

The Quest for Self: The Labyrinth in the Fiction of Lawrence Durrell

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Along with the figure of Narcissus, Durrell's image of the labyrinth commands center stage in his work—art made live through imitation so that life might imitate, might be, art. Thus humankind might live more fully and completely. Durrell's work mentions the labyrinth most prominently in *The Dark Labyrinth*; *Tunc* and *Numquam* in *The Revolt of Aphrodite*; *Justine*, *Balthazar*, and *Clea* in *The Alexandria Quartet*; and *Monsieur*, *Constance*, and *Quinx* in *The Avignon Quintet*. Clearly the image has been both ubiquitous and constant in Durrell's thought, the vulnerable omphalos of mankind's body and experience, the center of creation and destruction, itself beyond both time and causation.¹

For Durrell the labyrinth is representative of the necessary inner journey that all of us must make toward self-knowledge and self-realization. As John Weigel notes, the image is a "labyrinthian exploration of self" in which we all find what we are "destined" to find.² Indeed, as Marie-Christine Veldman suggests, the very structure of *Monsieur* with its documents, diaries, and novels within novels finally "implies" an image of the human mind.³ "Reality," Veldman insists, becomes "a web of disrupted, multiple though somehow interrelated" experiences.⁴

In the Classical Mediterranean world out of which so much of Durrell's thought grows, and which has been the subject of all of his mature work, there were, evidently, five great labyrinths—one located at Lake Moeris, two at Knossos and Gortyna on Crete, one on Lemnos, and finally the great Etruscan maze at Clusium. They have been variously interpreted in Larousse, Campbell, Bulfinch, and Fraser as places within which to lure devils, diagrams of heaven and astral motion and the cosmos, and significations of pattern and creative art as opposed to the spiritual essence of creative potential. More modern interpretations, which owe much to Jungian archetype, suggest a description of the unconscious as well as the apprentice journey of the youth who grows toward not only his own maturity but inevitably his own death. Penelope Reed Doob supports a final reading of the labyrinth as conscious intellectual choice, even identifying it with the brain.⁵

¹ There are numerous books outlining the labyrinth archetype. Foremost among them are Gaetano Cipolla's *Labyrinth: Studies on an Archetype* (New York: Legas, 1987) and S.H. Hook, ed., *The Labyrinth: Further Studies in the Relation of Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World* (London: SPCK, 1935).

² John A. Weigel, *Lawrence Durrell* (New York: Twayne, 1965) 53.

³ Marie-Christine Veldman, "Narrative Technique in *Monsieur*," presented at On Miracle Ground VI (Statesboro, GA, 1989) 2.

⁴ Veldman 4.

⁵ Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 52, 81. Doob argues that the Labyrinth always has an inherent duality, each structure containing its opposite—order vs. chaos, imprisonment vs. freedom, product vs. process, danger vs. security.

Durrell's labyrinth, as first developed in *The Dark Labyrinth*, is mythological Daedalus's maze. It is creative art, identified with human experience. That is, it contains the minotaur, if not as flesh most certainly as spirit or apparition (even if only as the harmless cow in *The Dark Labyrinth*). Daedalus was employed by Minos to build a maze to hide his wife Pasiphae's monstrous progeny, begot upon her by a bull so strong and handsome that Minos could not bear to sacrifice it to Poseidon as the god had told him to do. Thus the Labyrinth performs double duty, not only protecting man from the essence of his own masculinity—the Minotaur—but protecting the Minotaur from the jealous shame of vengeful man. The purpose of any labyrinth, of course, is to protect its center, the essence of man's creative impulse and experience, the sacred nature of heaven and hell. To Durrell, however, a twentieth century intellect, the journey to either place is always a journey of man inside himself to discover, to understand, to master human experience—his own perversity and his own genius. Thus, the labyrinth is art as life and life as art. And in good Jungian fashion, it is always ambiguous.

In *The Dark Labyrinth* all the major characters are described and discovered by their relationship to the labyrinth at Cefalu. As Fredrick Goldberg so cogently points out, their journeys or quests are subjective, each person discovering the nature of his own soul.⁶ While the quest and labyrinth are constant in all human experience, the living out of specific human destinies is always a relative and individual action. It is the attitude of each visitor to the labyrinth, and not the maze itself, which determines the character's vision and experience. Life and truth become and are what the individual imagines them to be. Eventually they are what the individual chooses to make them.

