

The Revolt of Aphrodite Short Guide

The Revolt of Aphrodite by Lawrence Durrell

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Contents

The Revolt of Aphrodite Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	6
Techniques.....	7
Themes.....	9
Adaptations.....	11
Key Questions.....	12
Literary Precedents.....	14
Related Titles.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16



Characters

The Revolt of Aphrodite (two novels, Tunc, 1968 and Nunquam, 1970) presents a large and diverse cast of characters, many of them appearing and reappearing in the first and second volumes, many of them peripheral and little-developed as characters. In fact, if some readers find most of the characters scarcely credible, memorable, or individualized, that may well be Durrell's intention, an effect of his design which places the firm Merlin, "that seeks to control" everyone's destiny, at the center of everything, as a kind of central character in its own right. Commenting on his characters in this work, Durrell noted: "They will lose a little as individuals and gain as puppets; will be swallowed by the Firm . . ."

However, even if this applies to the major characters to some degree, there is much vivid characterization, of both major and minor figures.

The major character, and the narrator of the story (it is his story), is Felix Charlock. His name is richly suggestive: from felix, or happy, to Charlock, a troublesome weed of the wild mustard family (Felix describes himself in the opening paragraph as "the thinking weed"). Felix further suggests the idea of the felix culpa (or Fortunate Fall), as Charlock also commingles hints of charlatan, Sherlock, and lock picker.

Many readers and most critics find Charlock "both carefully delineated and deliberately blurred as a character" (see Weigel in the "Resources" section of the Durrell biography). Certainly we know Charlock better than any other character in the work, and just as certainly, there is much that is vague or mysterious about Charlock. Some critics find Charlock both a sympathetic character and the central consciousness which projects the "values" of the novel; others find him increasingly unsympathetic (charging, for example, that he is the kind of man who must debase what he loves — Iolanthe and Benedicta — and can only love what he debases), as well as obtuse, and the target of telling criticism delivered by Durrell's authorial voice, a view that stresses the aesthetic distance created by Durrell between himself and his narrator. To be sure, Durrell's allusions to the Nazis, to death camps and Belsen, and the analogies with Charlock's laboratory at Toybrook, have the effect of authorial censure of the kind of mentality that will presume to invent, to create an Iolanthe-robot. Another vexing question raised by Charlock's characterization has to do with just how sane or insane he is at any given point in the narrative. Is he clinically (or spiritually) insane when he is confined at the Paulhaus hospital? If so, how trustworthy is his narration, his version of events?

More than one critic has noted the fact that Felix addresses his readers as "gentlemen of the jury" (not the conventional "dear reader" address) and concluded that this implies that the story is a trial to determine the guilt or innocence of Charlock (and an entire culture). Insofar as Charlock (and his culture) are driven by an obsession with control, by the need to invent, to tinker with nature, to manipulate the process of living, to dominate existence, then the verdict in the case of Charlock and his society is "guilty for reasons of insanity." The readers will have to judge carefully whether Charlock's



sorrowful destruction of his dummy-Iolanthe and his decision to burn the archives of the firm constitute sufficient expiation.

Other important characters, powerfully realized yet still somewhat mysterious, include Iolanthe, Benedicta, and Hippolyta. The real Iolanthe, the honest prostitute whose quality of "pagan innocence" attracted Charlock, may be the only lover and friend with whom he has a satisfying relationship — or so the poignancy of memory makes it seem. Her subsequent career as movie star, her death by cancer (an after-effect of a breast enhancement operation), as well as her reincarnation as IoRobot, provide telling commentary on her loss of "pagan innocence," her enslavement and debasement by a corrupt culture.

