

Previous scholarship on source materials for Lawrence Durrell's Gnostic themes in *Monsieur* are insufficient in light of his marginalia in Serge Hutin's *Les Gnostiques* and his notebooks for the novel. We contend that archival evidence from the Bibliothèque Lawrence Durrell in Nanterre, France, necessitates a reevaluation of previous work in order to account for the combination of Hutin's approach to Gnosticism and newspaper clippings in the notebook, which recast the nature of the Gnostic suicide cult that provides the impetus for the plot of the novel.

Gnosticism in Lawrence Durrell's *Monsieur*: New Textual Evidence for Source Materials

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While most critics are quick to turn to Lacarrière's *The Gnostics* to explain Lawrence Durrell's Gnosticism, especially as it pertains to his novel *Monsieur*, a number of facts should dissuade scholars from making either too quick or too close a connection between the two authors' individual understandings of Gnosticism, for fear that subtleties particular to Durrell's conception of the heresy might be overlooked. First of all, Durrell was cultivating an interest in Gnosticism well before he knew of either Lacarrière or his book; he began to study Gnostic texts in the early 1940s (Bowker 164), before he met Lacarrière in June of 1971 (MacNiven 587). Also, given Durrell's rather tepid "Foreword" to Lacarrière's book, which he describes as "more a work of literature than of scholarship" (7), and his criticism of the limitations of Lacarrière's earlier work (*Durrell-Miller* 447), it would be prudent to approach any direct correlation between *Monsieur* and *The Gnostics* with skepticism. Most importantly, the specific instances of Gnosticism that appear in *Monsieur* differ from Lacarrière's account in significant ways that cannot be adequately explained by referring to Durrell's usual playfulness with his sources. We argue that a number of discrepancies between Durrell and Lacarrière's Gnosticisms can be accounted for by turning to two other texts: one of Durrell's notebooks for *Monsieur* with a telling newspaper clipping and his saliently marked copy of Serge Hutin's *Les Gnostiques*, both of which Durrell appears to have used in his conceptualization and

composition of *Monsieur*. Both texts are held in the Bibliothèque Lawrence Durrell in the Université Paris X, Nanterre.

The strongest distinction between the Gnosticisms of Durrell and Lacarrière is that Durrell's Gnostics enact their refusal of the cursed world, flawed in every way, through suicide via the active acceptance of death. As Akkad explains to Sylvie, Piers and Bruce during their initiation into the heresy, "But then death... What is it after all? It is not enough! We will all die. Yet to the pure Gnostic soul the open gesture of refusal is necessary, is the only poetic act" (Durrell, *Monsieur* 139). Nevertheless, this tenet of Akkad's Gnosticism, that certain forms of suicide are acceptable, is anything but the belief of a "pure gnostic soul" as Lacarrière describes it; rather, Lacarrière writes, suicide

is the absolute antithesis of the Gnostic attitude. Not one of them, at any time, preached suicide. The aim of the Gnostic is not the conjugate extinction of life and of consciousness, but the mastering of the one and the other, the attainment of a hyper-life and a hyper-consciousness. (38)

Because mankind possesses a spark of the divine, however small, Lacarrière goes on to argue that suicide is not an option for any true Gnostic.

This refusal of suicide is not compatible with the active pursuit of death exemplified by the Gnostics in Durrell's *Monsieur*, who embrace death brought by another member of the cult and even see this "act of acceptance" as their most important, because "they sense the great refusal as necessary" (139), although Akkad does carefully add that "ordinary suicide, banal self-destruction, that is forbidden to us" (140). Moreover, the green notebook (#1349 in the Bibliothèque Lawrence Durrell) that Durrell used while writing *Monsieur* helps explain this discrepancy over suicide and it suggests how he arrived at the central problem of his novel. Using adhesive tape, Durrell attached a newspaper article to the back pages of the green notebook, for which the headline reads, "Un Club des Suicidés Fondé en Slovénie?" Below the article is pasted another headline, "Le Club des Suicidés" (49). The article describes the suicides of six young people, which occurred in quick succession in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana in 1968. The suicides, because of their rapidity and the proximity of all those involved, were quickly rumored to be the result of a "suicide club" and this notion was well publicized in the international press at the time. While the article itself contains no mention or even suggestion that the suicides were in any way connected to Gnosticism, the article's appearance in Durrell's notebook and its vague similarity to the Gnostic suicide cult of *Monsieur* is enough to suggest that Durrell used it in formulating his novel, combining this notion of "Un Club des Suicidés" with Gnostic ideas about the renunciation of a

