Silence and Psychology in Claude Vincendon's *Golden Silence*

(Durrell Studies 9)

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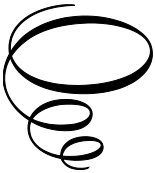

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Series: Durrell Studies

Edited by Richard Pine

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-4327-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4327-0

Figure 1: Claude in her prime

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

For a note on the Cover Image, see page xxix, note 30.

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To be contacted by Sibylle Vincendon with the typescript of an unpublished novel by her aunt, Claude Vincendon, was an occasion of revelation. Claude was the third wife of Lawrence Durrell, and therefore someone with whose work I was familiar; moreover, her place in Durrell's life, until her premature death at the age of forty-one, was more significant than that of any of his other wives, companions, lovers or other liaisons. The significance of an unpublished novel by Claude (after the rapid succession of her three novels in the late 1950s) was, therefore, immense.

Claude Vincendon (1925-1967) was a writer of Alexandrian origin, a member of the Menasce family who occupied a central place in Alexandrian society. Her relationship with Lawrence Durrell began in 1955 and they were married in 1961. She was the author of three published novels (under the name "Claude"): *Mrs O'* (1957), *The Rum Go* (1958), and *A Chair for the Prophet* (1959) and a translation of Marcel Rouff's *The Passionate Epicure* (1961), all published by Faber and Faber. Other works are discussed in the main Introduction to *Golden Silence.*

In preparing this work for publication, I owe immense debts of gratitude: firstly to Sibylle Vincendon herself, not only for entrusting the book to the Durrell Studies series, but in answering what must have seemed an endless series of queries about Claude's life and her writing style. Barry Forde, Claude's son, was – as we explain in the details of the provenance of *Golden Silence* – instrumental in bringing the typescript to light, and also in transmitting, *via* Sibylle Vincendon, a notebook his mother kept while composing *Golden Silence*. My old friend David Green, who has contributed a tender-hearted yet objective perspective on the life Claude experienced in Sydney with her first husband, Tim Forde, has not only been supportive throughout, but was fortunate to meet Claude's grand-daughters Claudia and Charlotte Mitchell (the children of Claude's and Tim's daughter, the late Diana Mitchell) who were instrumental in identifying locations in Sydney and in providing family photographs which appear here.

Marc Chaumeil brought his professional skill to reproducing Claude's family photographs, and Denise Tart both researched images of

Sydney and took the photos on pp. 102 and 128.

I am grateful to them all for their guidance, wisdom and enthusiasm, in agreeing to the publication of *Golden Silence* in this critical format, and for allowing me to provide the editorial introductions necessary to open up this novel, set in the 1940s and 1950s, to a readership which might otherwise never have known the richness and the depths of Claude's text.

Richard Pine
Durrell Library of Corfu

INTRODUCTION

The provenance of the typescript

At Christmas 1984, Lawrence Durrell sent Claude's son Barry Forde, an unpublished typescript written by Claude. It was a novel, titled *Gilt Silence*, signed with the pseudonym of Jason Thorne. In the letter accompanying the parcel, Durrell wrote that he had found the manuscript "in an old trunk". "She did not want me to see it before publication and I have consequently never read it, respecting her wishes." This is almost certainly true.

Barry Forde re-discovered the typescript in the late 2010s.

The typescript: "*Gilt Silence* by Jason Thorne" is dedicated to "Eric and Serga" (Claude's brother and sister-in-law) as a wedding present; this indicates that it was written (or at least completed) at the time of their marriage in 1964. But, given that her previous three novels were published in consecutive years (1957, 1958, 1959), it is also possible that she had been writing this earlier than the mid-1960s. However, Claude had been preoccupied with other matters (including her translations from French) ; a letter from Durrell to Henry Miller in February 1964 states "Claude has nearly finished a new novel", and it is almost certain that this refers to the present book.[1] Eric Vincendon and Serga Melikian married (in Teheran) on 21 October 1964, so the dedication as a "belated" wedding present suggests that she had not in fact finished the novel by that date.

At this time Claude was also translating *Tutankhamen* by Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, published in 1964, which had occupied her the previous year. The work of translation may in this case have contributed to the delay in completing *Golden Silence*.

I received the typescript from Barry Forde and the present version incorporates the author's manuscript corrections. There were no indications as to chapter-endings. In some places the section of the typescript stops in mid-page and is resumed on the next page, suggesting a chapter-break (these might also be simply the author stopping work at the end of the day and resuming with a fresh page next day); at others a row of asterisks or similar punctuation suggests a break in the narrative (which is very similar

[1] *The Durrell-Miller Letters 1935-1980* (Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 400.

to the way Durrell divided his chapters into sections). It has therefore been necessary to divide the novel into four sections (see "Plot Summary" below) and to "punctuate" each section with separate chapters.

The most significant point is the *title*: Claude's "Gilt Silence" is inspired by the French saying: **"***La parole est d'argent mais le silence est d'or*" (words are silver, but silence is golden). "Gilt", to an anglophone, evokes ambivalent feelings: while "gilt-edged" suggests a guarantee of durability, "gilt" as a substitute for "gold" has a pejorative ring: therefore, with the agreement of the copyright holders (the descendants of Claude Vincendon), the decision has been taken to change the original title to *Golden Silence.*

Plot Summary

Part One: Alexandria

Jason Thorne, age thirty-eight at the opening of the story, is a (wartime only) Commander in the Royal Navy (in his "real" life he is a novelist and playwright). He is stationed in Alexandria in 1944 (near the end of the second world war) and, through the agency of a local doctor, Georges Tallien, meets the Vandori family (a Swiss father and a Greek or Syrian wife), whose daughter, Gloria (aged 18) is dumb – due, her mother believes, to the "Evil Eye" having been exercised by a malign influence while she was in her cradle.

