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## BOOKS



# What They Wrote And What They Were

DAVID LITTLEJOHN

**L**AURENCE DURRELL AND HENRY MILLER:  
A PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE. Edited by  
George Wickes. *Dutton, \$6.95.*

Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller have been writing back and forth for twenty-eight years, ever since the young Englishman wrote an exuberant, Millerian fan letter to the author of *Tropic of Cancer* in 1935. By now, one would think, they should understand each other. But the obvious and near-tragic fact that emerges from this selection of their letters is that neither does, or ever has. For twenty-eight years, despite occasional glimpses of the truth, the two writers have been trying to make one another over into images of themselves. That their friendship has maintained itself undiminished through all these years of mutual nonrecognition is simply a triumph of the men over the writers.

At first glance, these painfully honest letters appear to chronicle the spectacular rise of the junior correspondent and the pathetic decline of the senior. Miller's only really "famous" work was written before the series began, and year by year, shrinking into his sullen exile, he finds himself less and less regarded—except by Durrell. One reads the book, in fact, not as Miller's story but as Durrell's, plotting his growth against the sadly static image of his early mentor and master, from the early, Miller-aping *Black Book* to the international celebrity of the Alexandria Quartet. But, though Durrell indeed has

grown, Miller, against appearances, has not declined: he has simply never moved.

Durrell kept expecting Miller to change, to "write his great work," kept hoping he would, while all the time Miller kept insisting he *could* not and never would. It was integral to his primitivist credo, as man and as writer—for him, there is no distinction; one's writing is simply a function of one's life—that one established a position and stayed there, rock-hard, unyielding, and unmoved. There is a certain stern nobility in his attitude, and, as one hears the same unflinching principles repeated over and over in Miller's letters to an ever less sympathetic, ever less comprehending Durrell, one begins to acquire the respect he feels this long-misunderstood man deserves. In one way, *because* of this monolithic sameness, because, in part, of the suffering and neglect it was certain to bring him—as he well knew—Miller is actually the better served by this revealing exhibition. Of the two, he is, there is no question, decidedly the lesser writer; but he is, as Durrell himself seems to recognize, the greater man. These letters may help one to forget all of Miller's tediously blathering books and to focus on the far more important fact of the man himself.

**W**HAT Miller is not, first of all, is a "man of letters"—he has nothing to do with "art," with "literature," as most of us regard it. He

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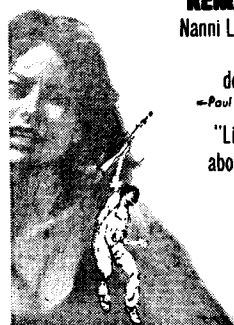
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writes only as a necessary means of self-discovery, as part of his lifelong search for the truth; because he must: "I am doomed to write perpetually." "Literature!" he quotes Balzac writing to George Sand: "But, my dear lady, literature doesn't exist! There is life, of which politics and art are part. And I am a man that's alive, that's all—a man living his life, nothing more." And later, "Where does creation lie—in the one thing done or in the effect? What and how a man does, acts, thinks, talks, every day is what counts, no?"

With standards like these, one cannot expect much in the way of "art." Miller has almost no sense of "taste" or discrimination, in his own work or that of others—though his five-page critique of *Clea* and, looking back, of the Quartet as a whole, is surprisingly keen. But he was even more enthusiastic about *The Black Book*—or the work of Céline ("Still the best writer alive today . . ."), Cendrars, Powys, Giono—or Kerouac. He revels in Hindu arcana, Zen, astrology. He delights equally in the best and the worst of his own voluminous autobiographizing, and insists, against Durrell's hopeless pleas that he develop some critical sense, that the most unreadable of his surrealistic fantasias are every bit as important as both the *Tropics* together. And, of course, they are.

The pity of all this stern anti-literary nobility is, unfortunately, that for almost anyone but himself Henry Miller has precious little to say—or precious little worth reading. As Durrell developed, year by year, his own critical sense, discovered the controlled, artistic self that was to dream *Justine* and its sequels, he began, perversely, trying to read Miller's works as "literature," to judge them as "art." When he got to *Sexus* in 1949, the first volume of the three-volume gargantua that Miller calls *The Rosy Crucifixion*, he balked:

But my dear Henry, the moral vulgarity of so much of it is artistically painful . . . All the wild resonance of *Cancer* and *Black Spring* has gone, and you have failed to develop what is really new in your prose, and what should set a crown on your work. The new mystical outlines are all there; but they are lost, lost, damn it, in this shower of lavatory filth which no longer seems tonic and bracing,

but just excrementitious and sad. One winces and averts the face. What on earth has made you slip back on a simple matter of taste—artistic taste?