flawed world, and hence creating a compelling engine for the plot that opens the novel while perpetuating the philosophical tension between life and death that drives *The Avignon Quintet* as a whole.

Other aspects of the notebook are especially interesting to consider with respect to the composition of *Monsieur*. Taped into the back cover of the book is Durrell's personal deathmap, similar to the one of Piers de Nogaret in the novel, dated to February of 1968 (n.pag), the same year as the Ljubljana suicides. At the head of the page is an ominous title, describing those listed as dead within the space of a few years (n.pag), which suggests that 1968 was the beginning, rather than the end, of this cartography of mortality. Furthermore, the page bears the names of people Durrell knew to varying degrees, including his wife Claude, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, and George Seferis, who were particularly important to him, as well as W.H. Auden and John Berryman, among others. A number of other notes on the page deserve mention. In the bottom right corner Durrell has scrawled that this map is for *The Avignon Quintet* and the character Piers' deathmap, which is described extensively in *Monsieur*; moreover, at the bottom left Durrell has written in black pen the quotation "all this winter I have lived with suicide – terrified" (unattributed source), which is particularly important given the devastating death of his third wife Claude, who died unexpectedly of pulmonary cancer in 1967, and who he still refers to in the present tense in his "Postface" to *Nunquam* in 1970. Confirming the autobiographical nature of many of Durrell's texts, the "I" of this quotation is disturbingly crossed out three times by red pen, giving tribute to the censored emotional intensity of his feelings. Following this quotation is an indication that this material might be used for Piers' diary, which is highly significant to the journey down the Nile in the "Outremer" section of *Monsieur*, the most overtly Gnostic portion of the novel.

Finally, one of the most outstanding qualities of the notebook is that it contains the sub-titular phrase from the novel "The Prince of Darkness" (Durrell, *Monsieur* 133), written to take up almost half a page in orange felt marker and elaborately framed by two large stars and a cloud of red pen. This phrase is notable, of course, because Durrell's *Monsieur* is distinguished from Blanford's fictive novel *Le Monsieur* by the phrase "The Prince of Darkness," as has been elucidated by Kaczvinsky (110). For Durrell's novel, the phrase serves as a subtitle, whereas it appears in the epigraph of Blanford's "The Prince of Darkness is a Gentleman" (276). Despite the importance of this phrase, both in the notebook and in *Monsieur* itself, it does not appear once in Lacarrière's text, in spite of its strong resonance with Gnostic faith and Lacarrière's preferential position as source material for much of Durrell-criticism's discussion of Gnosticism (Bowker 347; Lorenz, "O World" 109; Carley, "Avignon Quintet" 241; Carley, "Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon*" 287).

In contrast to previous criticism, and in response to the frequency of the phrase “The Prince of Darkness,” we draw attention to Serge Hutin’s *Les Gnostiques*, where it is written in French: “Le Prince des Ténèbres” (21). Moreover, Lacarrière himself referred to Hutin’s text when writing his own book of the same title¹. In his “Bibliographical Notes” to his own *The Gnostics*, Lacarrière writes,

I must also mention Serge Hutin’s essay *Les gnostiques* published in the ‘*Que sais-je?*’ series. In this work, the author goes beyond a general outline of Gnosticism: with great skill and clarity, he introduces us into the labyrinth of Gnostic thought, following it right down to the present day through its various esoterical, philosophical, and literary aspects. (135)