Jason's cousin, Robin (age 24 or 25), is coincidentally in hospital in Alexandria, having lost his hearing in an explosion in the Western Desert. Gloria and Robin are introduced (by Jason) and fall immediately in love. With Jason's support (and acting as chaperon), Gloria and Robin establish a means of communication.

Interlude

They marry and, after visiting Robin's family in England, go to live in Australia, where Robin has been offered a job as an architect.

Part Two: Australia

There are amusing and penetrating sketches of post-war Sydney and its expat British immigrants, derived from Claude's own time in Sydney with her first husband in 1949-1953. Gloria's speech is restored due to a freak

accident. The couple return to Alexandria, where, due to an unfortunate misunderstanding, Robin is killed in a street accident. Jason (who in the interval has married Joanna) narrates this by means of letters he receives from and about the couple, and from a visit he pays them in Sydney, when he observes slight difficulties in the marriage, emanating from Gloria's recovery of her speech.

Part Three: Nemesis

Gloria returns to England, staying with Jason and his wife (he having resumed his career as a writer). On a visit to London, Gloria once more loses her speech facility, due to another freak accident, which she and Jason refer to as "Nemesis". The story ends with her return to Alexandria and her re-marriage to a Syrian businessman.

General Introduction

This set of studies, concentrating on Claude Vincendon's novel *Golden Silence*, explores the themes evident throughout the novel: the comparative values of speech and silence; the inevitability of fate; and the different expectations of life of the principal characters.

In this brief over-view I will identify these themes in terms of the general narrative, and will return to them in greater detail as we reach each stage of the narrative. There are, however further aspects of these themes which should be identified at this stage, because the reader familiar with Claude's style and approach to life in her published novels (*Mrs O'*, *The Rum Go*, and *A Chair for the Prophet*) may be surprised by the thread of darkness running throughout *Golden Silence* which is not evident to such a degree in its predecessors.

Golden Silence is a self-contained novel that has a beauty all its own, but which has thematic connections with, and repercussions on, historical, social and psychological issues. It is set in Alexandria in 1944, then in Australia in the immediate post-war period, and finally in England. It is "psychological" in that the narrator, Jason Thorne (who is a writer), imagines that he is composing a story in which the characters are both real and imagined: he himself is both a central player/actor and the author. His narrative sets out the context within which the psychology of the characters (principally Gloria Vandori – a mute 18-year-old; Jason's cousin Robin; Sara Vandori – Gloria's mother – and Dr Georges Tallien) is explored. His frequent allusions to the characters as part of his drama propel the storyline from its opening to its conclusion.

"Writing about anything is writing about loss".[2] The narrative of *Golden Silence* is permeated by the sense of loss: of Gloria's capacity for speech, and, later, the loss of her muteness which has, it seems, unexpected consequences. And, on a different plane of consciousness, we read of the loss of different ways of life – in the societies of Britain and Egypt, and in the personalities involved in the narrative.

Furthermore, we also learn how a secret can be told, and that when it is spoken it loses its secrecy. A journey, as Chaucer demonstrates, is the occasion for the telling of stories, each of which contains a secret, the telling of which involves the crossing of a threshold or border. In *Golden Silence* Jason Thorne, arrived in Alexandria, crosses his first threshold (as far as this narrative is concerned) in his introduction to the Vandori household, and his encounter with Gloria Vandori (the daughter of the house), which precipitates the entire unfolding of secret places and the passions which they protect; and by "passion" I mean both *agápe* or respect and *éros* or the erotic. The silence at the heart of Gloria's existence is a secret waiting to be told.

The crossing of thresholds or borders (on the physical level, Jason's entry into Alexandria, Robin's and Gloria's into Australia, Gloria's into Jason's and Joanna's home in England and her final journey home to Alexandria at the book's end) and on a metaphysical level (from Gloria's muteness into speech, and from speech returning to silence), creates borderlands, *between*-spaces where meaning lurks, seeking metaphors. To cross a border is to find oneself in a new and potentially dangerous, or hostile, and uncertain place.

The journey becomes the message, the metaphysical crossing of the border, or boundary, in the shock of Gloria's "No!"

Borders – spatial, conceptual, spiritual and psychological – play a crucial part in the shaping of the dynamics of identity. The crossing of borders affects meaning, perception and sense of identity. The *border-land* between two places of meaning is an indeterminate space, where those meanings become blurred, indistinct, vulnerable to misuse and misunderstanding. To find oneself in a borderland – a waiting-room for meaning – is common throughout *Golden Silence*: for Jason and Robin (in Alexandria), for Gloria (in England and Australia), even for Jason's brief adventure with the prostitute in Malta – an entertaining interlude which also has its compassionate and joyful aspect. In such a borderland, the individual loses status and becomes the outsider, the stranger, the exile,

[2] Rony Alfandary, "Leaving Home and Adolescence" in R. Pine and V. Konidari (eds.), *Islands of the Mind: psychology, literature and biodiversity* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), p. 176.

and is defined by *difference*.