Benedicta, daughter of the firm's founder, sister of Julian, the shadowy head of the firm, and wife of Charlock, has the most tangled and tortured character of all. She was forced, as a young girl, to be her brother's lover (for which deed Julian was castrated by his father); very much like her brother in some ways, she, too, has participated in murderous and sadistic activities. After their marriage, when Benedicta is pregnant, she informs Felix that he is not to touch her; after the birth of their son, Mark, their separation seems irrevocable. In and out of institutions, committed and recommitted for insanity (for example, after the incident in which, stark naked and reciting the Lord's Prayer in a "shaky broken voice," she shoots up the mirrors in the grand ballroom, each shot "embedding itself deep in the reality of the nonmirror world, shattering her image" (Tunc) .

Benedicta may finally achieve some balance, some sanity, some condition of blessedness (as suggested by her name). At least Charlock (if not Durrell) would have the reader think so, in her apparent role as complacent partner and housewife at the end of *Nunquam*. Some readers, however, will remain perplexed by Benedicta to the end, profoundly troubled and unsettled regarding her multifaceted ever-shifting character: lover and destroyer, Jungian anima, Freudian seductress, quintessential Great Mother.

Hippolyta, in contrast, seems to be the most stable, balanced woman in the novel. Politically powerful, wealthy, seemingly all-knowing, poised in her role as countess and shaper of events, she also provides the best-informed commentary on events, as in the scene near the conclusion when she informs her friends what has really happened in various situations to various characters.

The large cast of minor characters includes Sacrapant, a functionary of the firm who invites Charlock to join, then mysteriously disappears, an apparent suicide (we later learn he was murdered by the firm for some unspecified infraction); Marchant the cynical, amoral employee of the firm who works with Charlock on the Io-Robot project, who cheerfully praises the efficacy of a pill called Ejax, which thickens sperm; Sipple the clown (and later embalmer for the firm), a typical Durrellian eccentric, a warmly drawn character of the kind familiar to readers of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Indeed a full complement of the usual sharply sketched Durrellian eccentrics and mystics populates the work: Caradoc, the architect, Count Banabula, hapless and ineffectual, longing to



join the firm as much as others long to be free from it, Mrs. Henniker the whorehouse madam, and Koepgen, the mystic-philosopher-poet, whose writing Charlock liberally quotes in his narration. Of these only Caradoc escapes the limitations of that puppetry noted by Durrell as an effect of having the all-devouring firm at the center of his work. Caradoc walks right off the page, vividly alive, and the scenes in which he figures are among the most sharply realized and memorable passages (for example, his marvelous speech at the Parthenon in Tunc).

Finally, there is Julian, the head of the firm, the most elusive and shadowy character of all, whose very existence Charlock (and the reader?) doubts until he is finally encountered late in the narrative. It would seem impossible to entertain the very notion of "character" in relation to Julian, unless his identity is equated with the identity of the firm.



Social Concerns

In his note accompanying the publication of *Tunc*, Durrell announced: "By intention this is the first deck of a double-decker novel"; in his afterword to *Nunquam*, he identified the two volumes as "a two-part novel of an old-fashioned sort." Since Durrell regarded *Tunc-Nunquam* as one work, under the title *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, and since critical tradition has followed suit in discussing these two volumes as one work, they will here be discussed simultaneously. The primary social concern of *The Revolt of Aphrodite* is the dire condition of contemporary culture and as Durrell put it in an interview, the "revolting civilization we've hatched up here."

At the center of *The Revolt of Aphrodite* is "the firm," a vast shadowy multinational corporation, which employs most of the characters, which demands absolute loyalty from its members, which, above all, stands for raw exploitation. The thrust of the social concern here is how one can be free from "the firm," how to turn the tide of the debasement of culture and human relationships, and, finally, how civilization might find renewal. In a larger sense, however, Durrell's focus is on more than the decline and corruption in contemporary Western culture; it is, in fact, on the very idea of culture and civilization — what he called "the quiddity of the idea of a culture." As he observed in his afterword to *Nunquam*, "I have tried to play about with the notion of culture."