More importantly, in Durrell’s own copy of Hutin’s *Les Gnostiques*, his marginalia draws the reader repeatedly to this phrase, “Prince of Darkness.” As the most obvious instance of its importance to his reading of Hutin’s 1970 book, Durrell has written “Prince of Darkness 32” in the interior back cover, pointing to a passage on the thirty-second page, which reads: “L’Iranien Mani, un contemporain de Plotin (2), est un dualiste décidé, qui n’hésite pas à faire du Prince des Ténèbres l’égal en puissance de Dieu bon” (32; Durrell’s underlining). Beside this, Durrell has marginally translated, again, “Prince of Darkness.” Another passage of the Hutin book has been partly underlined by Durrell, reading “à la notion d’un monde quequel la Divinité suprême est étrangère—celle d’un monde sur lequel règne une fatalité mauvaise, un Dieu inférieur ou ignorant, voire un monstrueux Prince des Ténèbres. Le monde est mauvais ; l’âme humaine y est inexorablement captive” (21; Durrell’s underlining). While the notebook itself makes no direct reference to Hutin, it is reasonable to infer that, while researching for the novel he had tentatively titled *Le Monsieur*, Durrell came across this phrase in the Hutin text and was so struck by it that he chose it as his subtitle, marking it in his notebook. At the very least, Hutin’s overlooked position in genealogies of Durrell’s Gnostic thought in *The Avignon Quintet* and his absence from scholarly investigations of this topic should be corrected.

A few examples of potential reconsiderations in light of these new source materials include James P. Carley’s argument that “Suicide, for the initiate, is a poetic act: a return to wholeness and an actualization of all the threads of one’s past. Moreover, in refusing, in dying, one participates in the redemption of nature. One defeats entropy” (“Avignon Quintet” 233). In view of the position of the Ljubljana “Club des Suicidés” in

¹ For the sake of clarity, we refer to Hutin’s text as *Les Gnostique* and Lacarrière’s as *The Gnostics*, as it is titled in the English translation that bore Durrell’s foreword.

Durrell's notebook, the potential for a less literal reading of death for gain is rendered more viable, as has been previously argued (Gifford, "Terror" 13-38; Gifford, "Phenomenology" 207-219). Moreover, Dasenbrock's series of works on death in Durrell's texts face questions over his position that "Deeming th[e] world a façade that must be seen through and punctured, the gnostic voluntarily chooses death to expose ordinary life as worse than death" ("Counterlife" 225). This is all to say, the reader may wish to grant more attention to Durrell's statement: "The gnosticism of the Quincunx becomes a disease" (Carley, "Lawrence Durrell and the Gnostics" 8), which suggests that the sincerity of his presentation of the Gnostic suicide as a viable option is questionable and is quite plausibly a satiric element of the work.

To continue the textual line of argument, Durrell's copy of Hutin's *Les Gnostiques* clarifies at least one critical suspicion about a specific reference in *Monsieur*. In a note from his book *Lawrence Durrell: The Mindscape*, Richard Pine speculates about the origin of the name "Macabru," the fictional Egyptian desert oasis where Bruce, Piers and Sylvie experience the Gnostic ceremony: "Macabru: it cannot have been incidental that Marcabru or Marcabrun was one of the earliest of Provençal troubadours" (432, n.22). This point has been repeated in subsequent scholarship, including Veldeman's assertion "the evocation of Egypt even more strikingly suggests multiculturalism: it focuses mainly on Macabru, an oasis in the Egyptian desert. The very name of the place, which recalls the name of the famous troubadour Marcabru, suggests a meeting between Christian and Islamic cultures" (24). Significantly, the viability of Pine's suspicion is supported by Durrell's copy of Hutin, in which the novelist has circled the passage "Il lie partie avec le diable -- s'écrit Marcabru -- celui qui couve Faux Amour" (68). Durrell's marked emphasis on this passage in his personal copy suggests, as does his interest in "Le Prince des Ténèbres," that this reference in Hutin was the seed that developed into the title, "Macabru," of the second book of *Monsieur*. Moreover, the page in the *Monsieur* notebook that follows his translation of "le Prince des Ténèbres" to "The Prince of Darkness," surrounded by elaborate ornamentation (22), is cross-hatched and overwritten with the name of the fictional locus for the Gnostic initiation ceremony in *Monsieur*: Macabru (23). This further associates the name with Durrell's reading of Hutin. At the very least, the association apparently struck him as important, and it should therefore occupy a similar role in critical scholarship. This strongly suggests that Durrell's energetic reading of Hutin, and particularly his encounter with the phrases "Prince des Ténèbres" and "Macabru," were either contemporaneous with his writing in this section of the notebook or they bore a reasonably significant influence on his unification of various stands of thought into the background of the novel.