Jason, Robin and Gloria each has his or her own border-land, a space where they are searching for meaning: Jason so that he can come to terms with the meaning of his life as a writer (so central to the "plot" of *Golden Silence*), so that, at the centre of the story, Robin can stutter his way towards an understanding of his wife. Love itself is a language for stuttering.

In the youthful passion of Gloria and Robin; to a much more subdued extent in Jason's marriage to Joanna; in Jason's unrequited passion for Sara Vandori (Gloria's mother); and in the requited affair of Georges Tallien and Sara, we meet different varieties of *love* and the ways in which love can both manipulate and be manipulated by its characters. As Ian McEwan reminds us (in his novel *Enduring Love*), love is both enduring *and* to be endured. Its effect on Claude's characters is in a sense an index to the play of fate which, like the darkness, runs throughout the novel.

Love, and its metaphors, becomes almost as important as the Greek tragedy which we observe; *almost*, because, in its persistence and inflictions, it is the central tool by which that tragedy operates.

There are two major thematic elements which create an "atmosphere" around this storyline: firstly, the ambience of Alexandria, in wartime, and its cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural life-style, the end of which is anticipated with the growing Arab/Islamic sense of nationalism. The first is suggested by Sara Vandori (the mother) who embodies the spirit of the Levant; the second by her son, who advocates the expatriation from Egypt of the family's assets as he foresees another "Arab Spring" – which in fact came with Gamal Abdel Nasser, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, and subsequent developments. (This reminds us of the same atmosphere evoked by Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet* and confirms that his impressions – often thought to be those of an outsider – correspond closely with those of Claude, an Alexandrian by birth and family background.)

The second thematic "atmosphere" is the idea of the "Evil Eye" as a phobia in Levantine folklore which is central to the muteness of the baby Gloria, the incident through which she regains her speech, the accidental death of Robin and the final accident in which she once more loses her speech.

Claude, a biography by Sibylle Vincendon

What should we call her? What was the name of Lawrence Durrell's third wife? Claude Marie Vincendon, according to the few specialists who wrote about her, seemingly unaware that, in those days, most French Catholic families gave the name of the Virgin to all of their children, including the boys? Should we stick to Claude Vincendon, after her father's name? She chose to sign her books "Claude", an epicene name that hid even her gender. This did not make the journalists' task any easier. In the *New York Times* of 29 June 1958, the critic Horace Reynolds thought he saw in the author of *Mrs O'* an "anonymous continental lady", without specifying the continent itself. Even more bizarre, in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 18 April 1958, one could read a long eulogy of Lawrence Durrell's *Balthazar* next to a catch-all in which Claude's *The Rum Go*, described as the "lightest and most feminine of soufflés", was granted no more than ten lines. Obviously, the press didn't know much.

Let's stick to Claude. Claude was born in Alexandria, Egypt, on 22 April 1925. She died in Geneva, Switzerland, on 1 January 1967, at the age of forty-one. She was my father's elder sister, my aunt. Most of the information in this short biography is family-sourced as there is not much to find elsewhere. One will search in vain in the depths of the internet and without bringing a lot to light. Concealment was Claude's doing, she's the one to blame but had she any other choice? Anonymity was the only way to avoid a biased judgment of her talent as a writer as if she were trying to profit from her husband's fame. Claude was far too independent to indulge in such compromising behaviour. Her whole life proves it.

She was the descendant of the unlikely meeting of two very different family branches. Her father, a Frenchman named Jacques Vincendon, was the son and grandson of army generals, raised in a very traditional, conservative and Catholic atmosphere. The family roots were in the Pays Basque, southwest of France, but he grew up in Paris. As a young banker, he was sent to Indochina, in those days a French colony and, on the way out or the way back, he stopped in Alexandria. As was customary in the bourgeoisie, he was invited into the high society and, most probably, to the Menasce house. We can assume he met Claire de Menasce, Claude's mother, in the course of this mundane activity.

The Menasce House, on rue Rassafa, was the home of the baron Félix de Menasce and his wife Rosette [Fig. 3]. The Menasces were an influential Jewish family, who had settled in Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1874, Claire's ancestor, Yacoub Levi Menasce, had been granted the title of baron by Franz-Joseph, the Austro-Hungarian

emperor, probably as a reward for his wise investment advice. The Menasce family was a benefactor for Alexandria, building schools, houses, a hospital, facilities devoted to every community, as well as a temple, the Menasce Synagogue. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several Menasces were presidents of the Jewish community in Alexandria, including Félix de Menasce, Claude's grandfather. This important function had nothing to do with religion, no Menasce being particularly religious and Félix even less so.

Moreover, his first two children were not Jewish at all! In the early years of the twentieth century, Félix was in his forties, a widower and father to a first son named Georges. Despite his family background, despite his role in the Jewish community of Alexandria, he fell in love with a Catholic Franco-Spanish girl, Rosette Larriba. Soon, they had a first child, Claire, born in Paris, and a second one, Jean, born two years later in Alexandria. A mixed marriage was unthinkable for a man of his position. Eventually, Rosette converted to Judaism and the two were married. The conventions were intact and the extra-marital children were accepted. But Claire, Claude's mother-to-be, was not "technically" a Jew. Neither were her own children: Claude and her two brothers, Daniel (born 1927) and Eric (born 1929). Was this scandalous? Not at all. The situation fitted quite well with what Alexandria symbolised in the interwar period: a place of tolerance, mixed origins and faiths. And sometimes, hectic destinies. Including Claude's.

