

Durrell's Aslant Lear at Corfu: Text versus Image in Travel Literature (1939-78)

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Few landscapes can claim as overt a colonial influence as Corfu, Greece. “Beautified” by a replica of Paris’ Rue de Rivoli, a Venetian cityscape and fortresses, British government buildings and an exceptionally anomalous Anglican church, and even an Austrian mansion to Achilles, Corfu offers a cosmopolitan ‘palimpsest’ to countless tourists every year. Exposing these overlaid imperial histories and the colonialism they bear testimony to is the crux of Lawrence Durrell’s various writings about Corfu, ranging his Holiday magazine story, “Oil for the Saint” (which is itself an intertextual palimpsest between his earlier Prospero’s Cell and later Blue Thirst) to letters, manuscripts, other archival holdings, his photobook The Greek Islands, and his various periodical articles on the island. While actively subverting the scopophobic gaze (or imaginative mind’s eye) of the tourist or travel reader, Durrell’s literary interventions are themselves deeply troubled by illustrations that draw the reader back from a detailed excavation to the generalizations concomitant with traditional landscape views.

Such visual materials range from photographs taken by his artist-wife, prints by Edward Lear (the famous landscape painter and nonsense verse writer), publicity photographs, and even tourist materials; moreover, the integration of such visual materials into colonial histories has developed into a focus for academic attention, as evidenced in Duncan and Gregory’s Writes of Passage. Furthermore, in accounting for this tension between verbal and visual texts, I also integrate troubling insertions of text into the landscapes themselves, where Durrell’s undermining of the viewer’s gaze at the island is dismantled by the tour guide’s integration of such texts as the ‘rose-coloured glass’ through which this landscape must be seen (while literally standing in the landscape itself). As a guide partaking in such actions, Whitton-Paipeti has also inserted herself in the textual (and photographic) tension here with her In the Footsteps of Lawrence and Gerald Durrell, which seeks to unite text, illustration, and ‘real’ landscape with the tourist’s fantasy of place. While Durrell’s texts expressly turn an uncanny mirror to the reader’s exotic expectations (creating glaring contradictions that are oddly difficult to perceive), the insertion of visual materials actively works against this movement; the reader’s textual provocation to introspectively regard perception as projection is translated into a spectator’s outward gaze at the visual object. This play on terrain and translation—which is etymologically quite appropriate—highlights the difficulties of reconciling the printed text with its visual contexts, either on the page or in spoken discourse occurring in interpretatively charged locations.