

Sexuality, Identity, and the Urban-Rural Divide in Lawrence Durrell's Novels

James Gifford - <gifford@ualberta.ca>
www.ualberta.ca/~gifford

As a site of anonymity, shifting identities based on location, and unanticipated cosmopolitan encounters or mixings, the city has played a major role in both academic investigations of the history of sexuality and in artistic interventions in formal histories. Moreover, while the city, as a topic, has been a critical nexus for work on Lawrence Durrell's novels and while interest in queer readings of his works continually increases, these areas of research seem not to have overlapped. This paper seeks to draw such connections and prompts further research; I integrate urban theory, queer theory, and the broad body of work on Durrell's representations of the city as a site of transformational encounters through direct analysis of the geography of Durrellian cities (which distinctly reflect the topography of the mind, rather than strictly the map) and its relationship to moments of queer tension in his texts. Whether this is a timidly described elation with the unlimited sexualities of London after a rural childhood in India, as in Durrell's juvenile *Pied Piper of Lovers*, or an explicit exploration of the "five sexes" that are "Capitally. . . resumed in the word Alexandria" (*Quartet* 17), queer encounters and the broadening of fixed sexual identities is a uniquely urban moment in Durrell's fiction, enraptured with the socio-cultural practices allowed by the artery-like twists and turns of the city's body. Furthermore, while "the sexual provender which lies to hand is staggering in its variety and profusion" (17) in all of Durrell's works, I contend that this is not the typical anonymity through presumed heterosexuality nor an exploration of censored sexualities through the foreign corpus of the Orient – a project caught up in problematic projections – but rather a distinctly urban characteristic of his work based on indeterminacy and interpenetrating identities. Foreign locales may provide the anonymity and the shifting ground on which exotic eroticism may be based, but in Durrell's works, queer cruising and the emergence of diverse sexual practices is more an element of the urban environment: "The city... used us as its flora – precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own" (17). As such, the city must be examined in tandem with his queerly shifting cities of memory in novels from 1935 to 1990: London, Avignon, Alexandria, and Athens in *Pied Piper of Lovers*, the *Alexandria Quartet*, and the *Avignon Quintet*. After all, the city "is the great winepress of love; those who emerged from it... have been deeply wounded in their sex" (*Quartet* 18), and the biblical allusion to *Revelations* 14:19 further binds censored sexualities with the city as their fount. Chisholm asks, "If lesbians, gays, and queers of all sorts owe their emergence to the modern metropolis,... how do they figure the city in genealogies of their own telling?" (195), and by exploring Durrell's integration of specific urban centres with urban sexualities, I seek to offer an answer.