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(Durrell Studies 8)

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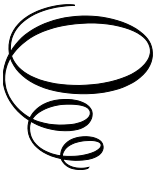

Re-reading *The Alexandria Quartet of Lawrence Durrell* (Durrell Studies 8)

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"D.H. Lawrence and Lawrence Durrell as Eudaemonistic Novelists" by C. Ravindran Nambiar (issue 5, December 2021); "My Word, What an Experience!" Form and Readership in *The Alexandria Quartet*" by Bartolo Casiraghi (issue 1, June 2019) and "Lawrence Durrell's Gnosticism: 'A Fatal Resistance To Life In This World'" by Frank Kersnowski (issue 2, December 2019).

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INTRODUCTION

RE-READING *THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET*

RICHARD PINE

Between 1957, with the appearance of *Justine* (the first volume of *The Alexandria Quartet*),[1] and 1962, when Faber and Faber issued the complete *Quartet* in a single-volume edition, Lawrence Durrell was transformed from a well-known poet and foreign-residence writer into one of the most talked-about novelists of the twentieth century. Not only did the popularity of the *Quartet* with readers and critics propel Durrell into the media, but the book began to generate the attention of serious readers.

While there have been several monographs on Durrell's work (for example the early studies by Fraser, Unterecker and Weigel, and later work by Clawson, Herbrechter, Nambiar, Nichols, Pine and Redwine), and several valuable collections of essays (Begnal, Friedman, Kersnowski, MacNiven-Pierce, and Moore), relatively few – if one excludes dozens of unpublished graduate theses – have concentrated on the *Quartet* itself: (chronologically) Friedman's *Art for Love's Sake* (1970), Creed's *The Muse of Science* (1977), Alexandre-Garner's *Etude sur l'amour* (1985), Diboll's *Egyptian Contexts* (2004) and Alfandary's *Psychoanalytic Study* (2019).[2] As will be seen from these foreshortened titles, each has concentrated on a specific aspect of the *Quartet*.

Alan Warren Friedman's *Lawrence Durrell and* The Alexandria Quartet*: Art for Love's Sake* (1970) is generally regarded as the first authoritative assessment of the *Quartet*. His enthusiasm for "the compelling quality of Durrell's writing and his structural experimentation and innovation" established the *Quartet* as a vital element in the tradition of the modernist novel. Yet by 2012 Friedman had, apparently, lost his

[1] Followed in 1958 by *Balthazar* and *Mountolive* and in 1959 by *Clea*.

[2] Three titles in German (by Hoops, Lampert and Ruprecht) which I have been unable to read (since they have not been translated out of German), complete this list.

enthusiasm, which had been replaced by a distaste for Durrell's "misogyny" and "orientalism", and his representation of Alexandria and Alexandrians ("a Western fantasy of the East"), and in addition the ubiquity of his "oracular pronouncements". Stylistically, it seems, Durrell had lost the readership he had gained in the post-war decades through his depiction of an "exotic setting [and] inscrutable characters" in "vivid, enticing prose".[3]

The focus on feminist issues, and the debate on "Orientalism" (initiated largely by Edward Said), both of which can be traced to the 1970s, have obliged us to examine Durrell's depiction of women and his concept of the "Other". But until much later, critical analysis of the *Quartet* had not kept pace with these investigations. Some of the essays in the present collection address the questions about Gnosticism, the Gothic and representations of women which contemporary thinking on social and psychological issues seems to demand.

I have chosen the essays in this volume, ranging in subject from a concentration on the themes of *The Alexandria Quartet* to Durrell's later work – *Tunc-Nunquam* and *The Avignon Quintet* – for the sense of intellectual excitement which they offer, and for the capacity of their authors to "think outside the box".

Friedmann's dismissal – or rejection – of Durrell's attempt at a novel of relativity and (as he originally intended) an "investigation of love; the bisexual psyche"[4] should not surprise us. From its appearance, *The Alexandria Quartet* both attracted and repelled readers and critics.

A seminal review by George Steiner in *The Yale Review* (1960) characterised the *Quartet* as a "baroque novel"; acknowledging "fierce disagreement" among reviewers, some of whom saw Durrell as a "pompous charlatan; a mere word-spinner and gatherer of flamboyant clichés", Steiner saw Durrell's *style* as the source of disagreement. Steiner himself saw the style as "a mosaic", with each word "set in its precise and luminous place" so as to give the reader an experience "of total sensual apprehension". "No one else writing in English today has a comparable

[3] A.W. Friedman, "Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*: 50 years Later".

[4] At the request of Faber and Faber, Durrell removed the word "bisexual" and substituted "modern" – thus obscuring the interest of the *Quartet* in the concept of love (as he expressed it in the quotation from Freud with which he prefaced *Justine*) as "a process in which four persons are involved". Durrell's initial intention – as indicated by a draft for the original Note to *Balthazar* – was "an investigation of love; the bisexual psyche" (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Durrell Archive collection 42, file 19/8).

command of the light and music of language."[5] He saw Durrell "in a great tradition of baroque prose" from Browne and Burton to de Quincey and Conrad, which was at that time out of favour. Comparing Durrell's prose style to that of Hemingway, C.P. Snow and Graham Greene, was like "setting a gold-spun and jeweled Byzantine mosaic next to a black-and-white photograph."