Perhaps Durrell's most obvious social concern here, as in much of his other work, is with love and sex, with "the human couple" as the "basic brick out of which our culture is constructed," with finding renewal through love that is free from ego, exploitation, and manipulation. Closely tied to this concern is Durrell's outrage over "the terrible treatment women have received in this culture." While the role of women in the complex and tangled relationships of this work is treated intricately by Durrell, one attitude comes through consistently, if not in the voices of characters, certainly in Durrell's authorial voice: the debasement and exploitation of women, of love, of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, is at the core of our corrupt and declining civilization. This matter is most clearly traced in the career of Iolanthe (the transformed princess of classical mythology) from sympathetic prostitute to movie star to death-by-cancer to transformation/resurrection as a dummy, a sciencefiction robot, to suicide.



Techniques

As is the case with *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Avignon Quintet* (1957/1960), Durrell's technique, form, and narrative strategies in *The Revolt of Aphrodite* are playful, experimental, typical — some would argue — of the postmodern novel, and for some readers, confusing at first glance. In this work as in his other major fictions, Durrell rejects what he calls "the old stable outlines of the dear old linear novel," preferring a "soft focus palimpsest," choosing to present events and experiences not in mere chronological order, but in the jumbled sequence in which they attain significance; that is to say, Durrell rejects mere history and embraces fiction, the chaotic rush and moil of life. For the reader trying to come to terms with the techniques of *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, there may be little comfort in Durrell's assertion in his afterword that "the poetic game is to try and put a lid on a box with no sides," and little reassurance in his statement that this is "a two-part novel of an old-fashioned sort," with no difficulties or "singularities" presented by its form.

By comparing this notion regarding the "old-fashioned" form of *The Revolt of Aphrodite* with Durrell's authorial notes to *Tunc* (which is "roughly about what it's all about; the reader makes it up as he goes along, if he goes along with it"); and if we consider Durrell's view that if the work "is what it sets up to be it will be building its reader as it unrolls through him," (for example, the characters "are as real as they make you and die happily ever after like readers and writers do," an observation which is both playful and deadly serious), then we will be able to grasp the essence of Durrell's techniques and narrative strategies: He demands the reader's participation and transformation in and through the making of the story.

At first reading, perhaps, the narrative method may seem somewhat straightforward. In *Tunc*, for example, Felix Charlock narrates his life in Athens, his affair with Iolanthe, the events that led to his involvement with the firm, his marriage with Benedicta and other events in straight narrative and flashback techniques. However, the question of narrative method is made more complex when we consider the role of Charlock's recordings into his "memory machine." It is still further complicated when we ask the essential question: When did Charlock write or "narrate" *Tunc*?

Critics have argued the matter variously, most suggesting that Charlock must have narrated *Tunc* sometime between the rendered action of that volume and the beginning of *Nunquam*, which begins with Charlock, ostensibly insane, waking up in the mental hospital. Thus *Tunc* is, simply put, the record of the events which lead to his breakdown. But when, and in what mental and spiritual condition, does he tell it?

One compelling argument is that he narrates it during his breakdown, from his hospital room, and *Tunc* is actually the record of his therapy. This makes *Tunc* a "double novel" one which presents itself as an objective account while in fact it is the wholly subjective account of Charlock's process of psychosis and breakdown. *Nunquam* continues this "double" process, redoubling it, as Felix moves toward his ostensible recovery. Early in



Nunquam, Charlock (and Durrell) ask the reader: "Would you like to know my method? It is simple. While I am writing one book...

I write another about it, then a third about it, and so on." Of course, the attentive and participating readermaker of the narrative, is aware that Charlock explains this "method" from his hospital room, confined for insanity; aware, too, that just before this explanation of his "method," Charlock admits that he is a kind of sleepwalking ghost, his life "covered in the heavy ground mist of an impossible past" which he will never understand.

Through all the self-begetting, reflexive passages, Felix struggles to understand, but the reader who is alert to these techniques — and to technique as meaning — will come, finally, to a deeper understanding.

