‘projected’ is a loaded word for him to have chosen, especially in the context of his delicate phrasing that avoids the nasty details of prior colonial occupations. Moreover, in the context of the cityscape itself, ‘projection’ is quite literally the matter at hand; the French have projected Paris onto their colony, the Venetians have done likewise, and the British have taken the more intriguing step of projecting a distinctly Anglo-Hellenic reconceptualization of Greece, architecturally, onto the land of Greece itself.

Furthermore, the narrator’s suggestion that colonising nations have ‘beautified’ the island allows the reader – who is presumably a Western and English-speaking Holiday magazine fan – to comfortably avoid the soured political details hiding beneath the surface of the palimpsest of
these admittedly lovely ‘unfinished intentions’. Durrell had first-hand experience with the British colonial endeavour, being both an ‘Extravagant Stranger’ to Britain, as Caryl Phillips classifies him (Extravagant 87-91), and an official in the British foreign office. His first novel, Pied Piper of Lovers, describes his childhood in India and his near-Oedipal conflict between competing national identities that he could not reconcile. Much later, he abandoned his home and post in Cyprus under fear of death during the attempted union with Greece, and this with other incidents in Belgrade, Cairo, Alexandria, Athens, and Rhodes suggest that Durrell is not only familiar with the uncomfortable political details he chooses not to allude to, but also that he is intimate with them. With ‘Oil for the Saint’ written after his retirement from the British Foreign Office, the ‘beautifying’ contention and the ‘falling asleep’ of these colonising nations are intriguing phrases that side-step the political affairs that Durrell had considerable experience in and open distaste for. What he has chosen to leave unexcavated in the story’s archaeological dig is informative to the close reader.

Durrell’s meandering reminiscences of the cityscape continue as his pilgrimage from sea to shrine progresses. He notes: ‘The Venetians fell asleep over the citadel, though they remembered to leave the winged lion there’ (‘Oil’ 289), and this attests to an exploration of the New Fortress adjacent to the harbour, where the Venetian emblem still guards the walls and gates. Notably, the citadel itself is British, added onto the Venetian New Fortress, although both of Corfu Town’s two forts bear the winged lion, so Durrell’s lack of specificity may mislead the reader into a blurred cityscape where parallel streets may cross and ‘relativistic’ effects can be seen, as in his Alexandria Quartet. Also, as Durrell’s first specific architectural reference, the fortress is informative; the purpose of the two intimidating fortresses in the Town is obvious and their contribution to the military history of the place is told all too clearly in their wound exteriors. As, by far, the largest constructed features of the city, they make the most palpable statement about the colonising powers that have ‘slept’ there and the force that such powers exercised in their restless doze.

The British also ‘fell asleep over the citadel’, leaving the Anglican Church of Saint George. Once we begin to physically explore the sites that Durrell describes, the work becomes more exciting. It is difficult to discuss the colonial nature of an ‘Anglo-Indian’ feeling nostalgic over a landscape constructed in Greece by Italians; however, the ‘nationality’ of the place and its reclaiming of its colonial history is made difficult by the stone relics that are littered about the landscape or that even make up the landscape itself. The Venetian fortress first attracted the population of the old city to the new location for sanctuary. The remains of the former Corfio fortress and town remain in Paleopolis, a short walk south of the current city, and the pediment from the Temple of Artemis is on display in the Archaeological Museum in Corfu Town. The ‘Mother of Gorgons –
beautiful stone relief in museum' (*Prospero's* 138), then housed in what is now the Asian Art museum, was 'Larry [Durrell]'s favourite exhibit' (110). At first, the juxtaposition of the powerful Gorgon over the Temple of Artemis is the most striking concept, until the reader realises that this structure came to ruins as a result of the various invasions and the desertion of the town in favour of the locations defended by the Venetian Fortress itself, which supplanted the old city. Furthermore, it was in the Old Fortress, under British Rule, that the Anglican Church of Saint George was constructed, but not under the sway of Gothic influences. Instead, an imitation of the temple of Artemis from Paleopolis is the best way to describe the resulting building, dedicated to Saint George the Dragon Killer, who stands in the archaeological palimpsest as the displacer of the Medusa with her coiled serpents.

This series of constructions, reconstructions, and imitations starts to become difficult to distinguish clearly, especially since the population abandoned much of the Greek history that the British imitated, all due to the Venetian fort that serves as the church's location. To further complicate the situation, after the British 'fell asleep' – or rather, were forcibly removed – the church was adopted by the Greek government and has since become a Greek Orthodox church, but housed in an imitation of Greek architecture that precedes Christianity. This reclaiming of an imaginary past or the imitation of it begins to show the 'Kingdom of the Imagination' and palimpsest that Durrell was so fond of creating in his novels.