Gérard Lebas, in a 1969 survey of criticism of the *Quartet*, pointed out that "most essays, studies and commentaries" originated in America, and that while Continental critics were attentive to Durrell, there was less interest in Britain: "this clearly underlines the non-British quality of his work".[6] What this "non-British quality" represented or consisted of, Lebas does not tell us, but he did suggest that criticism of the *Quartet* for its baroque qualities "may account for Durrell's lack of audience in Great Britain, where the baroque is not a natural component of the national make-up".[7] One recalls the wry comment in Anthony Burgess's obituary notice of Durrell, that "because he preferred warm expatriation to the tepid recording of adultery in Hampstead, he was regarded as a kind of baroque traitor to our insular literary tradition".[8]

In the same journal in which Steiner's review appeared (*Yale Review*), Martin Green – who clearly found Durrell's work, and possibly his character, distasteful[9] – was almost totally dismissive of the *Quartet* (clearly agreeing with F.R. Leavis's dismissal of Durrell as "not one of us")[10] calling its author "culturally retarded" and accusing the *Quartet* of

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[5] Steiner's review was reprinted in H.T. Moore, *The World of Lawrence Durrell*. Ibid., p. 15.

[6] Gérard Lebas, "Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and the critics", p. 92.

[7] Ibid., p. 93.

[8] A. Burgess, obituary of Durrell, *Independent on Sunday*, 11 November 1990.

[9] It was a curious decision – although probably a good marketing ploy – on the part of Faber and Faber to commission an introduction to a centenary re-issue of *The Alexandria Quartet* by a travel writer, Jan Morris, who demonstrably did not like the book she was introducing: "Introduction", *The Alexandria Quartet*, 2012 printing.

[10] The remark about Durrell being "not one of us" is attributed by R. W. Dasenbrock to Ray Morrison in "Centrifugality: An Approach to Lawrence Durrell", in L. W. Markert and C. Peirce (eds.), p. 210. We should also take note of Leavis' view, in *The Great Tradition* (p. 26): "It is true that we can point to the influence of Joyce in a line of writers to which there is no parallel issuing from Lawrence. [...] In these writers, in whom a regrettable (if minor) strain of Mr Eliot's influence seems to me to join with that of Joyce we have, in so far as we have anything significant, the wrong kind of reaction to liberal idealism. I have in mind writers in whom Mr Eliot has expressed an interest in strongly favourable

extreme and ugly depravity, derivative in this respect of Norman Douglas's *South Wind*, and, *en passant*, also repudiating *The Black Book*, *Bitter Lemons*, *Esprit de Corps* and *White Eagles over Serbia*.[11]

A critic of far greater authority than Green at that time was Bonamy Dobrée, who also reviewed the *Quartet* in 1960, for the *Sewanee Review.* Dobrée recognised Durrell's "great originality in his extreme endeavor to abolish the common illusion of time", and also the influence on Durrell of Georg Groddeck (who emphasised that we are "lived by the 'It'"), to the extent that "Alexandria […] 'lives' the characters". Dobrée sensed an ultimate failure on Durrell's part to achieve what he intuited was the principal aim of the *Quartet* – to explore a sense of pity, of tenderness.[12]

Few reviewers took Durrell's exploration of Relativity or the more profound aspects of his "investigation of modern love" – such as *tendresse* – seriously, preferring to discuss his language and approach to sex and sensuality. John Mortimer, for example, as early as 1958 (that is, before the appearance of the final volume) thought the first three volumes of the *Quartet* discussed "essentially unimportant ideas" while, much later (1975) Walter Creed could see the *Quartet* as "no more than an overlong prelude to a rather uninspiring discovery".[13]

Lebas recorded that contemporary critical response to the *Quartet* peaked in 1962 but by 1965 had fallen to its earlier levels. "The great excitement aroused by the completion of the *Quartet* rapidly diminished, was revived by the publication of the one-volume edition, and has slowly died away during the last six years" he wrote in 1969.[14]

Lebas (whose article listed four volumes [by Fraser, Unterecker, and Weigel, and *The World of Lawrence Durrell* edited by Harry T Moore] and fifty-nine articles by forty-eight critics, published between 1958 and 1965)[15] was not, however, merely counting the number of

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terms: Djuna Barnes of *Nightwood*, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell of *The Black Book*. In these writers – at any rate in the last two (and the first seems to me insignificant) – the point of what we are offered affects me as being entirely a desire in Lawrentian phrase, to 'do dirt' on life."

[11] Green's review was reprinted in H.T. Moore, *The World of Lawrence Durrell*; the opinions cited appear on p. 137.

[12] Dobrée's review was reprinted in H.T. Moore, *The World of Lawrence Durrell*; the opinions quoted appear on pp. 186 and 194.

[13] Mortimer and Creed, quoted in David M. Woods, "Love and Meaning in *The Alexandria Quartet*: Some tantric perspectives" in M. Begnal (ed.), *On Miracle Ground.*

[14] Gérard Lebas, pp. 91-92.