As for style, the rich and lyrical quality of the prose which has always been a compelling force for Durrell's readers is very much evident in *The Revolt of Aphrodite*. Some Durrellians (notably G. S. Fraser — please see "Resources" in Durrell's biography) feel that this work contains Durrell's best writing, retaining the poetic density of all his work, but avoiding overwriting, pastiche, and "trying a little too hard" for stylistic fireworks, eliminating the "clottedness" and "prolixity" that invaded the style in other works, such as *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Black Book* (1938). Others have noted that the style is tempered by the quality of orality, by the conversational and "oral history" tonality which is technically required by the fact that much of the writing is presented as "recordings." Still richly manifested, however, is one of Durrell's most effective (and conventional) techniques: the set-piece, the landscape set-piece, the atmospheric place-writing which is the quintessence of Durrell's mastery. *The Revolt of Aphrodite* contains much evocative place-writing, vivid and memorable scenes from London to Constantinople, from Paris to Athens.

Themes

The epigraph for *Nunquam*, from which Durrell derives the titles of both volumes of *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, is taken from *The Satyricon* of Petronius: "Aut tunc, aut nunquam." Translated in the epigraph as "It was then or never," and elsewhere by Durrell in the familiar it's-now-or-never formulation, this motif points to a network of related themes, inextricably bound up with each other, which may be stated simply as choice, freedom, enslavement, and contractual obligation. There is, as Durrell notes in his afterword to *Nunquam*, no mystery in the epigraph from Petronius: "It's always now or never — since we are human and enjoy the fatality of choice. Indeed the moment of choice is always now." This necessity of choice and fatality of choice, together with the consequences thereof, constitutes the principal theme of the work.

Felix Charlock, the narrator and central character, chooses to join "the firm," or Merlin, which Durrell presents as "the international corporation that seeks to control the destinies of us all." Charlock's choice, joining the firm, reeks of "fatality": obedient to the firm, he marries Benedicta Merlin, sister of his boss, the elusive, evasive Julian, and thus endures that curious, tortured relationship under the double-edged equation, job equals marriage, marriage equals job.

As the inventor of Abel, the "brilliant machine" or sophisticated computer which foretells the future, Felix is indispensable to the firm. Restive under that indispensability, Felix longs to be free from its clutches. As a scientist he is profoundly disconcerted that his research, his inventions, are used by the firm solely for purposes of exploitation of humankind, in the rawest kind of "greedy mercantile spirit." As a man, he feels his enslavement by the firm grievously. Near the end of *Tunc*, which is persuasively concerned with his efforts to be free, Felix tells his boss Julian that he has reached a point where he "must make a gesture, even the feeblest of free gestures, to continue breathing." But he is reminded by Julian of "the sanctity of contractual obligation," which essentially makes Felix an indentured servant of the firm; indeed, as Julian darkly suggests, the firm is the world, is "a fact of nature, man's nature," and no one can "blink the firm." Thus *Tunc* concludes, or so it would seem, with the only escape from the firm available to Felix: death.

His apparent suicide by drowning, however, is revised or revealed at the beginning of *Nunquam* to be illusory, as we find Felix, now officially insane, committed to the Paulhaus, the hospital of the firm. Variations on the theme of freedom and the fatality of choice abound in the second volume of this "double-decker novel." For example, when he becomes involved in the process of creating a dummy — Iolanthe, one of Charlock's main concerns is the need to construct the robot in a fashion that will allow some freedom, some choice. There are deliberate echoes of the Eden story and of God's creation of Adam, free to choose, free to fall.

When he finally murders, destroys his own dummy-creation, in a powerful scene in St. Paul's Cathedral (ironic echo of the Paulhaus hospital, where the novel began),



Charlock concludes his "story of the Fall, and how I slew my darling more in sorrow than in anger, more in sickness than in health."

Perhaps this choice marks the beginning of Charlock's personal freedom, his Fortunate Fall (Felix Culpa), when he is free from the curse of invention, when he ceases to live as creator or inventor and begins to live as a man.

