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# Bridging the gaps: Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet as a transitional work in twentieth century literature

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**Bridging the gaps: Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* as a transitional work in  
twentieth century literature**

by

**Tyler John Niska**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

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Program of Study Committee:  
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### **A Note on the Text**

This thesis follows the style protocols of the Modern Language Association. Any instances of British punctuation style that appeared in the original texts have been adjusted to reflect the American standards of the MLA. British spellings and syntax, however, have been preserved as per the original documents.

## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, Western nations experienced numerous challenges to their core notions and beliefs. Unprecedented scientific advancements, the advent of innovative and sophisticated technologies and fundamental alterations of the economic structure introduced changes at all levels of Western society and meant that Western citizens not only experienced cultural and political upheaval, but observed profound transformations of their daily lives as well. Precipitated by the accelerated pace of mass media consumerism, as well as the horror and disillusionment resulting from two devastating World Wars, these changes necessitated major philosophical revision. These revolutions of thought were reflected in the major forms of cultural expression, including art, science, and politics, but nowhere were these changes expressed more acutely than in literature.

*The Alexandria Quartet*, a tetralogy written by Lawrence Durrell and consisting of four novels, *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958), *Mountolive* (1959) and *Clea* (1960), was published midway through this tumultuous century. Written at a time when many new ideas clashed against a traditional status quo, Durrell's works can be interpreted as profoundly illustrative of the dominant trends and transformations in the major literature of the era. Thus, Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* serves as an intermediate piece of writing, a link that marks several important shifts in intellectual practice and connects the major literary movements of the twentieth century.

In this thesis, I will place the *Quartet* within a specific series of overlapping literary movements which dominated the early and middle twentieth century. I will explain how the *Quartet* not only reflects these traditions, which preceded Durrell's writing, but how it served

to herald and signify marked changes in these concepts and connected the major cultural and intellectual movements of the last one hundred years.

Specifically,

1. I will locate the *Quartet* within the basic structure and approach of the modernist fiction of the early and middle twentieth century.
2. I will demonstrate how, in addition to these numerous modernist aspects, the *Quartet* also embodies and foreshadows the aspects of postmodernist literature that would develop throughout the second part of the century.
3. I will demonstrate how the *Quartet* serves as a literary connection between the psychoanalytic assumptions of Sigmund Freud, which deeply impacted popular conceptions of personality and identity at the turn of the century, and the Neo-Freudian concepts instituted by Jacques Lacan.

These esoteric characteristics have drawn serious readers and critics to the *Quartet* for decades. Critics have often focused upon its themes of sexuality, love and maturation; analyzed its creative literary techniques; and even noted its postmodern potential and its depiction of a fragmented and unstable sense of personal identity. However, while many of the features I will explore have been discretely noted or partially outlined by disparate critics at various times, no single critical effort has positioned *The Alexandria Quartet* at the confluence of all of these interrelated literary and intellectual movements and awarded it recognition as a work fundamentally symbolic of the shifts of thought throughout the century.

### Lawrence Durrell: A Brief Background

Lawrence Durrell was born to a British father and an Irish mother in Jalandhar, India, near the Himalayas, on February 27, 1912. Throughout his early life, he had continuous exposure to the British imperial experience due to his colonial parents (who both, like Durrell, had been born in India). He traveled to England at the age of 13 to pursue his education, but immediately found the island to be dreary and unappealing in comparison to his warm and convivial childhood in India. His mother and siblings joined him in England after the death of his father in 1928, and, upon failing to gain admission to Cambridge, he helped convince his family to move to the Greek island of Corfu in 1935. He flourished in the Mediterranean climate, never residing permanently in England again for the remainder of his life and embracing the lifestyle of the expatriate author, which would inform and define his literary persona.

He began to write seriously in 1931, starting with poetry before moving to prose. His interest in writing led to a longstanding friendship with Henry Miller, initiated via correspondence, and Durrell published his first novel, *The Black Book*, which had been heavily influenced by Miller, in 1938. Fleeing ahead of the Nazi invasion of Greece in 1941, Durrell and his family moved to Alexandria, Egypt, where he worked as a British Foreign Press Officer for the duration of the war. Following this, he pursued various diplomatic assignments, which took him again to Greece, then to Argentina, Yugoslavia and Cyprus. During this time, most of his work consisted of travel writing reflecting on his Mediterranean experiences.

While working towards his third marriage, he set out to write the first installment of his ambitious *Alexandria Quartet*, *Justine*, in 1956, while still in Cyprus. *Justine* was

published to popular acclaim the following year, and he quickly completed *Balthazar*, *Mountolive* and *Clea* after a move to Provence, France, which he would call home for the rest of his life. He continued to write until his death in 1990 and he published two more multi-part epics—*The Revolt of Aphrodite* and *The Avignon Quintet*—but was never able to replicate the popular success of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Nevertheless, the *Quartet* had earned him modest renown and cult status in several cultural circles. His younger brother, Gerald Durrell (b. 1925), eventually became a well-known author and naturalist in his own regard.

#### Notes on *The Alexandria Quartet*

Because of the non-linear time frame, as well as the overlapping and non-straightforward nature of plot development throughout the series, I have chosen to investigate and analyze the *Quartet* as a whole rather than as individual works. *Justine* and its three “sequels” decidedly constitute one work to be considered in total, rather than piecemeal (in fact, many would dispute whether they should be viewed as “sequels” at all). Indeed, *Justine* cannot be fully understood unless it is viewed in light of the succeeding books; the reader cannot fully appreciate the progress of the narrative until he or she has read all of the books through *Clea*. Durrell’s introductory “Note” to *Balthazar* and other personal statements also indicate the intention of a carefully planned and orchestrated quartet of stories. Durrell also ambitiously declares the theme of his complete work: “The central topic of the book is an investigation of modern love” (*Balthazar* 9).

Though it is considered the most well-known (and financially successful) of Durrell’s works, the *Quartet* (and Durrell himself) largely failed to enter the prevailing literary canon of the Twentieth Century. Often lauded for its marked prose style and vivid imagery, the

*Quartet* has received some focused attention from certain critics, but is still largely unknown to many professional scholars and intellectuals today.

The first three books concern the comprehension of a single series of events revisited in each novel. These events are subject to successive revisions, each of which provides new and stunning revelations that reclassify the characters' (and readers') previous assumptions. The fourth novel follows these revelations and details how the characters react and cope after the initial time period. Because of this format, there is no strict sequence in which the novels *must* be read, but generally, for the plot developments and revelations to have full impact, they should be read in the designated order.

### *Justine*

*Justine*, the first novel, opens on an isolated and unnamed Mediterranean island, where Darley, an Irish schoolteacher and writer, has retreated in order to ponder and reflect upon his experiences in the city of Alexandria, Egypt in the late 1930s. Darley is chiefly preoccupied with recollections of his relationships with two very distinct women, the selfless Melissa, an impoverished and tragic cabaret dancer, and the enigmatic and sensual Justine, a wealthy and alluring socialite. Throughout, Darley continually emphasizes vivid descriptions of the people and locales of exotic Alexandria which frame the events of the plot. The story introduces several of the main characters who will be examined throughout the following books: Nessim, a rich Coptic banker and businessman and kind husband of Justine; Balthazar, the popular, homosexual Jewish doctor who represents the soul of the city; Pombal, the raucous French Diplomat with whom Darley shares a flat; Pursewarden, the blunt and insightful English author; Clea, the ethereal, aloof painter; and Scobie, the harebrained and eccentric police officer.

Darley narrates the story as a personal memoir and unravels his tale: in Alexandria, he works as a teacher while maintaining a relationship with Melissa and surviving in generally modest comfort. He soon encounters Justine, who introduces him to many of the upper echelons of Levantine society in Alexandria. Despite the deep respect and friendship with which he regards Nessim, Justine's husband, Darley commences a secret sexual relationship with Justine, with whom he becomes infatuated. Darley takes clues from a book, *Moeurs*, written by Arnauti, Justine's ex-husband, which supposedly offers insights into Justine's personality and behavior, including the fact that Justine was raped in her youth. As Darley endures many exotic exploits in the city, including the mysterious suicide of Pursewarden, he obsesses over Justine and worries that Nessim may discover their affair; he eventually fears that Nessim will arrange his death and conceal it as a hunting accident during the "Annual Duck Shoot" on nearby Lake Mareotis. There *is* a mysterious murder during the hunt, but the victim is found to be Capodistria, a notorious womanizer, who is revealed to be Justine's rapist. Justine, fraught with guilt and conflicted over her transgressions, flees both Darley and Nessim, and disappears, while Melissa, who had been terminally ill with Tuberculosis, is cast off by Darley and eventually succumbs to her disease. As the novel closes, Darley, confused and heartbroken, escapes from Alexandria with Melissa's child, fathered by Nessim, with whom Melissa had bonded before her death.

### Balthazar

*Balthazar's* wrap-around story picks up immediately after Darley has finished recording his initial reminiscences. Balthazar unexpectedly arrives on Darley's island, bearing a great "interlinear" full of comments and corrections of Darley's written account of the events depicted in *Justine*, which Darley had sent to Balthazar for revision. Believing that

Darley was misinformed about many of the circumstances, Balthazar urges Darley to read and consider his notations.

Forced to question his perception of events, Darley delves back into his experiences in Egypt. With the help of Balthazar's notes, Darley recalls other events that had occurred during the period of his habitation in Alexandria and relives the previously-described happenings from *Justine* through Balthazar's point of view and understanding. *Balthazar* also introduces new characters, including Narouz, Nessim's brutal and disfigured agrarian brother; Leila, Nessim's aging and reticent mother; and Mountolive, a senior English Ambassador serving in Alexandria. Darley also learns much more about the Hosnani family situation, and the uncomfortable relationship between Nessim, the elite and gentle banker, and Narouz, whose primary responsibility is to oversee the Hosnani estates and properties.

The primary piece of information which sends Darley spinning is the revelation that Justine did not, in fact, actually love Darley at all: their affair was merely a way for her to disguise from Nessim the affair she had had with her true lover: the writer Pursewarden. Pursewarden, who did not share her passion and treated her contemptuously, is also given a much more elaborate description and analysis than in *Justine*, as Darley must rethink his initial impressions of him. Darley further learns that Justine and Nessim's marriage was a charade—she cared nothing for him, but agreed to marry him for convenience. In addition, he learns that Scobie, while cross-dressing, had been killed by an angry mob, and the circumstances of the murder had been covered up by the doctor Amaril. These developments force Darley to reconsider all of his previous assumptions, as he must come to grips with what he perceives to be the truth of the events.

*Balthazar*, like *Justine*, also ends in a murder: at the climactic costumed carnival, Narouz murders a man whom he mistakes for Justine, and, believing that he has betrayed his brother, flees to confront Clea, whom he secretly loved, and he desperately admits his secret infatuation with her, who spurns his advances. The novel ends as Darley attempts to rethink his memories and judgments of characters as he prepares to revise his original story.

### *Mountolive*

*Mountolive* marks a significant break with the other novels of the *Quartet* in its narrative structure. It is the only novel of the four that is not narrated in the first person by Darley himself; instead, the book has a much more straightforward and linear story, told by a third-person omniscient narrator. *Mountolive* lacks most, if not all of the characteristic stylistic embellishments of Darley's accounts, which after the two previous books, are noticeably absent. Even the genre of this book is at odds with the others: *Mountolive* is not a personal recollection, and it is much less a romance than the other books (though that element is present); rather, it is a story of wartime political intrigue with heavy doses of subterfuge, diplomacy, foreign policy, and espionage.

Darley fades into the background as a minor, tertiary character, and the plot centers upon Mountolive, the British envoy introduced in *Balthazar*, and his decades-long relationship with the Hosnani family. Mountolive, who maintains a secret love affair with Leila, Nessim's mother, across broad distances of time and space, is a minor political figure who works his way up to become the main ambassador and administrator of the British colonial enterprises in Egypt, all in an attempt to fully realize his romance with Leila. Due to his love for Leila, and his deep friendship for Nessim, Mountolive is blinded to the Hosnani

family's surreptitious and subversive conspiracies to overthrow British rule in neighboring Palestine.

It is revealed that Justine and Nessim do in fact enjoy a deeply passionate affection for one another, built around the common goals and drives they both share. Nessim, a Coptic Christian who represents a rich but small minority of Egyptians, had originally sought to marry Justine, a Jew, as a way to cement political ties between two oppressed minority groups in the country who fear oppressive Arab Muslim rule following Britain's withdrawal from Egypt. Impressed with his commitment and passion for this cause, Justine agrees to marry him and assist him in his complicated plot. Nessim plans to secretly encourage the establishment of an independent Palestinian state under Jewish authority in order to counter the dominance of Egypt in the region, and its political repression. To this end, Justine seduces and manipulates both Pursewarden and Darley—both of whom are minor British foreign officers—in order to acquire information and divert their attention. Despite Pursewarden's initial faith in Nessim, he eventually learns the truth by accident from Melissa—Nessim is leading a conspiracy to smuggle weapons in an attempt to undermine the British government. Out of shame at his inability to discover the plot until too late, and the stress over his conflicting loyalties to Mountolive and Nessim, Pursewarden had killed himself (though this is not the first or the last explanation of his suicide), but not before separately informing both Mountolive and Nessim of everything he knew.

Meanwhile, Mountolive meets with Leila again for the first time in many years and is horrified that she has lost her charm and beauty. Devastated by this loss of his ideal lover, Mountolive temporarily flees into the underbelly of Alexandria, and is robbed and attacked before escaping back to the British consulate. Narouz, meanwhile, has become a potent

orator, delivering religious sermons on the necessity for Coptic opposition to Egyptian Muslims and drawing unwanted attention to Nessim's conspiracy. After Nessim is made aware of the danger that these speeches might expose the conspirators' efforts, the relationship between Nessim and Narouz deteriorates, and Nessim is eventually forced to bribe a corrupt, but powerful government official, Memlik Pasha, into concealing the issue. As the story ends, Memlik is reluctantly forced to act by his superiors and he must dispatch his agents to murder Narouz, who heroically fights off the assassins, but succumbs to his wounds, dying in Nessim's arms.

### *Clea*

Darley's narrative voice once again resumes in *Clea*, the final novel of the *Quartet*, as he returns to Alexandria with Melissa's child in an attempt to resolve all these disparate accounts once and for all. *Clea* occurs some time after the initial co-synchronous events of the first three books, and by this time Alexandria (and the rest of the world) is beleaguered by the onset of the Second World War. Darley discovers that the characters he had known have been physically and mentally disfigured by the war: Nessim, having been exposed as a traitor since *Mountolive*, has lost much of his wealth and influence, as well as an eye and a finger in an air raid. Justine, confined to house arrest for her role in the conspiracy, is debilitated by a stroke. Balthazar has lost his teeth, and narrowly survived a suicide attempt after a devastating romance with a young man. Pombal, the womanizer, continues to suffer from gout and has fallen desperately in love with a married woman, who is later killed before his eyes.