The layering of histories continues in the story when Durrell mentions, 'the French built half the Rue de Rivoli and then discontinued it' ('Oil' 289). As another site of colonial construction, and perhaps one of the most pervasive, the Corfiot population has likewise reclaimed this replica of downtown Paris. Nonetheless, rather than 'discontinued it', he could more accurately say the French were expelled from Corfu. As a diplomat and officer in the British Foreign office, Durrell was intimately involved in political strife in Greece, especially in Athens and Cyprus, so his choice of words here should again be taken as very specific. Moreover, he is visiting Corfu not as a British subject of Indian nationality, as he was during the time depicted in *Prospero's Cell*, but rather as a French resident and soon to be French citizen. Durrell physically embodies the colonisers of the island, whose architectural history points to his various 'homes'.

Moreover, in the Slenada, we have physical proof of the French presence, but in its incompleteness, we also see the curtailed duration of their stay. This reinforces the sense of time that has already been piqued by the nostalgia in the story, since it is in both time and space that the landscape-palimpsest exists. In addition, Durrell even draws attention to the etymology of nostalgia in his poem in 'The Anecdotes', 'Il - In Cairo', beginning with the epigram: 'Nostos home: algos pain: nostal-
gia...'. (Collected 203). In this story, 'The homing pain' is layered with architecture, experiences, and memory (Collected 203), all of which represents a wounded home and the homeward journey. In this very brief overview of the architecture of Corfu Town, Durrell has already established the multivalent and political context of the island that will inform the pilgrimage portion of the narrative that takes him outside the city-centre.

As I have noted, Durrell is implicated in multiple aspects of the colonial history of the island, and even at this relatively late point in his life, 'home' and 'nation' are difficult terms to integrate into his works. I would also suggest that the term 'home', which is problematic for Durrell as a 'native', is just as problematic for these architectural sites, even after they are reclaimed. He contends: 'all these motifs blend perfectly and become in some subtle fashion neither Venetian, British, French nor even Greek. They become Corfiote' ('Oil' 289). In the same respect, for the travelling resident, can one consider issues of hybridity and reclaiming in the terms 'home' and 'native'? If so, is there a meaningful way to distinguish between the cumulative creation of the Corfiot landscape and the foreign resident who becomes the returning native? What claim do these foreign constructions make on the land they occupy, and how can the native and landed population identify with this reconstructed landscape?

Durrell continues, 'The British elaborated the stylish Government House with stone especially imported from Malta – but did not stay long enough to enjoy its amenities fully' ('Oil' 289). As the most recent colonial power on the island, apart from tourists. Britain has left a sizeable impact, despite its relatively short stay. Again, I would like to draw attention to Durrell's wordy rephrasing of the ejection of the British as '[they] did not stay long enough to enjoy its amenities fully'. ('Oil' 289), with all the colonial exotic(eric)ism caught in the word 'enjoy'. After the Ionian islands reunited with Greece, the British gave the building to the Greek state, while at the same time walls of the Old Fortress were dismantled, despite protests based on its historic value. The Government House served, for a time, as the summer residence of the Greek royal family, but is now the Asian Art Museum, and as I mentioned earlier, housed the Archaeological Museum during Durrell's first residence on Corfu.

In Prospero's Cell, under the heading 'FOR SURREALISTS', Durrell marks: 'The Achilleion. A monstrous building surrounded by gimmick sculptures and lovely gardens belonging to the late kaiser'. (Prospero's 138). As with the Asian Art Museum, Durrell does not mention the Achillion Palace in 'Oil for the Saint'; however, it is well worth noting here as a part of the landscape he has considered, and as a possible source for his surreal 'Asylum in the Snow', since his first wife suggested naming the work after a Corfiot location, which may relate to the statues in it (MacNiven 124, Pine 116). The Achillion was built on behalf
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of ‘Sissy’, the Empress of Austria, and it was likely named in honour of Achilles because Sissy associated the dying Achilles with her son. In this way, the structure embodies Austrian nobility and the appropriation of Greek mythology. It was finally reclaimed as a heritage site by the Greek government after it had served as a casino (See the James Bond film For Your Eyes Only4). To repeat the essence of my earlier questions, which I will begin answering shortly, can the reader really accept a fallen Austrian noble imitating a Greek god, then a statue using the god to imitate the noble? The statue was made in Vienna and then shipped to Corfu, but has somehow become a domestic landmark, which can be found duplicated by local artisans in any tourist shop. Perhaps more than other locations, the Achillion demonstrates the nearly imperceptible layering of imitations, influences and interactions between nations and cultures in Corfu.