Finally, the Gnostic symbology of the snake is discussed at length in Hutin's text, as it is in the Lacarrière. What distinguishes Hutin, though, is a section that Durrell has highlighted, which characterizes the snake as a symbol for the human spinal column. Durrell has circled a note which reads, "Le serpent symbolise la force mystérieuse qui « serpente » le long de la colonne vertébrale et dont l'éveil est le but de nombreuses techniques d'illumination" (61, n.4). Below this note, Durrell has written "Kundalini," referring to a tenet of Yogic Meditation that claims that a snake named "Kundalini" winds its way up an initiate's spinal chord and activates specific chakra centres during meditation. This coupling of snake and vertebral column is, again, absent in Lacarrière's text, but it does appear in *Monsieur* and extensively throughout the rest of *The Avignon Quintet*. Akkad, again in describing the Gnostic rite to Bruce, Piers, and Sylvie, says, "For us [the snake] is, of course a symbol of the caduceus of Aesculapius of the spinal column, of the kundalini-serpent of the Indians—you will be able to trace the ancestry of the idea through many continents and many regions" (*Monsieur* 133). All three of these symbolic relationships are at least mentioned by Hutin, but Durrell's notation of the correlation of the vertebral column and the Kundalini snake in such close proximity cannot be mere coincidence, and suggests that previously scholarship should be revised in view of this association.

With this textual note on the correspondences among Durrell's *Monsieur*, his green notebook for *Monsieur* (which bears a reasonable association with Sutcliffe's "Green Notebook" in the "Sutcliffe; or, the Venetian Documents" chapter of the novel), and Serge Hutin's *Les Gnostiques*, we have avoided giving a complete account of the various similarities among the three texts. Instead, we have aimed to direct future research on Durrell's Gnosticism toward Hutin's work as important source material, especially since Lacarrière has been used in the past to resolve questions that his book is perhaps less suitable to answer. Neither do we intend to dissuade critics from using Lacarrière—although it appears that Lacarrière made extensive use of Hutin's text in his research, as Durrell did, this is not to say that similarities between Durrell and Lacarrière are any less compelling, even though Hutin's relationship to the notebook origins of *Monsieur* at least suggest that Lacarrière's influence has been overestimated. What these additional sources do reinforce, especially when the notebook's "suicide club" article is taken into account, is that Durrell played freely with his source texts, using facts and extra-textual references extensively, but reshaping and interconnecting them as he pleased. Both the notebook and Hutin's *Les Gnostiques*, therefore, suggest new avenues for interpreting Durrell's representations of Gnosticism and suicide, ranging from the satiric to the purely allegorical. Finally, we might imagine that Durrell's method for writing the *Quintet* was to compose novels from notebooks, getting progressively 'lazier' as he went along, forcing his

reader into an active role where he or she must construct a narrative from an unpolished collection of the source material he used; much like the *Alexandria Quartet*, which also has various floating texts that reflect the notebook stages of the novel's composition, Durrell "refer[s] the reader to a blank page in order to throw him back on his own resources—which is where every reader ultimately belongs" (Durrell, *Quartet* 307), and this readerly agency is emphasized by the notebook-like nature of the *Quintet*, "a book full of spare parts of other books, of characters left over from other lives, all circulating in each other's bloodstreams.... Be ye members of one another" (*Quintet* 693). As a working method, this 'lazy' writing seems an apt description, and as a provisional approach to texts largely concerned with writing and fragmentary narratives, it offers a potentially fruitful way of engaging with the themes of shifting identities, the palimpsest-like nature of Durrellian novels, and the stylistics of Durrell's prose throughout his career.

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