Encountering each of his friends, Darley comes to terms with his past and finally chooses to forsake Justine, with whom he was once obsessed, forever. He confronts a

mocking and disparaging account of himself written by Pursewarden before his death, in which Darley is affectionately referred to as “Brother Ass,” but by now he has learned to recognize and distance himself from his previous naivety and ignorance. Most importantly, he reencounters Clea and begins a passionate relationship with her based upon mutual trust and endearment. Though he has exhibited extensive personal growth and finally begins to understand what it is to be a writer, Darley begins to drift apart from Clea, and the two decide to separate as he returns to Greece. In one last rendezvous, however, Clea has a terrible accident—she is fortuitously impaled by a harpoon gun underwater and Darley is forced to amputate her hand to save her life. After saving her from drowning, Darley does indeed return to his island, but not without gaining considerable insight and a profound connection with Clea. As the story closes, Clea writes to him, revealing that her new prosthetic hand has augmented her artistic abilities, and Darley finally understands how to be a great a writer. In the final pages he draws upon his experiences and puts pen to paper with newfound confidence and understanding of the world around him.

### Critical Reception

Since the first release of *Justine*, *The Alexandria Quartet* has alternately been described as an astounding tour de force, a flawed masterpiece, a presumptuously shallow effort, and an insulting misrepresentation. While opinions of the significance and importance of the *Quartet* vary, the one element of Durrell’s writing that seems to be above reproach is the evocative and lyrical style. These stirring descriptions are evident from the first few pages:

In the great quietness of these winter evenings there is one clock: the sea. Its dim momentum in the mind is the fugue upon which this writing is made. Empty cadences

of sea-water, licking its own wounds, sulking along the mouths of the delta, boiling upon those deserted beaches—empty, forever empty under the gulls: white scribble on the grey, munched clouds. If there are ever sails here they die before the land shadows them. Wreckage washed upon the pediments of islands, the last crust, eroded by the weather, stuck in the blue maw of water ... gone! (*Justine* 16)

In contrast with the bleak, minimalist and straightforward prose of contemporaries like Ernest Hemingway, Durrell's expressive elegance immediately drew attention and remains, for many, his most impressive accomplishment. In the 1960 article "Durrell's Alexandria Series," Bonamy Dobrée remarks that, "incontestably, Lawrence Durrell is a man of remarkable talents. Moreover, everything that he writes is distinguished by a rich, sensuous appreciation of language, a capacity for vivid adventurous imagery, and a feeling for the modulation of phrase" (150). Hayden Carruth similarly notes that "For anyone who has read the *Quartet* attentively at all, a page of Durrell's prose will stand out unmistakably among the reams and reams published by his contemporaries" (125). Even his detractors will reluctantly concede, "it is generally admitted that the setting of *The Quartet* is vividly and poetically realized" (Hutchens 61).

Despite the brilliance and popularity of Durrell's *Quartet*, there are serious questions as to why the series has attained only limited critical recognition and little more than a cult following. The work today lies outside the major canon of twentieth century English novels. In fact, outside of *Deus Loci*, the literary journal devoted entirely to Durrell's fiction, which is published infrequently (only nine issues in the last seventeen years), there is relatively little scholarship on Durrell's writing today. Reed Way Dasenbrock outlines this basic bewilderment:

In the 1960s, Durrell was that rare specimen: a serious but popular novelist. The *Quartet* was widely read and widely praised both among the general public and among critics. And as critical studies began to proliferate on the heels of wide sales, Durrell seemed destined for a secure place in the literary pantheon.... In the 1960s when I was growing up in a small town in Ohio, even our family doctor had read *The Alexandria Quartet* and was deeply engrossed by it. Durrell's reputation has drastically declined over the past fifteen or twenty years, at least in the English-speaking world, and though this decline is not something others working on Durrell have directly faced, it needs critical examination. (515)

According to David Woods, the reason is because many of the initial criticisms directed toward Durrell seemed to outlive the praise:

It has been nearly thirty years since the publication of *The Alexandria Quartet*, and today it has achieved widespread recognition, chiefly as a stylistic masterwork. But one hears with frequency, sometimes even from those who grant its stylistic powers, vague expressions of distaste. Efforts to discover the bases of these complaints reveal that a couple of the central charges in the early criticism still linger, namely that the *Quartet* is not profound or meaningful, or that its view of love is shallow or perverse. (93)

Here Woods draws attention to the fact that even though the series was financially successful and generally lauded, the *Quartet* was not without numerous detractors. Some denigrated the ambitious and self-conscious nature of the books: "there is another impediment between this novel and its reader, one put up by the author himself: form-consciousness. The obvious manifestation of this is Durrell's pontificating about what he has intended to accomplish in

his book” (Elliot 117). Some find the language itself to be distracting and unwieldy—“Some of the descriptions of landscape and sky have a genuine Parnassian glitter, but the writing in general does not begin to sustain such an elaborate and pretentious structure,” claims Martin Green, who adds, “A steady diet of sentences like [those in *The Alexandria Quartet*] makes one feel one is sickening for a bad cold” (128). Others claim it is “neither a masterpiece nor so inferior that it deserves the vilification some critics have given it. It is mediocre, but its mediocrity, as a total work of literature, is of an unusual kind, made up of superlatively good and execrably bad elements” (Manzaloui 144); such a view effectively splits the difference and offers the prospect of contentious arguments over which parts of the work are or are not successful.

Despite these differing opinions, *The Alexandria Quartet* nevertheless occupies a fond place in the esteem of a number of dedicated readers. It will become clear, however, that the complexity and significance of these novels deserve far more consideration than the minor, albeit devoted, attention of a relatively small group of fans who currently enjoy the *Quartet*.

## Chapter One: A Modern Epic?

Published at the philosophical and chronological mid-point of the twentieth century, *The Alexandria Quartet* occupies a complicated theoretical middle ground between modernist and postmodernist notions. It shares traits with both movements, but eschews definitive membership within either school of thought. While critics have alternately claimed the *Quartet* for one camp or the other, it is my understanding that it simultaneously belongs to both groups and fundamentally links them to one another. To elaborate upon this, it will be necessary to outline and describe the basic history and tenets of modernism and postmodernism, and then demonstrate how *The Alexandria Quartet* evokes these concepts.

### The Advent of Modernism

Following on the heels of previous literary movements, specifically the idea of Realism, which sought to depict life and everyday events with the greatest possible accuracy, Modernism flourished in the early twentieth century and represented a profound and bitter cultural backlash against many intellectual assumptions that originated in the Enlightenment. This backlash at the core of modernism came about as the result of new developments in human understanding of how the world operated, specifically scientific principles presented in the works of Charles Darwin in the late nineteenth century, and Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Among these new developments were many notions suggested by evolution, human psychology, and physical relativity. Darwin's works, *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), detailed the idea of biological evolution in the natural world. Evolution contrasted with previous assumptions involving the immutability of the natural world and religious notions of the permanence of divinely instituted creation—Darwin

showed that the world was not a static and constant milieu, but was, over time, a continuously changing and developing environment. Freud's ideas about the fractured nature of the psyche depicted ongoing inner turmoil within the human mind, where unconscious desires could play out in conscious thoughts and actions. This notion differed from the previous understanding of a stable and rational human intellect, in which drives and motivations had clear and recognized causes and origins within the human brain.

Einstein's publication of the theories of special and general relativity, in 1905 and 1916 respectively, threw out many of the old Newtonian theories of Physics by revealing that perception of events and knowledge of the universe were greatly dependent upon one's relative position and perception of other objects. Heisenberg's work on indeterminacy led to the development of the Uncertainty Principle—the idea that data about the exact location and speed of atomic particles were mutually exclusive, and therefore knowledge of matter was always incomplete. He also helped outline the “observer problem,” which showed that the very act of observation of a process altered how particles reacted, and thus changed the outcome. Thus, according to Einstein's theory of relativity, there was no objective point of view from which to observe and describe, and Heisenberg's theory of indeterminacy showed that events could not be fully analyzed because of the change induced by the observer. Furthermore, Freud's theories demonstrated that the human mind was not an objective or reliable source of information in any case. Thus, comprehension of an “objective reality” was shown to be unreachable. The basic tenets of Realism, including the accurate and faithful description of the “true” nature of the world, were thus proved to be impossible and untenable, and it was necessary to develop a new philosophy of artistic interpretation.

The political and historical events of the twentieth century, particularly the First World War (1914-1918), also ushered in profound skepticism toward prevailing cultural ideologies of the age. Despite all the hope for the betterment of the human race in the twentieth century and the confidence in the superiority of Western civilization, Americans and Europeans witnessed over ten million gruesome deaths (and another twenty million injuries) in futile trench warfare, while unprecedented industrial developments in mechanized warfare further enhanced the carnage. The great costs of this conflict led to many political changes, but virtually no noticeable improvement was achieved in the lives of average citizens, and much less for those who actually fought and suffered. Because of this failure of humanity, artists and intellectuals in this era experienced great disillusionment in the institutions of Western civilization. The culture of skepticism and cynicism that developed was further intensified by the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Second World War (1939-1945), and the dawn of the Cold War in the late 1940s.

### Modernist Literature

Seeing a need for a comprehensive reevaluation of the role and purpose of art in this atmosphere of disillusionment, artists, writers and thinkers sought profound change and generated numerous experimental literary philosophies. These new movements, such as Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Vorticism, and others, were usually collectively linked under the heading of modernism. These related movements were championed by popular English-language writers of the early twentieth century, including Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf to name a few.

Modernism, though it always existed as a loose assemblage of stylistic and thematic features, typically displays a pattern of common elements, several of which are main features

of Durrell's *Quartet*. Because they often lack a definite point of view, however, modernist works often have no centralized values, tenets or authoritative absolutes. Thus, as Einstein suggests, there is no unified or absolute truth, and awareness is dependent on position and point of view and thus many of these authors also play with the nature of perception and reality. Lee Lemon hypothesizes that this is because

There is, the relativity proposition tells us, no one way to truth, no center upon which we may stand with absolute confidence.

The loss of the unities is a loss of orientation. The source of our particular loss of orientation results from the post-Kantian disappearance of absolutes ... that [place] human experience at the center of all knowledge. (158)

As Dianne Vipond states, for these modernist authors, "At best, Truth is provisional" (58).

This lack of apparent truth and orientation is reflected in their literature:

The loss of center in modern belief has been discussed so often—cause, effects on themes of fiction, effects on forms of fiction, and so on—that it is useless to belabor the issue.... [U]ntil roughly the midpoint of this century, the classic form of the then modern novel facilitated the expression of anguish at the loss of the "unities." (Lemon 153)

Furthermore, due to the untrustworthy nature of human experience and memory, modernist works frequently feature discontinuity in the narrative structure, where the described events are not linear in character or chronology. Themes of memory and remembering, as well as questions about how memories are produced, are often crucial themes in these works. Dasenbrock claims,

Nothing is more quintessentially modern than this.... Memory—not imagination—is crucial in modernism because art needs to stick to “the here, the now,” as Stephen tells himself in *Ulysses*. (Dasenbrock 518)

Ideas of consciousness and experience necessarily follow this emphasis on memory and “[m]any modern novelists ... sought to explore subjectivity through a depiction of consciousness” (Vipond 57).

In order to remedy shortcomings of memory, many modernists focus upon the role of art and artistic interaction as a way to connect with the world. By ordering the chaos of the uncertain world, Art, it was believed, could serve to combat the fear of being cast adrift on a sea of confusion. This leads, in Dasenbrock’s terms, to a modernist “tradition of art about art, in which art is taken seriously as a way to transcend quotidian reality” (521). Dasenbrock continues: “[t]he modern world is chaos and is presented as chaos, yet the artist can order the chaos through the complex structures of his art” (518). And he clarifies, “Art must provide order, but an order for our chaos, not an order in a vacuum or in an ivory tower. It must take the actual fragments of our existence and put them in an order, instead of fleeing that chaos and creating a world in and of itself” (518-19).

It is also important to recognize the rebellion in this period against Victorian social codes and customs, which were seen by modernists as particularly erroneous and repressive. Dasenbrock elaborates: “a second major theme, equally prominent and equally modernist, is life’s (and art’s) escape from other social forms of control,... specifically, it challenges bourgeois morality and the repressions—chiefly sexual—that help constitute that morality” and “modernist art has done this chiefly by representing those aspect of human life that earlier had not been considered proper to represent” (519). Thus themes of sexuality (and

frequently scatology) pervade these novels (notably those of D.H. Lawrence). The manner in which Durrell's work interacts with and reflects these modernist trends will be the focus of the next section.

### Modernism and *The Alexandria Quartet*

Many of Durrell's commentators see *The Alexandria Quartet* as a representative and fundamentally modernist work. For Anne Zahlan, "the emphasis on aesthetics and the creative process, as well as concerns with the elusive quality of truth, the workings of memory, the intricacies of psychic process, characterize the *Quartet* as modernist" (87). Reed Way Dasenbrock, author of "Lawrence Durrell and the Modes of Modernism," declares that Durrell fits "into a clear modernist tradition" (518). He also states that "much of the enthusiasm for *The Alexandria Quartet* upon its publication stemmed from the fact that Durrell manages to work with and carry forward the same themes as the modernist masters" (520). Coming in this period, Durrell's modernism could be viewed as somewhat refreshing, believes Dasenbrock. Though modernism had been tremendously popular in the preceding decades, by the late 1950s

Few other writers in this period were comparably working within the modernist tradition, and Durrell's work stands out as a refreshing contrast to the dreary and parochial reaction against modernism dominating English verse and fiction in these years. Here Durrell's exotic origins, biography, and settings for his work also place him in the cosmopolitan modernist tradition rather than anything narrowly or provincially English. (Dasenbrock 521)

The description of *The Alexandria Quartet* as modernist fiction, however, is obviously dependent on its exhibiting numerous aspects of literary modernism, specifically the

*Quartet's* attention to relativity and the lack of an absolute frame of reference, the presence of issues regarding the human memory's response to this lack of absolute truth, the ability of art and the artist to organize this chaotic uncertainty, and the post-Victorian view of sexuality, which is blatant throughout the series. As Marilyn Papayanis establishes, "*The Alexandria Quartet* fits squarely within the tradition of modernism in terms of its thematic of sexuality, its experimental form, and its self-conscious attitude toward art and artist" (40-41).