After surveying these politically charged landmarks of the city, the pilgrimage of the narrative takes over and Durrell describes personally charged landmarks, although I assert that these locations integrate and extend the same questions of hybridity, ‘home’ and colonialism, even if they do not rely on the same landmarks. Moreover, while we have seen the palimpsest of the landscape successively overwritten by different colonial architectures, this nostalgic return to Kalami and the Shrine of Saint Arsenius (the saint of the title) takes place over the text of Prospero’s Cell, and hence continues the palimpsest in a more literal sense.

On returning to the White House, where he had lived with his first wife Nancy, Durrell is told by his old landlord Athenaios, ‘The foreigners that come. So many, you will see. Every Sunday many caiques come from town to see the house. Many British; very nice people. Each one has a radio which is very loud. It is marvellous’ (‘Oil’ 297). Durrell notably derides such tourists throughout the story as a whole, despite the publication that the work appears in, as if in doing so, his own tour (and the one his reader is on) is somehow ostensibly above such brash ‘trade in itinerant celebrity hunters’ (‘Oil’ 297). Athenaios’ wife makes the pilgrimage of these tourists more explicit and more like the modern pilgrimage: “Later we will start a hotel,” said Kerkira. “And then they can stay here all the time with their radios. Already we have many who rent your room—remember where you used to work?” (‘Oil’ 297). I would also like to draw attention specifically to the monetary aspect of Kerkira’s speech here, where the tourists are welcome, but the transformation of rural Kalami into a rented resort with radios is quite obviously meant to act as a distraction to the reader. Immediately after this speech, Durrell’s ‘heart sank slightly’ (‘Oil’ 297). I would also suggest that Durrell is playing off the stereotype of the tourist who wants to visit a place

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4 This film, interestingly, uses Saint George to name a secret spy ship and has scenes at the third fortress, Angelokastro on the West coast of Corfu.
before it is ‘ruined’ by tourists (though ‘ruins’ are often the focus), thereby losing its ‘rustic charm’; however, there is a second point that is significant here. It is through Kerkira, who is the primary proponent of increasing tourism, that Durrell creates a voice that contradicts his narrator and that speaks for the island. Moreover, the story ostensibly tells of Durrell’s unaccompanied return to Corfu, but in ‘reality’ the work sits over three such trips in the summers of 1964 through 1966 (MacNiven 539-548), during all which he lived on the Western side of the island near Paleocastrizza, with his wife Claude, as well as (for the 1964 trip) his daughter Sappho and Claude’s two children. Such an image is far from that of the romantic traveller reveling nostalgically in his lonely memories, and whom the reader encounters in the work.

More significantly, Kerkira is also the Greek name for Corfu, which is oddly absent from the rest of the text. Durrell is quite honest in the story when he mentions his fluent Greek, as is evidenced by his letters and poetry to George Seferis held in the Gennadiou Library, which any modern traveller can read, as well as Kimon Friar’s remark to Durrell: ‘Katsimbalis has given me a copy [of your Six Poems of Sekilianos and Seferis] (and has also told me that your Greek is excellent!)’ (n. pag). While it has slipped from current scholarship, Durrell actually completed and published several translations from Greek authors and poets, including some of the earliest translations of Seferis and Cavafy. For this reason, I want to pose two rather rhetorical questions. First, why do the foreign words for Kerkira – Corfu and Corecyra – appear in the story, while the Greek word does not? This is particularly prominent given the fact that Durrell has specifically told the reader that all of his conversations are being carried out in Greek – his ‘fluent Greek puzzled’ the taxi driver (‘Oil’ 289) – and he apparently delights in using selected Greek words familiar to the tourist, such as ‘ouzo’, ‘retsina’, and ‘catave’. At the conclusion of the story, the reader is even told: “It is a great thing” said Niko sagely, “to be a creator.” He used the ancient word ‘deemiurgé’ which is still current in modern Greek (‘Oil’ 302), and this word is repeated a number of times over the next page. Second, if these conversations are in Greek, why, when Durrell meets his ‘peasant friends’, does the dialogue echo pidgin English. It would appear that for the sake of the narrative in Holiday magazine, Durrell often uses rustic, broken sentences. I suggest that this is a tongue-in-cheek rebuke against the reader who would so easily accept these contradictions based on what the assumed ‘truth’ would be, and this performs in exacting detail the role of the colonial travel narrative that Durrell customarily avoids in his ‘foreign residence books’. In this playfulness with Greek and English cognates, Kerkira is quite literally the voice of the island in the same way that Nicholas Gage’s mother, Eleni, stands in for Helas in her representative suffering, adding to the aesthetic symmetry of his novelistic history. Notably, Eleni of Prospero’s Cell and Totsa Athenaios’ first wife before
Kerkira, died ‘during 1940 – died keeping her children alive’ (‘Oil’ 295), just as in Gage’s Eleni.

