

Griffith University

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Mediterranean songs

Biographical note:

Professor Nigel Krauth is head of the writing program at Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia. He has published four novels (two of them national award winners) and three teenage novels, along with stories, essays, articles and reviews. His research investigates creative writing processes and the teaching of creative writing. He is the co-founding editor of *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* www.textjournal.com.au

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Where the Durrells and Miller went

The Shrine is our private bathing-pool.

– Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*

Here we baptized ourselves anew in the raw.

– Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*

Where the Durrells and Miller went, we want to follow. We drive towards Kalami, thirty kilometres north of Corfu Town, and at Nissaki we trek down from the hillside road. There's a dip in the rugged coastline here, Corfu folds on itself to protect a tiny knob, a white-washed little chapel, cypress-held above cleft rocks – the shrine to Saint Arsenius. Walking the cliff track in olive-shade we nearly miss it, but catching sight, scramble a descent for goats to a sun-trap ledge, and deep water.

Larry and Nancy Durrell came here, with *Prospero's Cell* a gleam in Larry's eye. They dropped cherries like blood-spots in turquoise, and Nancy dived naked for them. They brought their friend Henry Miller here too when he visited, to be baptized in Greece.

We've arrived with light packs and sunscreen oil to join their cavorting, to write and make love, to replay the privacy and potency. We expect to be alone, but have company straight away. Around the headland two open boats, one tows the other – three Corfiot fishermen. They lean out, tie up at the rock-shelf too near us. It's their daily routine, it seems. Studiously we're ignored on our ledge near the shrine. They keep looking away. We imagine these fishermen have a legend of people naked, taking photographs and writing, on this sun-struck, deep-water ledge.

We watch as two of them stroke the net-line in a wide arc out and back again, while the third waits, his back to us, in the rocking anchor boat. Then the motor splutters for the haul-in. The catch in the sea-oozing net is a glisten of jumping sardines – two and a half boxes, it turns out. We came here for a lesson in naked history; the fishing is the lesson now.

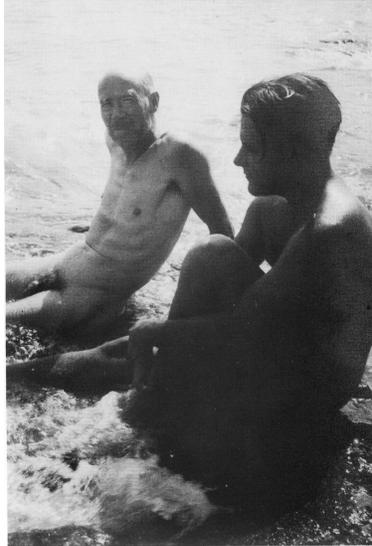
The sardines throb in the slippery light. They're the cherries in Nancy's mouth, surfacing; they're the words in Larry's book, and the specks in Henry's eye. We see in the gleam of ancient fishing, all we came for.

We put on our clothes and prepare to leave. This place has un-moored us from normal attachment to land. When we climb back up to the car we find we are smiling and seeing differently.

We don't often see snaps

J'aime le soleil, la nudité, la lumière...
– Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*

We don't often see snaps of famous authors naked. We look at this photo and want to get into it.



Miller and Durrell in Corfu¹

Marvellously, this shot of Miller and Durrell records their skinny-dipping in Corfu in 1939. Miller, by no means possessor of an Apollonian body, looks almost anorexic – bald and wasted, but happy with himself. Durrell, more introverted and twenty years younger than Henry, has a lithe attractive body, not ostentatiously muscled, young and fit but shyly uncomfortable before the camera. We like this photograph because it is the antidote to the tourist images of Corfu. Henry and Larry in their nakedness put a different frame around themselves: expansive rather than exclusive; sensuous not censorious. An invitation to honesty, not deception.

We sit down between them. There's room on the rock with the waves tickling our bare arses. We shake hands, and we blurt what admirers we are. Henry looks us in the eye and shrugs. 'What's up at your place?' he asks. Larry is more circumspect. 'We were just leaving ...' he says.

We lean back a little, trying to emulate Henry. 'We're doing a tour,' we say. 'We're looking for ourselves in the Mediterranean.'

Larry smirks, but disguises it with a cough. Henry puts his arm around us. 'You're in the right place,' he says.