Fearmax, the mystic, realizes the palpable nature of his own unrealities by walking into the evil mouth of the Minotaur. The religious fanatic Miss Dombey, ironically no mystic at all, wanders away from Fearmax and eventually, through suicide, faces the loneliness and terror of her own unbelief. Campion and Virginia Dale find the freedom of open air but are cut off from the outside world of other human beings by the sheer cliffs that form part of the outer walls of the labyrinth. They jump naked into the sea from which life came, Campion, the artist, unable to swim and face the real world and Virginia Dale, the courageous and simple girl, led by a substitute guide once again. Lord Graecen had deserted her when the party initially became trapped and lost in the labyrinth. She lives to be rescued. Campion drowns.

Despite his yearning, Graecen is too much of a rationalist ever to accept the depths of human experience. So, with a little luck, he finds his way out of the labyrinth and back to Axelos, ironically the old "Silenus," demigod of the novel and builder of its temple.⁷

Finally, Baird, guilt-ridden and directionless, submits to his own diffidence and never reenters the labyrinth, a place which he had only inadequately known as a hiding place during the war. Like Graecen, Hogarth, and even Axelos, Baird

⁶ Fredrick Goldberg, "The Dark Labyrinth: Journeys Beneath the Landscape," *Deus Loci* 2.3 (1979): 13-14.

⁷ Lawrence Durrell, *The Dark Labyrinth* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969) 16. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation DL.

only flirts with the depths of his own soul. He is a man of the outer world who would know, but cannot experience, the seeming insanity of the labyrinth and life's infinite pattern. A moral man, but only a man, he is saved by lies. Rationality is bought at the expense of truth. Such paradoxes are common in Durrell.

Only the elderly, bourgeois, and always loving Trumans rise above their ordeal. They travel upward toward the "roof of the world" (*DL* 216), learning in the process that the Minotaur is really just Elsie the cow and heaven a very qualified and limited, human place. Elsie Truman at last realizes "that the roof of the world did not really exist, except in their own imaginations" (*DL* 256).

The Trumans, Fearmax, Campion, Miss Dale, and Miss Dombey live beyond judgment. Their individual lives become what they imagined them to be, not what they "should" have been. Art and reality meld into one. The labyrinth comes to represent the mystery, the wholeness, and the unity of man's experience as integrated personality. The characters do not so much reject absolute virtue as come face to face with its human irrelevance, its nonexistence. The measure and purpose of life is to search, discover, experience, know, and sympathize, not to judge. Energy and change are ever superior to form and stasis. Durrell's frequent use throughout his works of multiple mirrors, prisms, and the mandala as images only reinforces this central paradox.

Despite its 1962 publication date (*Cefalu*, as first titled, appeared in 1947), *The Dark Labyrinth* remains Durrell's most seminal evocation of the maze archetype. Doob suggests two paradoxically different mazes—the classical multicursal model which defends its center by presenting many confusing paths for the treacher and the Medieval Christian unicursal model which seems confusing but leads always and only to its center, thus suggesting the difficulty of the one path to Godhead. Durrell's labyrinth suggests neither a search for good and evil nor an opposition of godhead and mortality. If the purpose of the labyrinth is to defend its "center," in some way to preserve or protect both the sacred and profane (all experience as knowledge), then Durrell's novels consistently search for a pattern to the unknowable, ironically for a meaning to mystery itself. It is never a contest between God and man.

In *Justine*, Darley admittedly searches for "the meaning of the pattern" in this "first great fragmentation of my maturity,"⁸ and it is the artist's imagination, disciplined and tempered by the search, that will give that meaning and significance to the bewildering array of subjective visions and experiences, all equally valid, which both Darley and Clea find in the littorals of Alexandria. In *Justine*, the insane maze of *The Dark Labyrinth* becomes the "invisible cobweb of loyalties, ideas" and "hesitations" within which Darley lives in Alexandria (*J* 79). The image of the web is introduced in *The Dark Labyrinth* when we are told that people like Fearmax and Baird wander into Hogarth's "web," a kind of psychoanalysis which Graecen is not able to understand (*DL* 41). Finally, in the last volume of the *Quartet*, it is "Ariadne's thread" which is attached to the steel arrow that transfixes

⁸ Lawrence Durrell, *Justine* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1956) 7. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *J*.

Clea's hand to the old ship wreck on the sea's floor.⁹ Slowly and painfully swimming along the thread, Darley is led to the wounded Clea. Eventually to free her, he must cut off her hand. It is, of course, only after this "death" that Clea discovers herself as an iron-fisted (Durrell's pun) artist.

For Durrell, then, the labyrinth exists between birth and death, between death and rebirth. It is essential and necessary pattern because it seemingly denies, yet finally asserts, order and ultimate meaning in human experience. All knowledge is vital. The search, paradoxically, creates its own treasure.