Similarly, I have pointed to the literary palimpsest in the story, which lies over the earlier volume, Prospero’s Cell, and this literary ‘intertextuality’ seems to be the most likely reason for Durrell’s heavily selective rendition of his journey. The awareness of this effect of text upon text encourages the reader (or the Durrell fan) to ‘read on’ to more works, which slowly start to reveal contradictions, such as those between the travel narrative and Durrell’s own voyage. In his published letters to Henry Miller, Durrell refers to the same journey, using phrases and adjectives that would resurface in ‘Oil for the Saint’, but contradictions appear as well. Tellingly, the first volume of the Durrell-Miller correspondence appeared in 1963, so the role of these letters as printable texts was likely very close to Durrell’s mind when he wrote in 1964: ‘we went up to Koukoura [Kalami] and spent a night in the old white house’ (Durrell-Miller 403). The ‘we’ contradicts the veracity of the unaccompanied pilgrimage Durrell creates in ‘Oil for the Saint’ and especially the opening scenes of arrival and the finale, where he falls asleep alone in his old room. The contradiction is reinforced by his note that ‘Totsa [Anastasius Athenaios] is wrestling with a succession of strokes’ (403), which in the published version become ‘Athenaios had a small stroke two years before which had half-paralysed one shoulder’ (‘Oil’ 295); true suffering would not befit the strong peasant in the pages of Holiday. Nonetheless, Durrell does tell the story of the ‘jog ... down to the shrine of Saint Arsenius ... one brilliant morning’ (Durrell-Miller 403), which validates the story. Bitterness, such as the bitterness of the wars in Greece and the suffering of the people, are kept at the limits of the story and minimised, like Athenaios’ (Totsa’s) stroke, and therefore it does not disturb the magazine reader’s enjoyment of place. Durrell was also well-aware of the need to censor his political commentary, as is evidenced in the drastic editing of his Reflections on a Marine Venus, where all political commentary was removed by Anne Ridler, and the relatively apolitical stance adopted in his more contemporaneous and politically charged Bitter Lemons.

As the pilgrimage (and our retracing of the text) winds to a close, the reader is slowly led to the shrine of Saint Arsenius, near Kalami, and Durrell completes the archetypal journey with the reconciliation required by the poignant conclusion of Prospero’s Cell. The reader, there, is told ‘the white house has been bombed’, which is another fabulation, and

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5See David Roessel’s ‘Introduction’ and ‘“Cut in Half as It Was”: Editorial Excisions and the Original Shape of Reflections on a Marine Venus’.

6This is also an instance of the palimpsest of text, since these scenes from the conclusions of Prospero’s Cell, as well as the opening of the book, are contained in an altered form in ‘A Landmark Gone’ (187-190), which has itself gone
‘History with her painful and unexpected changes cannot be made to pity or remember; that is our function’ (Prospero’s 133; emphasis original). In this way, ‘Oil for the Saint’ is the reconciliation between cultural bodies that picks up after the intercultural violence of the island history of warfare and suffering. Durrell writes that he ‘think[s] only that the shrine with the three black cypresses and the tiny rock-pool where we bathed must still be left’ (133) and it is here that he must return with his ‘parting tribute to hollow flesh’ (Pied 34). While Durrell is never explicit about cultural hybridity in the course of the story, it is significant to note at this climactic point, and given his interest in archetypal theory and his earlier correspondence with Carl Jung, the journey as a form of appeasement seems inevitable. As the story is entitled, ‘Oil for the Saint’, at the conclusion of the pilgrimage the discussion surrounds the mixing of Greek and French olive oil in the lamps of the Shrine of Saint Arsenius: ‘I entered the little chapel, after so long, with emotion... I unstoppered my phial of green oil and reverently tipped it into the glass bowl’ (‘Oil’ 300). Moreover, Niko explains:

