Panic Spring

A Romance

Charles Norden

[Lawrence Durrell]
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1937 was a momentous year for the young Lawrence Durrell. *Panic Spring*, his second novel, reflects the rapidly developing milieu in which he was conceptualizing his craft and organizing his influences. Durrell had lived in Greece for twenty-five months when *Panic Spring* first appeared in print, and on the advice of Faber & Faber, the novel was released under a pseudonym after revisions and expurgations – although Durrell’s name appeared with the copyright, making the authorship an open secret. The surname Norden derives from Henry Miller’s virile Van Norden in *Tropic of Cancer*, a work that preoccupied Durrell at this time and that had prompted him to begin a correspondence with Miller in 1935. This was also a turning point when Durrell began to influence others as well – his correspondence from the Greek island Corfu, where he then resided, was spreading widely.¹ While his first novel *Pied Piper of Lovers* highlights the personal preoccupations that would linger across his career, *Panic Spring* shows the synthesis of influences he would later reconstruct into a late Modernist enterprise, as it appears in *The Alexandria Quartet* and his subsequent novel sequences.

Both of his first novels, from twenty years before his rise to fame, come at a critical juncture, both in Durrell’s career and in modernist writing in general. His modernist readings are clear, as is their influence and his struggle with it, and his own late modernist experiments were beginning to be noticed by his contemporaries. These early works provide a readily apparent genealogy of the development from traditional narrative through modernist experimentation in Durrell’s *oeuvre*. This
is the stylistic point at which Durrell moves from a realist mode similar to that seen in Orwell’s novels to an experimental frame that ties him to late modernism. Panic Spring is the key point in this transition, offering the missing aesthetic development that is not clearly traceable in Durrell’s peers: the integration of the mannerisms of literature from the 1890s to the 1920s in tandem with a late modernist discomfort with these often still-living predecessors. D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Norman Douglas, W.B. Yeats, Stéphane Mallarmé, Remy de Gourmont, and Richard Aldington all figure prominently, very frequently modulating further allusions to much earlier authors in the English canon while transforming contemporary movements of the 1930s. Yet, their influence is discomfited, as if they are tied to the social obligations and milieu that were reaching a breaking point prior to World War II.

Durrell’s works from this period overlap significantly, and he tended to deride his first two novels, preferring to begin considerations of his career – and even then only when necessary – with The Black Book in 1938. This appears to have been largely a matter of convenience and posture: Pied Piper of Lovers was too autobiographical for a private personality like Durrell, and Panic Spring reveals the formative influences he was synthesizing that appear less overtly in his subsequent works. Apart from being compelling works of the late inter-bellum period, contemporary to and often anticipating George Orwell’s pre-war fiction, these first two novels inform Durrell’s later works in important ways, primarily because they show his influences and preoccupations more clearly.

The affinities with Orwell’s novels are also uncanny. Orwell later used the same character names and a windfall of 50 pounds (dollars for Orwell) that sends the budding artist-protagonist off on a foolish spree in his 1936 Keep the Aspidistra Flying, an exact parallel to Durrell’s 1935 Pied Piper of Lovers. Durrell repays the favour here by using the same class-based pun on mispronunciations of “Ro-mance” (opposed to “Romance”) that Orwell strongly emphasizes and by setting the chapter “Francis” in a firm in which the titular character makes good by producing expert advertisements. In Orwell’s novel, a poet who works for an advertising firm has a sexual relationship with his girlfriend in a dilapidated boarding house while working in a series of bookshops, in which he notices and derides lower class pronunciations while extolling a classless society. The scenarios are, otherwise, quite different, and Orwell invests little energy in describing the perspective or feelings of his
female character, Rosemary. Durrell reverses Orwell’s gender dynamic, and on the whole, Durrell’s Frances receives a far greater proportion of narrative consideration than does Orwell’s Rosemary. This echo rings truer when Durrell’s Gordon (a repeated character that predates the protagonist in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*) is granted the same occupation and experiences as Orwell’s Gordon Comstock. The two young authors would subsequently joust publicly in *The New English Weekly* in 1937, with Orwell condemning the politics of *The Booster* and Durrell quipping that such critiques “could be turned on George Orwell’s own flying aspidistras with more profit” (“Booster” 78). Orwell would, nevertheless, write a famous review of Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* that became his “Inside the Whale,” and he notably went to Spain wearing Miller’s overcoat, given to him en route by Miller in Paris.

