

*Narratives of Cyprus:  
Modern Travel Writing and Cultural Encounters since  
Lawrence Durrell*

JIM BOWMAN

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Jim Bowman's book *Narratives of Cyprus, Modern Travel Writing and Cultural Encounters since Lawrence Durrell*, offers analysis and critique on travel narratives in English by a number of writers from 1955 to 2005.

Bowman, who spent an extensive period living in north Cyprus, begins his book with the two chapters discussing what is, or should be, a modern travel narrative, calling upon various theories of rhetoric, approaches, styles and cultural contexts. He claims that travel narrators deliver their texts to their public in order to achieve different purposes and thus shape international and domestic politics resulting often in asymmetric relations of power. Bowman tries to present and explain travelogues as "cultural works" which have an effect on how people see and understand themselves, but also remain a synthesis of a travellers' experiences, motives and narrative style. Central to his analysis and critique is the "ethos" which should be found in each traveller's text. He questions whether ethos is the result of the interaction or an a priori position of the traveller. He concentrates on what the travellers have omitted and why they write as they do under the circumstances.

Not much has been written about Cyprus recently, says Bowman. Perhaps that is because of its position, too far east in the Mediterranean, or perhaps because travellers were worried about security due to the militarization of the country. A simpler explanation should perhaps have been considered by Bowman: Cyprus, during the last 20 years or more has been competing with new markets and is being marginalised due to high costs and saturated product.

The dire circumstances in Cyprus and the political situation conspires against the independence of the traveller, confuses him and makes him feel insecure as to his personal assessment, continues Bowman. As a result, the north part of Cyprus (unrecognised, illegal area for many years) has not been clearly recognised, researched and understood by most travellers. And this is the niche which Bowman wants to explore and do justice to since it is lacking in most travelogues. In doing so he introduces himself as the ideal person to present the case, as he has lived in Turkey and in north Cyprus and visited repeatedly south Cyprus. He, in effect, lays out how

ideal his position is in relation to the work he is about to embark on, the *Narratives of Cyprus*, perhaps blowing his own trumpet a bit too loudly, especially when it comes to understanding the Greek Cypriots. The fact that he had worked with them, as a US government official in education, already places him in an awkward position with regards to the subjects of his study. It should be remembered that US was much blamed by Greek Cypriots for the situation in Cyprus in 1974, and in 2004 it was also blamed for the 'demonic' Annan Plan. So, Greek Cypriots are often apprehensive and suspicious of most Americans when it comes to politics and consequently do not talk honestly and openly with them.

In chapter 3, Bowman starts his cultural encounters with *Bitter Lemons* (1957), by Lawrence Durrell. In a nutshell, the book is treated as a political exposé camouflaged as a travelogue. Bowman has taken an obvious dislike to Durrell's narrative and does not accept him as the good spirited writer who aims at informing his readers about his own emotional experiences in Cyprus. Durrell is not forgiven for omitting obvious political realities such as the tensions between the two communities on the island in 1953-56, omitted, according to Bowman, purposely, so as to be likable to the domestic readers. Nor is he forgiven for purposely avoiding to mention the responsibility of the British government for the tragic situation in Cyprus. But his greatest fault, claims Bowman, is, contrary to Durrell's own contention that human beings are the expression of their landscape, the fact that, in *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell constructs both the landscape and the character of the people. Durrell is accused of embracing the differences between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots because he does not know the latter, to whom he attributes myriads of oriental tropes, and thus his text lacks ethos.

It is rather hard for anyone to question the traveller's intake of the country, the result of which was *A Journey into Cyprus* (1975). Being much kinder to Thubron, Bowman understands that the writer follows Don George's school of thought, which dictates 'don't tell what your characters are feeling but show it and let the reader draw conclusions'. Bowman, embracing postmodern theories, does not agree with this method, which he labels 'intimate distance' and which he believes creates dangerous asymmetric qualities in the narrative.

Further into his analysis Bowman returns to his defence of the Turkish Cypriot and claims that historically even the word Cypriot does not include the Turkish Cypriot. But why does it not? 'Cypriots' usually means a conglomeration of ethnicities living on the island, and when spoken of historically, in the Middle Ages Cypriots referred more to Venetians or French than Greeks. Just as Turks were referred to as Muslims during the Ottoman period, Greeks were referred to as Christians or 'infidels', but both were thought of as the population of the island which, in fact, was often called

Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Bowman rightly notes that the use of Cypriots appeared mostly in the 20th century and proved uncomfortable to both the Greek and Turkish communities. Further on, while using a series of episodes from *Journey into Cyprus*, such as Thubron's observance of the Turkish women at Hala Sultan Tekke, his encounters with Hussein, Kemal, and the Greek peasant, Bowman asserts that Thubron misunderstood the Turks, made assumptions and used distant intimacy, which led him to the wrong conclusions. He rounds up his arguments that Thubron's text implicitly posits "the supremacy of western secularism, culture and political hegemony of the UK and the West over societies like Cyprus and Turkey." Towards the end, mellowing down, in his last remarks in the chapter, Bowman admits that Thubron, when abandoning his distant intimacy, produces noteworthy results within his narration and grants him 'a text that stands up fairly well to the tumult that has shaken Cyprus and Europe in the decades since its creation'.

