ECHOES OF ITALY IN CYPRUS: LAWRENCE DURRELL'S BITTER LEMONS

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical references in Lawrence Durrell's "Bitter Lemons". It focuses on two Venetian historical characters, Caterina Cornaro and Marcantonio Bragadino, who lived in Cyprus in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and points out how their experiences in Cyprus were similar to Durrell's. It then explores briefly other Italian references in the work.

The study also examines the historical periods in which Caterina Cornaro and Marcantonio Bragadino lived, and the reasons for Durrell's choice of these figures. It analyses the connections between Italian literature and history and "Bitter Lemons". The study also touches on a great part of the fascinating history of Cyprus and draws parallels between the events of the past and those of the more recent peri- ods, while making inferences to the relevance of precedents set in the past.

It also highlights once again the pivotal role Cyprus has played in political and strategic schema in this part of the world.

My approach to Lawrence Durrell's "Bitter Lemons" grows out of my own experience as lecturer of Italian Language and Literature at the University of Cyprus. Just as Durrell came upon a travel book before setting out from Italy, I also consulted the record of an earlier foreign resident of Cyprus, in this case Durrell's "Bitter Lemons".

A critical analysis of Durrell's work is not the aim of my study here. It doesn't attempt to approach the many exhaustive studies that have appeared in the last twenty years. I have tried to review merely what I thought were the pertinent points in my paper regarding the fascinating "Bitter Lemons", and have had to limit my purview accordingly. For more comprehensive studies I have referred to the talented scholars and critics who have analysed and evaluated Durrell's works.

As an Italian living in Cyprus, I appreciated the use of Italian figures and symbols in "Bitter Lemons", which had a special meaning for me, and it is some of these ref-

erences I would like to explore with you in this paper, in particular Durrell's use of the Venetian characters Caterina Cornaro and Marcantonio Bragadino. What is the significance of the appearance of these two characters at the beginning of his book?

Caterina Cornaro (reigned 1474 -1489) was the last queen of Cyprus. She was the beautiful daughter of one of the leading families of Venice at the time of the city's greatest prosperity. She was caught up in the political intrigues of the time while still a girl, and she was sent off in state to the island of Aphrodite to marry James II, who called himself king of Cyprus, Jerusalem and Armenia. She was very attractive and the inspiration of poets and troubadours, and painted by the great artists of the Renaissance. Durrell says: *"Titian and Bellini painted her, Bembo wrote a philosophy of love to amuse her courtiers".* When the Cypriot ambassador Philip Mistachiel saw her for the first time in the Doge's palace he wrote: *"Her beautiful wide dark eyes shone like stars, her long blonde abundant hair seemed to be made of gold, and her handsome features and whole stature easily betrayed her aristocratic origin".* She reigned with her husband for less than one year before he died. The son born to her after her husband's death, the last king of Cyprus, died before he was one year old. Caterina's natural courtesy and goodness, and the sweetness of her face, made her much-loved by the people of Cyprus. Rebellions, assassinations, and personal hardships, restrictions and intrigue marked the agitated years of her reign. Finally Venice persuaded her to abdicate in 1489, citing the vital commercial and political importance of Cyprus to the state, and the growing likelihood of a Turkish invasion, hard for a woman to handle. She left with an afflicted soul. In compensation she was allowed to retain her royal title, a state pension, and a small, elegant dominion at Asolo in the Alpine foothills of Venetian territory. There in that golden exile she had a small but brilliant court frequented by poets and philosophers, artists and musicians. Durrell depicts her in the following gracious way:

In the only portrait I have seen the eyes are grave and beautiful, full of im- penitent life of their own; the eyes of a woman who has enjoyed much adula- tion, who has travelled much and loved much. The eyes of one who was not narrow enough, or self-seeking enough to trespass on the domain of politics without losing at the game. But the eyes of a true woman, not a phantom.[1]

Another Italian character Durrell turns his thoughts to is the one he calls *"the great soldier",* Marcantonio Bragadino. The writer relates Bragadino's role in the siege of Famagusta (1571) during the war against the Turks, when Cyprus was un- der the Venetian rule.

Famagusta was the only town to resist the Turkish attack for as long as eleven months. It was not captured by storm, but forced to capitulate owing to a total shortage of provisions. Durrell says:

His defence of Famagusta against the Turkish general Mustafa ranks among the great feats of military leadership in the whole of European history.....