Five days later, having waded through all twelve hundred pages, he desperately cabled: SEXUS DISGRACEFULLY BAD WILL COMPLETELY RUIN REPUTATION UNLESS WITHDRAWN REVISED LARRY."

Miller, with remarkable grace, accepted his friend's "defection," and patiently tried to explain once again what he was doing. Before this rare display of tolerance and benignity, Durrell retracted at once, and begged the Master's forgiveness; and the crisis passed. But Durrell was obviously right. As books, as "literature," so many of these things of Miller's are very nearly worthless. The gory, gratuitous obscenity that so dismayed his dearest friend is, of course, Miller's most notorious "inelegance"; but the pages in between can be equally distressing. Miller is committed, for one thing, to an autobiographical, "ego-protagonist" mode—it is all he has ever used: "all this Brobdingnagian experience must be vomited forth." Which would be well enough, except that most of Miller's life, for all the sex, has been awesomely dull. His motley associates, the "heroes" of his "novels," have been for the most part a sordid grab bag of crackpots and cranks, panhandlers and astrol-ogers and undiscovered writers—the sort of people who simply cannot retain one's interest through twenty or twenty-five books.

His "philosophy," if it may be called that, often rambles off into untrackable pseudo-mystical realms, but at core it is and always has been an apocalyptic doom-shouting condemnation of the whole of civilization. He simply doesn't like it: we were better off in caves. Since almost none of this, however, finds its way into the letters, one begins to wonder just how serious it all is. The Miller here revealed, the same, almost, from first page to last, is this unyielding anti-literary Ego, writing himself out laughing in book after rambling book.

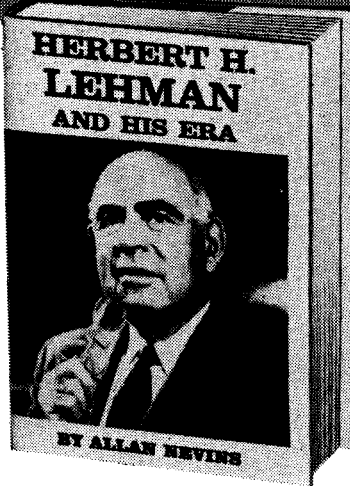
"If one lived long enough the whole man would come through in the work—ideas, sensations, experience, philosophy, aesthetic, and everything . . . All these 'new trends



and directions' which the critics discern with each new work—all this sort of apperception is false." He is childlike, sensitive, very proud, high-spirited, totally uncritical, alternately gay to the point of euphoria and despairing to the point of suicide. He curses a civilization that he does not understand, reviles a country he is unable to leave, and dismisses as worthless all the major authors he has never taken the trouble to read. He refuses to make any effort to commercialize himself, to "earn a living," but harasses his acquaintances to support him ("You call yourselves my friends") in petulant open letters—and they do. I do not pretend wholly to understand such a man—even Durrell, who should of all people be able, all too obviously fails. But his letters here, cleared of the cant and rhetoric of his books, offer as clear a picture as we are ever likely to get. They prove, at least, if proof were needed, that the Dirty Old Man who still represents the greater part of his public image is really only a fractional, though integral, fragment of the whole—a whole that is huge, unchanging, probably unique, and the closest thing our century is likely to produce to a genuine Noble Savage.

**B**UT ONE READS this correspondence, as I say, not so much to piece together the picture of a Henry Miller as to trace the growth of Durrell—a growth seen, increasingly, as one moving away from the fixed and unfertile point of the Master. The first stage in this development extends from the original exchange of adulatory letters to the completion of Durrell's *The Black Book* in the spring of 1937. So far, they are virtually step in step. The already notorious, middle-aged author of the *Tropics*, up in Paris, could not say enough fine things about *The Black Book*: he thought that he had discovered another Henry Miller. "Your commercial career is finished," he chortles. "From now on you're an outlaw . . . You are the master of the English language. . . . This is way beyond Lawrence and the whole tribe."