[15] Lebas included articles mostly in English or French, but noted that many had also been written in Norwegian, Finnish and German. He tells us that Moore's

critics; he noted the praise for the *Quartet* by Steiner and the negative comments by John Kelly (in *Studies*), by P. Cortland (in *English Record*) and Martin Green, and Inna Levidova's "violently hostile" criticism (in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*). He noted, especially, criticism of the "overladen sophistication and mannerism", "rhetoric as a meaningless ornament", "bad fine writing" and the "lack of life and credibility of most of his Alexandrian figures".[16]

Nevertheless, the prescient Lebas considered that "Time will allow criticism to decant […] Though the success of the *Quartet* may only be due to a literary fashion, it has for a long time prevented the critics from judging the works according to merely literary criteria."[17] The author expected that the publication of *Tunc* (in 1968) would "probably initiate another revival of the critical interest in Durrell's work".

Response to Durrell's depiction of Alexandria in itself has been sharply divided between appreciation of the metaphorical – and metaphysical – city, in the exotic setting of pre- and post-war Egypt, and denunciation of "the falseness of the *Quartet*", Durrell's "careless attitude towards objective reality [… and] cavalier distortion of the truth".[18] Such denunciation has almost become a genre in its own right. Making an analogy with Joyce's *Ulysses*, Mahmoud Mantzaloui states: "Joyce knew Ireland. Mr Durrell does not know Egypt." While Mantzaloui allows that "the writer […] is by all means free to alter the details of a town or a country to suit his purposes", Durrell's "bad observation and dishonest reporting" and "crude pseudo-orientalism" which "distorts the essential Egyptianness out of existence" meant that his "unreality reaches almost pathological depths" and, ultimately, affects his "abstract artistic integrity" and becomes "deeply offensive" – "an outsider exploiting, distorting and emerging with a myth woven by himself".[19] To this, we might add Frank Kersnowski's observation (in the present volume): "Just how much personal experience Durrell had of Egypt outside the expatriate community is very much in question". Herbert Howarth (whom Kersnowski cites below

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volume "is only a collection of press articles", without disclosing that it contained three of the more remarkable reviews of the *Quartet*, by George Steiner, Martin Green and Bonamy Dobrée.

[16] Ibid., pp. 93-95.

[17] Ibid., p. 96.

[18] M. Mantzaloui, "Curate's Egg: An Alexandrian Opinion of Durrell's *Quartet*", pp. 151-2.

[19] Ibid., pp. 153-6. Mantzalouli's criticism predates Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

as an influence on his reading of Durrell) supports this, presumably from firsthand knowledge: "He seldom stirred from the cities in those years, scarcely interested himself in the Egypt of the Egyptians, as differentiated from cosmopolitan or diplomatic Egypt".[20]

Mantzaloui's criticism of Durrell's ignorance of the city and its denizens was repeated by Edwar al-Kharrat in 1996 at a conference in Alexandria itself: "Durrell did not know Alexandria, neither did he know, in his fiction, true Alexandrians […] To him, Alexandria, essentially, is an exotic illusion." Al-Kharrat, like Mantzaloui, saw Durrell as an orientalist, writing

> a deeply-rooted fable on the exotic 'Orient' […] animated by an abnormal ambiance that the writer endeavours to cloak with the attraction of the unfamiliar to a repulsive, by times disgusting, degree, the attraction of excessive imagery, of pre-fabricated 'beauty' and of deft distortion […] implying an essential rejection, alienation, separateness and a sentiment of superiority.[21]

It is possible, thus, to see why a critic would greet al-Kharrat's own portrait of Alexandrian life, *City of Saffron*, as "at once more actual and more magical than anything Durrell, for instance, ever gave us."[22]

Although Durrell relied heavily on E.M. Forster's *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1922) and *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923), Jane Lagoudis Pinchin read the *Quartet* as showing "a different town" to that described by Forster:

> A fevered city, a dying city, a prodigal, stranger-loving, leaf-veined city. A city of deep resignation, of spiritual lassitude and self-indulgence, of jealousy and retribution […] a city of exiles, the capital of Asiatic Europe […] Elegant […] stylishly wicked, hybrid, and proud.

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[20] H. Howarth, "Durrell Snapped in a Library". Howarth goes on to demonstrate Durrell's borrowings from three books by S.H. Leeder (*Modern Sons of the Pharaohs*, *The Desert Gateway* and *Veiled Mysteries of Egypt*) as well as J.W. McPherson's *The Moulids of Egypt* and other sources.

[21] E. al-Kharrat, "My Alexandria", typescript, copy in the Durrell Library of Corfu. Elsewhere, al-Kharrat has written that Durrell "always had this 'strange' aspect in his portrayal [of Alexandrians], with an eye to satisfying the desires of western readers, who have a certain fascination with the sensational strangeness or exoticism of the East": in M. Awad and S Hamouda (eds.), *Voices from Cosmopolitan Alexandria*, p. 60.

[22] Michael Moorcock, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 November 1989.