When at last the pitifully small forces of the besieged were forced to parley they agreed to surrender on condition that they were given a safe passage to Crete. Mustafa broke his word, and no sooner was Bragadino in his power than he unleashed upon his person and that of his captains all the pent-up fury of the religious fanatic.[1]

Mustafa caused Bragadino to endure all kinds of sufferings and torture. Durrell writes:

Bragadino's nose and ears were cut off, and his body flayed ..... [1]

- that is, he was skinned-alive -

then he was set in a slung seat with a crown at his feet and hoisted at the yard of a galley, "hung like a stork", for all to see.[1]

The courage that this brave hero showed throughout his torments was incredible. In the sight of the whole city, he displayed remarkable calmness. Durrell quotes the chronicler Calepio:

But his saintly soul bore all with great firmness, patience and faith....and when their steel reached his navel he gave back to his Saviour, a truly happy and blessed spirit.[1]

Then Mustafa ordered Bragadino's body to be carved into four parts and his skin filled with straw which was sat on a cow. This grotesque trophy was taken to Constantinopole and later on carried to Venice, where it now lies in a marble urn in the church of SS Giovanni e Paolo with an inscription to the memory of a leader of undying fame.

I will return to these unfortunate figures at the conclusion of my paper.

Durrell's Cyprus, the island that Antonio gave to Cleopatra, is almost fabulous with *"its echoes from forgotten moments of history',* a *"place where different des- tinies can meet and intersect in the full isolation of time'.*[2] Yet Durrell's journey to Cyprus begins in Venice, a city which arouses rare emotions and sensations in the writer.

Venice at dawn, seen from the deck of a ship which is to carry me down through the islands to Cyprus; a Venice wobbling in a thousand fresh-water re-

flections....Fragments of history....Mentally I held it all, softly as an abstract painting, cradling it in my thoughts - the whole encampment of cathedrals and palaces...the vaporetto on the Grand Canal beats too, softly as a human pulse...The glass palaces of the Doges are being pounded in a crystal mortar, strained through a prism….[3]

and in his mind the two, Venice and Cyprus, are connected:

Venice will never be far from me in Cyprus - for the lion of St Mark still rides the humid airs of Famagusta, of Kyrenia.[4]

Durrell was conscious of the historical, cultural and linguistic ties that exist between Cyprus and Italy, and with Venice in particular. These historical ties have their foundations set in ancient times when, in the first century BC, Cyprus became part of the Roman Empire, and soon afterwards, was the first land to be governed by a Christian. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Venetians ruled Cyprus, and the superb evidence of their presence, the old walls of Nicosia and those of the port city of Famagusta, still exist today. The linguistic ties can be explained in terms of the structural and lexical similarities between Latin and Greek. In the language of Dante, the language of one of the influences that have contributed to the rich cultural heritage of their country, the Cypriots find a link with the past. Durrell is also aware of this when he mentions Dante, a fellow-exile, in a sad, lyrical, evocative scene.

Due to its favourable position in the eastern end of the Mediterranean, at a crossroads of trade and transit between East and West, Cyprus has benefited and also suffered from occupying regimes: the Mycaeneans, Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Venetians, Ottomans, and the British, all leaving marks of their presence. Durrell quotes from *British Cyprus* by Hepworth Dixon (1887):

'A race advancing on the east must start with Cyprus. Alexander, Augustus, Richard, and Saint Louis took that line. A race advancing on the west must start with Cyprus. Sargon, Ptolemy, Cyrus, Haroun al-Rashid took this line. When Egypt and Syria were of first-rate value to the West, Cyprus was of first- rate value to the West. Genoa and Venice, struggling for the trade of India, fought for Cyprus and enjoyed supremacy in the land by turns. After a new route to sea was found to India, Egypt and Syria declined in value to the West- ern Nations. Cyprus was then forgotten; but the opening of the Suez Canal has suddenly restored her to her ancient pride of place."[5]

Durrell says that Venice *"is an appropriate point of departure for the traveller to the eastern Levant... ."*[6] Claims to a special relationship to Byzantium can be made

by several cultures; however of all the people and regions with which the Byzan- tines came into contact Western Europe and Venice were areas with which they had the closest affinities, and with which they themselves felt most closely related, and with which they repeatedly exchanged influence.

The commercial revolution, in which the Venetians were the most active agents, was beneficial to Byzantium, while Venice benefited from the magnificence and majesty of Byzantine architecture and art. They shared traditions and realities. Dur- ing the tragic course of its rise and fall the influence of Byzantine culture affected both East and West, and of course, the cultural contribution to Byzantium from Venice and the West is by no means negligible. Greco-Roman antiquities and learn- ing survived through the ages in Byzantium because Byzantium had preserved the heritage of the ancient world.