The most notable and critically examined aspect of Durrell's *Quartet* with regards to modernism and postmodernism has been its conscious and deliberate form. This form also makes it much more difficult to locate the *Quartet* as existing within a specific literary tradition. Indeed, Durrell was attempting to posit something new and revolutionary, for the *Quartet* was designed as "an experiment to see if we cannot discover a morphological form one might appropriately call 'classical'—for our time" (*Balthazar* 9). This experimentalism of the *Quartet* has received the much attention from Durrell's readers and critics and Donald P. Kaczvinsky observes that "to speak of the *Quartet* in terms of "Space-Time" theory has become almost commonplace" (*Durrell's Major Novels* 36).

The key element of this experimental form is Durrell's attempt to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of Einsteinian relativity on Durrell's "Space-Time." Durrell delineates his intention in the introductory "Note" to *Balthazar*:

Modern literature offers us no Unities, so I have turned to science and am trying to complete a four-decker novel whose form is based on the relativity proposition.

Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum. The four novels follow this pattern.

The three first parts, however, are to be deployed spatially (hence the use of “sibling” not “sequel”) and are not linked in a serial form. They interlap, interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. The fourth part alone will represent time and be a true sequel.

The subject-object relation is so important to relativity that I have tried to turn the novel through both subjective and objective modes. The third part, *Mountolive*, is a straight naturalistic novel in which the narrator of *Justine* and *Balthazar* becomes an object, i.e. a character. (*Balthazar* 9)

Thus Durrell alerts his readers and critics to his overall goals and intentions for his work: *Justine*, *Balthazar*, and *Mountolive* are intended to represent a single moment in time, and each describes roughly the same sequence of events from differing viewpoints, which originate as perspectives from each of the three dimensions of space. *Clea*, which occurs after the events of the first three novels, involves a shift not in location within a single space, but a development in viewing the events through the perspective of the progress of time. Though other modernist authors had experimented with notions of time and perceptions in their works, Durrell draws a distinction between what he attempts to do and what was previously achieved. He claims that his method is “not Proustian or Joycean method—for they illustrate Bergsonian ‘Duration’ in my opinion, not ‘Space-Time’” (*Balthazar* 9), which he attempts to portray.

At times, Durrell even reaffirms his intent through the words of his characters, specifically Pursewarden’s suggestion in *Clea* that

seriously, if you wished to be—I do not say original but merely contemporary—you might try a four-card trick in the form of a novel; passing a common axis though four

stories, say, and dedicating each to one of the four winds of heaven. A continuum, forsooth, embodying not a *temps retrouvé* but a *temps délivré*. The curvature of space itself would give you stereoscopic narrative, while human personality seen across a continuum would perhaps become prismatic? Who can say? I throw the idea out. I can imagine a form which, if satisfied, might raise in human terms the problems of causality or indeterminacy. (*Clea* 135-36)

It is precisely this suggestion to Darley that Durrell attempts to realize in his own *Quartet*.

This deliberate attention to time and the relativity of perception constitutes perhaps the most straightforwardly identifiable element of modernism within the text. Theodore Steinberg identifies Durrell's incorporation of Einstein and Heisenberg as the main reasons for the success of his work. "Durrell is one of the few writers who has ever consciously tried to incorporate recent scientific discoveries—pivotal discoveries—in his work" (197). Commenting on Durrell's modernist attention to the twentieth century revision of scientific thought, Steinberg places Durrell at the confluence of twentieth century thought, which is significant because:

Not only was he writing after the Second World War, itself a historical juncture that figures in a number of these twentieth-century epic novels, but more than any of the other authors we have considered, he is aware of the psychological and especially the scientific changes that help to revolutionize the century. (196)

Vipond further asserts that:

Durrell's appropriation of Einstein's relativity theory as a metaphor for perception in an attempt to refine a metaphysics of consciousness connects him with Modernism,

but the relativity proposition, in fact, destabilizes the old unities as it manifests the relativity of point of view and absence of absolute truth. (57)

Steinberg also describes how the *Quartet* attains, in his terms, “epic status:” “one of the things that helps make Durrell’s work epic is that he both embodies and consciously explores the implications of that [scientific] revolution, of that critical moment in human history” (197).

Some commentators appreciate this ambitious attempt: “the several books delight their reader by the multiplicity of perspectives rather than by the sense of resolution and completeness, and the more the merrier” (Kaczvinsky, *Durrell’s Major Novels* 36). Others see it as a necessary step in the development of modernism: “it is the kind of novel that had to be invented in order to illustrate and justify post-Jamesian preoccupation with multiple perspective,” claims Steven Kellman (122). There are those, however, who take issue with Durrell’s treatment of “Space-Time.” Mahmoud Manzaloui, for example opposes Durrell’s effort to employ Einstein’s theories and contends “no one can seriously believe that because Space-Time has four dimensions, a novel should have four sections. No one can take the dependence of *Balthazar* upon *Justine* for an analogy between two dimensions of space” (147-48). He ascribes Durrell’s “failure” in this respect to “inherent flaws in the vision of the writer” (146).

Nevertheless, an opposition to the assumption of an absolute truth underlies *The Alexandria Quartet* and constitutes a pervasive modernist theme. Darley’s journey through the varying accounts of the events in Alexandria clearly evinces a preoccupation with the limits of human “knowability” and the futility of attempts to determine what “really” happened. “Like a cubist painting, the *Quartet* allows for multiple ‘inner’ and ‘outer’

perspectives in a single viewing,” avows Kaczvinsky (*Durrell’s Major Novels* 37). Through the form of his novel manuscript, Darley is compelled to search for the truth and significance of his affair with Justine. His attempt to come to terms with his obsession with Justine opens up a challenge to his entire mental framework and he begins to doubt the validity of his entire experience. Durrell’s depiction of different facets of these characters at different times makes it clear that “characterization in the *Quartet* partakes of the multiple reflections of modernism” (Zahlan 95).

Aiding Darley in his understanding are several statements from Pursewarden and Balthazar that seem to rely heavily on the concepts of relativity and “Space-Time” and nudge him along in his understanding of reality. Echoing Durrell’s attention to these concepts, Pursewarden in particular mouths the concepts of these modernist principles:

“At this time when we knew [Pursewarden] he was reading hardly anything but science.... He defended himself by saying that the relativity proposition was directly responsible for abstract painting, atonal music, and formless ... literature. Once it was grasped they were understood too. He added: ‘In the Space and Time marriage we have the greatest Boy meets Girl story of the age.’” (*Balthazar* 142)

Balthazar also suggests how Darley might go about representing the alternating visions of reality and the acquisition of new information by describing the characteristics of a literary “palimpsest” where reality is revised, and one’s interpretations of events is refined:

“I suppose (writes Balthazar) that if you wished somehow to incorporate all I am telling you into your Justine manuscript now, you would find yourself with a curious sort of book—the story would be told, so to speak, in layers. Unwittingly I may have supplied you with a form, something out of the way! Not unlike Pursewarden’s idea

of a series of novels with ‘sliding panels’ as he called them. Or else, perhaps, like some medieval palimpsest where different sorts of truth are thrown down one upon the other, the one obliterating or perhaps supplementing another.” (*Balthazar* 183)

Darley had earlier echoed this sentiment in musing over the time he spent in Alexandria: “It seemed to me then to be somehow symbolic of the very reality we had shared—a palimpsest upon which each of us had left his or her individual traces, layer by layer” (*Balthazar* 21). Thus it is clear that Durrell was heavily influenced by Einsteinian developments in relativity, and this preoccupation with relativity and the unreliability of human perception forms a major part of Darley’s progress and motivation throughout the *Quartet*.

Durrell’s constant revision of the events portrayed and Darley’s continual attempts to organize them also helps establish the prevailing theme of the undependable role of memory for comprehending experiences in the three novels he narrates, i.e., *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Clea*, which are marked by their non-linear discontinuity. Darley recounts memories of events and descriptions of the city in a non-chronological order. He states, “What I most need to do is to record experiences, not in the order in which they took place—for that is history—but in the order in which they first became significant for me” (*Justine* 115), thereby signifying the primacy of mind over reality.

The role and process of memory are just as important as discovering the “truth” behind events. It is also important to note, as Dasenbrock does, that “all three of Darley’s novels in the *Quartet* begin with his invocations to memory” (518); Darley is positively preoccupied with memory: “I return link by link along the iron chains of memory to the city we inhabited so briefly together.... I had come so far away from it in order to understand it

all!” (*Justine* 15); “I had come here in order to rebuild this city in my brain” (*Justine* 15); “The city, half-imagined (yet wholly real) begins and ends in us, roots lodged in our memory” (*Balthazar* 13); “the city,... [a] memory, I told myself, which had been falsified by the desires and intuitions only as yet half-realised on paper. Alexandria, the capital of memory” (*Clea* 11). Kaczvinsky agrees that “Like most modernist novels, *Justine* is a predominantly a drama of the mind” (*Durrell’s Major Novels* 41) and, by extension, of modernism and the inner workings of human perception and memory as well. Many of the non-chronological episodes that Darley recounts exhibit a strange dream-like quality, and seem very much unconnected to any firmly established time or place. Many of these episodes, including descriptions of the city of Alexandria, seem to resemble impressions and vaguely remembered ambiance rather than real descriptions of a particular time and place. These memories are often highly romanticized and eroticized as well.

Durrell’s attention to relativity and the human conception of reality are merely two of numerous modernist aspects to his writing. The ability of art and writing to transcend and organize this complicated “Space-Time” and Darley’s progression as a writer and artist, from naïve ignorance to cautious and experienced perception, reflect a “major theme of the *Quartet*,” which is Darley’s “emerging vocation as a writer” (Dasenbrock 516), and so “*The Alexandria Quartet* works within an important convention of modernism in having a figure for the artist as the central figure” (Dasenbrock 517). Similarly, the central role played by Darley and the other writers in the story (i.e., Pursewarden and Keats) in comprehending and rationalizing the world around them demonstrates that “one major theme in the *Quartet* is art and its power to order life, art’s control over life” (Dasenbrock 519), which had been a major preoccupation of modernism. More specifically, through the course of the plot that

Darley must gradually come to terms with the events in which he has been a participant. His success in this endeavor depends upon his imagination, his ability not simply to piece together the many fragments of his past, but to reconcile and recreate them into a whole, coherent work—a complex but unified vision. (Kaczvinsky, *Durrell's Major Novels* 38)

This sentiment is reflected in Dasenbrock's article as well, where he states, "it is organized chaos that the writer must experience and confront for himself. And in this thematic presentation of the modern world as chaos, as fragments, Durrell is clearly working within the tradition of modernist fiction and poetry" (517).

Other critics, however, such as Eleanor Hutchens, argue that while there are some new forms in the *Quartet*, the bulk of this thematic content about art presents nothing new in Western literature:

The fact is that *The Alexandria Quartet* [italicization added], exotic though it is, and employing though it does most of the psychological, scientific, erotic, anthropological and mythological paraphernalia of modern literature, is written in the tradition of the English novel. Durrell, speaking though Pursewarden, may rage against that tradition ... but even as he fulminates he is in the critic-defying tradition of Fielding, Thackeray and Hardy. (60)

Hutchens identifies this character development as not necessarily a modernist feature, because

Darley's self-discovery is in a line reaching at least as far back as Tom Jones, and including the self-confrontations, however wildly different, of Emma Woodhouse, David Copperfield, young Arthur Pendennis, and Dorothea Brooke. The same

anxious, searching, mistake-making learner peers through them all, misjudging people and situations, suffering, revising, and finally seeing. (61)

But even Hutchens must concede that Durrell “has brought the apparatus of the modern symbolist [novel] into genuine, significant, and reasonably credible relation with a setting, a story, and a group of characters which are valid in themselves as fictional creations” (61).

Likewise, George P. Elliot maintains that “[m]ost of the elements of which it is composed are old-fashioned, tried-and-true, romantic” (118). Dasenbrock counters these arguments, however, positing that the *Quartet* is definitively different than previous literary representations of art and artists because

The modernist “portrait of the artist” distinguishes itself from its nineteenth-century predecessors by overlaying a complicated structure on top of the linear narrative of the experience of the artist-protagonist, and it does so to order the chaos, and more importantly, to show that it is art (and art alone) that can order the chaos of modern life. (518)

As Darley tries to come to terms with a perception of events that had initially devastated him, he doubts his ability to accurately portray the nature of the world and loses his capacity to write. He explains how his writing:

“has stopped. I don’t seem to be able to carry it any further for the moment. I somehow can’t match the truth to the illusions which are necessary to art without the gap showing—you know, like an unbasted seam. I was thinking about it at Karm, confronted again by Justine. Thinking how despite the factual falsities of the manuscript which I sent you the portrait was somehow poetically true—

psychographically if you like. But an artist who can't solder the elements falls short somewhere. I'm on the wrong track." (*Clea* 72)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, he has refused to take up his pen until he regains confidence in his ability to comprehend and order his life. Once again, a doubting or loss of perspective is coupled with loss of artistic ability. It is only through his relationship with and eventual separation from Clea that he can fully invest himself in art once again, and the *Quartet* ends with an assertion of unified vision and a return to authorship:

Yes, one day I found myself writing down with trembling fingers the four words (four letters! four faces!) with which every story-teller since the world began had staked his slender claim to the attention of his fellow-men. Words which presage simply the old story of an artist coming of age. I wrote: "Once upon a time ..."

And I felt as if the whole universe had given me a nudge! (*Clea* 282)

His feeling that he is being impelled by the universe to continue his art communicates a sense of cosmic approval and

Thus, the *Quartet* ends hopefully—with a vision of the renewed possibility of the artist's life. More significantly, it concludes with a move into ontological space in which transformations occur and new worlds are found and experienced. Memory and multiple consciousness have done their work: time has been recaptured. (Zahlan 97)

This is very much in line with the modernist precept of salvation from existential chaos through art. Thus, along with its treatment of reality and human perception, the *Quartet* further confirms its modernist disposition in its treatment of the power of art. Other modernist traits, such as disregard for cultural sexual conventions, also persist within the *Quartet* and "this tradition of taking sex seriously as a mode of transcending bourgeois norms is

obviously a shaping influence on *The Alexandria Quartet*" (Dasenbrock 520) and helps to define it as modernist.