But in addition (and I suspect Pinchin regards this as more significant), "Durrell envisions the artist unwrapping truth" – and that the narrative strategy of the city – or City – is, perhaps not exclusively, but principally, to do with the relativity of truth, a "medieval quest" for "extreme sensuality and intellectual asceticism" which leads him into the world of the "cabal" and the poetic mind of Cavafy, to which the social and diplomatic world is background.[23]

By contrast, Hala Halim, while, like Mantzaloui and al-Kharrat, critical of Durrell's depiction of Alexandria, regards him primarily as a neo-colonialist; the *Quartet* "effects a […] transition from twilight-of-empire […] to long-distance neocolonialism" using a false sense of Alexandria as a "cosmopolitan elite" and positing it as a hybrid: "neither solely as an extension of Greece/Europe nor as an 'Oriental' city."[24]

Michael Haag's approach to Alexandria, and Durrell's representation of the city, was through the gate of memory, and principally the memory of that same "cosmopolitan elite" of families such as the Benakis, Ambrons and Menasces (to the latter of whom Durrell's third wife, Claude Vincendon, was closely related). While Haag is effective in his re-creating of that cosmopolitan city and its inhabitants and cafés (such as Baudrot and Pastroudi), he did not take into account the Alexandria whose people inhabit the novels of al-Kharrat, Naguib Mahfouz or Ibrahim Abdel Meguid.[25]

It should also be noted here that the Egyptian scholar Mary Massoud suggests that "The setting of *The Alexandria Quartet* is no more objectively real than, say, Brobdingnag or Lilliput in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*." Viewing Swift as Durrell's "great Anglo-Irish ancestor", Massoud sees Durrell's view as "primarily a comedy in the Irish comic tradition".[26] Like many an apologist for "Durrell's Alexandria", she states quite clearly: "Durrell was not interested in a realistic portrayal"; she sees a more intense interest on Durrell's part, which is concomitant with its Swiftian comic dimension: "When we have finished reading Durrell's *Quartet* […] we do not feel that the questions raised by the work have been resolved. On the contrary, we find ourselves asking numerous

[23] Pinchin, *Alexandria Still*, pp. 163, 166.
[24] H. Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism*, pp. 180, 182, 225.
[25] Haag and his approach to Durrell's Alexandria are extensively discussed in three chapters of Bruce Redwine's *The Heraldic World of Lawrence Durrell*; Redwine's study also includes a detailed chapter on "Ancient Egypt and the *Alexandria Quartet*".
[26] M. Massoud, "Historic or Comic? The Irishness of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*", pp. 378, 380, 385.

questions, but getting no answers for them. No answer is meant to be given."[27]

It is perhaps ironic that May Hawas, in "How Not to Write on Cosmopolitan Alexandria" has made a distinction between "nostalgic cosmopolitanists" (including Haag, Ilbert and Yannakakis [*Alexandria 1860-1960: the brief life of a cosmopolitan community*] and Awad and Hamouda [*Voices from Cosmopolitan Alexandria*]) and "anti-nostalgic cosmopolitanists" (who include Hala Halim). "Neither camp", Hawas suggests, "is interested in complexities"; she attributes this disinterest to the social and political situation developing since the 1950s. Regarding the criticism of Durrell's *Quartet*, Hawas suggests that "the assumption is perhaps that a novel should resemble a tin of Quality Street; pleasing to everyone and heavy on the fudge". She also points out that "Nothing remains of Durrell's Alexandria. Perhaps it never existed […] In a city where nothing seems constant, Alexandria's literary fictions seem preferable to representations of reality."[28]

This brief discussion of Durrell's representation (or fictionalisation) of Alexandria in the *Quartet* has of necessity set aside works which might be regarded as "nostalgic cosmopolitanism" such as Pénélope Delta's *Alexandrie: capitale de la douleur* (1899), André Aciman's *Out of Egypt: a memoir* (1996), Harry Tzalas' *Farewell Alexandria* (2000) or Adel Darwish's *Alexandria Adieu* (2022).

The essays presented here require little introduction: they are both retrospective and innovative. Each takes an approach to the *Quartet* which is distinct from the themes rehearsed above, in the sense that they address issues such as the Gothic-uncanny and portrayals of women which (with the exception of James Nichols' *The Stronger Sex*) do not feature in regular criticism of Durrell's work.

Of especial value, throughout these essays, is the direct or indirect exploration of one of the most significant of Durrell's preoccupations: the relationship of *animus* to *anima* which invigorates what he saw as an exploration of the "bisexual psyche" – that is, a condition that, as Jung explained it, revealed the *anima* in the man and the *animus* in the woman, thus making possible a complete person. In a notebook dating from 1937-39, Durrell had noted:

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[27] Massoud, op. cit., p. 383.