With Orwell as a comparative focus, Durrell immediately proves to be more genuine in showing his Decadent in addition to his Modernist influences. Moreover, in contrast to his later “entertainments,” as he called them, such as his espionage-thriller *White Eagles Over Serbia* or the comedy series *Antrobus*, these early novels engage in stylistic experimentation that struggles within the traditional narrative structure. Although *Panic Spring* has been largely ignored by critics of Durrell’s works and by broader studies of this period – perhaps in large part due to the difficulty of obtaining a copy of the text – it is very much a part of the critical transition in Anglo-American late modernism and English Surrealism that occurred in the late 1930s. Its immediate successor, *The Black Book*, stands in stylistic kinship with Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938), Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), and Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* (1936) at the turning point to a late modernist aesthetic (Miller, *Late* 7–9, 12–13) – these kin are also all alike in having protracted delays in publication, which makes *Panic Spring* unique in that it bridges that moment of delay in Durrell’s career. In contrast with Gascoyne’s surrealist first novel, *Opening Day* (1933), Durrell also successfully negotiates the formal complexities of the novel form, allowing for experimentation within a tautly managed structure. His is perhaps the first surrealist novel to do so successfully, but this transition is very clearly anticipated in *Panic Spring*.

Durrell began work on his more critically well-known *The Black Book* in May or June of the same year, which makes the two novels overlap in composition by seven to eight months. During this same period in late 1935, Durrell completed his highly surrealist short story “The Cherries.” While significantly revising the Faber & Faber proofs for *Panic Spring* in 1936, he completed “Asylum in the Snow” and finished what was possibly the third draft of *The Black Book*, sending copies of both to Miller in less than two months from Christmas 1936 to February 1937. This
nexus of creativity broadens, and in addition to publishing *Panic Spring* under a pseudonym from Miller’s work, Durrell began to publish overtly Surrealist works in a joint venture with Miller, Alfred Perlès, and Anaïs Nin: *The Booster*. This journal eventually became *Delta* under Durrell’s direct editorship. It focused increasingly on English surrealist poetry and attracted contributions from several rising writers of the late 1930s, many of whose careers were disrupted and overshadowed by the war: Dylan Thomas, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, Tambimuttu, Kostas Palamas, Kay Boyle, Audrey Beecham, and Anne Ridler. This same period saw the rise of Durrell’s influence on David Gascoyne, whom he published in *Delta* and invited to co-edit the poetry issue. The young poet had already taken a leading role in translating Surrealist works, rapidly displacing Samuel Beckett after the young Irish author’s first work translating contemporary French Surrealist materials. Gascoyne took the lead when both, with other English authors, translated Paul Eluard’s *Thorns of Thunder* in 1936, coinciding with the London Exhibition (Gifford 36–64). This network widened rapidly during the period of *Panic Spring*’s composition and publication, including Durrell’s sharing the manuscript of *The Black Book* with Gascoyne.