While all of these traits correlate with Modernism, Zahlan opens up questions of literary classification, suggesting that "Durrell has embedded in this final volume of his modernist masterpiece signs of a new world to come" (97). It is with this assertion that we shall turn to the *Quartet's* postmodernist attributes.

## Chapter Two: Postmodernism in *The Alexandria Quartet*

Postmodernism, typically associated or identified with poststructuralism and Deconstruction, draws its inspirations from modernism. It developed during the 1950s and 60s and became perhaps the dominant form of literary criticism by the 1970s and 80s. Jacques Derrida's landmark lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," delivered at a symposium at John Hopkins University in 1966, is generally seen as marking the decline of modernism and the advent of postmodernist thought in the study of literature (Leitch 1816). Besides Derrida, other prominent postmodern literary critics include Roland Barthes, Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan.

### Postmodernist Literature

Before we continue with further analysis of Durrell's work, it will be beneficial to review the characteristics associated with postmodern thought and literature. Modernism and postmodernism share several basic features and both draw their inspiration from the same historical causes. But whereas modernism usually assumes the tone of a lament for the loss of center and comprehension in the contemporary world, postmodernism offers a different viewpoint and reaction to these conditions. It can best be described as a method or technique of navigating this difficult terrain rather than as an ideology of espoused truth. As Vipond urges, "[r]ather than seeing postmodernism as a break with or rebellion against modernism, it makes more sense to regard it as its logical extension" (55). Zahlan continues along this line of thought:

Politically, postmodernism is associated with the decline of liberal humanism and the discrediting of cultural master narratives. If modernists clung to the possibility that human beings could not only survive but prevail, postmodernist artists, thinkers, and

writers appear to have lost faith in the principles of both the Renaissance and Enlightenment. An underlying belief in the human mind correlates with modernism's focus on "problems of *knowing*"; diminished confidence in knowledge and knowability, on the other hand, doubtless contributes to that emphasis on "problems of *modes of beings*" that Hale and others deem postmodern. (89)

While modernists seek a solution to the problem of subjective points of view and seek to overcome the human inability to discover an "absolute truth," postmodernists question if it is "even possible that one can approach awareness of, let alone communicate, the totality of truth—since truth by its very nature is unstable" (Friedman 90). Through postmodernism, however, conflicting and problematic "dichotomies are not reconciled—for that is impossible and undesirable—but are brought into organic contact" (Friedman xvi). In contrast to the modernist belief that art will resuscitate human beings from the miasma of the uncertainty of existence, postmodernists have no such assumptions. For postmodernists, art is not a final salvation and there is no possibility of human "knowability," because "no one can know all of what really happened, including the author himself" (Elliot 121). Because of this, "[p]ostmodernist artists no longer stand clearly outside or above their creations. Postmodernist theory and practice permit deliberate violation of textual boundaries" (Zahlan 91).

As a consequence of its epistemological skepticism, postmodernism differs significantly from modernism. Vipond sums up many of the recognized postmodern trends: It is useful to think of postmodernism as both a period in literary history (the latter half of the twentieth century—1960 and beyond) and as a theoretical model that posits certain literary traits: metafiction with its emphasis on the imaginative process

of storytelling and the mixing of literary and critical concerns; often a baroque or neo-baroque style with accompanying linguistic artifice and self-consciousness; a recognition of the collaborative role of the reader as interpreter; a privileging of form as integral content; tolerance of paradox and ambiguity; an awareness of the ideological underpinnings of rhetorical “truth”; use of irony, parody and intertextuality as defamiliarization techniques; attention to destabilized reality; a dynamic subject/object relationship; and a sensitivity to context/historicity. (54-55)

Metafiction, whereby an author deliberately creates a work that consciously declares its status as fiction through the plot itself, often “experiments with form; the architectonics of the work are not mere scaffolding but substantive elements” (Vipond 63) within the story and are intentionally designed to inspire consideration of how fiction operates. Metafiction is further described as “the natural extension of the modern novel, which in its most experimental form seeks to explore the nature of consciousness. Metafiction also reveals consciousness at work as it renders the mind of the writer engaged in the act of composition, while considering the premises and theories upon which artistic practice is based” (Vipond 56). Based upon the “ineffability of experience,” which

is not new to the realm of aesthetics, or to writers generally ..., metafiction provides an arena in which this issue becomes a central subject of inquiry. The writer struggles to extract meaning from experience and in the process self-consciously reflects upon the meaning-making property of language, its limitations, and its capacity for communicating truth through the conventions of fiction. (Vipond 63)

Vipond continues, quoting the work of Waugh, to the effect that: “the essentially deconstructive methods of metafiction” consist “of parody and inversion, where parody, ‘as a

literary strategy, deliberately sets itself up to break norms that have become conventionalized” (61). Postmodernist literature, through these various tactics—metafiction, intertextuality, parody, pastiche, etc.—seeks to de-center the readers’ perceptions of the world and force them to question the function of the text that they are reading.

#### Postmodernism and *The Alexandria Quartet*

Though it evinces modernist qualities, Durrell’s *Quartet* also displays many of the postmodernist elements described above. Despite Darley’s basic quest to find the truth, there are prototypical instances of the postmodernist lack of “knowability.” Typically, until the final book, *Clea*, these postmodern features come in the form of counsel offered to Darley by other characters, especially Pursewarden and Balthazar. In fact, “Pursewarden’s musings may in fact anticipate the augmented postmodernist dimensions of Durrell’s later work” (Zahlan 94).

Many critics will agree that the *Quartet* exhibits postmodernist qualities. After enumerating her list of the attributes of postmodernist literature, Vipond assertively claims, “The *Quartet* exhibits all of these characteristics” (55) of postmodernism. Vipond also expands on Heisenberg’s theories, in particular, as a way to demonstrate the *Quartet*’s postmodern nature, and describes those concepts in relation to Durrell:

Durrell sees the subject-object relationship as having been modified by Heisenberg’s Principle of Indeterminacy, a theoretical position based upon the discovery that we cannot observe the course of nature without disturbing it and one which is common to a postmodernist perspective. It also calls into question causality and discredits the strict determinism, which had permeated much scientific thought until this time. (58)

Thus, “[j]ust as there is no final version of the truth about what happened in Alexandria, so there is no fixed progression of aesthetic concepts, no neat summary of aesthetics provided for the reader” (Vipond 61). Zahlan states that the books “cross the border into a postmodern space” (97) because

[u]ncertainties and interrogatives mark its text and world: Alexandrian characters gaze into mirrors in search of the meaning of their own reflection and of the glimpsed images of others. The precariously central consciousness of Darley grapples with what happens and why, as Durrell’s readers also struggle to know and to comprehend. (87)

Pauline Beard sees Durrell’s *Quartet* “taking its place as one of first postmodern English novels” (75) and goes on to say, “As Darley/Durrell finds his identity as a writer, the English novel finds a new shape in the seemingly fragmented but complexly integrated and unified structure of ‘three sides of space and one of time’” (77).

Metafiction, the deliberate effort to make the fictional nature of a work apparent, frequently draws connections between the life of the reader and the life of the characters, confusing the distinction between reality and fiction. This blurring of distinctions is an obvious feature of the *Quartet*. Vipond effectively sums up the presence of metafictional qualities in the *Quartet*:

As an aesthetic workbook and a metafictional text, the *Quartet* consists of three parts: 1) the fiction of Darley’s artistic apprenticeship and journey to selfhood, 2) the literary theory propounded by Darley, Balthazar, and other characters, but chiefly by Pursewarden, and 3) the literary criticism which works in two ways—where Darley

judges his own work by the standards of Pursewarden and where the reader judges Durrell's *Quartet* using the standards presented in the novel. (60)

Throughout the series, Durrell gives the impression that he is treating *himself* as a character within the confines of his own fictional universe. Indeed, various characters seem to embody specific traits of Durrell himself. The parallel between Darley and Durrell, who are both writers sharing the initials L.G.D., seems to be the most immediate and obvious connection between Durrell and his characters in this respect. The themes and developments of the plot also reflect this connection, most notably in the fact that the content of Durrell's first book of the series, *Justine*, which is presented in its entirety to the reader, also exists within the fictional environment of the plot of the succeeding books as Darley's much-alluded-to manuscript, also entitled *Justine*. Durrell and Darley, having written the same book—one in real life and one inside the fiction itself—are thus essentially equivalent. Furthermore there is the example of Durrell's real-life action of writing and publishing a multi-dimensional book about Darley trying to write and publish a multi-dimensional book. In this respect, Durrell and Darley are to be understood as counterparts, and this connection is considered obvious to most critics. Vipond characteristically links the two authors, saying that “[t]he *Quartet* represents Durrell's coming of age as a novelist as well as Darley's inasmuch as it was his first novel to receive both serious critical attention and popular success” (Vipond 56-57).

In addition, Pursewarden, the seemingly “mature” writer who assists Darley on his existential quest, can be understood to be a more enlightened and skilled writer and perhaps embodies Durrell-as-author of the *Quartet*. Vipond also notes that “Durrell often quotes Pursewarden during interviews and has referred to him as his favorite character” (60).

Furthermore, Pursewarden stands in contrast to Darley, who is a naïve neophyte throughout much of the series and whose progress towards establishing a confident authorial voice reflects Durrell's own journey as Durrell arrived at the point where he could compose a complete and realized novel (such as the *Quartet*). Dasenbrock notes how "in registering a difference in consciousness between that figure [the inexperienced Darley] and the more mature artist creating the work ..., the presence of the writer is therefore curiously doubled: he is both a character inside the work and the artificer outside the work creating it" (517).

Though Durrell seems to share much with Darley and Pursewarden as far as mentality and perspective, it is possibly the character of Mountolive, surprisingly, who most corresponds to Durrell biographically. Mountolive, like Durrell, serves as an officer in the British Foreign service in Egypt and shares Durrell's distaste of the position. Furthermore, and perhaps most revealingly, Mountolive's father is invested in the British colonial efforts in India, as was Durrell's, and both fathers are effectively absent. Durrell, left India at age thirteen and, similarly, Mountolive "had not seen his father since his departure from India on his eleventh birthday" (*Mountolive* 97). Also, Durrell's father died before Durrell reached adulthood, while Durrell was in England, while Mountolive's father retreated into an incommunicable oblivion: "he has become like someone condemned *in absentia* for a crime ... which could not be formulated. A friendly withdrawal into the world of Eastern scholarship on which his heart had been set for many years" (*Mountolive* 97). The effect of this absence on Mountolive and his mother undoubtedly affects Mountolive's early life and, as Freud suggests, may even distort his sexual development, leading to his obsession with Leila, who is a generation older than he is. Thus, Mountolive's background is perhaps a

sorrowful or resentful representation of Durrell's own Oedipally-awkward upbringing, and the sting of his multiple divorces.

Durrell, however, denies any complete representation of himself in any specific character. In an interview with Kenneth Young, who inquires if these similarities mean "that Darley is [Durrell's] mouthpiece" (45), Durrell responds "[i]t's not autobiographical in that sense" (45). Huw Wheldon also pursues this line of questioning, asking to what extent the characters of Pursewarden and Darley draw upon Durrell's personality—if they have "got anything to do with Durrell?" Durrell answers, "[e]verything [in the *Quartet*] has to do with Durrell. I mean, I'm Justine as well as Mountolive. But in just what proportions it's impossible to say" (57).

Though there may not be a definitive connection between Durrell and Darley, the evolution of the writer that the reader follows through the character of Darley presumably corresponds to the one taken by Durrell as he prepared to write Darley's very story. The changes that Darley undergoes duplicate the progress of Durrell himself. Thus, in *Clea*, the final book, when Pursewarden suggests that Darley "might try a four-card trick in the form of a novel; passing a common axis through four stories, say, and dedicating each to one of the four winds of heaven" in order to create a "continuum, forsooth, embodying not a *temps retrouvé* but a *temps délivré*" (*Clea* 135-36), he is in fact reiterating the guidelines declared by Durrell in his introductory note to *Balthazar*, namely, to write a multi-part story comprising "Three sides of space and one of time" (*Balthazar* 9). Thus, at the end of the narrative, Darley has arrived at the point from which Durrell had begun when he set out to write the *Quartet*.

In addition to the metafictional properties of the books, the presence of intertextuality within the *Quartet* also represents another trend characteristic of postmodernist literature. The concept of intertextuality is outlined by Roland Barthes in his 1971 essay “From Work to Text,” where he describes the intertextuality of a “text” as a work “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages . . . , antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” (Barthes 1473), or, in other words, a text which firmly and openly establishes itself in relation to other texts through these connections. The previous example of metafiction above, where *Justine* is both a book and at the same time a book within the book, can also be interpreted as exemplifying the intertextuality of the *Quartet*. Additionally, Vipond establishes intertextuality within the *Quartet* by explaining that “Durrell’s concern with the intra- and intertextuality is readily apparent through the structure of the novel. . . . [in] the presence of numerous literary allusions, and the reappearance of several *Quartet* characters in *The Avignon Quartet*” (62). Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* exhibits these elements of intertextuality not only with its topic and theme, which are often compared and associated with other authors of this period, such as D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, who wrote about similar matters, but in his direct inclusion of real-life literary figures into the action of his story. Constantine P. Kavafy, the Greek Alexandrian poet whose work drew attention to the Hellenistic and Levantine history of the city is the most notable example. He was thereafter recognized as a dominant persona and principal bard of the city. While Kavafy never physically appears in the *Quartet*, he interacts with the characters outside of the immediate plot and is frequently mentioned as a friend and associate of the characters, especially Balthazar. Darley and the other writers of the novel draw inspiration from Kavafy’s literary reputation and he is well-respected by Darley’s peer

group; Darley even affectionately refers to him as “the old man” and “the old poet of the city” (*Justine* 14, 15).

Another significant postmodernist trait evident in *The Alexandria Quartet* is the element of pastiche. Frederic Jameson, in his essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” claims that “one of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today is pastiche” (1962) and further describes pastiche as “the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles” (1962). Jameson elaborates on this concept:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor: pastiche is to parody what the curious thing, the modern practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the stable and comic ironies of, say, the eighteenth century. (1963)

This mimicry of other techniques and blending of stylistic genres is present throughout the *Quartet*; due to shifts in perspective, narration, and format, the *Quartet* is alternately a memoir, a romance, a thriller, a murder mystery, an epistolary novel, a psychological portrait, and a bildungsroman, and the series is punctuated with anecdotes and vignettes about the characters of Alexandria which are ambiguously relevant. Elements of non-fictional forms, such as literary critique, philosophical treatise, intellectual musings, history, cultural ethnography and geographical description, also appear throughout the books.