The new master of the language began to show signs of rebellion, however, signs of what Miller could only regard as a dangerous and




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spineless truckling to the world. The artist, he had warned Durrell, was committed to becoming "a traitor to the human race"; but his new disciple was giving disquieting evidence of wanting to rejoin it. For one thing, he appeared willing to expurgate *The Black Book* in order to get it published. Henry stepped in at once, spoke of "conscience" and "moral responsibility," and Durrell backed down, awestruck and ashamed. Next came the more serious question of Durrell's "double life," his insistence, as it were, on eating the cake of bourgeois security and spitting it out as well. This Miller could not understand. The following exchange, from July of 1937, dramatizes in an essential way this difference between the two men. Durrell writes:

... I CAN'T WRITE REAL BOOKS ALL THE TIME. ... Already the B.B. has played havoc with me. What I want is this, frankly. Once every three years or more I shall try to compose for full orchestra. The rest of the time I shall do essays, travel books, perhaps one more novel under Charles Norden [his Dr. Jekyll pseudonym]. ... I think you will probably feel this is traitorous or something, but you must understand that I need my friend Norden in order to keep my peace of mind and be happy a little and love. ...

And Miller:

Don't, my good Durrell, take the schizophrenic route. ... what is the penalty, after all? What can they do to you—THEY? ... If, as you say, you can't write REAL books all the time, then don't write. Don't write anything ...

The warning was heartfelt and strong, but of course ineffectual. Durrell, literarily, is still happily schizoid, writing space-time continua with the right hand and diplomatic low comedy with the left. ("All this is very perplexing to my fans who don't know whether I am P. G. Wodehouse or James Joyce or what the hell.") The disciple, already, was drifting away.

Through the late 30's, when the two finally met in person, first in Paris and then in Greece (see Miller's *The Colossus of Maroussi*), the breach widened, as Durrell took more and more a part in the human race from which Miller was more

and more retreating. Miller writes that he must withdraw, to meditate and write; Durrell writes back, from his once-despised England, "I have written nothing but grown in humanity half a cubit." Miller raves to him about Tibetan yoga and the Zen masters—"It drives me wild, delirious with joy"; while Durrell discovers the Palladian green loveliness of Warwickshire, rediscovers the grandeur of Shakespeare—he even loves the swans and the tourists of Stratford. They are writing at, not to, one another, from two different worlds.

THE CRUCIAL YEARS for Durrell, for Miller too, in a way, for so many people, were the war years. Miller retreated—from civilization, if you will—to America. He drove sixteen thousand miles, first, about this "Air-Conditioned Nightmare"; then, shrinking as far off to the edges as he could, settled into a borrowed, ramshackle cabin at Big Sur, California—one of the most spectacularly beautiful seacoasts in the world.

While he sat there fending off the tourists, playing Ping-pong, and spewing out reams of *The Rosy Crucifixion*—the sum of his activity, virtually, for the next fifteen years—Durrell had actively rejoined the world, and was working for the British Information Office—in Alexandria! "I have a wonderful idea for a novel on Alexandria ...," he writes one day in August, 1944; and from then on we are reading paragraphs and pages from the embryonic *Quartet* in his letters to Big Sur.

But more important still, for Durrell, was the experience of war, of statecraft and public starvation, of "history as reality"—the sort of drastically maturing experience that Miller had purposely fled. He tries, over and over, to explain to Henry what it is all about. "We live in an atmosphere of privation, spiritual as well as physical; and from all over Asia and Europe the famine reports are pouring in. It's hard to feel anything until you've seen the effects of the war. It's lucky you have been spared them. Athens would make you weep: smashed currency, labour shortage, dearth of raw materials, hunger, syphilis, and the ruin of the common man. Only the rich still glitter." Later still, from Yugoslavia

—Durrell is on the Foreign Service circuit by now: Press Attaché, Director of Public Relations; Buenos Aires, Belgrade, Cyprus—

. . . my dear Henry, you are crazy. You cannot have the faintest idea what a communist country is like. . . . No, but you won't understand even now. BUT IF YOU CAME HERE FOR JUST A WEEK, you'd realize that even a great war would be justified to prevent THIS, and liberate the millions under the yoke of this tyranny, this moral prison. . . . But you will disapprove.

After the war, Durrell finds himself more and more reconciled to England, and has become fast friends with—of all people—his publisher and new mentor, T. S. Eliot. One wonders what Miller must have thought. Durrell even presumes now to advise and to criticize; the roles are beginning to reverse. “. . . Like all American geniuses you have no sense of form whatsoever . . . you have lost a good deal of critical control . . . quite half of *Murder the Murderer* [Miller's nihilistic response to the war] could have been blue-pencilled out. It seemed repetitive and platitudinous.” Something less than subtle has happened to the relationship, although neither yet seems entirely aware. “I occasionally read your frenzied appeals to reason in the avant garde papers—sounding but so remote . . .”