‘We think there’s a network of self-knowledge in the world,’ we say hesitantly. ‘Made of place and literature and experience. And for English-speakers it’s significantly focused on the Mediterranean...’ Then we add, ‘... the cradle of the Western world,’ and immediately regret it.

Henry gives us a great slap on the back. ‘Damned right,’ he says. ‘Do all of it. Do it any way you can. The network extends everywhere. Rock that cradle!’ He rubs his knees enthusiastically. We wonder about the impropriety of developing erections.

But Larry comes to our rescue. ‘The world is complex and nasty,’ he says. ‘And very gorgeous. You need strategies.’

Like Neruda

This hidden Capri that you enter only after a long pilgrimage,
after the tourist label has peeled off from your clothes...

– Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*

Like Neruda we walk around Capri and walk around our bodies. The sheer drops are our declivities, the belvederes our bright thought. Pathways bend and open like the progress of our talk, and the air tells stories of near and far, like our breath.

Curled together, head to head, the zig and zag of stairways, the funicular of pleasure, we circle our nipples. A palace rises, remembering atrocities. A grotto unfolds, with celebrations. We see the spectacular view. In the square the clock tower times waiters with trays.

We are bursting in the street, leaf and wall, and vine. Winter blew us to this island, our love. And here we found hugging fire. We curved into each other’s breasts. A sea of love and troubles surrounds us.

There’s nothing to learn of a place but through another. We know the colour of winter, an unripened avocado, green not yet black. But the flesh and seed on the inside of us is what counts.

When we learn this island we will learn ourselves. We will bring it out of its hiding inside us. The bougainvillea will blossom later. Right now, the stones explode with rain on the dark leaves.

In bed with DH Lawrence

We are on top of the island, and look down on green pine-tops,
down to the blue sea ... But I don't really like islands.

– DH Lawrence, Letter to Else Jaffe, 1928

In bed with DH Lawrence, there's plenty of room under the covers. He's so skinny now, practically weightless, he takes up almost nothing of the world's space. He smells like cheese, and moves his bones uncomfortably. He's been lying down too long, hasn't been for a walk in weeks. We hear the fruity churning in his pinched chest, with an echo that belies his narrowness. He coughs up a patch of blood. He spits it into the envelope from one of the letters that arrived today, re-seals it, and adds it to the pile of reddened envelopes secreted under the bed. Then he picks up the edition of *John Bull* magazine that came with the letters. He riffles through it. His wide eyes tell us he wants to fight, wants to blast the world and make love to it at the same time, but the spleen is gone from him. There's not enough of him left.

'Ah,' he says. 'They hate my *Lady C* ...'

He wants to toss the magazine under the bed, but we put our hands out for it. He gives it up with a sigh. His eyes are red-rimmed, barely seeing us.

"'Famous Novelist's Shameful Book'," we read out aloud, "'...the most evil outpouring that has ever besmirched the literature of our country ... the fetid masterpiece of this sex-sodden genius ... we have no doubt that he will be ostracized by all except the most degenerate coteries in the literary world...'"²

We stop reading. It is too much.

He breathes out, giving up more of himself to the world. We worm beside him, turn on our sides and put our arms across his thin frame. We feel the pulse in his belly. His stick fingers open another letter, this from the publishers of the catalogue of paintings for his London exhibition.

He shakes his head.

'And my *Dandelions*,' he says. 'They want to leave it out ...'

He waves the letter vaguely, then drops it onto the bed covers. He adjusts his bony buttocks on the mattress. We get a waft again of cheese under the blanket.

'It's a painting of a man pissing, for Christ's sake,' he blurts. 'A man pissing! What's wrong with that? It celebrates the simplest, most beautiful thing. He's naked, pissing onto dandelions beside a wall. His arse is firm. He has beautiful shoulders. His head is bowed. But ... the most important thing I painted in that picture *was the wall*.'

He turns his gaunt face to us, his fingers clawing at our shoulders.

'My darlings,' he says. 'We are so *afraid* ... so pathetically afraid.'

Then he gives a croaking sort of laugh which alarms us because we think it might be the death rattle.

‘We are so afraid of *ourselves*,’ he says.

Frieda has heard the croak and sweeps into the room from the kitchen. She frowns at us cuddling up to Bertie, but says nothing. She’s a big woman, and we can imagine how these two lie in bed together, him moving over for her.

She hard-tucks the blanket on either side of us, like a good hausfrau.

‘Are you wanting anything?’ she says.