‘If it lights the first time... it means you are welcome and that [Arsenius] has no outstanding complaints against you’. The wick flamed up and Athenaios clapped his hands softly. All of a sudden I saw the faces of my friends spring out of the gloom, touched by the yellow light; they had achasened, ageless quality...’. Niko went on rallying the saint. ‘Now You are drinking French’, he told the ikon. ‘Drink then, drink deeply. Then tell us if the French oil is as good as ours’. (‘Oil’ 301)

Saint Arsenius’ presumed pleasure in the tribute of the French oil points to a reconciliation of the colonial history of the island, as well as the complex interplay between the architectural artefacts of colonial domination and their reclaiming in a distinctly Corfiot identity. I would suggest that this same hybridity applies to Durrell’s thorny assertion of himself as a returning ‘native’ with a sense of nostalgia for a place that most properly cannot be his ‘home’. Nonetheless, such a reading is troubled by the role of the author in giving voice to the ‘colonised’, even if the island is allowed to speak back through one of them, and moreover it is Durrell’s oil from his French groves that gives light to the scene, just as it is his pen that illuminates the blank page.

Returning to the architectural ‘palimpsest’ that I focused on in the opening of the story, the Shrine is again a site of mixing, with its pagan and orthodox history. Immediately after filling the lamps, Durrell states: ‘There was one more visit to be made – to the little underwater cave in which we used to hide... I slipped overboard into the cool water and

through a number of republications: ‘the house is in ruins... I think only the shrine with the three cypresses and the tiny rock pool where we bathed is still left’ (190).
swam into the bay. Once we had made a clay statue of Pan and set it up in the cave' (‘Oil’ 302). The issue I would like to underscore is the juxtaposition of the Saint’s shrine above the water, with its orthodox connections, against the Pan that lies underneath it — the one built over the other, so to speak. Even though the cave is not actually directly beneath the shrine, the point still stands with one site sharing the space with another, as is so common in the Greek landscape. Unfortunately, the reader discovers that ‘the winter sea had long since licked out the cave’. (‘Oil’ 312; emphasis added), but even this is another instance of textual layering, as it stands over Durrell’s earlier letter that tells Miller, ‘The cave is still there but our statue has been licked away by the winter sea’ (Durrell-Miller 403; emphasis added).

With this temporal, textual, and architectural palimpsest firmly in place and contextualized in its colonialism, I will return to my first quotation from the text, which betrays the role of memory and nostalgia in the uncanny nature of both the narrator’s re-experiencing of the island and the colonial history/attitudes embedded in the ‘palimpsests’ I have ‘excavated’. At the outset, Durrell tells his reader quite explicitly, ‘Corfu would have too much to live up to’ (‘Oil’ 287). Furthermore, there are ‘twenty-year-old ghosts of the place’ (297) ‘piling memory upon memory’ (295) and ‘History with her painful and unexpected changes cannot be made to pity or remember; that is our function’ (Prospero’s 133; emphasis original). This palimpsest of memory, fulfilling the author’s role as speaker for the dead, communicates the uncanny nature of Durrell’s remembering, reconstructing even, of a present layered by a past. At a telling point, where the awareness of those who are no longer living is the most salient and is being retold, Durrell-the-narrator is brought ‘photographs yellow with age … [that] conferred … a mild air of improbability. Who was this good-looking and rather cocksure young man who stared out at me, fishing trident in hand? What had he been so damned sure about anyway?’ (‘Oil’ 295). Looking at his own photo, the narrator has an ‘uncanny’ feeling, an un-home-like sensation in his ‘native’ land. He realises that his memory and imagined self do not match the ‘fact’ of the photo. The issue that I am interested in here is the strangeness that the narrator experiences when he sees the photo of himself as he used to be. Aside from the obvious connections to the nostalgic tone of the work and the numerous comments on ageing (lost youth!), there is also a suggestion of the flux of the individual as an opposition to the perceived sameness of the place. Corfu, as a place of hybridity and multiple influences, is obviously not static. The constant state of flux on the island is implicit in Durrell’s references to the landmarks, since even ‘the profile of the rock [at the Shrine of Saint Arsenius] has been altered somewhat by the explosion of an Italian landmine during the war’ (‘Oil’ 300). Nevertheless, ‘It hadn’t changed’, (300) and the narrator insists on the opposite interpretation from that implied by his depictions of the
landscapes; he explicitly feels uncomfortable when confronted with his own transience. For the returning ‘native’, ‘the real strangeness was that it was all so recognisable, down to the smallest detail’ (‘Oil’ 287).