Earlier, in *The Dark Labyrinth*, Graecen had been "roused" from his "pleasurable maze of conjecture" by a girl who cried in her sleep (*DL* 101). At the beginning of *Monsieur*, Bruce asserts the central image of the entire *Quintet* when he notes that "the whole pattern of our lives (and in consequence our love) had continuity and design."¹⁰ Later in the book, Sutcliffe tells us of Angkor Wat (which he and Pia had revisited on their honeymoon and where Pia later was compelled to take Trash): "You walk stiffly . . . up the long avenue of genii and through the last portal; and then you find yourself unexpectedly in a sort of labyrinth of courtyards, chambers, corridors and vestibules . . . The five-coned towers form a quincunx, and their flanks are scooped into niches in each of which has been placed a smiling Buddha . . . bas-reliefs start contending for your attention . . . Elephants with their trunks locked in deadly combat and their riders hurling arrows: chariots full of gesticulating bowmen: an inextricable swarm of dead and dying, victorious and defeated in the last frenzy of war: bridled tigers: ships with dragon prows advancing methodically over mythological rivers thick with crocodiles and great fishes. This is the world, the real world, munching itself to death. Your world and mine" (*M* 240-41). Notice that the Quincunx of Angkor Wat stands at the center of the labyrinth and thus can only be reached by traveling through it. The secret and sacredness of life is protected by the maze. At Angkor Wat space, time, and individual perceptions meld into a paradoxically nonlinear continuum which is the whole of human experience itself. There are no first causes, no final truths.

All of Durrell's cities are equally patterned—Avignon, Athens, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Venice. It is their landscape of streets, canals, and alleyways that determine life in them. Darley tells us of Alexandria: "Walking down with remembered grooves of streets which extended on every side, radiating out like the arms of a starfish from the axis of its founder's tomb . . . a hive of white mansions flanking those narrow and abandoned streets of mud . . . a great honeycomb of faces and gestures" (*C* 54-55).

During his walk about the city, Darley feels, he says, "like the Adam of medieval legends." He sees himself as elemental man (everyman), his return to Alexandria as a rebirth, and the city as projecting the "sadness and beatitude of

⁹ Lawrence Durrell, *Clea* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1960) 241. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *C*.

¹⁰ Lawrence Durrell, *Monsieur* (New York: Viking, 1975) 7. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *M*.

this human condition" (C 54-55). In *Tunc*, Charlock in like manner is introduced to the "fantastic honeycomb of action" upon which modern Istanbul has been built.¹¹

But the human condition is not just landscape and memory to Durrell or to his characters. Life is never merely an external puzzle to be solved by reacting to, or even attempting to understand and sympathize with, humankind's environment. To the contrary, Durrell remains an enigmatic Platonist. "Know thyself" is the key to Durrell's Templar labyrinth and the treasure at its center. Order is man-made and anthropocentric. In *Monsieur*, Durrell asserts that "the very concept of order is home-made, the product of our finite minds" (M 133). Order, then, is finally the inner world of man's soul as surely as the outer world is of his body, and civilization reflects, at least, that equally inner, spiritual order.

Darley says of an earlier walk through Alexandria with Justine, "We turn a corner and the world becomes a pattern of arteries, splashed with silver and deckle-edged with shadow" (J 138). Later, at the end of Part Four, he muses "Somewhere in the heart of experience there is an order and a coherence which we might surprise if we were attentive enough, loving enough, or patient enough" (J 225). And in *Quinx*, Aubrey insists to a jeering alter ego Sutcliffe, "I am just about to begin by marshalling all these disorderly facts into a coherent maze of language,"¹² an act (the novel itself) which we are told later is hoped to be "a metaphor for the human condition" (Q 136).

Central to Durrell's mature fiction has been the desire to discover the order and pattern within this labyrinth of human experience. Life is sacred in its mystery, but that very mystery contains within it a greater and more potentially productive, creative order. Constance and Aubrey shiver at the conclusion of the *Quintet* as they are about to enter the Templar Labyrinth beneath Avignon, not because they are frightened but because they are excited; a new world of human experience and possibilities awaits them somewhere at its center. Theirs is a shiver of "premonition" and, ironically, reality rushes to the aid of art, and the "totally unpredictable" begins to take place (Q 201).

Paradoxically, the search for order and pattern that has always been so much a part of Durrell's work is a necessarily self-defeating quest yet a self-realizing challenge that must always be met. We must discover limits with which to measure the infinite. Charlock's building of Abel, the computer in the *Revolt of Aphrodite* is an attempt, we're told, to "bring scientific order to chaos" (T 288). Abel's remarkable ability is based on "pogo-nometry," deduction growing out of the pogo, the smallest conceivable unit of speech, one millionth of a millionth of a phoneme (T 14). Into Abel, Charlock plugs all that is necessary to reproduce an actual human being, to complete a new, mechanical Iolanthe, an absolute and perfect reproduction of the dead woman Julian so loved. At one point in *Tunc*, Felix asks the question, "To what degree is pattern arbitrary?" Then he tells us, "So the labyrinth of this intermittent record poured out of the little machine . . . Later our three bent heads would try to puzzle this out" (T 289).