Even when Byzantium fell, her spiritual and political traditions lived on and their influence was felt, not only in those lands which had once been Byzantine, like Cyprus, but beyond the frontiers of the Empire through a thick network of diplomat- ic relations, and trade, cultural and artistic exchanges. Durrell says: ·

> *… and the Greek churches and communities kept it alive through four cen- turies after Byzantium itself had gone down to dust and its children foundered deeper and deeper in the darkness… .*[7]

Information about Venetian settlers establishing commercial and economic inter- ests in Cyprus is found in several documents dating from the end of the twelfth cen- tury and attested to later by the regular passage of ships between Cyprus and Venice. During the period of the Byzantine empire Limassol was probably the main Venetian centre in Cyprus, but later Christian refugees came *over* to the island as the coastal cities of Palestine and Syria, fell one by one to the Muslims. Among them were Genoese, Syrian and Nestorian merchants who settled in Famagusta, which was directly opposite Syria. They enriched the town with their commercial skills and their network of trading connections.

As noted in Richard Pine's recent study,[8] Durrell eliminated from his novels the conventional use of time as understood and pursued by Western narrative. He seems to concentrate on ideas rather than a sequence of actions or events. Durrell is *above* all an artist, a creator of images, symbols, metaphors, a master of style. The whole book "Bitter Lemons", which I personally find closer to poetry than prose, is full of symbolism. Indeed Durrell moves to poetry altogether when a poem of the same title concludes the work.

In the need for metaphors, connections and relations Durrell typifies a modern

approach sharing feelings of disquiet of the avant-garde literary experience. Again according to Pine, he had the ability to write novels that were not novels in the accepted sense of the term, texts which brought non-fictional conventions into the world of fiction. He succeeded in introducing non-narrative elements into his novels. He was praised by his contemporaries; for example T. S. Eliot cited his first novel as being one of the great hopes for modern English fiction. Sometimes his emotions are not expressed in words, but in facts. At the very beginning of "Bitter Lemons", for example, he reports how he found a book about Cyprus in 1953, in the Italian city of Trieste. The inhabitants of the city were fighting for irredentistic reasons, and he discovered the book while the citizens were rioting after a bomb-throwing. Dur- rell says this of the book (I paraphrase):

> *...(its) faded green cover with its floral device promised me a Victorian travel-account which might introduce me in a most suitable manner to the Crown Colony of Cyprus. But something more than this. I felt (it) was a sort of omen.*[9]

This episode may be an anticipation of the riots and bomb explosions in Cyprus, part of EOKA's campaign to achieve Enosis. It is also an anticipation of all Durrell's activities in Cyprus which culminate in "Bitter Lemons". All that survives the chaos of Trieste and Cyprus are works of art.

The book emphasises artistic qualities such as harmony and colour, and is full of musical rhythm and poetic images. His work is shaped with a never-failing sense of aesthetics. The style of his book bears his own unmistakable imprint, his intense sense of lyricism; the delicate handling of the prose rhythm pleases and charms the reader. Durrell's love and appreciation for art and musical rhythm is evident in the use of the Italian words drawn mostly from the field of classical music, symbolising the selection of poetry as a whole way of life, words such as *brio, piano, pianissi*-mo. Reading "Bitter Lemons", we see Durrell as an artist of great erudition: it is impossible not to notice his admirable knowledge and the in-depth study of documentation drawn from history and transformed in poetry. "Bitter Lemons" is a fascinating book of national culture, class, creed and psychology.

He displays an amazing, deep knowledge of the peculiarities of Italian regional characters when after leaving the city of St. Mark he notes the remarks of a fellow-passenger from Bologna about Venice: " *'Beautiful'; but it was a reluctant admission, for he was from Bologna, and it was hard to Jet the side down by admiring a foreign city...".* Durrell asks his acquaintance about the Cypriot wine, and the other responds: *'"Heavy and sweet'. This was not so good. A Bolognese is always worth listening to on the subject of wine".* When the gentleman from Bologna hears that Durrell will be making his home in Cyprus, his manner changes: *"for politeness does not permit an Italian to decry another's plans".*[10]

Coming back to Caterina Cornaro and Marcantonio Bragadino, what is the symbolism behind Lawrence Durrell's choice of the two Italian historical characters? The characters of the figures Durrell depicts have no relevance beyond their sym- bolic identities. They constitute a set of archetypal symbols through which various elements of the author's rhetoric can be heard and tested. Durrell notes: *"My characters are not real, (they) are true',* and he creates situations in which his characters' emotional lives, rather than their incidental lives, are to be believed.