*Mountolive* is perhaps the most obvious instance of pastiche, as in this volume the series abruptly though temporarily adopts features of suspense, criminal mystery, political intrigue, and conspiratorial drama. The series also highlights the often wistful reminiscences of Durrell as he looks back on his life in wartime Egypt, and also suggests the “nostalgia mode” (Jameson 1965) of cultural expression in which “we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 1967). It is the combination of these various and overlapping stylistic forms, as well as the nostalgic mode of the *Quartet*, which also helps establish the work as postmodern.

### Darley’s Evolution

If one is to understand the *Quartet* as outlining a postmodern conception of life and an emotional development toward a postmodern attitude, an examination of Darley’s personal experiences and development is crucial. We are given very little description of Darley in the first few books, and it is only in *Mountolive* and *Clea* that we get any real third-person physical and psychological descriptions of him. If he is seen as effete and pedantic, he is, curiously, also viewed as being rather naïve, childlike and unremarkable in the minds of his associates. His affair with the cosmopolitan and glamorous Justine consequently seems inexplicable. Pursewarden gives his first impressions of Darley in *Mountolive*:

This of course is Darley, the vaguely amiable bespectacled creature who inhabits Pombal’s box-room at certain times. He teaches for a living and writes novels. He has that nice round babyish back to the head which one sees in cultural types; slight stoop, fair hair, and the shyness that goes with Great Emotions imperfectly kept under control. A fellow-romantic quotha! Looked at hard, he starts to stammer. But he’s a

good fellow, gentle and resigned.... I confess that he seems unlikely material for someone as dashing as Nessim's wife to work upon. Can it be benevolence in her, or simply a perverse taste for innocence? There is a small mystery here.... [W]hat she sees in Darley I cannot credit. The poor fellow flutters on a slab like a skate at her approach.... Darley at any rate must have some appeal because he has also got himself regally entangled with a rather nice little cabaret dancer called Melissa. You would never think, to look at him, that he was capable of running a tandem, so little self-possession does he appear to have. A victim of his own fine sentiment? He wrings his hands and his spectacles steam up, when he mentions either name. Poor Darley! (*Mountolive* 111-12)

Pursewarden, however, does admit, "I like him [Darley]. I like the way he sits on his hands with excitement when he discusses art, which he insists on doing with Yours Truly.... Darley is in fine voice this eve, and I listen to him with grudging pleasure.... He really *is* a good chap, and a sensitive one" (*Mountolive* 114-15). Thus, while he is viewed as good natured and upbeat, he is often pitied or condescended to by others for his obtuseness. Even in the midst of manipulating him as a part of his political conspiracy, Nessim remarks to Justine "I am sorry for him,... [H]e is so good" (*Mountolive* 209). Over time, however, these impressions will be altered as Darley matures and advances in his understanding of his experiences and of the idea of "truth" in general.

Darley is characterized by an incessant need to order his thoughts and interpret the events around him. Though it is intensified by his receipt of Balthazar's emendations to his manuscript, this effort to make sense of the reality of his experience is not completely a result of his looking back on his time in Alexandria, but is an inherent character trait in Darley.

This desire to find order and understand his surroundings is partially why Darley decides to join Balthazar's Cabbala group in Alexandria, because Balthazar

spoke, I remember, of the *fons signatus* of the psyche and of its ability to perceive an inherent order in the universe which underlay the apparent formlessness and arbitrariness of phenomena. Disciplines of mind could enable people to penetrate behind the veil of reality and to discover harmonies in space and time which corresponded to the inner structure of their own psyches. (*Justine* 100)

The moment this perceptual doubt arrives, becomes inexorable, and drives him from his complacency is his reception from Balthazar of “the immense bundle of manuscript that I had sent him—papers now seared and starred by a massive interlinear of sentences, paragraphs, and question-marks” (*Balthazar* 18) or “the great interlinear to *Justine*—as I have called it. It was cross-hatched, crabbed, starred with questions and answers in different-coloured inks, in typescript” (*Balthazar* 21). No longer can Darley trust the validity of his memory and experience as a means toward “truth.” This is due to the fact that in the interlinear, Balthazar openly questions Darley's methods and reveals his faulty assumptions:

“I have debated in myself very long about telling you some of the things I have put down here. At times it seemed a folly and an impertinence. After all, your concern—was it with *us* as *real* people or as ‘characters’? I didn't know. I still don't. These pages may lose me your friendship without adding anything to the sum of your knowledge. You have been painting the city, touch by touch, upon a curved surface—was your object poetry or fact? If the latter, then there are things which you have a right to know.” (*Balthazar* 19)

Chief among the disturbing developments is another conception of his relationship with Justine:

The list he had headed “Some Fallacies and Misapprehensions” where he said coldly: “Number 4. That Justine ‘loved’ you. She ‘loved,’ if anyone, Pursewarden. ‘What does that mean’? She was forced to use you as decoy in order to protect him from the jealousy of Nessim whom she had married. Pursewarden did not care for her at all—supreme logic of love!” (*Balthazar* 22)

Upon the introduction of the interlinear and this revelation, a bewildered Darley is epistemologically devastated and he decides to dedicate himself to the goal of seeking out the “reality” of his experience as a solemn and quasi-religious quest. He is compelled to seek answers by a

ferment, a desire to study his interlinear, to revise—not my book (that has never been of the slightest importance to me for it has never been published), but my view of the city and its inhabitants. For my own personal Alexandria had become, in all this loneliness, as dear as a philosophy of introspection, almost a monomania. (*Balthazar* 19)

He becomes obsessed with this task and, “despondent at his failure to meditate illusion and reality,” Darley comes “to inhabit a world that Roger Bowen aptly terms a place of ‘epistemological desperation’” (Zahlan 164). As a consequence of this new information, Darley believes that he

must, it seems, try to see a new Justine, a new Pursewarden, a new Clea.... I mean that I must try and strip the opaque membrane which stands between me and the

reality of their actions—and which I suppose is composed of my own limitations of vision and temperament. (*Balthazar* 28)

Darley takes heed of Balthazar's challenge to fit the pieces of the story together.

So much I have reconstructed from the labyrinth of notes which Balthazar has left me. "To imagine is not necessarily to invent," he says elsewhere, "nor dares one make a claim for omniscience in interpreting people's actions. One assumes that they have grown out of their feeling as leaves grow out of a branch. But can one work backwards, deducing the one from the other? Perhaps a writer could if he were sufficiently brave to cement these apparent gaps in our actions with interpretation of his own to bind them together?" (*Balthazar* 98)

But by the end of *Balthazar*, Darley questions whether it is enough to supplement his understanding, or if he must fully replace it:

So much has been revealed to me by all this that I feel myself to be, as it were, standing upon the threshold of a new book—a new Alexandria. The old evocative outlines which I drew, intertwining them with the names of the city's exemplars ... were subjective ones. I had made the image my own jealous personal property, and it was true yet only within the limitations of a truth only partially perceived. Now, in the light of all these new treasures—for truth, though merciless as love, must always be a treasure—what should I do? Extend the frontiers of original truth, filling in with the rubble of this new knowledge the foundations upon which to build a new Alexandria? Or should the dispositions remain the same, the characters remain the same—and is it only truth *itself* which has changed in contradiction? (*Balthazar* 184)

Distrusting his previous interpretation, yet believing in the validity of Balthazar's privileged view, and with the intention of incorporating the new "truth" of the interlinear, Darley laboriously rewrites his original manuscript;

I have begun to copy it whole—the whole of it—slowly and painfully; not only to understand more clearly wherein it differs from my own version of reality, but also to catch a glimpse of it as a separate entity—as a manuscript existing in its own right, as the determined view of another eye upon events which I interpreted in my own way, because that was the way in which I lived them—or they lived me. (*Balthazar* 185-86)

Darley continues: "And so, slowly, reluctantly, I have been driven back to my starting-point, like a man who at the end of a tremendous journey is told that he has been sleepwalking" (*Balthazar* 23).

In his search for the reality behind his experiences, he is aided by the acquired wisdom of Balthazar and Pursewarden (whose postmodern beliefs have been previously outlined). Darley wonders, "Must I now work my own experiences in order to come to the heart of the truth?" (*Balthazar* 186) and he recalls the postmodern musings of his friends; "'Truth has no heart,' writes Pursewarden" (*Balthazar* 186) and "'Truth,' said Balthazar to me once, blowing his nose in an old tennis sock, 'Truth is what contradicts itself most in time'" (*Balthazar* 23). Balthazar also relates to Darley Pursewarden's disdain for the kind of staid, intellectual and academic approach that Darley might have employed: "[Pursewarden] said of this 'Truth is a matter of direct apprehension—you can't climb a ladder of mental concepts to it'" (*Balthazar* 142).

By the end of *Balthazar*, Darley begins to grow with his reconsideration of his life in Egypt, though he does not yet see with a new, postmodern attitude. He muses,

From the vantage-point of this island I can see it all in its doubleness, in the intercalation of fact and fancy, with new eyes; and re-reading, reworking reality in light of all I now know, I am surprised to find that my feelings themselves have changed, have grown, have deepened even. Perhaps then the destruction of my private Alexandria was necessary;... perhaps buried in all this there lies the germ and substance of a truth—time’s usufruct—which, if I can accommodate it, will carry me a little further in what is really a search for my proper self. We shall see. (*Balthazar* 226)

The reader is granted a respite from Darley’s philosophical pursuit in the next book, *Mountolive*, before this track is once again picked up in *Clea*, where Darley’s quest has foundered and he has lost all confidence in his ability to discover any kind of truth. But “in *Clea*, by contrast,” Zahlan claims, “Darley has become a narrator who declares himself unable to narrate” (86), an inherent contradiction and a truly postmodern proposition. Darley broods on his failure:

I had set out once to store, to codify, to annotate the past before it was utterly lost—that at least was a task I had set myself. I had failed in it (perhaps it was hopeless?)—for no sooner had I embalmed one aspect of it in words than the intrusion of new knowledge disrupted the frame of reference, everything flew asunder, only to reassemble again in unforeseen, unpredictable patterns....

“To re-work reality” I had written somewhere; temeritous, presumptuous words indeed—for it is reality which words and rewords us on its slow wheel. Yet if I

had been enriched by the experience of this island interlude, it was perhaps because of this total failure to record the inner truth of the city. I had now come face to face with the nature of time, that ailment of the human psyche. (*Clea* 12)

He decides that he must go back to Alexandria and confront the figures of his past before he can progress:

Indeed, though I loved it so much, I was powerless to stay; the city which I now knew I hated held out something different for me—a new evaluation of the experience which had marked me. I must return to it once more in order to be able to leave it forever, to shed it. If I have spoken of time it is because the writer I was becoming was learning at last to inhabit those deserted spaces which time misses—beginning to live between the ticks of the clock, so to speak. (*Clea* 14)

Upon his return, Darley begins to mature through his confronting of Justine and Nessim, reestablishing ties with Balthazar, finding a new understanding of Pursewarden, and discovering new love with Clea. He is primarily inspired, however, when he reads Pursewarden's unpublished manuscript, called "My Conversations with Brother Ass" (Darley being the titular "ass"), which is a fictional account wherein Pursewarden castigates and criticizes Darley and his flawed approach to life. Pursewarden lectures about his own outlook:

Brother Ass, the so-called act of living is really an act of the imagination. The world—which we always visualize as "the outside" World—yields only to self-exploration. Faced by this cruel, yet necessary paradox, the poet finds himself growing gills and a tail, the better to swim against the currents of unenlightenment. What appears to be perhaps an arbitrary act of violence is precisely the opposite, for

by reversing process in this way, he unites the rushing, heedless stream of humanity to the still, tranquil, motionless, odourless, tasteless plenum from which its own motive essence is derived.... Whoever makes this enigmatic leap into the heraldic reality of the poetic life discovers that truth has its own built-in morality! There is no need to wear a truss any longer. Inside the penumbra of this sort of truth morality can be disregarded because it is a *donnée*, a part of the thing, and not simply a brake, an inhibition. It is there to be lived out and not thought out! Ah, Brother Ass, this will seem a far cry to the “purely literary” preoccupations which beset you; yet unless you tackle this corner of the field with your sickle you will never reap the harvest in yourself, and so fulfil your true function here below. (*Clea* 153-54)

Pursewarden continues:

But how? you ask me plaintively. And truly here you have me by the short hairs, for the thing operates differently with each one of us. I am only suggesting that you have not become desperate enough, determined enough. Somewhere at the heart of things you are still lazy of spirit. But then, why struggle? If it is to happen to you it will happen of its own accord. You may be quite right to hang about like this, waiting. I was too proud. I felt I must take it by the horns, this vital question of birthright. For me it was grounded in an act of will. So for people like me I would say: “Force the lock, batter down the door. Outface, defy, disprove the Oracle in order to become the poet, the darer!”

But I am aware the test may come under any guise, perhaps even in the physical world by a blow between the eyes or a few lines scribbled in pencil on the back of an envelope left in a café. The heraldic reality can strike from any point,

above or below: it is not particular. But without it the enigma will remain. You may travel round the world and colonise the ends of the earth with your lines and yet never hear the singing yourself. (*Clea* 154)

Darley, who has by this time come to recognize his own shortcomings and earlier faults, reacts to this denigrating critique pensively and tolerantly. He takes no offence and even agrees with most of Pursewarden's assessment:

It seemed to me that his observation was not lacking in accuracy and whatever whips and scorpions he had applied to my image were well justified. It is, moreover, useful as well as salutary to see oneself portrayed with such blistering candour by someone one admires! Yet I was a trifle surprised not to feel even a little wounded in my self-esteem. (*Clea* 155)

At this point, it is clear that Darley has begun to gradually acquire a new confidence and his outlook has started to change. He avows that "one speaks of change, but in truth there was nothing abrupt, coherent, definitive about it. No, the metamorphosis came about with comparative slowness. It waxed and waned like a tide, now advancing now retreating" (*Clea* 235). As a part of this evolution, he finds he has now adopted what can be described as a postmodern perspective of the world:

There *was* no answer to the questions I had raised in very truth. He had been quite right. Blind as a mole, I had been digging about in the graveyard of relative fact piling up data, more information, and completely missing the mythopoeic reference which underlies facts. I had called this searching for truth! Nor was there any way in which I might be instructed in the matter—save by the ironies I had found so wounding. For now I realised that his irony was really tenderness turned out like a glove! And seeing

Pursewarden thus, for the first time, I saw that through his work he had been seeking for the very tenderness of logic itself, of the Way Things Are; not the logic of syllogism or the tide-marks of emotions, but the real essence of fact-finding, the *naked* truth, the *Inkling* ... the whole pointless Joke. (*Clea* 176)

And he continues: “I began to see too that the real ‘fiction’ lay neither in Arnauti’s pages nor Pursewarden’s—nor even my own. It was life itself that was fiction—we were all saying it in our different ways, each understanding it according to his nature and gift.” (*Clea* 77). Thus, he realizes, there is no privileged viewpoint and the truth he had sought was inherently unattainable. Confronted by this realization, he reacts not with the despair and fatigue of modernism, but rather with postmodernist acceptance. In this way, he is also able to find a perfect match in Clea, who holds similar ideas and declares, “Let us go to bed together and ignore the loutish reality of the world” (*Clea* 86).