She was a beautiful little blue-eyed blond, as numerous pictures show in the family albums. The parents spoke French, the nanny (Polly O'Meara) English, the entourage both languages plus Italian, Arabic, occasionally Spanish ... At the age of eleven, as was customary in wealthy Francophile families, Claude was enrolled at the Lycée Français d'Alexandrie. This institution was deeply secular, consistent with the Menasce family's relaxed attitude towards religion. She was a brilliant pupil, who enjoyed reading, discovering fields of knowledge. She developed witticisms which were the "trademark" of this cosmopolitan high society. She was brilliant. In 1943, Claude obtained the Baccalauréat, ranked "good", a source of family pride. Of course, going abroad to further her education was impossible during these war years, but in any case, the girl had other plans. She decided to apply for a job at the Navy supplies, the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean being stationed in Alexandria. Claude wanted to be part of the mobilisation and the adult world as fast as possible. She was too young for the Female Service and wound up as a "junior typist".

The family was appalled, but obviously she was thrilled. Years later, Claude would write a witty and funny novel based on this experience, *The Rum Go*, her second one, published in 1958. In the book, one of the main characters goes as "the senior man" and we may assume that he was inspired by her boss, Tim Forde. In real life, Forde was a roughly forty-year-old man, one of the officers in charge of the navy supplies, a position of some importance in the military, though not so much in Alexandria's social life. He was married with a wife and two sons in England. Was Claude aware of this background? Perhaps, but this did not prevent her from having an affair with him, and more than a crush. In 1946, she was twenty and expecting. Claire's discovery of her daughter's pregnancy in the elegant fitting rooms of Jean Dessès Couture in Paris, when Claude suddenly couldn't button up a bespoke dress, remained for years an oft-repeated family story. Despite his matrimonial situation, Forde was reliable. They settled in London, at 303, Old Brompton Rd. In 1947, Diana, their first child, was born. Tim obtained a divorce, and Claude and he married.

From that point on, Claude's life turned into a never ending trip. Back in civilian life, Tim Forde was always looking for a more rewarding job, wherever it might take them. Claude followed but, in a way, she was nomadic too. In the 1950s, Alexandria could no longer be considered home for Europeans – except the stubborn ones who clung to colonialism – and certainly not for Jews. But London was only a first step. Tim's and Claude's next stop was Cork, Ireland. They ran a pub at 4, Grand Parade, Cork's main street. Nowadays, this lovely four-storey house is listed in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage and home to a McDonald's. Daughter to one of the most notable Jewish families in Alexandria, Claude ended up a publican in an utmost Catholic country. The atmosphere was far from jolly, indeed rather tragic. It nourished her first novel, *Mrs O'*, published in 1957.

No sooner had Claude mastered the art of uncorking a barrel of stout than the couple were on their way out of Ireland. They decided to make a new start in Australia where, in 1949, their second child, Barry, was born. According to family lore, Tim had been offered an opportunity to become part of Sydney's docks management.[3] But tracing Claude is a challenge. Michael Haag, author of *Alexandria, City of Memory*, writes, "They opened a green grocery in the Sydney suburb of Vaucluse." Who to believe? Both. According to David Green, who has tracked Claude's life

[3] The Sydney docks were administered by the State government, so that Tim Forde was a government contractor.

in Australia, the couple lived at 16, East Crescent Street, McMahon's Point, "an impressive three-storey townhouse which would have had in 1949 panoramic views on Sydney Harbour, the great bridge and, importantly, most of Sydney's dockyard areas as they were at the time." [Figs. 14, 15] An ideal spot for a dock manager. But the Fordes also settled in Vaucluse, at 14, Tower Street. The green grocery was located at 171 New South Head Road.[4] Whatever the case, they stayed in Australia from early 1949 (when they disembarked at Sydney on 3 February) to May 1953.[5] Once more, Claude found in the place inspiration for literature. Australia stands as a character in itself in *Golden Silence,* her unpublished last novel.

Could she have turned Australian for good? Destiny decided otherwise and brought the Mediterranean back in sight. A job opportunity in Tel Aviv, for Tim as usual, arose thanks to Dr. Fritz Katz, an old family friend from Alexandria. An acquaintance of his had bought an old *pension*, the Dan, and wanted to turn it into a first-class hotel. A managerial position was available for Tim and a job for Claude too. With no more qualifications than she had for the pub, and probably with as much enthusiasm, Claude became the Dan Hotel public relations clerk.

Some sources state that she spent time at a kibbutz but no one in the family remembers such a move. Nonetheless, Claude was deeply attached to Israel, very much in line with her family's Zionism. Haïm Weizmann, future first president of the State of Israel, had been a long-time friend of Félix and Rosette de Menasce, Claude's grandparents. Both Félix and his first son Georges bought land for the future state, helping financially. Félix even acted once as a go-between for Zionists and Palestinians. Claude was fascinated with Israel's start as a new state and one can feel it reading *A Chair for the Prophet*, her third novel, published in 1959.[6] The story takes place in a newly built housing development in the middle of nowhere. The heroine, who sounds much like the author, settles in one of the small concrete cubicles, tries to communicate with her Yiddish-speaking neighbours using a few German words and shares deep reflections about the challenge of initiating a homeland with people coming from everywhere.