Bowman exaggerates dangerously when he declares that the north appears as the 'dark other' of Cyprus in the narratives post-1974. Obviously he has not spent time exploring the feelings of both communities, and his own ethos is at stake here. Sanctions and embargo for the north, blamed by Bowman for 'the darker other', were requested by the Republic of Cyprus, but were these really adhered to? And if so, to what extent and for how long? Travel writers visited and visit the north, travel guide books in fact often contain descriptions of the north and not the south (I should point out here that this is not always the editors' choice). Guilty feelings, attributed to writers going into an illegal state, writing about occupied areas, buying or renting properties of the Greeks who lost part of their country, did not seem to stop either visits or travel writing during the last decades. After 2003 direct flights to the north and easy crossings through the Green Line have made visits to the north routine. The fact that a number of travellers choose to visit the north through arrivals to the south, which seems to bother Bowman, is nowadays a matter of convenience: they may thus visit the south as well, where they find better tourist infrastructure, better communications etc. But it is important to note that the vast majority of travellers declare that the north is the better half of the island and offers a more interesting landscape. Orientalising tropes regarding the north need further analysis by both the travel writer and Bowman. Furthermore, according to Bowman 'the north of Cyprus only sporadically finds itself fully included in symbolic constructions of an inclusive Cyprus'. Although not exactly true, especially in recent years, how can north Cyprus be included in 'Cyprus' when it advertises and proclaims itself as the 'Republic of Northern Cyprus', an 'independent

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1 While researching early 19th century paintings of Cyprus in repositories of libraries or museums, I often found these under Turkey or Ottoman Dominions.

state', having its own tourist policies and having nothing to do with the south?

Hitchens' book *Cyprus, Hostage to History* (1997), a political narrative, probably justifies Bowman's bitter criticism. In fact Hitchens' a priori political stand poses obstacles towards a just exposé. He does not devote enough time to understanding the people nor in analysing the socio-economics of the landscape. The book though stands on its own merits independent of the usual travelogues. Bowman proceeds to examine two books, by foreigners living in the south and visiting the north, British expatriate Libby Rowan-Moorhouse's *In the land of Aphrodite* (2005) and the Irishman Seamus MacHugh's travelogue *Cyprus an Island Apart* (1999). Throughout his review, Bowman insists on finding tropes for the Turk as 'the dark other, pitiful, poor etc', questioning the knowledge and understanding of the writers but also pre-empting any possible understanding of incidents other than through his own explanations. 'Unhopeful smiles' cannot be interpreted this or that way! Angry Turkish youth shouting obscenities to the Greeks can only be bored conscripts! Wearing a moustache signifies a Turk! (I never knew my father was a Turk!!). The Turkish Cypriot Cuma does not want to go back to his village in the south because of the deprivations and hostilities of pre-1974, although he speaks fondly of his Greek friends and wants the Green Line to disappear. It has never occurred to Bowman that Cuma would not want to go back because he is better off in material terms compared to pre-1974: ethos is questionable here. Another 'incomplete' narrative, according to Bowman, of 'day tripping in the north' is *Dispatches from the Dead Zone*, by Anderson and Junger (1999). Cyprus is constructed as a sad place suffered in by decent people, people who cannot dream anymore. Certain readers might in fact agree with Anderson and Junger who paint a gloomy picture of Cyprus and a population trapped in its own petty politics rendering the island hostage to their immaturity and stubbornness. In claiming that the horrific construction boom around Kyrenia was done pre-1974, I suggest Bowman should have a look at photographs of that period.

*The Infidel Sea, Travels in North Cyprus*, by Oliver Burch (1990), enjoys Bowman's approval. Burch and his family lived long enough in the north part of the island and acquired enough cultural experiences to be able to give a decent voice to the Turkish Cypriots. According to Bowman, Burch offers an ethical narration. But Burch skilfully avoids analysing the relations between Turkish Cypriots and Turks. Bowman mentions this but he does not delve into it. Another case of ethos not prevailing? Further on, we are told that 'the dark other' appears due to qualities like anti-materialism and poverty and has political and economic justifications: after living through so many hardships Turkish Cypriots prefer to sacrifice prosperity for security. The validity of this argument can be challenged. Perhaps more explanations can be sought within Turkey's influence/power in Turkish Cypriot affairs, or the relation between the Turkish Cypriot

administration and Turkey.

For Bowman, the apogee of travel narratives on Cyprus seems to be the book by Yiannis Papadakis, *Echoes from the Dead Zone* (2005). More global in his approach, having visited north, south, Turkey, Greece, UK and US, Papadakis's narrative is a challenge to travel writing. He establishes an ethos based on responsibility, revelation and personal rigor, goes across the divide rather than cement it and tries to bridge differences and respond to people fairly. The writer involves himself in the encounters with his subject and opens up to them. Furthermore, he addresses the points of social distance between Turkish Cypriots and Turks. To Bowman's credit, while Hitchens was criticised as a biased observer (married to a Greek Cypriot), Papadakis's background, a Greek Cypriot from Limassol, is accepted with no qualms because of his overwhelming narrative.

I ought to admit that I found *Narratives of Cyprus* interesting, although at times I felt the language was complex and tiring and in general the text too theoretical. Bowman speaks authoritatively about Cyprus and in his book he assumes the role of the apologist for the Turkish Cypriots. To a Greek Cypriot it is apparent that the author does not know enough or understand well the Greek Cypriots. Once too often, I felt I had to defend and answer on behalf of the Greek Cypriots, I felt the need to clarify misconceptions and answer to criticism. This led me to question Bowman's purpose for his book. On the one hand it is surely a critique of the aforementioned narratives, but an apologist's ghost lurks between the lines of his script.

**RITA SEVERIS**