Darley’s psychological development is mirrored in his physicality. No longer seen as the timid and unimposing scholar, Darley is frequently reminded by others of his change in appearance. He describes how “Nessim had peered at me sharply and said: ‘Darley, you have changed very much,’ though whether in reproof or commendation I could not tell” (*Clea* 32). Clea, upon seeing him for the first time in years, comments, “Darley, how you’ve changed. You don’t stoop any more! And your spectacles....” (*Clea* 77). He tells her that “‘I broke them by accident ages ago, and then found I didn’t really need them’” (*Clea* 77). No longer restrained by his provincial myopia, Darley has abandoned his spectacles, the representation of an impotent intellectualism, as his own philosophical vision and perspective has improved. Additionally, he has improved in physical strength and coordination: “Clea had always been

a fine swimmer, I a poor one. But thanks to my period spent in Greece I too was now expert, more than a match for her” (*Clea* 228).

Darley’s growth as an author and his insight into the art of writing are similarly augmented as he prospers in his postmodern perspective. When Pursewarden was asked, ““What is the object of writing?” His answer was this: ‘The object of writing is to grow a personality which in the end enables man to transcend art’” (*Balthazar* 141). If art is the transcendent achievement of modernism, in *Clea* it is not the end result or solution to the problems of life. For Darley, being an author is not about writing, but about understanding and interacting with the world. He comes to appreciate this in part through a meeting with Keats, a journalist, who, like Darley, had previously been small, naïve and humorless, but also has since matured physically and mentally. Darley describes his shock at meeting Keats again after his long absence:

A Greek god! I was so surprised at the transformation that I sat down abruptly on the lavatory and studied this ... apparition. Keats was burnt black and his hair had bleached white. Though slimmer, he looked in first-class physical condition. The brown skin and ashen hair had made his twinkling eyes bluer than ever. He bore absolutely *no resemblance* to my memories of him. (*Clea* 179)

Excitedly Keats shares with Darley his most profound development:

He leaned forward and said in a whisper, his eyes twinkling, “I’ve become a writer at last!”...

“What have you written?” I asked.

“Nothing” he said, smiling. “Not a word as yet. It’s all up here.” He pointed a brown finger at his temple. “But now at least I know it is. Somehow whether I do or don’t

actually write isn't important—it isn't, if you like, the whole point about becoming a writer at all, as I used to think.” (*Clea* 181)

Edified by this, Darley's progression continues as he pronounces an understanding of the universe and his place in it with newfound self-assurance:

It was now only that I began to see how mysteriously the configuration of my own life had taken its shape from the properties of those elements which lie outside the relative life—in the kingdom which Pursewarden calls the “heraldic universe.” We were three writers, I now saw, confined to a mythical city from which we were to draw our nourishment, in which we were to confirm our gifts. Arnauti, Pursewarden, Darley—like Past, Present and Future tense! (*Clea* 177)

As the novel concludes, Darley has overcome the writer's block and creative impotence that has plagued him for much of the *Quartet*. He proclaims, “And I felt as if the whole universe had given me a nudge!” (*Clea* 282). Darley's evolution from naïve scribe to enlightened author is complete. He has progressed from his initial naïve assumptions and obliviousness to his desperate lament at his inability to comprehend reality to finally reach a confident and assertive state of harmony.

### Objectivity and *Mountolive*

Given that both modernism and postmodernism highlight the problems of human subjectivity and reject privileged points of view, one of the most curious elements of the *Quartet* is the sudden shift in narrative style from the first two books, which are told with a very intimate, first-person narration, to the third book, *Mountolive*, which, without direct explanation, changes to omniscient third-person point-of-view. The final volume, *Clea*, picks up more immediately from *Justine* and *Balthazar* and is much closer to them in style.

*Mountolive* thus remains a curious aberration; in it, Darley, the narrator of the rest of the *Quartet*, recedes into the background and is not a central character; in fact, he barely appears in the novel at all.

Though the information presented in *Mountolive* is directly relevant to Darley (and his previous narrations), and the reader's impression of him and the events surrounding him is irrevocably altered, it is also unclear to what extent Darley is aware of the events revealed in *Mountolive*. While this volume of the *Quartet* is told (as Zahlan notes) in "a disembodied and so plausibly omniscient third-person voice" (86), this trait does "not confer immunity from later contradiction or reinterpretation" (Zahlan 86). Similarly Alan Warren Friedman cautions, "Don't read *Mountolive* as omniscient, but rather as a third-hand point of view with its own flaws and prejudices" (112). Thus, "it would be a mistake to equate Durrell's use of 'subjective' with 'false' or 'inaccurate' and 'objective' with 'true' or 'accurate,' and consequently to read *Mountolive* as the 'key' to the *Quartet* in the sense that a legend specifically and unequivocally explains all the symbolic shorthand contained in a map" (Friedman 112). According to Vipond, *Mountolive* is presented in this way because, "in the same way that the reader of postmodern fiction draws upon knowledge of the realistic tradition in order to appreciate fully a postmodern text, the reader of the *Quartet* relies upon *Mountolive* as the touchstone which illuminates the significance of the other three novels" (60). Friedman suggests that *Mountolive* exists perhaps to demonstrate that "[i]t is not Darley, then, but the superficial 'facts of reality' which become the most unreliable narrator of Durrell's *Quartet* and thereby tend to negate only themselves" (Friedman 176-77). Thus, *Mountolive* functions, not merely to give an objective account, but rather to demonstrate the

existence of other accounts, and to demonstrate that even privileged, “objective” accounts contain elements which are later overturned and modified.

Additionally, it is also interesting to note that *Mountolive* forms the third spatial aspect of Durrell’s “Space-Time” continuum and it is told from a third-person perspective. Similarly and curiously, the first three novels, *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Mountolive*, each representing a dimension of space, might also be understood to present information in the first-, second- and third-person, respectively. *Justine* serves as the personal artifact of a single mind recollecting the past; *Balthazar* introduces that first-person perspective to another perspective present alongside it, i.e. the interlinear, which confronts and accompanies the original first-person experience. *Mountolive* concerns a third-person perspective which is almost entirely separated from the immediate perspective of the original first-person narrator.

#### The Strange Case of Pursewarden’s Suicide

The events surrounding Pursewarden’s suicide, and Darley’s understanding of it, are another central example of the postmodern qualities present within the *Quartet*. It is possible to accept, as Frank Kermode does, the final explanation of the event in *Clea*. Kermode asserts that, with regards to the confusion and uncertainty of the various events in the story, “The most obvious lacunae are filled by *Clea*; for example, the suicide of the novelist Pursewarden is fully accounted for” (114). But others, however, disagree with Kermode; Steinberg rebuts, “Pursewarden’s suicide is never fully accounted for, because, as is the case with so much else in the *Quartet*, human motivations are never that simple” (Steinberg 211), nor, it would seem, is any human understanding of the world really that definitive. Demonstrating a correlation with postmodernism, the multiple presentations of this event insinuate the impracticability of human interpretation.

As more information is revealed throughout the *Quartet*, Darley's understanding of "Pursewarden's solitary act of cowardice" (*Mountolive* 214) is continually modified and "this tragic event constantly changes its shape as we see it from the point of view of different characters and as the characters themselves learn more about it" (Bode 141) and this modification of motive and circumstance is a postmodernist feature of the text. As Dobrée claims, in postmodern literature, "the explanation of an event varies. Take, for instance, Pursewarden's suicide, incomprehensible in *Justine*, in *Mountolive* the result of an irresolvable conflict between duty and affection..., but seen in *Clea* as a willing self-sacrifice for the sister whom he incestuously loved" (154).

The death of Pursewarden, who had killed himself during the events of Darley's original tenure in Alexandria, is variously described in the first three novels of the *Quartet*. In *Justine*, Darley's encounter with him the night of his suicide is described, but there is very little explanation proffered as to Pursewarden's motivation for taking his own life. Darley ostensibly assumes that it has something to do with Pursewarden's incapability of showing affection:

What then, could have been his motive in leaving me five hundred pounds with the sole stipulation that I should spend them with Melissa? I thought perhaps that he may have loved her himself but after deep reflection I have come to the conclusion that he loved, not her, but my love for her. Of all my qualities he envied me only my capacity to respond warmly to endearments whose value he recognized, perhaps even desired, but from which he would be forever barred by self-disgust. (*Justine* 115-16)

Thus only brief and trivial attention is given to the suicide in Darley's initial memories and he pays it little mind. The events of *Balthazar*, and the new revelations of the interlinear, add

more information about the circumstances, but still offer few explanations. It is made known that Balthazar had arrived at Pursewarden's apartment, along with Nessim and Justine, shortly after his death and had attempted to revive him. Balthazar sees the events in the context of Pursewarden's affair with Justine, who is hysterically anguished at Pursewarden's death. Even with this new knowledge, the event remains impermeable to discernment and Justine "found this act as completely mysterious, as completely unforeseen as I myself did" (*Balthazar* 147). Darley continues: "Of all things, his suicide has remained for me an extraordinary and quite inexplicable freak. Whatever stresses and strains he may have been subjected to I cannot quite bring myself to believe it ... yet I should have said this was surprisingly out of character" (*Balthazar* 141). It is only in *Mountolive* that any kind of reason is ascribed to the suicide. Here it is separated completely from the context of the love triangle of Pursewarden-Justine-Darley, and his suicide is revealed to be a matter of torn loyalties and personal dishonor. Here it appears that the primary motivation is because Pursewarden, employed as a British agent by the Foreign Office, learns that his friend Nessim is actively subverting the colonial government. He is thus conflicted by his friendship and affection for Nessim on one hand, and his allegiance to his country and Mountolive on the other, as he explains in his suicide note to the latter:

But I simply am not equal to facing the simpler moral implications of this discovery. I know what has to done about it. But the man happens to be my friend. Therefore ... a *quietus*. (This will solve other deeper problems too.) Ach! What a boring world we have created around us. The slime of plot and counter-plot. I have just recognized that is not my world at all. (*Mountolive* 184)

Pursewarden's disgust at the deceitful and mendacious elements of his political appointment, and the world in general, are also made apparent, as Balthazar comments, "It annoys me, his suicide. I feel I had somehow missed the point. I take it to have been an expression of contempt for the world, contempt for the conduct of the world" (*Mountolive* 234).

Pursewarden's suicide is thus accounted for, even if the account is not entirely convincing for many, and even Mountolive is compelled to exclaim, "Utter folly! Nobody kills himself of an official reason!" (*Mountolive* 185). In *Clea*, another complication is exposed: it is suggested that Pursewarden killed himself because of a long-term incestuous affair with his sister, Liza. Liza relates her relationship with Pursewarden to Darley:

"We were lovers, you know. That is really the meaning of his story and mine. He tried to break away. His marriage foundered on this question. It was perhaps dishonest of him not to have told her the truth before he married her. Things fall out strangely. For many years we enjoyed a perfect happiness, he and I. That it ended tragically is nobody's fault I suppose. He could not free himself from my inside hold on him, though he tried and struggled. I could not free myself from him, though truthfully I never wished to until ... until the day arrived which he had predicted so many years before when the man he always called 'the dark stranger' arrived. He saw him so clearly when he gazed into the fire. It was David Mountolive. For a little while I didn't tell him that I had fallen in love, the fated love. (David would not let me. The only person we told was Nessim's mother. David asked my permission.) But my brother knew it quite unerringly and wrote after a long silence asking me if the stranger had come. When he got my letter he seemed suddenly to realize that our relationship might be endangered or crushed in the way his had been with his wife—

not by anything we did, no, but by the simple fact of my existence. So he committed suicide.” (*Clea* 170-71)

She divulges to Darley Pursewarden’s final letter, which reads in part,

“I must really abandon you, really remove myself from the scene in a manner which would permit no further equivocation in our vacillating hearts. Yes, I had anticipated the joy, but not that it would bring with it such a clear representation of death. This was a huge novelty! Yet it is the completest gift I can offer you as a wedding present.” (*Clea* 171)

This sequence in which the facades of the event are unraveled has a profound impact on Darley, who had never suspected that such complexity could underlie an event to which he had previously given little thought:

In this strange and frightening experience I caught a glimpse, for a moment, of the true Pursewarden—the man who had always eluded me. I thought with shame of the shabby passages in the Justine manuscript which I had devoted to him—to my image of him! I had, out of envy or unconscious jealousy, invented a Pursewarden to criticize. In everything I had written there I had accused him only of my own weaknesses—even down to the completely erroneous estimates of qualities like social inferiorities which were mine, had never been his. It was only now, tracing out the lines written by that rapid unfaltering pen, that I realised that poetic or transcendental knowledge somehow cancels out purely relative knowledge, and that his black humours were simply ironies due to this enigmatic knowledge whose field of operation was above, beyond that of the relative fact-finding sort. (*Clea* 176)

This tactic of revelation and then counter-revelation in Durrell's *Quartet* unnerves and de-centers the reader and induces skepticism about whether, in fact, there is any "final truth" beyond Pursewarden's suicide at all.