I have mentioned Claude's three novels – all published in London by Faber and Faber – as they are related to the places she lived during the

[4] See David Green's essay, below, pp. 137-146.
[5] They sailed from Tilbury on the *Orontes*; initially they stayed at the Manly Hotel before moving to McMahon's Point.
[6] See below (p. xxxiii) for the possible influence of *A Chair for the Prophet* on Lawrence Durrell's *Judith*.

years of her first marriage. But in fact, the writing as well as the publishing took place in the aftermath, in the second part of Claude's life, after she and Tim arrived in Cyprus in 1955. Why Cyprus? Apparently, it was not Tim's move this time. Claude applied for a job at the Cyprus Broadcasting Company, the official radio maintained by the British Foreign Office to spread positive views on the British occupation of the island. According to Michael Haag, Lawrence Durrell, who was director of information, conducted the interview. Was it love at first sight? It was love indeed.

From now on, one might assume that Claude's life, linked with the notorious Durrell, would be better known. But no. Dark spots remain such as this episode in 1955, at the beginning of Claude's and Larry's affair. Tim was offered a managing job for a Bombay hotel. All commentators, including family, affirm that Claude never set foot in India, but once again they are mistaken. She accompanied her husband as a devoted wife, while writing on Airlines Hotel Bombay stationery deeply loving letters to Larry. These few months convinced her that Durrell was the one. Fortunately for Claude, the Bombay hotel proved very disappointing for Tim, "pretty second-rate" according to her. Going back to Cyprus made sense for both, and this same year they separated. The father was given custody of the children, whom he sent to boarding schools. Years later, Claude explained this decision, confessing to a friend that she and Larry "were the guilty party".

At first, the new couple stayed in Cyprus, at Larry's villa in Bellapaix village. In his correspondence with Henry Miller, Durrell describes them writing together, night after night, each on his or her typewriter, contemplating a huge map of Alexandria, following the streets with their fingertips, retrieving lost memories. According to Haag on his blog, "Claude inspired him not only to finish *Justine* but to expand what till then he had intended as only a single novel into a quartet, its span the interwar years and World War II in Alexandria, bringing something to it of her own memories of the city as well as characters and stories from her family history."[7] In Cyprus, Claude herself started writing, always signing her books solely by her first name. She also became a *de facto* editor for Larry. She had a literary eye.

The political situation on the island, with Durrell being a target as a representative of the British authorities, despite his private commitment to the Greek cause, was not sustainable. In Larry's life, leaving the Greek island of Corfu had been a first painful exile during the war. Cyprus was a

[7] See below (p. xxv) on the evolution of *The Alexandria Quartet* and Claude's part in it.

second one. Did Claude suffer? Never, in his correspondence with Miller, does Durrell mention anything about her feelings. They first went to England and spent a few weeks in a cottage in Wiltshire, where Claude took care of Sappho, Larry's second daughter, while her own children were away. A common situation nowadays, not so much so then. Six months later, they moved to the south of France, to Sommières, Gard. A lot has been written about Larry's decision to choose this area, a sort of remembrance of Mediterranean Corfu. Again, what about Claude? Her French roots were on the opposite side of the country, on the Atlantic, in the Pays Basque. The Vincendon branch comes from Saint-Jean-de-Luz, no less charming than Sommières (though rainier).

But obviously, Claude shared Larry's decisions, got along with his selfishness, not to mention his brutality. Maybe staying in the shadow was her choice. Durrell's biographies overflow with the most minute details of Larry's literary life, whereas one has to scratch to find that Claude wrote three novels in three years and translated a lot of writers from French into English. None of her three novels has been republished. Moreover, Durrell leads us on a false path when he writes to Miller that Claude "has just finished a book about the French, entitled *Les Français à table*". In reality, she translated from French into English a huge work about gastronomy, *The French At Table*, written by Raymond Oliver, a famous chef at that time.

Their first dwelling in Sommières, Villa Louis, was more a cabin than a villa. No running water, no heating, life the hard way. After a few months, they left for the "mazet Michel" on the outskirts of Nîmes, a small house built on acres of olive trees, very rustic in the first years, better after improvements. They spent the following seven years there. [Figs. 7, 8] According to Ian MacNiven, Durrell's biographer, Claude's life in mazet Michel was a mix of various devotions: "Claude was superb at the day-to-day management of the household. She kept his financial records, typed most of his manuscripts, absorbed his rages, kept herself attractive to him."

Durrell had been married twice, Claude once and both of them had gone through the hard times of divorce. Larry's resistance to marriage was strong but nonetheless, on 27 March 1961, the two became husband and wife in London. Maybe money issues were at stake, especially for Larry, whose correspondence shows that kind of preoccupation quite often. But getting married may have been, for both of them, an attempt to start anew a somewhat damaged relationship. Claude and Larry were heavy drinkers. During her last years, she endured several health problems and had undergone surgery two or three times. She also suffered from the

mazet's hard life during the winters, having regular bronchitis. Did this declining health incite her to find a more comfortable place to live? In spring 1965, Claude went to an auction in Paris and bought a mansion in Sommières, at 15, route de Saussines. [Fig. 9] "A large comfortable solid vicarage type of thing", wrote Larry to Henry Miller. Claude got the house for a very good price (15,000 pounds at today's value) and paid for it on her own. Claude's son, Barry Forde, is assertive on the point. She was very much involved in the renovation of the Sommières house which, in fact, was hers.