‘Only you, my love,’ he replies.

Remarkably, Lawrence is revitalized by her attention. He sits up further, rigid. He smiles at her as she leaves the room.

‘Oh, Lord. The fights we had,’ he says. ‘I remember trying to kill her on several occasions. Lying in wait and attacking her. Of course, she did the same to me.’

He croaks again, and coughs another mouthful, this time onto the letter about his *Dandelions*. He folds it over.

‘I have always hated what I loved at some time or other,’ he confides. ‘Even simultaneously.’

He pats our shoulders.

‘But not clichés. I never loved them.’

We think we’re really getting somewhere. We feel so close to him. We move our arms around his waist to hug him tighter.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘I might as well...’

Then he erupts into a spasm of coughing and there’s blood all over us, all over the bed. It’s a huge hemorrhage. The women come running from the sitting room and we fly up to the ceiling. Hovering there, all we think is how much we love him, for what he has done for us.

In the town of Vathy, on Ithaca

I have some idea of purchasing the Island of Ithaca.
I suppose you will add me to the Levant lunatics.
– Lord Byron, Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 1810

In the town of Vathy, on Ithaca, there's a memorial stone near the modest little cinema whose foyer has room for just a table and chair. In Greek and English the inscription reads:

For the
Commemoration of
BYRON'S
Stay at Ithaca August
1823

–
'If this island belonged
to me I would bury
all my books here
and never go away'

Byron

The stone, which looks like a gravestone, is set at the address where he stayed en route to his Greek war. It is one street back from the waterfront. We wonder why he did indeed go on, why he didn't sell up all and buy the island, and never go away. He was obsessive about Greek independence from the Turks, and his continued writing about the atrocities done to Greece attracted world attention. He was astutely opposed to Lord Elgin's robbery of the Parthenon marbles and, as a member of the House of Lords, was experienced in diplomacy with both the Turkish and Greek camps. So why as a writer did he take up the sword and join the war of independence rather than continue to do what he did best – be Greece's outstanding publicist and celebrity?

We assume Byron's mention of burying his books refers to Prospero's finale in *The Tempest*, and that he saw Ithaca as Shakespeare saw *his* island – a metaphor for the magic of his entire writing output. But possibly, the books Byron referred to were those he carried on his final travels towards his inglorious death on Greek soil: there was a considerable load of them, overweight luggage rates not being what they are today. Maybe the mention means that as a writer he did not need a library any more – that the island of Ithaca replaces all need for a library when contemplating one's final sum of knowledge – that Ithaca is *better* than a library, has more to teach, can teach it better. That Ithaca is poetry, drama, philosophy, history, natural science – that it is indeed, encyclopedic experience. But we wonder further: maybe the books he intended to bury were *his own*. Might a single perfect island answer all the questions one seeks to answer in a lifetime of writing?

Byron took the track to the Arethusa Spring at the southern end of Ithaca. This is the same track Odysseus walked when he returned in Homer's classic. Byron probably rode on a mule or donkey with a guide, but today we trek through waist-high scrub, un-signposted, wishing we'd worn long pants: the bush is gnarled and spiky. But marvellously, it feels like walking the ancient landscape of the *Odyssey* itself. Byron went to the Arethusa Spring in homage because this was where, in song, Odysseus re-met his honest swineherd, the only friend he could trust, Eumaios. Odysseus came home via the back gate, so to speak, by a remote beach landing, because home had become a dangerous place. He crept up on his wife, to discover what she was doing. But also, as a consequence of arriving this way, he didn't recognize his own island. Home wasn't home as he thought it would be. 'I do not think this is my beloved Ithaca,' he complains to the goddess Athena, 'but some other country, where I find myself.'³

After more than an hour of lonely walking, we arrive at the famed Arethusa Spring. It's a nondescript hole between rocks, less than a metre wide, with a grubby makeshift bucket abandoned on a length of frayed rope nearby. We look upwards at a cliff-bolstered mountain and down on a deserted beach. There's nothing human in sight. No building, no road, no sign of our civilization. A raven caws above us, razors the cliff-ridge of the mountain, and we feel greatly drawn to the place. It is truly wild.

We pick our way down to the tiny beach and take our clothes off. We sit on a rock naked for an hour with our feet in the sand. It's cold, but not too cold. No one passes on land or sea, only nature moves. Like Byron, we decide to take a swim in this unpolluted water where Odysseus re-found his story home.