Durrell introduces the two Venetians and the Bolognese traveller at the *very* beginning of his book to warn and prepare the reader, in a way which can't be mistaken, that Cyprus will prove less than paradisiac. The passenger from Bologna bears the same message in a more straightforward and explicit way.

Caterina is depicted as a queen Who, like Durrell, loved art, philosophy, intellectuals, artists and poets, and was fascinated by the mythical kingdoms of the east; with the cloths of gold, fruits and spices, the scent of spring, old castles o the crusaders, the beautiful churches, and the goodness of the people of Cyprus. She *loved* so much the island for which she suffered so much. But she was overcome by the politics of the time; by forces stronger than her own will. She agreed to ab- dicate because she couldn't manage the various political intrigues that surrounded her. Western powers feared she might prove too weak to hold the island in the face of Turkish and other threats.

Bragadino, also fond of Cyprus, fought the invaders but lost Famagusta and his life. He too was overwhelmed by powers greater than himself. His heroic acts were rendered futile by the fact that the rescuing fleet *never* arrived.

Durrell, poet and idealist, came to Cyprus as "a *private individual"* to create in his unique poetic, humorous style, unforgettable pictures of sunlit villages and people, ancient buildings, mountains and sea. He wrote the story of his experiences on Cyprus between 1953 and 1956, first as a visitor, then as a householder and teacher, and finally as Press Advisor to a government confronted by revolution. He wanted to find a peaceful place in the mountains where he might meet his fellow- villagers, Greek, Turkish and expatriates, and enjoy relaxed conversations about philosophy, art and poetry. He bought a house. He tried to settle in Cyprus. His so- journ became a period of residence, or at least was an attempt to establish himself in that fluid, dynamic, volatile piece of the eastern Mediterranean that is Cyprus. But he found himself caught in a revolution, and in the gloomy political tragedy that weighed upon the island. As a former resident of Greece and one moreover who spoke the Greek language with ease, Durrell was not without ideas on how a peace- ful solution to the Cyprus problem might be effected. *"With the moral sovereignty of the place conceded to the majority it might not even be necessary for Cyprus to*

leave the Commonwealth at all.' [11]

But his government's approach was founded on quite a different, narrow-minded set of concepts, such as are found in the following: that the Cypriots were *"an indolent, careless and mimetic people, but without a spark of Turkish fire, without a touch of Grecian taste."* [12]

As he was leaving, a final comment expressing the failure of communica- tion which precipitated the violence and the diplomatic stalemate of the situation came from a taxi driver with whom he was having *"one of those Greek conversa- tions which carry with them a hallucinating surrealistic flavour".* The driver said (paraphrase) the Cypriots fight the British; they really love them, but they will have to go on killing them, with regret, even with affection… .[13]

Durrell had always been a lover of the Mediterranean countries, and of Cyprus he wrote: "*I had come to love Cyprus very much by now; I realised, even its ugli- ness, its untidy and sprawling vistas of dust and damp cloud, its hideous incon- gruities."*[14]

Caterina, Bragadino and Durrell: they all loved Cyprus. They all represented occupying powers, and they were all aliens, strangers to Cyprus, even if at a later time they cam,,e to love her. They were all victims of powers greater than themselves; they were all overcome by the policies of their homelands, homelands that didn't appreciate their value, their valour. All of them were disappointed figures in the history of Cyprus. All three of them saw one period of Cyprus' history come to an end and a new period dawn. Bragadino and Caterina Cornaro were metaphors for the circumstances of Durrell's own exile. On a lesser scale Durrell's experience mirrors those of the two historical figures he quotes. All three came to Cyprus with one purpose or objective, or idea, or goal, but destiny thwarted their designs. That is bitterness!

Notes

1. *Bitter lemons,* Faber & Faber Edition, 1957, p. 12.

2. Ibid., p. 14.

3. Ibid., p. 9-10.

4. Ibid., p. 10.

5. Ibid., p. 8.

6. Ibid., p. 10.

7. Ibid., p. 117.

8. *Lawrence Durrell: The Mindscape,* St. Martin's Press, 1995.

9. Ibid., p. 115

10. Ibid., p. 11.

11. Ibid., p.171.

12. *British Cyprus,* W. Hepworth Dixon, 1887, quoted by Durrell in "Bitter Lemons", p. 165.

13. Ibid., p. 250.

14. Ibid., p. 189.

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