In December 1966, the couple were planning a "real British Christmas" in the new house when, once more, Claude fell sick. Larry cancelled the invitations without telling her. He took her to a clinic in Geneva, hoping it was "a microbe and nothing worse". It proved to be pulmonary cancer. Claude died on 1 January 1967. Larry didn't inform his own two daughters of Claude's death, nor his brother Gerald nor Claude's French family. No ceremony was held. There's no judging someone's way of dealing with grief and Larry's was profound, no doubt. He was petty nonetheless. After Claude's death, Durrell made the children sell the house to him, at the original price. Diana and Barry felt cheated and in no position to fight. Then the successful author of *The Alexandria Quartet* organised a trust in Jersey to avoid paying taxes in France, pretending to stay as a tourist in Sommières though he lived there all year round. Thanks to the late Claude.

Seventeen years later, at Christmas 1984, Durrell sent Barry an unpublished manuscript written by Claude. It was a novel which she had entitled *Gilt Silence*, signed with the pseudonym of Jason Thorne. In the letter he enclosed with the parcel, Larry wrote that he had found the manuscript "in an old trunk". "She did not want me to see it before publication and I have consequently never read it, respecting her wishes." Respecting her wishes? Wasn't Claude's wish to have this book published? Most probably. Published and read.

Editorial introductions by Richard Pine

Claude and Durrell: "working like maniacs"[8]

It is clear from Claude's letters to Durrell during her brief time in Bombay (above, p. xxii)[9] that Durrell was more attractive to her than was Tim Forde. The principal reason for this may have been sexual, but I suspect that it was also a meeting of minds. Claude was an emergent writer, and Durrell, while already established as a poet and essayist, was on the threshold of both achievement and notoriety as the budding author of *The Alexandria Quartet*. He was immediately attracted to Claude, due not only to her great beauty but also, I think, to her Alexandrian background. "A lovely young Alexandrian" who "gave me enough spark to settle down and demolish the book" (as Durrell described Claude to Henry Miller).[10]

He told Miller that Claude is "an Alexandrian Becky Sharp, gay resourceful and good tempered"[11] – a none-too-kind reference to the heroine of Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* (1847), a self-confident and successful woman.[12] In Mary Mollo's words, Claude was "a gold and porcelain creature, delicate as a thrush, strong as a thoroughbred." She thought, given their financial circumstances, that Claude was "brave" and "gallant", "taking the plunge with him to live on a budget of about thirty pounds a month."[13]

Claude, having serendipitously "escaped" from Alexandria through her liaison with, and then marriage to, Tim Forde, re-encountered the city, if only in retrospect, in her new life with Lawrence Durrell. He tells Miller that they sit "over a scale map of Alexandria […] re-tracing the streets with our fingers, recapturing much that I had lost".[14]

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[8] L. Durrell to Richard Aldington, *Literary Lifelines: the Richard Aldington-Lawrence Durrell Correspondence* (Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 31.

[9] Which Claudia Mitchell and Sibylle Vincendon have allowed me to read.

[10] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 279; he was referring to the completion of *Justine*.

[11] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 294.

[12] Becky Sharp, an orphan, is of the lower-class and is determinedly upwardly mobile – so that Claude was quite unlike her in that respect.

[13] M. Mollo, "Larry, My Friend" (in *Twentieth Century Literature* [Lawrence Durrell issue] 33/3 [1987]).

[14] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 279; see also I. MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell: a biography* (Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 431. Michael Haag was, I think, mistaken in giving Claude the credit for Durrell's decision to make a quartet – that is, having written *Justine*, to follow this with three further novels. It may well have been that, in her company and with her active assistance and encouragement, he pursued the writing of *Balthazar*, *Mountolive* and *Clea*, but I am certain that the structure of the

He welcomed her as a fellow-writer, even though she initially posed a dilemma: "a writer with something oddly her own".[15] Her distinct abilities and her style as a writer would be a challenge and a stimulus to him. When they first met, in 1955, and "she was running my French section of Radio Cyprus", she was struggling to become a writer; like Gloria in *Golden Silence*, she had notebooks with drafts of ideas for novels, and Durrell urged her to make these into books.

Within a few months they had left Cyprus and were living in a cottage lent by a Greek friend, in the tiny village of Donhead St Andrew, in Wiltshire, in the west of England, near the city of Shaftesbury. This may have been Claude's only experience of rural England (they stayed there for only a few weeks) where, having already completed *Justine*, he was working on *Balthazar*. Despite the brevity of her acquaintance with rural England, Claude had the ability to describe Robin's home life in *Golden Silence* as well as Gloria's later life with Jason and Joanna. Her capacity to capture not only the "British Way of Life" but also aspects of Jason's very English childhood was remarkable.