Swimming in the Mediterranean sea

'What country is it, and what men live here?'
– Homer, *The Odyssey*

Swimming in the Mediterranean sea, we feel we are rebirthing ourselves. We have a space to think about who we are, where we've come from, what the hell's happening to us. We realize we've not spent time thinking about what we've done; we've been too busy doing it. Living life has gotten in the way of understanding it. What do we value most in life? We couldn't say.

We realize how mundane these epiphany thoughts are. We're supposedly intelligent, and educated, but we've made a complete stuff-up of living. Knowing Homer or Byron or all of modern literature did nothing for knowing ourselves. A university degree is like a marriage certificate – it means zilch in real life.

Except perhaps right now, at this moment when we're dripping wet on Homer's beach sharing with Odysseus his headache about home. He staggers out of the sea, flinging water from head, chest and thigh. He's not the big dude we imagined, has good pecs

though, and excellent legs. We smile at him. He reminds us a little of ourselves in times earlier, when long-haired and tanned. He looks confused and worried. Looks as though he feels he looks older than he should. But that's the way it happens, re-contemplating home.

He comes up the beach and stops, looking at us.

'Fuck you, guys,' he says. 'Are you the ones I have to deal with?'

He approaches more cautiously, leans across the rock beside us, and we notice behind the rock he has secreted his clothes and a longbow and arrows. It's a huge bow, a bazooka of a bow. He picks it up and puts an arrow to it. Then suddenly lifts it and points it at our foreheads.

'Jesus, mate,' we say. 'We're on your side.'

After a moment he shrugs and chuckles. He lets the bow and arrow fall to the sand. He sits on the rock beside us. His hairy brown shoulders are wet and rub against ours. He smells like the wine-dark salty sea and pig-meat. But we get a great charge from his intimate, thoughtful aggression.

'Fuck. I've been going for so fucking long,' he says, digging his feet in the sand. 'I've been fucking sheilas all over the fucking world. High-class, middle-class, lowest class. Goddamn prostitutes and goddamn kings' daughters. Nubile, married and divorced. No difference. It's a wonderful world, this Mediterranean.'

He explodes into laughter, shaking his head. A torrent of seawater comes off his shaggy curls.

'But what about home?' we say, knowing he might stand and put an arrow through our heart for mentioning it.

'Fuck, guys,' he says. 'I haven't got the faintest idea. We deal with it until we can't deal with it. We get away with what we can until we can't get away with it. Eventually, as with the bow and the arrow, we decide where our true aim lies.'

While we're absorbing these words he gets up from our rock and transforms into an older man, shawl over his shoulders, staff in his hand. We recognize ourselves again in him.

'Good luck, guys,' he says. 'Goddamn, I love you. You've given me so much strength to go ahead.'

We grasp his hand. We feel tears in our eyes.

'Our aim is true too,' we say.

Our hands unclench and he heads off into literature and pulp fiction.

Endnotes

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Research statement

Research background

Richardson's 2006 list of fiction written entirely or largely in the 'we' form includes works by Kafka, Faulkner, Robbe-Grillet, Barthelme and Cortázar who researched the inclusive and exclusive effects of 'we' narratives (2006: 141-2). First person plural experiments from 1924 to 1964 were mainly undertaken in short bursts in short stories. After 1970, novels such as John Barth's *Sabbatical* (1982) and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) showed the robustness of the 'we' voice for longer narrative. Similar to the 'you' of second person narration, the narrating 'we' is an unstable viewpoint that can disorient readers and lure them into perspectives not previously experienced.

Research contribution

Conventionally, the 'we' narrative represents 'an in-group pushing against an out-group' (Nesbit 2014) corresponding with the linguistic perspective where "'we'" does not designate multiple "I"s, but rather an individual "we"-sayer' (Margolin 1996). I am interested in the case where the 'we' might indeed be multiple 'I's, might represent a dual experience, a love-dyad viewpoint such as that postulated in e.e. cummings' 'little you-i' (cummings 1960: 68), and its effects in the context of memoir.

Research significance

This piece is part of a portfolio of work concerned with the boundaries (or lack thereof) between autobiography and fiction (see Krauth 2010, 2012). In line with Brien's examination of speculative biography (2014), this piece tests the concept of a memoirist 'we' and the territories it shares with conventional biography, autobiography and fiction.

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