#### The Alexandrian Shift: Modernism to Postmodernism in Durrell's Work

Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* is understood to embody a transitional work in the literary ideologies of the twentieth century, as modernism gradually developed into postmodernism. Because "the historical and social conditions that contributed to the development and vitality of the modernist movement had, by the time Durrell begins writing, given way to a different aesthetic, at least insofar as English Literature is concerned" (Papayanis 41), Durrell stood at the edge of one literary institution, and he reached out for a newer one, which came to be called postmodernism. As the *Quartet* ends, Darley regains his ability to write, and according to Zahlan, by "concluding the *Quartet* with a modernist affirmation of the artistic vocation, Durrell at the same time embeds in his text traces of waning faith in the 'knowability' of reality and the power of art" (84) which are characteristic of postmodernism. As Durrell's work itself seems to recall Pursewarden's concept of a novel with "sliding panels" or, as previously described in Balthazar's terms, of "a medieval palimpsest where different sorts of truth are thrown down one upon the other, the one obliterating or perhaps supplementing another" (Balthazar 183), the *Quartet* becomes strikingly postmodern in form. Vipond explains that, "[w]ritten in the late fifties, the *Quartet*, in true postmodernist form, reflects the modernist tradition while undermining it" (Vipond 55). Because of this, Zahlan notes that "commentators on twentieth-century literature generally agree that Lawrence Durrell's work partakes of impulses of vision and technique that have been labeled postmodernist as well as those associated with Modernism" (85) and

Vipond proudly and firmly declares that “[b]y virtue of its form, content, and fortuitously transitional position in literary history, Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* provides the narrative missing link to postmodernism” (54). She elaborates:

Durrell reaches back to Modernism’s preoccupation with consciousness explored through experimentation with point of view and the application of the ideas of the time, i.e., relativity, indeterminacy, and Freudian psychoanalysis. Simultaneously, he moves forward as he investigates the artistic process in anticipation of metafiction, which has come to dominate postmodern fiction. (Vipond 65)

Steinberg agrees with these assessments, observing, “Durrell’s *Alexandria*, that microcosm of the social, political, psychological, and the scientific worlds in the middle of the twentieth century, is indeed real. The problem, in a postmodern world, is to know what ‘real’ or (‘less unreal’) means. And of course one point of the *Quartet* is that we can never finally answer that question” (203).

*The Alexandria Quartet* also marks a similar shift in Durrell’s own oeuvre. Zahlan positions the *Quartet*, and *Clea* in particular, as evidence of “Durrell’s turn away at this moment for later works” (87). According to Zahlan, “*Clea*, published in 1960, can be seen to dramatize and to embody a conversion from Modernism to postmodernism” (85). She specifies this claim: “in his literary journey from *Alexandria* to *Avignon*, sites of his two monumental novel sequences, Lawrence Durrell enacts the century’s shift from modernism to postmodernism” (85). This is because “the text’s concerns also undergo transformations: Epistemological explorations of shifting perception and relative truth give way to the ontological interplay of realities that dominate Durrell’s later fiction” (92-93). Zahlan explains that “the narrator’s loss of faith in the possibility of recapturing past time through

memory leads to acceptance of reality as unknowable—a philosophical position that makes way for the engagement with multiple realities that marks Durrell’s later fiction” (86) and thus shows how the *Quartet* hints at “signs of radical experiments to come” (92). These later works, which were also multi-part series, *The Revolt of Aphrodite* and *The Avignon Quintet*, quite clearly leave modernism behind and were much more controversial, and did not receive as much attention due to their highly experimental and unfamiliar forms. Zahlan continues: “For Durrell, as for his fictional Darley, *Clea* marks a point of embarkation: Here he takes leave of Modernism, first to traverse the experimental space of *Tunc* and *Nunquam* [a.k.a. *The Revolt of Aphrodite*], and finally, in the 1970s and 1980s, to achieve the unpredictable postmodernist territory of *The Avignon Quintet*” (Zahlan 84-85).

Dasenbrock agrees, and even credits the original success of the *Quartet* to its obvious modernist form, which was an accepted standard at this time, and he states, “The *Quartet* was so popular largely because it worked comfortably within modes of modernist fiction writing already assimilated by mainstream taste, modes largely created by D.H. Lawrence, Proust, and Joyce” (516). But, he says, “Durrell’s next novels do no such thing. They not only fail to conform to these modernist modes within which *The Alexandria Quartet* can be placed, they deliberately confront, mock, and subvert them” (521). According to Dasenbrock, “*The Alexandria Quartet* satisfies us. *The Revolt of Aphrodite* disturbs us” (527), and because of this, “Durrell lost much of his audience, both popular and academic” (521). Though he never duplicated its level of success, Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* epitomizes a definitive point in the literary transition from modernism to postmodernism in the twentieth century.

### Chapter Three: A Psychoanalytic Approach to *The Alexandria Quartet*

In our discussion of modernism and postmodernism, we have neglected (at least) one crucial aspect of those theoretical propositions: the role of Freudian psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan.

#### Mind over Matter: Freud and Modernist Literature

The works of Sigmund Freud, which posit that the individual person's experience is guided by outside influences and numerous unconscious psychological factors, were extremely popular in the first half of the twentieth century and influenced modernism. According to Vincent Leitch, Freud "helped revolutionize the modern Western conception of human life and its place in the universe" (913). Leitch continues, asserting, "for Freud, human reason was not master in its own house but a precarious defense mechanism struggling against, and often motivated by, unconscious desires and forces" (913).

To this end and throughout his career, Freud investigated not only the "existence of unconscious forces at work in everyday life" (Leitch 914), but "larger cultural forces and structures" (Leitch 915) as well, and drew many conclusions about the collective psychological unconscious which he believed affected all of humanity. Freud speaks of the "dominance of the unconscious laws of thought" (954) that motivate and control the psyche of the individual. He also originated the concept of the Oedipus Complex, whereby young men oppose their fathers as threats to sexual maturity and he was very much interested in uncovering "something universally fascinating and repressed" (Leitch 915) in humanity. Because an individual has no power over his or her emotional and mental development at such a young age, a person is subject during childhood to these unconscious forces, which play out in essentially similar ways for every individual. In his 1927 essay "Fetishism," for

example, Freud described an archetypal situation that he viewed as an underlying motivating force for the adult male. According to this theory, a young boy subconsciously understands his mother's female anatomy as being that of a former man who has been emasculated by a hostile father. Following from this, in order for boys to consummate sexual maturity, they must therefore resort to focusing upon fetish items in order to disguise a woman's lack of a penis in order to maintain the concept that women may, in fact, still retain any sort of strength or potency. Because such a castration functions as such a basic and visceral threat at such an impressionable age, it can have later psychological consequences in adulthood; this is thus an example of uncontrollable factors influencing the individual in profound and imperceptible ways. The individual person, of course, is not cognizant of such a dissonant conflict, and, according to Freud, the result is that "a piece of reality which was undoubtedly important had been disavowed by the ego" (955). Not only do these unconscious forces act beyond the individual's control, they act beyond his or her knowledge, because he or she has typically repressed or never realized their effects.

While many of Freud's theories have been discredited or revised, his work is nevertheless a significant milestone in the understanding of human mental processes. Freud's elucidation of the human mind in terms of conflicting forces "either immensely complicated or put into doubt the notion of a stable human ego" (Lemon 158). According to this theory, the mind was not a stable or static unit, but rather was composed of several differing components. Chief among these mental components were the Ego, a person's basic personality and consciousness, where the forces of the Id, the primitive pleasure-seeking subconscious, and the Superego, a conscience that urges moderation, self-restraint and adherence to social values, produce unconscious influences and urges. For modernist

literature, Freud stands for “the explosion of the old stable ego imagined by the Victorians, the ego split up into a whole subconscious full of voices, and the subconscious is on the time ribbon, the whole ribbon of memories so that you get a dispersed ego with a big question mark over it” (Goulianos 122). Thus, Durrell’s insertion of Freud is a product of his modernist viewpoint, as he “is equally careful to keep before [his characters] the similar relativity-pattern discovered by modern psychoanalysis” (Unterecker 179).

Metafiction, described in the previous chapter, derives many of its initial motivations from these Freudian concepts. These new theories, according to Leitch, the editor of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, “make visible in new ways the narrative challenges involved in telling the story of a life—one’s own in particular” (913). Chiara Briganti explains, “The sense of fragmentation of reality and of the self exposes tremendous presumption of knowledge implicit in the figure of the author, a figure whose status has been increasingly questioned in the last few decades” (46). This focus also leads to a trend in psychological fiction where it is understood that “The façade of established identity, of accepted social personality, is shattered” (Fraser 114). Throughout the *Quartet*, Durrell is very much “using the conventions of the psychological novel as a framework for a vision of reality based in myth” (Fraser 114).

Durrell very much accepts these Freudian hypotheses and was very vocal in his support of and appreciation for Freud. Indeed, Durrell’s first epigraph to *Justine* is a remark made by Freud (see below). Like Freud, “Durrell rejects the conventional psychology of human beings as stable clusters of discrete, categorical traits” (Kellman 121). Furthermore, “Durrell sees Freud as Einstein’s counterpart in the domain of the psyche,” states Vipond (58), and Durrell understands Freud’s idea of unconscious drives, like relativity, as

something that is pivotal to fiction and he includes it in his own writing. In his interview with Wheldon, Durrell himself stresses the need for a deliberately constructed psychological spirit in literature, and outlines his position with regards to Freud and modernist literature:

Wheldon: So you would say that Einstein provided a physical background for the book in the same way as Freud provided its psychological background?

Durrell: Yes, structurally. Yes I think that's very fair. But you see, that's not precisely modern. Freud's interpretation was created in 1900, and the first relativity propositions were made in 1912. It takes a long time for the stuff to leak through to the man in the street. I'm thinking of myself. I didn't understand all this for many, many years. I'm not even sure I understand it all now. But some inkling of the world pictures we have is beginning to leak through and I am just trying to mobilize it if I can and turn it to some use.

Wheldon: Put it into literature?

Durrell: If possible. (57)

Durrell puts his sentiments into the words of his characters, such as Arnauti, the author and ex-husband of Justine, who comments, "For the writer people as psychologies are finished. The contemporary psyche has exploded like a soap-bubble under the investigations of the mystagogues. What now remains to the writer?" (*Justine* 113).

In addition to the psychological fracturing of the human psyche elaborated by Freud, Durrell is similarly interested in the way Freud inserted sexuality into philosophical discourse. Durrell disagrees with the tone and attitude displayed toward sexual identity and relationships in the work of D. H. Lawrence, who is often considered a literary precursor and direct influence on him. Durrell locates his break with Lawrence in his understanding of

Freud, and explains, “He [Lawrence] remained very much a moralist and a puritan moralist. It’s very hard to do that if you know your Freud” (Wheldon 56). Freud’s influence upon Durrell is thus open and apparent, and the realization of the multi-faceted nature of the ego, and thus the complicated social representations of the characters, and the relations of these ideas to sexual identity, are some of the many lessons acquired by Darley in his maturation.

In accepting the idea of the fragmented psyche, Darley learns that, in accord with the postmodern concept of relativity or lack of absolute truth, people themselves can never be fully understood. In remembering his complicated relationship with Pursewarden, and the mystery of his suicide, Darley questions, “how much of him can I claim to know? I realize that each person can only claim one aspect of our character as a part of his knowledge. To every one we turn a different face of the prism. Over and over again I have found myself surprised by observations which brought this home to me” (*Justine* 119). In his study of Justine’s (fabricated) diaries, given to him by Nessim after Justine’s disappearance, Darley is chastised by Balthazar: “I picture you, wise one, pouring over Moeurs, the diaries of Justine, Nessim, etc., imagining that the truth is to be found in them. Wrong! Wrong! A diary is the last place to go if you wish to seek the truth about a person. Nobody dares to make the final confession to themselves on paper: or at least, not about love” (*Balthazar* 15). Balthazar also speculates that “I suppose we live in the shallows of one another’s personalities and cannot really see into the depths beneath” (*Balthazar* 141). Because of the presence of these “different faces,” a person’s true nature could not be completely determined, and hence John Unterecker’s asserts that the *Quartet* is primarily concerned with the false representations erected by people: “The first two volumes [offer] private false faces and the third [offers] the public false faces of political action” (Unterecker 181) in the double-dealing and conspiracy

of the Hosnani Plot. As he contemplates the new revelations and the false faces of the past, Darley laments his failures, which

had been in art, in religion, and in people. In art I had failed (it suddenly occurred to me at this moment) because I did not believe in the discrete human personality. (“Are people”, writes Pursewarden, “continuously themselves, or simply over and over again so fast that they give the illusion of continuous features—the temporal flicker of old silent film?”) I lacked a belief in the true authenticity of people in order to successfully portray them. (*Justine* 196)

Much like a modernist, Darley believes it is not possible to ever capture the true nature of a person in his work. It is also true, he comes to learn, that these “different faces” which complicate interpretation of personality are not only imparted by others, but sometimes originate within each of us. Darley sees this when he visits Melissa’s corpse: “The other faces of Melissa ... thronged my memory and had established their identity there. She bore no resemblance to any of them. This white little face was the last term of a series. Beyond this point was a locked door” (*Justine* 238).

Human beings present illusions of their “true” natures, whether deliberately or unintentionally. With the help of Pursewarden’s words, Darley begins to understand how the many “different faces” of each person’s identity can be presented:

“We live” writes Pursewarden somewhere, “lives based upon selected fictions. Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time—not by our personalities as we like to think. Thus every interpretation of reality is based upon a unique position. Two paces east or west and the whole picture is changed.”

(*Balthazar* 14-15)

In that statement, Purswarden echoes the concepts of Einsteinian relativity and connects them to Freud's theories. Darley continues to make use of this phrase "selected fictions" throughout the *Quartet*, and refers back to this concept again and again. Darley comes to understand that people must confront the "selected fictions" in which they choose to believe, and that these are imposed on them both by the mirages produced by others, and the dissonance within themselves.

As Darley learns more about what happened in Alexandria (and with the Hosnanis in particular), he questions his past relationships: were his views of any of the people he knew, or the women he loved, based on an actual depiction of their characters, or was it all simply a meaningless artifice? After re-encountering Justine and finally forsaking his misplaced love for her, he begins to heal:

But unexpectedly I was discovering that truth was nourishing—the cold spray of a wave which carried one always a little further to self-realisation. I saw not that my own Justine had indeed been an illusionist's creation, raised upon the faulty armature of misinterpreted words, actions, gestures. Truly there was no blame here; the real culprit was my love which had invented an image on which to feed. Nor was there any question of dishonesty, for the picture was coloured after the necessities of the love which invented it. Lovers, like doctors, colouring an unpalatable medicine to make it easier for the unwary to swallow! No this could not have been otherwise, I fully realised. (*Clea* 55)

And he extends this more broadly:

Something more, fully as engrossing: I also saw that lover and loved, observer and observed, throw down a field about each other ("Perception is shaped like an

embrace—the poison enters with the embrace” as Pursewarden writes). They then infer the properties of their love, judging it from this narrow field with its huge margins of unknown (“the refractions”), and proceed to refer it to a generalised conception of something constant in its qualities and universal in its operation. How valuable a lesson this was, both to art and to life! I had only been attesting, in all that I had written, to the power of an image which I had created involuntarily by the mere act of seeing Justine. There was no question of true or false. Nymph? Goddess? Vampire? Yes, she was all of these, and none of them. She was, like every woman, everything that the mind of a man (let us define “man” as a poet perpetually conspiring against himself)—everything that the mind of man wished to imagine. She was there forever, and she had never existed. (*Clea* 55-56)

Darley also sees that the falseness of “human personality” and the misinterpretation of it is essential for human interaction and romance: “And as for human characters, whether real or invented, there are not such animals. Each psyche is really an ant-hill of opposing predispositions. Personality as something with fixed attributes is an illusion—but a necessary illusion *if we are to love!*” (*Balthazar* 15). It is these concepts which are directly pertinent to Durrell’s overall theme of the “investigation of modern love” (*Balthazar* 9) which he has explored throughout the *Quartet*. It is also the literary expression of his epigraph to *Justine*, a passage by Freud: “I am accustoming myself to the idea of regarding every sexual act as a process in which four persons are involved. We shall have a lot to discuss about that” (*Justine* 10). In this interpretation, every human relationship involves four people, the two people, and then the two “necessary illusions” that each person holds of the other. But what of the growth caused by these mystifications and untruths? Darley wonders, “Was Clea

enriched or beggared by her relations with Justine? Enriched—immeasurably enriched, I should say. Are we then nourished only by fictions, by lies?” (*Balthazar* 140) and he is haunted when he “recall[s] the words Balthazar wrote down somewhere in this tall grammarian’s handwriting: ‘We live by selected fictions,’ and also: ‘Everything is true of everybody....’” (*Balthazar* 140).