Their life together was not only very loving and, as we also know, often punctuated by violent tempers, but it was a power-house of creativity. Durrell wrote to Miller from their cottage in Wiltshire in October 1956, that "Claude and I are […] both working like maniacs on our books".[16] He keeps up a report of their mutual output: he is writing the successors to *Justine* (*Balthazar* through 1957, *Mountolive* begun in 1957 and continued in 1958, and *Clea*, begun in 1958 and completed the following year) while Claude was simultaneously establishing herself further by selling *The Rum Go* to Faber by July 1957 and only five months later she had also sold her third novel (*A Chair for the Prophet*) to Faber. And during this time Claude was not only writing her own books, but typing Durrell's revisions: in 1958 she typed the 140,000 words of *Mountolive* (which is dedicated to her) in, it is said, only ten days.

In September 1958 Claude and Larry moved into the mazet Michel, a small farmhouse near Nîmes. Sibylle Vincendon says that she "hesitates to say that the years at the mazet Michel were the best years of

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Quartet was in his mind from the outset – the "relativity" of the *Quartet* could not have been conceived without the concept of *Justine* being followed by *Balthazar*, for example. Mary Mollo seems to contradict Haag's view, when she tells us that when she received a copy of *Justine* it was inscribed "first stage!" and, when she responded, Durrell told her "Wait for the rest" (in her essay "Larry, My Friend").

[15] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 279.

[16] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 281.

her life".[17] This is due partly to Claude's ill-health, which may have been her reason for purchasing their next house, at Sommières. But the thrill of home-making at the mazet which it represented for Durrell (and it was a new experience for them both) was, I am sure, shared with Claude. "Windy forlorn and rather Brontë […] A rather fine property […] Mountains of flat rocks which I hope to build into terrace walls […] To my surprise the garrigue […] is pure Attica; even the sky" as he told Richard Aldington, to which Aldington affirmed "You and she [Claude] have made the place so pleasant and non-bourgeois, and I often think of it and of you both in it with great satisfaction."[18]

There are well-validated stories of Durrell's temper towards Claude – arguments which sometimes led to violence; these occurred from as early as their time in Cyprus and continued into the year before her death. But, as Mary Mollo observed while on holiday with the Durrells in Corfu in 1964, they both had hot tempers, and "Talking about Claude, Larry once said, 'What was so marvellous about her was that when I threw a plate at her, she would hurl one back at me'."[19]

Sibylle Vincendon doubts whether Durrell gave Claude the "shoulder to cry on" that she needed after the death of her father in 1962.[20] And she asks: however much Claude may have been "the love of his life", what did he think of her writing? "Did Larry give Claude the support, the encouragement, the proofreading she could have needed? Did he for a moment turn away from his self-centred fixation with his own work, his difficulties to get it moving, his writing blocks, his future publications, his painful obligation to earn a living, his worries about money?"[21]

It will be clear from my remarks here that I do not take as severe a view as others of Durrell's behaviour towards Claude. I am well aware, from my personal knowledge (in relation to both his long-term liaison with Margaret McCall and his partnership with Françoise Kestsman) that he was ill-at-ease with *all* women, whether they were his mother, his wives, his daughters or his lovers. It was a psychological obstacle to the equation *animus=anima* which he sought, excitedly and desperately, both in his own life and in his fiction. Yet I agree with observers of his life with

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[17] *Trois Alexandrines* (Stock, 2022), p. 242.
[18] *Literary Lifelines*, pp. 50, 58, 89; see also Durrell's 1960 essay "To Sing On, Unfaltering, At Peace", which describes his working life in the mazet, in *Endpapers and Inklings*, vol. 1, pp. 29-37.
[19] M. Mollo, "Larry, My Friend"; see also I. MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell*, pp. 436, 460, 506, 539.
[20] *Trois Alexandrines*, p. 251.
[21] *Trois Alexandrines*, pp. 225-27.

Claude, that this love affair, this marriage *and* this meeting of writers, was the most meaningful for him *and* a time of satisfaction, achievement and deep love for Claude.

It was, nevertheless, a "writerly" relationship and all the more important to him for that reason. When Durrell referred to *Mrs O'* as "lightweight" he was recognising his own capacity for "makeweight" writing which he had called, in his 1948 essay, "minor mythologies", in which he argued against the critical snobbery which distinguished "serious" literature from more popular writing.[22] He himself wrote considerable "minor" works, such as *The Dark Labyrinth* and (written while he lived with Claude) *White Eagles over Serbia, Pope Joan* and many of the "Antrobus" stories, which owe their inspiration largely to Claude's *The Rum Go*.

He also read *Mrs O'* as "thin and slender" but, for an emergent writer, it was "a Rubicon" – a crossing from one type of writing to another. He saw her "warmth and candour", although he thought the love affair between "Mrs O'" and Sean unnecessary.[23] But he also acknowledged that *Mrs O'* was "far more skilled than mine was, I must admit [his first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers* – 1935 – that is]."[24]

He expected Claude to develop from the authorship of *Mrs O'* to what he called, in his own case, "real" books – but what he thought of *The Rum Go* and *A Chair for the Prophet* we do not know, although, not only for financial reasons, he was clearly pleased by her success. I think he would have acknowledged them as progressively more heavyweight in tone and intent. And in any case he borrowed from them for his own work.

In February 1964 Durrell tells Miller "Claude is writing a new novel",[25] which we have to assume is *Golden Silence*. While there are undoubtedly darkness, unhappiness and concealed truths in these novels (especially in *Mrs O'* and *A Chair for the Prophet*, less so in *The Rum Go*), these elements in *Golden Silence* are darker, less happy and the truths are more carefully concealed, perhaps because Claude was writing at least six years later, and was in increasing ill-health.