[28] M. Hawas, "How Not to Write on Cosmopolitan Alexandria". It should be observed that her reading of the cosmopolitanists is directed very forcibly towards a "political" understanding of Alexandria in its post-1950s Egyptian context.

animus – the surface self
anima - " deep "
animus – rational knowledge
anima – mystical knowledge.[29]

This brings us to the core of what Durrell was pursuing in his "religious quest",[30] his search for the true self whom he (and Darley) had lost and was seeking throughout a life which passed through Alexandria as it passed through so many Balkan and Levantine places: "*un refugié de moi-même*".[31]

Another, and equally vital aspect of Durrell's mindscape which is evident in these essays is the relationship of Relativity to *meaning*. As Nambiar say in his essay here, "human history shows that reality gets frequently redefined or reinterpreted by artists and philosophers; with the result that man is now forced to believe that true reality is beyond his perception." This, for me, evokes Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1977 lecture on "The Meeting of Myth and Science" in which he states unequivocally: "There is something very curious in semantics, that the word 'meaning' is probably, in the whole language, the word the meaning of which is the most difficult to find. What does 'to mean' mean?"[32] The very foundations of the "Victorians['…] cheap watch-chain certainty, their half-hunter universe" (as Durrell saw it),[33] are undermined. Instead, we should look to one of Durrell's favourite Greek philosophers, Heraclitus, who said of the Delphic oracle "it neither utters, nor lies, but shows by a sign". Here, again, we have the Swiftian notion, elicited by Massoud, that "no answer is meant to be given."

It seems to me that the "uncanny", the sense of an "Other" which haunted Durrell's prose and poetry, and the real/unreal in both the city, its

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[29] In a publisher's dummy, now in the Durrell Archive at Université Paris-X, Nanterre.

[30] "My real objective has always been a sort of religious quest, if it could be described as such. I used religion in a purely selfish way, in the hope of curing my complexes": L. Durrell, conversation with R. Pine, Sommières, 1998.

[31] 'C'est pour cela que l'hôtel figure tout le temps dans mes livres. Pour ainsi dire, je me sens beaucoup mieux dans un hôtel qu'ailleurs [I am a refugee from myself […] That's why the hotel always figures in my books. So to speak, I feel more comfortable in a hotel than anywhere else]': typescript of an interview (thought to be unpublished), '*Entretien avec LAWRENCE DURRELL… propos receuillis par Jean-Luc Moreau at Jean-Didier Wagneur*', held in the Durrell Archive at Université Paris-X, Nanterre.

[32] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 12.

[33] In a letter to Alan Thomas, 1939: *Spirit of Place*, p. 47.

people and its "It", are enduringly underlined in the essays which follow.

Allyson Kreuiter, whose (as yet unpublished) PhD thesis of 2014 (University of Amsterdam) "The Elegant Velvet Glove"[34] focusses on Durrell's representation of a "Gothicised Female Form", contributes four essays which develop that thesis and bear very pertinently on Durrell's sense of the uncanny as "Other". She also suggests very persuasively that the "palimpsest" of *Justine* and *Balthazar* can help us to understand the relationship between "real" and "unreal" – a valuable signpost towards an interpretation of Durrell's use of Relativity.

Ravindran Nambiar, who is already distinguished as the author of *Indian Metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's Novels* (2014) has explored Durrell's relationship to, and reading of, D.H. Lawrence, who, although a haunting presence in the *Quartet* (appearing in *Balthazar* and discussed in *Clea* ["Brother Ass"] and *Mountolive*), has not been explored in this way, making a link between Durrell's *Quartet* and his *Avignon Quintet* – the comparison of Lawrence's "Connie" with Durrell's "Constance'.

Frank Kersnowski is one of the doyens of Durrell scholarship. His friendship with Durrell is well-known (and indicated in the letter from Durrell included here). Kersnowski also edited *Into the Labyrinth* (1989) with important contributions by (among others) Ian MacNiven, James A. Brigham, Jean Blot (that is, Alexandre Blokh) and an invaluable discussion between Marthe Nochy and Kersnowski's wife, the late Alice Hughes.

It is a pleasure to welcome a younger scholar, Bartolo Casiraghi, whose comparison of Durrell and Umberto Eco lends a new dimension to the pursuit of semiotics in approaching Durrell's *meanings*, the nature of Indeterminacy and the relationship between text and reader.

Two essays by Kersnowski which do not bear directly on the *Quartet* are also included here, since his exploration of Durrell's Gnosticism and his view of *Tunc-Nunquam* enable us to better appreciate the way Durrell approached all his fiction. His deeper reading of Jung in relation to *Tunc-Nunquam* is invaluable (as is his identification of a possible candidate for the character of Koepgen).

Kersnowski's "reconsideration" of *The Alexandria Quartet* gave this collection its initial impetus; his idiosyncratic yet utterly plausible interpretations of Durrell's work – attested by Durrell himself – lend an authority to a series of explorations which it has been my privilege to bring together.

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[34] A. Kreuiter, "The Elegant Velvet Glove: a textual and visual reading of the Gothicised Female Form in Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*".

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PART ONE:

ESSAYS BY ALLYSON KREUITER

CHAPTER 1

THE URBAN GOTHIC CITY IN LAWRENCE DURRELL'S *THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET*

According to Robert Mighall, the urban Gothic is more than just a work set in a city, rather the city needs to possess a "concentration of memories and historical associations" that are found in architectural and topographical forms.[1] This landscape should provide for a "fearful sense of historical inheritance […] with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space".[2] In this chapter I will examine how urban Gothic themes such as a sense of claustrophobic enclosure, the active agency of the city, the haunting return of the past, and abjection are significant to the representation of Durrell's Alexandria. The concept of abjection detailed by Julia Kristeva in her work *Powers of Horror* (1982) will be central to my exploration of Durrell's Alexandria as an urban Gothic space, one that is at once menacing and inviting. The abject as productive of an uncanny effect of horror that threatens the certainty of the self, feeds into the idea of the dread and anxiety of the uncanny and the Gothic with their disruption of the familiar, that is accompanied by a sense of something loathsome and a compulsion to repeat. Therefore, the abject and the uncanny underpin my exploration of Alexandria as an urban Gothic space. Consequently, my contention throughout this chapter is that Durrell's city is an active urban Gothic space, which functions as an uncanny mechanism of return.

