

## Subjective Diplomacy and Durrell: Response to Caroline Krzakowski

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James M. Clawson  
*Grambling State University*

Caroline Krzakowski presents a useful simultaneous reading of *Bitter Lemons*, *Mountolive*, and Durrell's diplomatic experience. As *Bitter Lemons* was published only a year before *Mountolive*, it should be inevitable that we read their diplomatic aims into each other—but little scholarship has demonstrated such work.

Especially compelling are Krzakowski's explorations of the original archival duties of the diplomat, evolving from a clerk or librarian of diplomats to a disseminator of ideas and champion of national interests. Krzakowski illustrates the power of a diplomat as emerging from "his ability to choose which fragments of information to transmit to his superiors"—the successful diplomat must also be a successful archivist, interpreter, and communicator. And it is tempting to go farther where she finds *Mountolive* representative of "the postwar 'shrinking' of the British Empire," asserting that "Mountolive's failure as a diplomat parallels the demise of empire" (115). In the context of Durrell's entire body of work, *Mountolive*'s failures of understanding are those of *Everyman*, underscoring a motif in Durrell's work: the modern world's frustration by subjective limitations. In this sense, perhaps, Lawrence Durrell shapes all of his matured protagonists from archivists of collected histories into networkers of fragmented understandings.

In his critical text *Key to Modern Poetry*, written 1947–1948, Durrell describes the problem of subjectivity:

Man is simply a box labeled personality. He peers out of the box through five slits, the senses. [...] Only in his imagination can he inhabit the whole—a reality which is beyond the reach of intellectual qualification: [...] we must accept it, and be content with our provisional truths, our short-range raids on this greater territory (*Key* 5)

Delivered as they are so soon after World War II and by a colonial-born British subject after the fall of empire, Durrell's words resonate: "we must accept it." Mountolive's attitude to these "provisional truths" represent in part his failure. Since Mountolive does not *recognize* his limitations, he cannot *accept* them.

Krzakowski writes of Durrell's diplomats that they are "a class onto themselves" because they "develop an expertise in hermeneutic decoding and in revising the significance of the information which they gather. [...]they are an international society of emissary-arbitrators with special privileges who belong nowhere and whose public personas can erode their private convictions" (133). But Durrell's diplomat is not unique in these regards. The figure of the diplomat may help galvanize an idea, but the necessity of navigating, decoding, revising, nowhere-belonging, and disconnecting—Durrell suggests elsewhere—are requirements of us all. Darley, never a diplomat, might demonstrate these abilities most acutely. Through and throughout the *Quartet's* four books, Darley navigates to decode, eventually understanding the world and finding his art only after distancing his private recollection from what he comes to understand as a public truth. In fact, the problem of understanding an uninhabitable whole is one Durrell explored his entire career.<sup>1</sup> Mountolive feels joyed by (mistakenly) thinking that the reality of Egypt lives up to his Orientalist expectations (414). Likewise in *Black Book*, Lawrence Lucifer believes a diary is all he needs to understand Death Gregory—a tradition Darley takes up when he reads Justine in her diary in *The Alexandria Quartet*. In *Tunc* and *Nunquam*, Charlock too late discovers the error of his reducing the essence of people to the sounds they produce. Uniquely, in *The Avignon Quintet* the "whole" of reality shows itself bigger than imagined by outgrowing the pages of the work in a few places, most overtly on the last pages of the first and last books. Each of these four works hinges on difficulties of understanding the world. In each of these works, the protagonist plays the fool who bungles by believing things to be as simple as they appear. (In *The Avignon Quintet*, the reader is the protagonist fool, taken in by the text's twists.) Thus, the failure of British diplomacy in Egypt isn't the fault of Mountolive so much as an indicator of the faulty questions we can't help asking ourselves: "can the empire survive?" or

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<sup>1</sup> At an address in Pennsylvania in 1986, he describes his life work as one of trying to "restore the broken context" (Begal 17), suggesting perhaps that it was an unwillingness to accept the provisional that moved him to write.

“can my constructed understanding of the world survive unchanging in the kind of world that does nothing but change?”