As early as 1958 Durrell also reported to Aldington that "Claude is now writing a book about France and England", which Ian MacNiven believes to have been entitled "The French Habit" but which Sibylle Vincendon knows as "Lettres Françaises" and wonders "Where is the

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[22] "Minor Mythologies", in *Endpapers and Inklings*, vol. 2, pp. 219-33.
[23] *Literary Lifelines*, pp. 29-30.
[24] *Literary Lifelines*, p. 30. He was also very pleased that Claude thought *Clea* (the concluding volume of *The Alexandria Quartet*) "the best of the four" – ibid., p. 87.
[25] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 400.

manuscript? A mystery".[26] Larry seems to have regarded this unfinished project with respect, telling Miller he would doubtedly enjoy it.[27]

The relationship which, due to Claude's ill-health, was to last only eleven years, was slightly disturbed when, as Durrell puts it, "Claude found and bought a rambling, ugly house just outside Sommières, with a lovely parc, tall trees. Not a château […] but a large comfortable old vicarage type of thing".[28] Mary Mollo tells us that "Claude decorated it with loving care and a lot of common sense, so that each of them could work in peace or have guests without anyone getting into anyone else's way."[29] I say that the purchase of this house, known as "Mme. Tartes", affected the relationship because I think that the six years at the mazet Michel had been the most productive and the most affectionate-loving for both him and Claude. Claude's death on 1 January 1967 – very shortly after they had made alterations to, and moved into, "Mme. Tartes" – left him completely adrift, "wandering about in a tremendous vagueness".[30]

I think the move to Sommières also exacerbated the despair he was feeling at the time which contributed to the *chute totale* (as he called it)[31] in which he wrote *Tunc-Nunquam*. David Green points to the lines

> Only of late have I come to see this house
> As something poisoned when I paid for it;
> Its beauty was specious and it hid pure grief.
> Your absence, dearest, brings it no relief

as an indication of the effect of Claude's death coming so soon after the move from the mazet to the mansion in Sommières.[32]

It is certainly true, as Sibylle Vincendon says, that after Claude's death, Durrell's work went into decline.[33] This is confirmed by Mary

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[26] *Trois Alexandrines*, p. 242.
[27] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 321.
[28] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 410.
[29] M. Mollo, "Larry, My Friend".
[30] *Durrell-Miller Letters*, p. 416. The very apposite cover image to this book (Claude with a mirror) comes from a photograph taken by Durrell on a Rolleiflex in the hallway, shortly after they had moved into "Mme. Tartes" (information to the Editor by Barry Forde, 19 August 2023).
[31] In a notebook, Durrell Archive, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, collection 42/11/1.
[32] The poem, "Route Saussine 15" [the address of the house] first appeared in Durrell's homage to Provence, *Caessar's Vast Ghost*, and is reprinted in *The Fruitful Discontent of the Word* (Colenso Books/Delos Press, 2018), p. 39.
[33] *Trois Alexandrines*, p. 226.

Mollo who adds a comment: "However deeply Larry was shocked, there was no doubt he would recover. Nobody who knows him can be unaware of his inner power and strength; he has a personal philosophy of life and death which gives him a rocklike quality".[34] As a professional writer, Durrell was almost preternaturally condemned to continue; but in the years before Claude's death his mental stability was waning, and the book which eventually became the two-volume *Tunc-Nunquam*, and is dedicated to Claude (*Tunc* is dedicated "For Claude-Marie Vincendon", and *Nunquam* "*à Claude Vincendon*") was written during the period when Claude was having surgery and he himself was becoming increasingly depressed with the state of the world. *Nunquam* carries a "Postface" which is also a posthumous message to Claude, who had died three years before its publication: "Dear C-M. V., Well, here it is, the second volume I promised you […] It was you who said once that all my novels were inquests with open verdicts" and ends "ever thine LD". *Mountolive*, the third volume of *The Alexandria Quartet*, is dedicated: "A Claude – το όνομα του άγαθου διάμονος" [the name of the good spirit].

The first three novels

As we have seen, Claude published three novels in quick succession, at the same time as Lawrence Durrell was writing *The Alexandria Quartet*. *Mrs O'*, dedicated appropriately to Polly O'Meara (her nurse, who had accompanied Tim and Claude to Sydney), appeared in 1957 (the same year as Durrell's *Justine*), followed the next year by *The Rum Go* (dedicated to Claude's favourite uncle, Georges de Menasce; it appeared simultaneously with *Balthazar*, to be succeeded the same year by *Mountolive*) and, in 1959, by *A Chair for the Prophet* (coinciding with *Clea*, and dedicated to Claude's father). Claude also found time not only to type Durrell's own books, but to translate Marcel Rouff's *La Vie et la Passion de Dodin-Bouffant, Gourmet* as *The Passionate Epicure* (1961) and, several years later, *The Captive of Zour* by Marc Peyre (1966), both of these with prefaces by Lawrence Durrell. Her translation of Desroches-Noblecourt's *Tutankhamen* was published in 1964, and Raymond Oliver's *The French at Table* appeared after her death in 1967.[35]

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[34] M. Mollo, "Larry, My Friend".

[35] *The French at Table* was published in Britain by the Wine and Food Society in association with Michael Joseph, and in the USA as *The Gastronomy of France* in association with World Publishing Company.