There are, however, no simplistic resolutions of Durrell's themes in this complex, elusive, shifting, riddling work. Even the most dramatic choice made in *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, the act of freedom that goes beyond the merely personal, and points toward some kind of universal redemption or renewal — the destruction of the firm's archives — is treated ambiguously. By the end of *Nunquam*, when the "whole responsibility of the firm" is in the hands of "Felix Charlock, bound in mind and body" (as he describes himself), Felix and Benedicta decide to take the great liberating blow of burning all of the firm's archives, thus allowing freedom for all whose destinies have been controlled by this vast sinister international corporation. The great fire will occur on Christmas Eve, the eve of rebirth and renewal. Some readers will no doubt view this conclusion (as have some critics) as powerfully optimistic and affirmative, as a resolution that promises a new society, a civilization and a culture reborn, rooted in nature, in biology, in love, and in organic relationships, rather than in contractual obligation and exploitation.

However, other readers will share the reservations and "alarm" of the minor character Baum who, on the last page, gives Felix his assessment of the effects of the great fire: "Either everything will disintegrate, the firm will begin to dissolve; or else nothing, Mr. Felix, absolutely nothing. People will be afraid to take advantage of the fact that they have no contractual written obligations. They might stay put from funk or . . ." And Felix adds: "So it will be either/or once again; it will be now or never." Whatever the effects of the fire, whatever the prognosis for human freedom after the destruction of contractual servitude, Durrell concludes, the freely chosen and willed act of liberation must be made. As *The Revolt of Aphrodite* ends, Benedicta and Felix are dancing, "dancing in complete happiness and accord," and they will keep on "dancing and dancing, even though Rome burn."

In addition to these principal themes of freedom and servitude, choice and renewal, and inextricably bound up with them, is Durrell's announced intention (in his afterword to *Nunquam*) to "play about with the notion of culture," "to take a culture reading." The provenance of his ideas should be familiar, he observes: "It's a sort of novel-libretto based on the preface to *The Decline of the West*. Freud is there too, very much there." And such closure, such thematic resolution as the work may offer is to be found in Durrell's insistence that "the moment of choice is always now" and "for the rest, the fabled two is the human couple, but it is also the basic brick out of which our culture is constructed — mathematics, measure, motion, poetry."

Adaptations

Justine is the only Durrell fiction made into a major film (Twentieth Century Fox, 1969). On the whole, its critical reception was unfavorable and it was considered a failure, both as film and as attempt to render the spirit of the novel. Although film rights to other Durrell works (including *Tunc* and *Nunquam*) have been purchased, they remain unproduced. In general, Durrell's work presents such technical complexities that the prospects for effective film adaptations do not seem very bright.



Key Questions

For group discussions, the most accessible point of entry to *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, and the concern with the most promise for lively and stimulating discussion, is Durrell's theme of the "decline" of culture and civilization. This discussion might usefully begin with Caradoc's lecture at the Parthenon, with his evocation of "Mobego" (or Mob-ego?) the "god of today," with his assertion that most people "are mere vegetables, malingerers," and that "human sloth" is the cause of the ruin of civilizations and "all the great cosmologies." The discussion could branch out from there to examine Durrell's various presentations of the causes and symptoms of "decline" and his prescriptions for renewal. How pertinent and timely is Durrell's diagnosis, his prognosis?

Another angle of approach for discussion likely to find broad response is through Durrell's image of "the firm," the "international corporation that seeks to control the destinies of us all."

Is this, at bottom, just another version of a familiar paranoia that seeks to explain all contemporary events by some kind of "conspiracy theory"? The group might discuss, both in the terms of the novel and in terms of personal experience, what it would mean to be free from all "contractual obligation."