Although the city in *The Alexandria Quartet* has received a great deal of scholarly attention as an urban landscape, there has been limited engagement with the urban Gothic tropes that I consider to be present in Durrell's representation of the city.[3] My reading of Alexandria as an urban Gothic environment will, however, only consider the city as a fictional and

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[1] R. Mighall, "Gothic Cities", p. 57.

[2] Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London*, p. xix.

[3] See Morrison (*A Smile in His Mind's Eye*) and Bowker (*Through the Dark Labyrinth*) who briefly touch on Gothic aspects in Durrell.

subjective creation across the three novels, *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958) and *Clea* (1960), which Darley narrates. John Rodenbeck has noted that the "verisimilitude of Durrell's version of Alexandria has never had defenders".[4] Mahmoud Manzaloui, in his 1962 article "Curate's Egg: An Alexandrian Opinion of Durrell's Quartet", criticised Durrell's representation of Alexandria as a "renchérisement of traditional western pseudo-orientalism".[51] Praising Durrell's evocation of Alexandria, Soad Hussein Sobhy says that it represents an "ingenious use of Alexandria as metaphor". This concept of Alexandria as metaphor has also been emphasised by Richard Pine who indicates that "place becomes not simply *a* metaphor, but *the* metaphor".[6] Linda Stump Rachidi notes that it is Darley's memories of the city, reflecting his subjective experiences there, that provide the focus of the narrative and which are not an objective picture of the real city of Alexandria.[7] Sobhy posits that the Alexandria of the *Quartet* is a mythical metaphor and "open to various interpretations which are all equally true and equally limited".[8] In line with Sobhy's idea of the city being open to various interpretations, my chapter will not discuss the "real" cultural, political or historical aspects that might inform Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria as being outside its aims. Instead, through a close textual reading, I will explore how the metaphorical Alexandria of Darley's imagination is turned into an uncanny urban Gothic site.[9]

Sara Wasson, in her "Gothic Cities and Suburbs 1880-Present", indicates that the Gothic has always been associated with a sense of being perpetually haunted by the past and is a spatiality that is often conceived as being claustrophobic and imprisoning.[10] Commenting on Durrell's narrative technique in the *Quartet*, James Gifford has remarked on what he terms the "repetition compulsion" and "overlapping narrative moments" of

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[4] J. Rodenbeck, "Alexandria in Cavafy, Durrell and Tsirkas", p. 145.

[5] M. Manzaloui, "Curate's Egg", p. 252. Important as the concept of Orientalism is to an analysis of Durrell's tetralogy, an in-depth engagement with this discourse remains outside the scope of this chapter (for explorations of Orientalism in Durrell's narrative see Halim (2013), Boone (2001), Sobhy (1995/6; 1998), Gifford (2001; 1999) and Said (1979)).

[6] R. Pine, *Lawrence Durrrell: the Mindscape*, p. 242.

[7] L.S. Rachidi, "Durrell's City as Interior Space", p. 34.

[8] S. Sobhy, "Alexandria and Groddeck's It", p. 26.

[9] For discussions of cultural and political discourses surrounding Durrell's depiction of Alexandria see amongst others Haag (2006; 2004), Rodenbeck (2001), MacNiven (1998), Halim (2013) and Gifford (2012)).

[10] S. Wasson, "Gothic Cities and Suburbs 1880-Present", p. 132.

this work and relates this layering to the concept of the palimpsest.[11] In contrast to Gifford's employment of the device of the palimpsest, I argue that this repetition of situations and events is a Gothic technique that provides strangeness and a sense of uncanny terror to the narrative construction of the urban Gothic space of Alexandria. Within the confining alleys that the character Darley describes, there subsists a sense of the familiar that is unfamiliar and of the abjectly disturbing. The city remains a liminal space which seems to define itself by its own otherness.[12] Alexandria is thus situated in the narrative as an unknowable and active presence that continually acts to ensnare Darley in the "iron chains of memory".[13]

Scripting his memories of the city, Darley notes that "the taste of this writing should have taken something from its living subjects – their breath, skin, voices – weaving them into the supple tissues of human memory" (*Q*: 20). Memory seems to drain the essence from its living subjects, transforming them into commodified textual objects, the offspring of the city. These characters seem part of a story that they did not consciously choose and the narrative becomes what Sara Wasson calls "a story controlled by an unknown agency that may well be malevolent".[14] It is the feminised corporeality of the city that renders this urban Gothic space as different and dangerously Other and in possession of what Richard Pine refers to as a "cunning and a discrimination in its pleasures and disasters which equips it as both a sexual and an intellectual mistress".[15] Indeed, Durrell chooses to gender the city of Alexandria as a feminine space. Corinne Alexandre-Garner writes that Durrell's Alexandria is "Alternately virgin and whore, Alexandria is not however Babylon. Lascivious, admittedly, she is deflowered by the writer who metaphorically fecundates her, so that she carries within her all the fictional characters who live and die at her breast."[16]

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[11] J. Gifford, "Real and Unreal Cities: the Modernist Origins of Durrell's Alexandria", pp. 14-15.