Given Durrell’s creation or alteration of most of the incidents in the narrative for the sake of his various audiences, I interpret this resistance to his own image as his depiction of a traveller who confronts the repressed contents of his projection onto the Other or foreign locale. This theme is explicit in his later works, such as Monsieur, where the French and Egyptian landscapes blur into each other and are ultimately revealed as the fictional creation of the narrator and the colonial’s mental constructs. By the same token, the recovered picture that creates an uncanny recognition is a theme that appears twice in Durrell’s Alexandria Quartet and once in The Avignon Quintet, so again the seemingly objective travel narrative is in fact a palimpsest written over successive historical and fictional works. This same effect can be seen on the cover of MacNiven’s biography of Durrell, where the young and trim Corfiot ‘native’ stands on the ‘metamorphic stone ... in the shape of a mons pubis’ (Prospero’s 12) clad only in a bathing suit and gazing back at the reader, while the back cover shows an aged man, 73 years old, likewise grinning into the camera lens.

To use the textual palimpsest in regard this uncanniness, the photograph functions like a distorting mirror, reflecting back contents the viewer was not expecting, such as his youth, unvoiced desires, and other such materials. The youth in the picture is a ‘good-looking and rather cocksure young man who stared out at [the narrator]’ (‘Oil’ 295; emphasis added), reflecting the remove in time and implicit ageing, as well as the changes in sexuality that will normally occur between one’s mid-twenties and fifties. One finds oneself no longer quite oneself. This mirror recurs as well, in the pilgrimage. I have already noted Durrell’s brief correspondence with Jung, who was keen ‘to learn about [Durrell’s] hellenic dreams’ (Jung n. pag.); this and the general focus of Durrell’s oeuvre suggests that travel is somehow an inward journey. Such an inner exploration reflected in the outer voyage is exactly the allegorical structure Durrell employs in Cefalu (a verbal mixing of Corfu and Kerkira or Kephaldonia, and also know as The Dark Labyrinth), and as a reflection the mirror is significant. Not only do photographs recur in the fiction, but the mirror itself also play a pivotal role in the Alexandria Quartet, and in ‘Oil for the Saint’ the ‘flawless skin of the night sea [can] settle ... into its mirrored calm’ (303; emphasis added). The reflection of the story in the correspondence can likewise make the implausible claim that ‘the water was like a mirror in the little cove’ (Durrell-Miller 403), even though it is the Ionian Sea. In the tale, Durrell first views Corfu through ‘heavy field glasses’ (‘Oil’ 287) that mitigate his perception; moreover, such a reference to perception draws the reader back to the text layered below, where Corfu is ‘a dark crystal; the form of things becomes ir-
regular, refracted. Mirages suddenly swallow islands, and wherever you
look the trembling curtain of the atmosphere deceives'. (Prospero’s 11).
For the travel narrative reader, as well as his narrator who had ‘. Better
leave the rest unsaid / ... [to] Keep its calms like tears unshed’. (Bitter
252), Durrell has made literal his statement: ‘Other countries may offer
you discoveries in manners or lore or landscape; Greece offers you
something harder – the discovery of yourself’ (Prospero’s 11).
As a pilgrimage to a sacred birthplace, Durrell returns to his ‘place
of predilection’ (Blue 22), his second birthplace, since ‘[one] ha[s] two
birth-places. You have the place where you were really born and then
you have a place of predilection where you really wake up to reality ... in your 'inner life' (Blue 22). The simplicity of the pilgrimage belies the
complexity of the intercultural context of both the location and narrative.
Likewise, the nostalgic tone of the work draws on concepts of ‘home’
that are based in the imaginative landscape of memory, which makes
Durrell’s key discussion of ‘projection’ from the Imperial power to the
colonised island highly significant. Moreover, by using the reader’s expec-
tations (nostalgia, exoticism, and Imperialism), the text disturbs self-
reflection. While the text traces the palimpsest of the landscape and city-
scape over earlier writings, the landscape recreates the text into some-
thing more than it was at first and forces an inward examination of the
mirroring of expectations onto the foreign terrain. Durrell draws on his
readership’s expectations of a factually true travel narrative by an author
who has become associated with the Hellenic world and the exotic Mid-
dle East, and by using these various expectations, he ultimately places the
reader in the position of the narrator staring at his own uncanny photo-
graph; the dark crystal forces the hard discovery of oneself, which is
really the purpose of any pilgrimage. ###

Works Cited

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