When Durrell’s correspondence with him started in 1935, Miller had concurrently begun a parallel correspondence with the British poet and art critic Herbert Read. At some point prior to October 1936, he began openly sharing Read’s materials with Durrell, in particular to develop a conversation about the London International Surrealist Exhibition. This led rapidly to his and Durrell’s quasi-anarchist resistance to Surrealism’s communist political affiliations, which Read himself then shared. However, Durrell and Miller maintained the surrealist methods of “pure psychic automatism.” Durrell began to respond to these materials in detail, especially Read’s political lecture from the Exhibition, and this is reflected in the formal experimentation of *Panic Spring* – he rejects the political for the personal. It is then no surprise that the island, Mavrodaphne, markedly resists the governmental upheavals in Greece, to which the novel alludes, and instead nurtures individual creativity. A non-hierarchical form of mutualist individualism also guides the actions of the characters while the only authority figure, Rumanades, who is also overtly tied to capitalist excesses, weakens until he is prematurely aged and diseased. Fonvisin fled from the Bolsheviks in Russia, and Walsh is eager to know if poetry in London is “still communism.” Francis escapes sexual exploitation as a female labourer, and the luxury of independent means is poignantly desired by Marlowe as he regards his circle of friends at the novel’s conclusion. Yet, neither Rumanades’ excessive wealth nor the contemporary revolutionary zeal displace the individual’s hour in the sun or the mutualist life of the village – this trend continues in Durrell’s
works, and these “politics of the unpolitical,” akin to Herbert Read’s, are frequently misread as apathy or elitism. This situation is anticipated in Durrell’s extensive responses to and creative engagement with Surrealism via Read and Miller, which antedates his meeting with André Breton by a year, marking this novel with the signature of an artist caught in the midst of a struggle between conflicting aesthetic allegiances, which are themselves caught between deeply conflicting political aims.3

Finally, in addition to demonstrating a stylistic development into the late modernist mode that Durrell adopted after Panic Spring, the novel also ties his later works to his earliest. As James A. Brigham points out in his article in this volume, characters recur across Durrell’s first three volumes, as do specific locales and descriptive tropes. In contrast with Beckett and Barnes, this makes Durrell’s ongoing reconstruction of his narrative materials clearer than is typically possible with a writer developing his or her craft. Affinities are easily found between Durrell’s first novels in the 1930s and his last in the 1980s. The publication of Miller’s first two novels is akin, but Durrell is the only author in this nexus whose early novels were actually brought to a final form and published under his own eye.

The anticipations here of Durrell’s later works are clear: the mumification chapter prefigures the social satire via embalming in The Revolt of Aphrodite; the leap from the high cliff is repeated in his novel The Dark Labyrinth (originally published through Tambimuttu’s Poetry London as Cefalu); the dark tension between satire and prejudice in an English protagonist’s view of the Levant in general and Greece specifically; and so forth. Perhaps more importantly, the novel treads ever-closer to the stylistic break being nurtured among Anglo-American writers at this moment, a break from High Modernism to which his subsequent The Black Book contributed: the refusal to move time forward; the employment of multiple, conflicting narrative perspectives; a neo-colonial landscape that depicts decadence without a viable nostalgia for empire; and the bitterness of a dark humour that treads narrowly between the ridiculous and the allegorically damning. These features mark the increasing shift in 1930s writing but without the overt political aims of the Auden Group: a feature likely due to the neo-anarchist individualism Durrell then espoused in tandem with Henry Miller, and with which both infected the New Apocalypse poets. Although Durrell does not appear in the New Apocalypse anthologies, he and Miller published and mentored most of the Apocalyptic poets in the 1930s and prompted the anarchist shift in the thinking of Herbert Read, who was a direct influence on the New Apocalypse (Gifford 53–60). Durrell is also referred to repeatedly in Apocalyptic anthologies, where his stylistic influence is clear, though he is cast as too individualist for the military nature of the

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movement, making G. S. Fraser comment “even such a brilliant visionary of defeatism as Lawrence Durrell...cuts apart from the movement” (“Apocalypse” 6). This individualist “defeatism” is abundantly evident in the retreat from politics and the world in Panic Spring, a retreat that informs the “Private Country” of Durrell’s subsequent works.