Outside of his novels, too, the novelist upends these constructions; the diplomat may function as an “in between,” but Durrell creates that space for himself inconsistently in *Bitter Lemons*. A foreign diplomat with native language skills, he initially positions himself between the British and the Cypriots in a way that befits the liminal persona of a diplomat: Cypriots are unable to find humor in ridiculous British customs, and the British see Cypriots in one dimension (*Bitter Lemons* 36). But Durrell also disrupts this construction when he articulates one more position. Rather than defining his place as a liminal one of mediation between the British and the Cypriot causes, he instead points out distinctions between Greek and Cypriot cultures (40, 114–115), and he increasingly identifies himself with Britain—which he situates between Greece and Cyprus: “You’d be surprised how much we are beloved,” he writes to an Athenian, “we” being the British whom he suggests are beloved by the Cypriots (118).

In *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell largely establishes his diplomacy, his in-between-ness, by driving wedges—creating and occupying middle grounds. And even as he does so, he gestures toward the importance of interpretation and indeterminacy, the nature of reality as comprised of the “selected fictions” Pursewarden is fond of in *The Alexandria Quartet* (210). In a sense, then, the successful diplomat shifts from an archivist of diplouns to a networker of fragments. Witness, for example, Piers, Sylvie, Bruce, and Toby setting off from Alexandria for Macabru, traveling through relics at the desert’s edge (*Quintet* 91–99). While Toby is unable to navigate satisfyingly through the artifacts—he is troubled by the fragments of history, thinking they might be mirages, symptoms of the troubled perspective through which an individual sees the world—Piers is able to make his way. As the sole character truly to feel a connection with the religious events at the oasis, he is also more sensitive than his companions. Piers acts here as a networker of fragments, a true diplomat who both *sees* and *sees beyond* the “outer furnishings of this world” (95). He represents the diplomat-as-networker who exists within the world of diplomacy, rather than the diplomat-as-archivist who suffers himself to keep the artificial bounds of an artificial creation. Piers is, of course, not an international diplomat, but he represents the extent to which all of Durrell’s matured protagonists are individual diplomats, responsible for

negotiating among interests in order to fathom the kind of world that resists understanding.

When it comes to Durrell and diplomacy, of course, we cannot let the selection of the fictional obscure the implications of the actual. Durrell's publication in 1957 of a British account of the diplomatic crisis of Enosis was followed closely by two Cypriot accounts: in English, *The Age of Bronze* by Rodis Roufos in 1960; in Greek, *Closed Doors* by Costas Montis in 1964. Despite Durrell's note in the Preface that *Bitter Lemons* was no "political book" (ix), Roufos attributed to Durrell (cast as Maurice Ferrell, author of *Sour Grapes*) a book which is "not only very British—[...] it is Tory British" (138). And the narrator of Montis's work might easily be speaking to an Irish proxy of Durrell when he asks, reasserting the politics of the personal, "how could you have come to kill us?" (110). The successful diplomat in Durrell's writing is one who learns to understand the archive of diplouns to navigate among the fragments of a fractured reality. Beyond his world of fiction, the enormity of the world's archive withheld such a tidy narrative arc from his diplomacy.

More than wanting to comment upon Mountolive's failure as ambassador or even Britain's failure as a colonial power, Durrell uses these figures as symbols of a greater common truth. Krzakowski makes a gesture in this direction when she cites Durrell's consideration of monuments as makers of contemporaneity: in *Bitter Lemons*, she argues Durrell "asks how the late modernist writer should reconfigure the fragments of the past" (125). In the *Avignon Quintet*, these fragments of the past are not reconfigured but presented precisely *as* fragments of the past. Obscured by no interpretation, they instead emphasize the contemporaneity of the moment, which comes at the end of so many other moments. In doing so, at least in Durrell's later work, the fragment is once again an aestheticized object, but in a way that is neither Eliotian nor Wordsworthian but something newer. History becomes an archive of fragmentary moments, the connected and networked accumulation of which reminds us when we are. *Now* is that time which could come only after we have experienced many *thens*. Likewise, our understanding of reality requires us to imagine networked connections among "our provisional truths, our short-range raids" of it (Durrell, *Key* 5).

This lesson is common to Durrell's corpus, from *The Black Book* through the *Avignon Quintet*, from Lawrence Lucifer through Darley, Charlock, Piers, and Durrell himself in *Bitter Lemons*. Mountol-

ive's failure as a diplomat, Britain's failure in Egypt, and the Foreign Office's failure in the hearts and minds of Cypriots—each of these failures offers for Durrell a diplomatic symbol pointing to the problem of subjectivity he explored for nearly fifty years.

James Clawson is Assistant Professor of English at Grambling State University. His research focuses on interactions with philosophy and politics in 20th-century British literature, especially considering elements of the Romantic in works by Irish and Scottish novelists. His recent articles have appeared in *Mosaic* and *Deus Loci*.

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