As Darley is shocked and befuddled by these realizations, he bemoans his inability to understand others and laments his state of uncertainty at “the multiple ‘consciousnesses’ or personalities of each individual [which] form facets subsumed within the single identity he presents to those about him” (Friedman 68). He struggles with the question of whether “human personality is an illusion? And if, as biology tells us, every single cell in our bodies is replaced every seven years by another?” (*Clea* 98). It is at this point that Darley must develop a Lacanian, postmodernist approach in order to deal with his trauma.

#### Lacan and Subjectivity in *The Alexandria Quartet*

Building on the foundation of Freudian principles, *The Alexandria Quartet* can also be understood to display many Neo-Freudian concepts that were developed by Jacques Lacan in the 1950s and 60s. Lee Lemon even specifically characterizes Durrell in the context of a “new generation of writers and a new audience whose background includes not only these novelists but also such critics as Derrida and Lacan” (162). Surprisingly, despite these foundations for Lacanism within his work, Durrell himself expressed a dislike for Lacan and his theories. In an interview with Corinne Alexandre-Garner in 1984, when questioned about his “hatred for Lacan,” Durrell responded that “[Lacan] really is jargon. There is not a single aphorism in him, not an insight which to me has been enriching. And I have read quite a lot of him,” though he also concedes that “[Lacan] is a highly coherent man.... Maybe I ought to

read him again ... I did not read him with literary insight” (218). Nevertheless, the *Quartet* can be read with a Lacanian philosophy in mind.

According to Lacan, humanity is subsumed by the social milieu that it inhabits. In such a framework, humans lack not only the ability to choose, but also to penetrate any “true” nature of reality, for concepts of truth have been circumscribed within cultural values. Individuals, irreversibly altered and indoctrinated by their surroundings, are thus subjected by ideology. Lacanian and postmodernist thought embodies, in Jameson’s words,

what one might call the poststructuralist position. It adds: not only is the bourgeois individual a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they ‘had’ individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity. (1964)

This inevitable subjectivity that inscribes the individual—through the Lacanian mirror-stage, for example—dominates that individual’s concept of reality and ineluctably influences his or her perceptions of the world.

To Lacan, a self-avowed follower and student of Freudian psychoanalysis, a person’s subjectivity arises in a pre-verbal “mirror-stage.” As Philip Hill describes in *Lacan for Beginners*, Lacan’s “theory of the subject is, very simply, a theory of what it means to be a person” (29); the subject is an individual who interacts with the world. Lacan believed this notion of the singular subject to be misleading, however, because of the numerous conscious and unconscious drives within the psyche, as propounded by Freud. Through the mirror-stage, however, a conflicted and tumultuous inner life is simplified into a single, definite identity, a concept of the *I*: “This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at

the *infans* stage ... would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form” (Lacan 1286). This notion of the self “would have to be called the Ideal-I” (Lacan 1286) and “the fact is that the total form of the body [as seen in the mirror] by which the subject anticipates in a mirage ... is given to him only as Gestalt” (Lacan 1286). This gestalt “symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue in which man projects himself” (Lacan 1286). The creation of this false mirror-image constitutes “the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development” (Lacan 1288), and this becomes a permanent definition. By identifying (or, rather, misrecognizing) oneself as a single form, an “imago,” in the mirror, the subject falsely collects all his or her disparate elements and drives into the fallacious “whole.”

The individual is thus irreparably split between this “exterior” version of himself and the “interior” world of his or her own psyche, and it becomes traumatically impossible to return him or her to a pre-subjected state. Lacan admits that he must “regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*” (1287), i.e., the “innerworld” and the “outerworld” of the individual’s understanding. Because the exterior “imago,” or false image, of the individual betrays the complexity of the inner experience, Lacan posits that this will naturally lead to confusion and distress on the part of the subject: “to break out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt* generates the inexhaustible [impossibility] of the ego's verifications” (1288) and it is this

“function of *méconnaissance* [misrecognition] that characterizes the ego [of the subject] in all its structures” (1290).

To summarize these complicated concepts, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, in their essay “Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis,” briefly describe how

In the 1950s and 1960s, Lacan developed a structuralist theory of psychoanalysis based on the linguistic theory of Saussure. Against object relations theory, Lacan argues that the ego is constructed through imaginary percepts and narcissistic fantasies, and it remains blind to its determination by the drives, the unconscious, and its placement and construction in/by language. Before language assigns us an “I,” we possess no sense of self. It is language that gives us identity (while simultaneously taking it away in the sense of something pre-given or internal). The unified self posited by object relations theory is an illusion. The child begins as fragmented drives, percepts and attachments that eventually congeal into an imaginary identity at the “mirror stage” of development. (123)

Furthermore, “Desire and its realization only appear immediate, however, and what Lacan calls the Real, an impossible wholeness of self, plenitude of desire satisfaction (*jouissance*), and continuity of the signifier and signified or word and object, is never possible” (Rivkin and Ryan 123). It is impossible, they claim, because

the whole we imaginarily seek and imagine we have when we construct egos for ourselves is merely a way of concealing from ourselves the initial fissure or *béance* that separation from [the mother] installs permanently within our being.... Our identity is given to us from outside, and we are constitutively alienated. The

imaginary or narcissistic character of all desire merely conceals this basic fault, this radical alterity or otherness, in human existence. (Rivkin and Ryan 124)

Whereas Freud (and modernism in general) seemed to offer no solution to the fragmentation of identity and personhood, Lacan states that while there may be no real “solution,” or “completeness” at all, there is at least the possibility of accepting and coping with this “otherness of human existence.” According to Rivkin and Ryan, “Lacan thinks that we are constitutively split from ourselves and that we can never possibly attain wholeness in the world of objects. That is the delusion of the ego.... What we can learn is to accept our frustration and to come to acknowledge the lack that defines our being” (125). Similarly, the “imaginary identity (of self/(m)other) must be given up, and separation (the duality of meaning implied by the fact that one can only have metaphors and not real things or complete fulfillment) accepted” (Rivkin and Ryan 127). Lemon relates this sentiment to Freud and modernism: “[i]f Freud taught us that the human personality is a many-layered mentality, Lacan radicalized Freud by arguing that we never get to the bottom layer because there is no bottom layer, that the human psyche is less an entity, however structured, than refractions of a series of events” (Lemon 160). To be truly postmodern, psychoanalysis “must avoid even the suggestion that there is an ideal pattern of life for either the protagonist or the reader” (Lemon 158).

Characters in the *Quartet* must simply learn to live with their division, with Darley’s supposition that “if two or more explanations of a single human action are as good as each other then what does action mean but an illusion—a gesture made against the misty backcloth of a reality made palpable by the delusive nature of human division merely? Had any novelist before Pursewarden considered this question? I think not” (*Clea* 176).

Throughout *Justine* and *Balthazar*, Darley is clearly subscribing to many faulty assumptions of the psyche. He relies entirely upon an egoist perspective, whereby he tries to collect all of the disparate elements of his psyche together into a comprehensible whole regulated by the Ego, and as a consequence for Darley and the reader, “what we feel is a helpless, not a Stoical, acceptance of what at our most feeble we are, a submission without protest to the idea that we are things lived by an It” (Dobrée 168). Until the final book, Darley “remains an egoist. As an artist, Darley draws solace from Nessim’s words that those Justine harmed most she made fruitful, for she ‘expelled people from their old selves’” (Morrison 502), and with a modernist attitude, he attempts to find relevant meaning through art in his painful relationship with Justine., but he cannot achieve this because he focuses on the possibility of knowing the Other, which, as Freud and Lacan suggest, can never really be understood.

Briganti explains:

Remembering a couple of Pombal’s astringent comments on Justine and Melissa, Darley reflects, “He was right perhaps, yet the true meaning of them resides elsewhere” (*Balthazar*, 18). Darley seems to echo Lacan’s notion that the true meaning of an utterance always remains elsewhere, for the subject is a divided entity dominated by an unknowable unconscious. Although, as Pursewarden puts it, to “seek to supplement the emptiness of our individuality through love” is mere illusion it is true that the “unconscious is the discourse of the Other”—it belongs to the Other and is addressed to the Other, be it reader, analyst, lover, double. The self can be experienced and investigated only in relation to the Other. Thus Durrell’s “investigation of modern love” reflects both the Lacanian notion of the conative

character of language and of the divided nature of the subject, and his own cubist approach to fiction. (44)

It is only by finding a way to mediate and explore his various psychic elements that Darley can succeed. He must understand that “life consists in the act of choice, the perpetual reservations of judgments and the perpetual choosing” (Morrison 500). He must turn inward, and “in order to understand his disorganized and shapeless self, Darley needs to learn about himself and become whole—and through this process, he becomes a writer” (Fertile 67). By returning to Alexandria, and confronting his previous, faulty assumptions, Darley can appreciate Pursewarden’s claim, worded in true Lacanian fashion: “There is no Other; there is only oneself facing forever the problem of one’s self discovery!” (*Clea* 98-99).

Darley eventually comes to find strength in the fragmentation of his mental life. Keats, after his experiences covering the desert war in Egypt, reveals to Darley that “[t]he man of action and the man of reflection are really the same man, operating on two different fields. But to the same end! Wait, this is beginning to sound silly” (*Clea* 182). This lesson is crucial to Darley at the climax of *Clea*, when Darley, the detached and contemplative pedant, who until this point had always characterized himself as the “man of reflection,” finds that he must act swiftly to save Clea from drowning. It is through this crisis that Darley is able to draw on the other aspects, the other fragments, of his personality, to become the “man of action” precisely when he is needed most: “[i]t was as if I were for the first time confronting myself—or perhaps an alter ego shaped after a man of action I had never realised, recognised” (*Clea* 249). This profound change does not arrive as matter of will; “‘I cannot present,’ says Darley, ‘that anything which followed belonged to my own volition—for the mad rage which now possessed me was not among the order of the emotions I would ever

have recognized as belonging to my proper self. It exceeded, in blind violent rapacity, anything I had ever before experienced” (*Clea* 249). By summoning this inner “man of action,” a dormant and unrealized portion of his multi-layered psyche, Darley is able to rescue and resuscitate Clea in an intensely uncharacteristic display.

At the end of *Clea*, he returns to his island, and he continues to ponder these questions: “Here for a night and a day I lived the life of an echo, thinking much about the past and about us all moving in it, the ‘selected fictions’ which life shuffles out like a pack of cards, mixing and dividing, withdrawing and restoring” (*Clea* 276-77). As he learns about himself and accepts the fragmentation and multiplicity of his mind, he finally recovers his confidence in his ability to write. “As a postmodern author,” observes Briganti, “Darley renounces any claim to invention and originality. Writing becomes for him a question of assemblage in which the writing subject undoes itself and becomes dispersed and fragmented” (50). Thus, through his experiences and his relationship with Clea, “Darley the seeker of answers and solutions comes to view life not as a problem to be overcome by mind and will but a vast and secret cosmos of whose nature only intimations reach him— intimations to be heeded and submitted to” (Hutchens 56-57). Thus, Darley’s final perspective, which Durrell seems to encourage, corresponds with Lacan’s ideas, which were based in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Durrell’s overall conception of the human psyche successfully and simultaneously embodies the various elements of modernism in Freud and of the postmodernism of Lacan and forges clear links between the two.

### **Conclusion: Bridging the Gaps**

I have argued that Durrell's work occupies a middle ground between the two dominant literary movements of the twentieth century. *The Alexandria Quartet* displays elements of modernism in that it concerns itself with the disillusionment of a central character with the falseness he perceives in the world around him. With explicit attention to Einstein and Freud, as well as drawing on the theories of Heisenberg, Durrell explores the theme of a lack of absolute reference and the uncertainty of perspective in the exterior world. Though it is obviously influenced by and positioned within the modernist literary genre, it is also apparent that the *Quartet* presages the development of postmodernism, which would only become well-known almost a decade after the books were originally written.

Postmodernism in the *Quartet* is demonstrated through the use of metafiction, whereby the fictional elements of the story connect with the author's real-life writing intentions, and the line between fiction and reality is blurred and confused; through intertextuality, whereby a work connects itself, both internally and externally to other works by the same or different authors; and through pastiche, or the combination and blurring of literary genres. Unlike modernist novels, in which characters and authors display anxiety and stress at being unsure of their sense of reality, postmodernist works do not bemoan, but rather find possibility and autonomy in this indeterminate and unfixed environment.

Durrell also depicts Darley with several psychological neuroses and faulty assumptions, drawn from Freud's theories of the effect of the human unconscious upon behavior and the split nature of the psyche. However, while he intends to instill these Freudian complications in his characters, Durrell also exhibits elements of the subsequent theories of Lacan. The split psyche and the impossibility of wholeness of the subject are

recognized by his characters and, once again, in contrast to the modernist reactions to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Durrell's characters learn to accept and negotiate the complex and fluid structure of their divided inner identities in order to interpret and succeed in the outside world. By embodying the elements of these diverse literary ideologies, and foreshadowing the later critical developments which would only become popular after the publication of the *Quartet*, it is clear Durrell's tetralogy achieves a status as a significant transition between movements in twentieth century literature.

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