[12] See Maria Belville, "Zones of Uncanny Specrality: the City in Postmodern Literature", p. 604.

[13] L. Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* [one-volume edition, 1962], p. 17; references to the one-volume edition of *The Alexandria Quartet* appear parenthetically in the text as (*Q*: --).

[14] S. Wasson, *Urban Gothic*, p. 111.

[15] R. Pine, op. cit., p. 202.

[16] C. Alexandre-Garner, *Le Quatuor d'Alexandrie*, p. 209; my translation [Tour à tour vierge et putain, Alexandrie n'est pourtant pas Babylone. Lascive certes, elle est deflorée par l'écrivain qui la féconde métaphoriquement et ce qu'elle porte en elle ce sont tous les personages de la fiction qui s'animent et meurent en son sein.]

Darley's reaction to this city is marked by a deep ambivalence when he refers to her as "poetical mother-city exemplified in the names and faces which made up her history" (*Q*: 234) but also terms her this "whore among cities" (*Q*: 217). The body of the city becomes a "desirable and terrifying […] fascinating and abject […] maternal body".[17] Appropriated as a feminine terrain, Alexandria is both the known and the unknown Other. Not only is she Darley's mother figure; she is also a locus of fear and horror. Catherine Nash suggests that this fear and desire are imbricated with the lack and loss figured in the masculine.[18] This fear and desire evoke an "overflow into disgust and terror" in Darley for the city (*Q*: 26). I suggest that Darley's response is one that Kristeva argues is central to abjection where a thing is perceived as loathsome or horrifying and the "I" attempts to expel it from itself: "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*".[19] Marking the fragile division between the inside and outside of the body, the abject represents the horror associated with the fear of loss of identity and death. Darley fears the cityscape because it does indeed threaten the disruption of "identity, system, order" and shows no respect for "borders, positions, rules".[20] Alexandria acts as an intimate aspect of Darley's memories and has been incorporated into his self, yet is also the foreign malignant object which, through the writing down of his memories, he is forcibly trying to eject. Darley's ambivalence towards the otherness of the city he has feminised is thus revelatory of the uncanny horror posed by this space and the threat it represents to the certainty of his subjectivity.[21] Yet, Darley can still observe that he and the other characters, remain "children of our landscape; it dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it" (*Q*: 39-40). Darley considers himself and his friends as being mere pawns of the city who uses them as "its flora" in an experiment during which they partook of "conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own: beloved Alexandria" (Q: 17).

Darley's own feelings towards the city are abjectly equivocal. While he remains her child and considers her as his own beloved cityscape, he is in equal measure repulsed by the ancient corruption he perceives in the "thousand dust-tormented streets" where "the incubation of a human misery of such proportions that one is aghast, and all one's

[17] Roger Dadoun, "Fetishism in the Horror Film", p. 54.
[18] C. Nash, "Reclaiming Vision: looking at landscape and the body", p. 155.
[19] J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.
[20] Ibid., p. 4.
[21] See Julian Wolfreys, *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*, p. 3.

feelings overflow into disgust and terror" (Q: 17, 26). In a co-mingle of feelings of horror and abject repulsion, Darley realises that his actions are dictated by the urban space of the city that is intent on denying him his own self. Manipulating her inhabitants, the city forces them to become a part of her abject landscape, one that is filled with the "politics of love, the intrigues of desire, good and evil, virtue and caprice, love and murder" (Q: 216). Darley's representation of Alexandria reveals her as a ruthless sentient entity, which Lionel Trilling writes possesses "its own way and its own rights, its own life and its own secret will to which the life and the will of the individual are subordinate".[22] Critics such as Trilling and Pine consider Alexandria as the dominant force within the narrative, "the controlling myth, the sole reality", one against which the characters are powerless and unable to exert any purposive agency, remaining merely vehicles for this abject and terrifying Urban Gothic landscape's destructive self-interest.[23] This feminised urban Gothic cityscape with its intimate connection to Darley, has become a space of active horror in which the familiar is rendered frightening and loathsome and, I suggest, is synonymous for Darley with "a radical evil" that needs to be suppressed.[24]

A degenerate urban Gothic landscape, Alexandria seems to invite a similar psychological and physical degeneration of its human inhabitants.[25] This degeneracy is apparent in the disintegration of the city's own body, visible in the description of the decay found in the buildings and streets of quotidian life where "the streets […] with their tattered rotten supercargo of houses […] keeling over. Shuttered balconies swarming with rats […] Peeling walls leaning drunkenly to east and west of their true centre of gravity" (*Q*: 26). The narrator's description is filled with a sense of repulsion for this decaying space that contains elements of biological disease in the bodies of the "swarming rats" and the "black ribbon of flies attaching itself to the lips and eyes […] flies everywhere" (*Q*: 26). It is as though the city is emphasising the fragility and precariousness of the built environment and the promise of contagion and death it holds for its inhabitants. These disintegrating human constructions seem to point to the possible "psychological crumbling" of those who dwell in the city's urban Gothic space.[26] The slum-like streets and houses hold the horror of contamination and a loss of security that seems to threaten the idea of civilisation. Yet the labyrinthine alleys through which a myriad of living