The oceanic gap that now divided them was suddenly and cruelly laid bare, as we have seen, by Durrell's outspoken condemnation of *Sexus* in September of 1949, and as frantically covered up again. Although they quickly pretend it never happened—they were, after all, friends first and critics only a far distant second—this ugly episode discovers just how very far Durrell had grown from Miller since his return to America, how much he had forgotten what it *was* that Miller had devoted his life to doing. Otherwise, how could he possibly have troubled Henry over questions of “moral vulgarity,” “critical sense,” “failing to develop”—of “taste,” for heaven's sake, of “ruining his reputation”? These were now, of course, among Durrell's own major concerns, but they had never been Miller's. That Durrell was “bitterly disappointed” in the book was perhaps to be expected;

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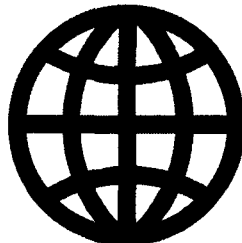


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but that he could have so lost sight of the Master as to expect him to heed, even to understand, his so-"literary" critique is astonishing.

Durrell is more careful after this; one feels more and more the tension of benevolent reticence, of remembered praise and ritual congratulation. Miller is, he realizes, simply too fine a man to be hurt like that again: there are more important things than "taste." *Sexus* comes up for a hesitant, more kindly review, eight years too late. "I found somewhat to my surprise that *Sexus* which I was once so shocked and disgusted by is really as great as *Tropic*—only it is very unpruned." Even his desperate, so sensible attempt to convince Miller, through four successive letters, of the cheap, pretentious-sentimental banality of the Kerouac & Co. Beats ("They need a week at a French lycée to be taught to think and construct"—the new Durrell talking—Eliot's Durrell)—even this, so obviously serious and sincere, backs down at last into respectful, filial acquiescence. "Don't be angry with me for not going along on this book. Maybe it has fine things in it which are not on my wavelength. . . . I may have been unjust . . ."

Proposing his own Quartet, which so evidently satisfies him, Durrell is to Miller uncertain, apologetic: "(Christ, you will say disapprovingly. The conscious artist.)" Of *Mountolive*, he is positively ashamed. It is so "naturalistic," so un-Miller. "You may yawn your head off . . ." (Henry, of course, loves it, effusively. "My dear man, don't say such things, ever, not to anyone. That book is a perfect gem." Two can play the same game.)

On matters not directly concerned with the now off-limits grounds of their writings, the two can still serve as each other's best conscience—as they have since the letters began. Uproot yourself from America, Durrell insists. It's ruining you. ". . . America is really harming you, making you critically soft. . . . I feel that a visit to Europe is essential to you for your work . . ." In return, Miller kept nagging away at Durrell to get out of the Foreign Service, to quit everything else and write. "Is it so impossible? You'll always be working for someone, if you think it's

'necessary.' Take a good think some day. Map out your life as you'd like to live it. Then jump!" Durrell did "jump," at last, in December of 1952, and from here on the book is his—his and Justine's, Pursewarden's, Narouz's, Melissa's.

WITH THAT, as the world knows, he was in: Henry, at the end of his fine critique on the Alexandria Quartet, handed over the crown. Translations, prizes, Book-of-the-Month Club, Durrell's own problems with fans and reporters, honors from the Queen Mother followed in order. Durrell was now writing introductions for Miller, trying to pay back a long-standing debt. Miller responds—an exchange typical of their later relationship—with a gracious preface to the French *Justine*.

Against the triumph of Durrell, the tragedy of Miller, now juxtaposed letter for letter, stands out all the more starkly. It is with a certain pain that we watch as this sixty-eight-year-old monument comes at last to the kind of bitterly honest introspection in depth that monuments should never have to make:

What I feel like saying sometimes—when the whole bloody *Crucifixion* comes to an end—is "Ladies and Gentlemen, don't believe a word of it, it was all a hoax. Let me tell you in a few words the story of my tragedy; I can do it in twenty pages."

And what would be the story? That, wanting desperately to become a writer, I became a writer. In the process I sinned. I became so involved with the Holy Ghost that I betrayed my wife, my child, my friends, my country. I fell in love with the medium. I thought—if one makes a stroke on the blackboard that is the thing in itself, the reality. I almost fell in love with myself, horrible thought. I recorded what I saw and felt, not what was.