1. Discuss Felix Charlock's name, its etymology, its allusive resonance. In Durrell's fiction, especially in this work, the answer to "what's in a name" is often quite complex.
2. Analyze Durrell's name-typing in terms of other major and minor characters. What are the etymological and classical roots for such names as Iolanthe? Benedicta? Hippolyta? Why does Durrell name the firm Merlin's?
3. How "sane" or "insane" is Charlock at various points in *Tunc*? In *Nunquam*? Is his "sickness" personal or widely shared with his culture? Does he recover, is he healed of this "sickness" by the end of the novel?
4. Why does Charlock address the reader in this fashion: "Gentlemen of the jury"? What verdicts (and in what case, what charge) are arrived at by Charlock? By Durrell? By the participating reader?
5. How credible are Durrell's characters? Are they, as he suggested, more "puppets" than "individuals" since their destinies are shaped by the firm?
6. In *The Alexandria Quartet* and other works, Durrell sees character as a function of landscape, sees people as largely shaped by place. Is this in any way true of *The Revolt of Aphrodite*? Is place important in this work?
7. Discuss the details of Caradoc's lecture at the Parthenon. How convincing is his organic explanation of architecture? Are there other important architectural images in the novel?



8. Discuss the narrative techniques employed. Is Charlock a reliable narrator? Does the authorial voice of Durrell intercede, intrude, in any way condition what we understand from Charlock's narration?
9. Do Tunc and Nunquam truly make up one inextricable "double-decker novel"? Would either volume stand alone?
10. What are the attitudes toward women in this work? Charlock's attitude? Julian's? Consider the passage in Nunquam where Julian discusses what happens when woman "leaves the passive role" and becomes "some sterile and monstrous androgyne." Does Charlock agree with Julian? Does Durrell?
11. Consider Benedicta as victim and victimizer. Compare and contrast Iolanthe's character and fate with Benedicta's.
12. Do you see the burning of the firm's archives as a positive, affirmative conclusion to the novel? As a joyful act of freedom, liberation? Or do you share Baum's assessment of the matter?
13. Ultimately, what is the force and the practical application (if any) of Durrell's Tunc-Nunquam title and epigraph, the now-or-never (or then-or-never) formulation which pervades the work? (You may wish to consider the source passage for "aut tunc, aut nunquam" in *The Satyricon* of Petronius, the Loeb edition; there, in the original context, among other questions raised, is this fundamental question: "What's going to happen to this place if neither god nor man will help us?")

Literary Precedents

It is difficult to place Durrell, in general, and *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, in particular, in any stream of literary precedents and influences. Born in India, Durrell the "colonial" and lifelong expatriate seems distinctly set apart from British literary traditions.

He often seems, for example, to be more of a French writer than a British writer. His affinities with Flaubert, Montherlant, and Proust are much deeper than any connection with Dickens, Conrad, or Greene. And it would be difficult, indeed, to trace as concrete "precedent" any linkage of *The Revolt of Aphrodite* with the work of Durrell's two prominent mentors, the American novelist Henry Miller and the American-English poet T. S. Eliot, except in the most general senses of concerns with sexuality and spirituality.

One English novelist, however, looms large in any reckoning of Durrell's literary forefathers: D. H. Lawrence. An interesting case has been made that Lawrence's short story "The Man Who Died" is a direct source for *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, and that *Tunc* and *Nunquam* depend on this work, are extensions and expansions of Lawrence's story, and yield Durrell's answer — quite different from Lawrence's — to the question: What happened to "the true birth of free man"? For another thematic precedent, readers may wish to explore Durrell's suggestion that *The Revolt of Aphrodite* is based on Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Finally, knowledgeable science-fiction aficionados may be able to locate in that vast terrain some precedents for Durrell's memory machines and robots and Charlock's technical wizardry in *Tunc* and *Nunquam*.

Related Titles

As Durrell observed, the "attentive reader" will discern in *The Revolt of Aphrodite* "intentional" echoes of *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Black Book*.

Some of this is in the form of specific allusion, such as the assertion that the novelist Purswarden (in *The Alexandria Quartet*) has influenced Koepgen. Other echoes are more elusive or more general, found in technical and thematic similarities and resonances, or in characterization. Charlock as narrator, for example, shares some similarities with Lawrence Lucifer of *The Black Book* and Darley of *The Alexandria Quartet*. For some readers, Iolanthe recalls Melissa of *The Alexandria Quartet*, as Hippolyta recalls Clea, and Benedicta resonates with Justine.



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