CRITICISM

Included with this edition are an Introduction by Richard Pine and a reprint of an early article by James A. Brigham that contextualizes the novel. Durrell’s works have attracted an eclectic range of scholarly criticism since his rise to prominence in the 1950s, although his ties to his Modernist predecessors and late Modernist contemporaries are often neglected in favour of his works from the same period of the Angry Young Men. In part, this text and the critical works included with it seek to correct this oversight. The scholarly work on Durrell has developed into an impressive body on its own, but it is only now becoming more fully integrated into twentieth century literary studies.

Also, while many critical investigations discuss Durrell’s early works, due to their rarity for the past seven decades, very few scholarly essays have focused exclusively on the novels on their own, preferring instead a comparative approach to Durrell’s later fiction. The Bibliography includes these comparative works, which analyze Panic Spring in relation to Durrell’s oeuvre and his development as a writer, as well as entries for Durrell’s contemporary writings.

THIS EDITION

This edition draws on the Faber and Faber first edition in 1937 in comparison with the subsequent American edition by Covici Friede later in the same year, nearly contemporaneous with the firm’s bankruptcy. A few obvious typographical errors have been silently corrected, and spellings with ligatures have been modernized throughout. In contrast to Durrell’s later works, there are no authorial revisions between the two editions, which has simplified my task.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any effort to return lost works to our attention involves a network of academic support and personal encouragement. My appreciation is profound, and I recognize that this work would not have been possible without the assistance of several people. Candace Fertile first made Durrell’s early novels available to me, the University of Alberta afforded me the opportunity to teach such works, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada supported my research while preparing this text. I am also indebted to Edward Bishop, who encour-
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I must also make a special note for James A. Brigham, who first called for the publication of these materials in 1979. Jay’s papers were donated by his widow to the University of Victoria while I was there as a post-doctoral fellow conducting research in the McPherson Library. I had the opportunity to organize these papers early in 2007. During several late nights sorting his correspondences and manuscripts, I realized the staggering extent of his humble and private labours to aid others in their scholarly work. I discussed this editing project in its earliest stages with Jay in 2003, to which he responded with much enthusiasm. I can only hope that bringing these works back to the public, nearly thirty years after his first call to do so, is a suitable tribute to his contributions to literary studies.

Notes
1 Another notable feature is the degree to which Panic Spring reflects Durrell’s life on Corfu. Although many parallels to Corfu are generalized in the book, in a signed copy of the novel dedicated in 1937 to a “Mrs Holdsworth,” he pasted in a map of Corfu and re-titled it “Map of Black Daphne,” the name of the fictional Ionian island. Moreover, this was the first of several “island books,” as Alan Warren Friedman describes them, and its submerged theme of revolution anticipates Durrell most famous island book: Bitter Lemons and its recollections of Enosis on Cyprus. Durrell wrote the first draft for Panic Spring largely between his arrival on Corfu in March 1935 and its completion in the following December. The opening scene also parallels his own delays in Brindisi during the attempted coup in Athens by Venizelos.

2 Exceptions to this tendency exist, such as the Ace Books pulp edition of Durrell’s The Dark Labyrinth, which places Panic Spring first in Durrell’s list of published novels, despite the pseudonym. The Dark Labyrinth is very much a return to the issues that concern Durrell in Panic Spring, including another fictional Greek island, and it was his next novel after The Black Book, so its temporary return to his acknowledged publications is not particularly surprising.

3 For more detail on the political tensions involved in Durrell’s ties to the Surrealists and his intrusions into the Miller-Read correspondence, see James Gifford, “Surrealism’s Anglo-American Afterlife” (36–64). Significantly, Durrell first voiced his notion of the “Heraldic Universe,” an artist’s individual creative world, in a direct point by point response to Read’s most political speech on communism during the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition.

4 Notably, Fraser later went on to write a book-length study of Durrell and was with
him in Egypt during World War II while writing for the New Apocalypse. Fraser was also involved in the *Personal Landscape* movement led by Durrell and Robin Fedden, the title of which demonstrates their personal and individualist stance.