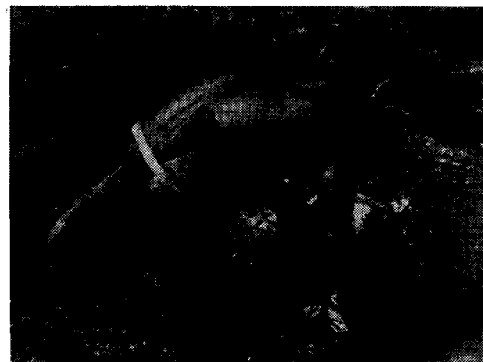
Or perhaps the triumph, as well as the tragedy, is really Miller's. He raises, in the last letter here, Yeats's central question: "Perfection of the life, or of the work?" Pleased, proud of his onetime disciple's success, he is still not sure. "All I was trying to say, bedazzled as I was, and it was like trying to put a knife into a crevice, was: 'What's it all about?' After the last line, *what?* After the television appearances, after the Académie, *what?*" What, indeed.



To these primitives, the ideal body is completely hairless, except for the hair of the head, which is valued highly. This Urukú mother is removing her son's eyebrows by knotting a thread over each hair and quickly pulling on it.



Ceremonial costumes are an essential aspect of religious rites. They are made and donned in the "masking house," reserved for men only. Women who attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the masking house are brutally punished.



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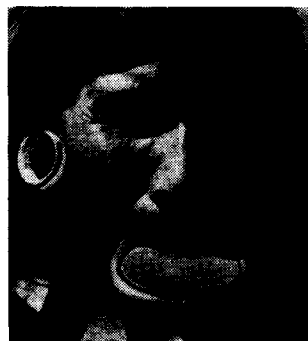
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When a male of the Suyá tribe is married, his lower lip is perforated and "trained" until he can wear the huge disk shown above. The earlobes also are perforated and disks inserted. The disks are discarded in old age, about 35 or 40.

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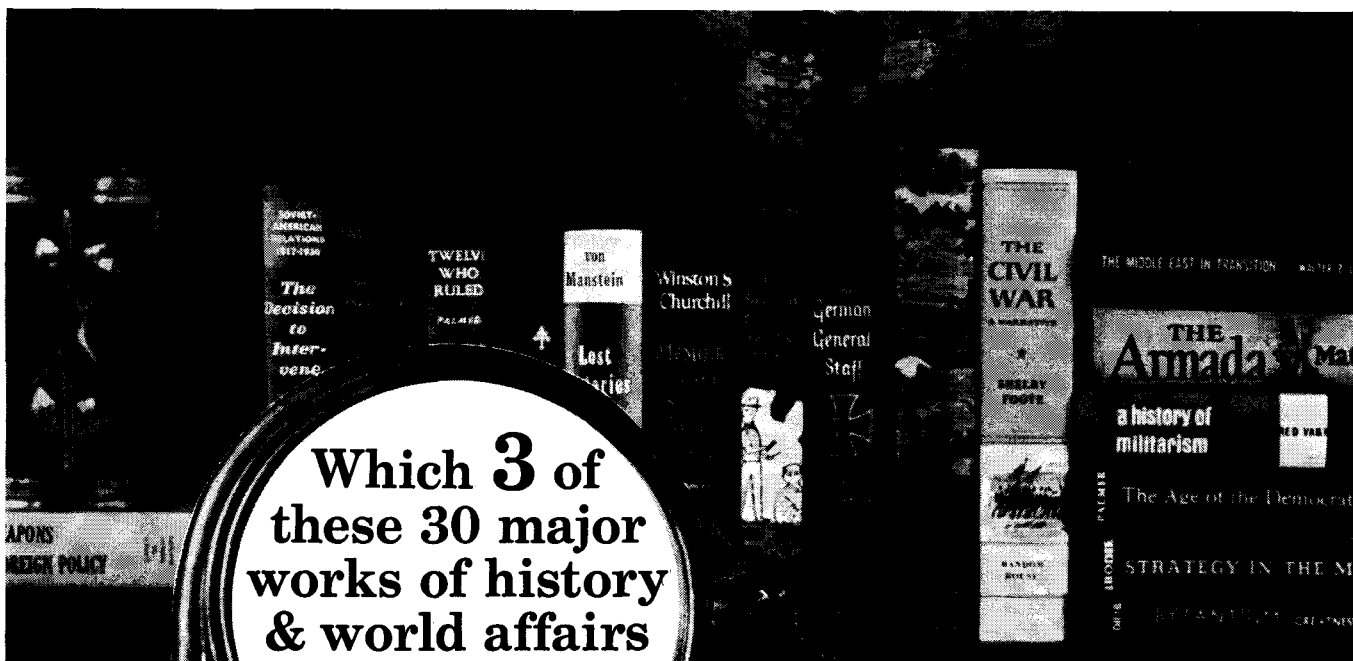
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