¹¹ Lawrence Durrell, *Tunc* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968) 149. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation T.

¹² Lawrence Durrell, *Quinx* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985) 13. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation Q.

What Abel reproduces, of course, is the maze of human motive itself. The machine reproduces human beings, and the magic of such pattern produces that which is completely unexpected—free-will, the mechanical Iolanthe's insistence upon her own personal freedom. Durrell's theology insists upon this essential mystery. Free will is one thing which neither Julian's lust nor the Firm's wealth and power can give to her or to anyone else.

Thus, the final paradox of the Durrellian labyrinth is that we can escape from it only by searching for it, by discovering its center from which we have never left. Freedom is inside ourselves, not outside. All dogma and all rules are finally but chimera. The key to the pattern of life's fragmentation exists only in the living of it.¹³ Life's meaning is found only by using it up—by actively seeking but not desiring one's own death (as did Christ).

Throughout his fiction, Durrell moves surely and directly toward an inclusive understanding of his image. The labyrinth at the end of *Quinx* into which Constance and Aubrey prepare to walk; through which Darley, Justine, Clea, Balthazar, and Mountolive journey in the *Quartet*; and which Felix Charlock analyzes, discovers, and creates in *Tunc* and *Numquam*—that labyrinth is not a place or a thing but a process. It is life itself, an inevitability, the very stuff that dreams are made of whether nightmare, fantasy, or empiric reality. Durrell's labyrinth cannot, finally, be discovered or isolated in space or time because it subsumes both those deceivers. It is insight not dogma (Q 14), feelings far more than knowledge, energy not matter, practice more than theory, and kinesis rather than stasis.

In the *Quintet* the labyrinth is Sylvie's asylum and the turnings of her tortured consciousness within which she will always remain (M 13). It is Quatrefage's torture as well as his prison and bookish quest. It is the open corridors of the ancient seaside necropolis that Sylvie, Toby, Akkad, Piers, and Bruce visit on their way to Macabru and the "architectural circumlocution" of Sutcliffe's memory-ridden Venetian canals (M 177). In *Tunc* and *Numquam* it is Merlins, the excrement eating international corporation which is so implicit in the later *Monsieur* (M 177). It is the cobwebs and the spider webs of memory and of human causation and responsibility from which no human beings can escape. It is the labyrinth of notes which Balthazar leaves to reconstruct Alexandria yet once more. For Sutcliffe, the labyrinth is those "concealed motives" (M 157), which render the task of art too great even for him, and it is the cobweb which gives the great human attachments their form and substance.

Above all, the labyrinth of life's experience is neither for the faint hearted nor the prudish. Danger is written everywhere before the caves of Avignon. To enter them is to risk everything and not to enter them is to lose all. Durrell's singular theology insists upon this clear and final paradox. As in Kavafy's poem "Ithaca," the quest itself measures the human journey. The labyrinth is the means, structure, and body of life. But ruefully admits Sutcliffe, "The universe says nothing precise, it hints" (Q 95). Thus, in Durrell's labyrinth, maze treader and maze viewer, knowledge and action, mortality and Godhead co-exist in simultaneous poise.

¹³ Lawrence Durrell, *Balthazar* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958) 125.

And finally the labyrinth is text. Robin Rook notes that the labyrinth is Durrell's "Double Concerto" of Aubrey Blanford and Sutcliffe, the two imagined authors of the *Quintet*, discussing art and reality with each other and wondering about old D—the devil at large.¹⁴ In both the *Quartet* and *Quintet*, Durrell's musings upon the relationship of actual experience to artistic experience, the chaos of reality to the pattern of the narrative, form the core of his philosophy and life-long search.

Old D, Old Durrell himself, is, of course, the god of the *Quintet*, its creator, in Gnostic terms Monsieur, the perverse god to be denied by his creations who people the world of Avignon. Monsieur is thus implicitly associated with the dynamic chaos of the unrestrained imagination which must be harnessed and controlled to produce the tenuous stability of the art work itself. Without his father's control, Icarus flies too near the sun and falls to his death. Only in the imaginative act do art and life exist as simultaneous reality, both informing and living off one another in perfect poise. Daedalus and Durrell build mazes.

¹⁴ Robin Rook, *Lawrence Durrell's Double Concerto* (Birmingham: Delos, 1990) 6-7.