[22] L. Trilling, "The Quartet: Two Reviews", p. 60.
[23] R. Pine, op. cit., p. 232.
[24] J. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 70.
[25] S. Wasson, "Gothic Cities", p. 132.
[26] Ibid.

bodies throng are firmly contrasted with the "hinterland" in which black, winding and decay-filled alleys, with "smashed and tumbled masonry, of abandoned and disembowelled houses", are located (*Q*: 318). The word "disembowelled" shocks the reader. The houses, like an animal or human, seem to have been slaughtered as punishment. The savagery of the word "disembowelled" reveals the destructive forces of entropy in this Gothic city which appears "a place of ruins" and in a state of "death-in-life".[27] These ruins do not represent sentient entities, but the uncanny and squalid Gothic wreckage of the city's body.[28] In the labyrinthine alleys and the dark entropic hinterland resides what Wasson refers to as the Gothic's representation of "the experience of space as claustrophobic and imprisoning".[29] Hala Halim, commenting on Durrell's representation of this depiction of the slum quarter, indicates that "the adjectives allocated [...] belong to a register of squalor and animalism, and the description is from the vantage point of a decidedly voyeuristic foreign sojourner […] never from the point of view of the inhabitants of the area."[30] Sobhy considers that depictions such as these in the *Quartet* are founded in a "vocabulary of Orientalism".[31] Contained in the overloaded orientalised descriptions of the space and topography of the city lurk uncanny qualities.

According to Freud, the uncanny is related to what is frightening and arouses dread and horror and leads back to what is known of the old and long familiar.[32] For Freud the uncanny became a mechanism of return and the compulsion to repeat, relive a past experience and a return of the repressed caused by an anxiety associated with the past.[33] As Elizabeth Bronfen notes the uncanny "entails anxieties about fragmentation, about disruption or destruction of personal stability, bodily integrity, immortal individuality".[34] Similarly, the abject blurs the clear demarcation between the self and the other and results in a sense of disorientation that threatens identity, bodily integrity and a disruption of the self.[35] All the characters in the *Quartet* become a part of an unknown and terrifying agency that intensifies their anxieties and individual identity crises. One of the characters,

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[27] Alexandra Warwick, "Urban Gothic", p. 251.
[28] S. Wasson, *Urban Gothic*, p. 146.
[29] S. Wasson, "Gothic Cities", p. 132.
[30] H. Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism*, p. 190.
[31] S. Sobhy, "The Fabulator's Perspective on Egypt in *The Alexandria Quartet*", p. 88.
[32] S. Freud, "The Uncanny", pp. 193-195.
[33] Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature*, p. 14.
[34] E. Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, p. 113.
[35] J. Wolfreys, op. cit., p.3.

Nessim, wonders whether the "discordance of their lives" is merely "a measure of the anxiety which they had inherited from the city or the age" (*Q*: 147). Haunted by its many pasts that destabilise the characters' lives, Alexandria renders its familiar space into an uncanny one that seems stained with an "ancient poison".[36]

Darley comes to believe that every event that occurs within the space of the city is merely "part of the historical fabric of the place […] part and parcel of the city's behaviour, completely in keeping with everything that had gone before, and everything that would follow it" (*Q*: 154). The terrors of this city's past and present are dictated by this powerful urban Gothic locus, which usurps human consciousness and will and governs and controls the historical past and the present strife its inhabitants continue to re-enact. Darley, in the reformulation of his relationship with the city, concludes that the people he knew cannot be considered "men and women any longer […] but as being unconsciously made part of place, buried to the waist among the ruins of a single city, steeped in its values" (*Q*: 369). Identity is merely a fiction because everything is lived through the will of the city. Absorbed into the city, men and women become merely aspects of her Gothic otherness. Alexandria constructs and bestows upon these beings not only their morals, but their acts of folly and deceit and Darley sees them as puppets projected by the

> white city itself whose pearly skies are broken in spring only by the white stalks of the minarets and the flocks of pigeons turning in clouds of silver and amethyst; whose viridian and black marble harbour-water reflects the snouts of foreign men-of-war […] swallowing their own inky reflections […] those sullen preaching guns against the yellow metal of the lake and the town which breaks open at sunset like a rose. (*Q*: 280)

Envisioned as white, the colour of purity and glittering mica, this portrayal of Alexandria is reminiscent of Italo Calvino's description of the city Zobeide in *Invisible Cities*, which he refers to as "the white city".[37] Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria juxtaposes the whiteness of the city to the "viridian and black marble harbour-water" with its "inky reflections". Tinged with chiaroscuro overtones of dark green and black, the water seems to enforce the sinister nature of the "foreign men-of-war" that float upon it. The power of the West is exemplified in the steel and death-dealing ships, but the presence of the foreign sailors is indicative of the

[36] S. Wasson, "Gothic Cities", p. 132.
[37] I. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 39.