The Alexandria Quartet Short Guide

The Alexandria Quartet by Lawrence Durrell

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Characters

The Alexandria Quartet (Justine, 1957, Balthazar, 1958, Mountolive, 1958, Clea, 1960) presents a procession of characters as rich and diverse as any work of twentieth-century fiction. At first glance, they all seem terribly exotic, in part because of their Alexandrian setting, which seems to shape character in mysterious ways. Then readers realize that they have met most of these characters before, in life and in literature, and they are quite conventional:

diplomats and politicians whose lives are lived at the center of power and who yet remain curiously powerless; inept intelligence agents who seem to lack, above all, intelligence and the ability to fathom their own plots; prostitutes with hearts of gold; writers and artists who talk too much and create too little, whose creative struggles are frustrated for a variety of reasons; and lovers of all persuasions who remain, for the most part, incomplete lovers.

Most of the characters may seem quite conventional yet what is fresh about the presentation of character is the prismatic diffusion of identity, the multifaceted quality, whereby all the characters blur and mingle. Early in the first volume, Justine sits in front of a multiple mirror (one of many in the work) and declares: "Look! five different pictures of the same subject." If she were a writer, she says, she would "try for a multi-dimensional effect in character, a sort of prism-sightedness. Why should not people show more than one profile at a time?" This kind of Picassoesque fragmentation is one major aspect of character presentation. Even more important is that sense of relatedness through which discrete, separate, established identity is shattered or denied. All the characters "throw down a field about each other." They can be known only through their relationships.

Justine, for example, seems, by turns, exotic and passionate, nymphomaniacal and sexless unless sex is yoked with political intrigue. Readers may think they know her when they understand that her sexual activity amounts to an attempt to exorcise the fact that she was raped as a child. Or, when one realizes that all of her sexual encounters may be rooted in espionage, one is invited to conclude that she is merely Nessim's spy, a tool in her husband's anti-British conspiracy. Even her psychoanalysts are unable to discover the one true face behind the multiple masks. Of course, as readers work their way through the simultaneity of the complete Alexandria Quartet, and learn that the basic facts of the first volume are a kind of hoax, readers finally come to understand, with Darley, the romantic young narrator in the process of learning how and what to see, that Justine does have one identity, one face: "the primitive face of mindless Aphrodite."

Perhaps the most important character group, in this or any other Durrell fiction, is that of the artists, the writers and painters: Arnauti, Pursewarden, Darley, Keats, and Clea. Some of them, after great suffering and struggle, come through to wholeness, to a genuine and elemental creativity which is the terrain of art and love. One of the more

unique and memorable characters, one whose outlines are not blurred, is Scobie, who has been celebrated by some critics as one of the great comic originals of literature, on the order of Falstaff or Uncle Toby. On the one hand, he represents, in his homosexuality and transvestism, one of the work's sexual extremes. On the other hand, he is the exemplar of childlike innocence and goodness. He is, Durrell would have one feel, Saint Scobie, the "holy fool" as G. S. Fraser has put it, "who knows nothing and everything."

Finally, it bears repeating that Alexandria, "the capital of memory," the source and intersection of everything in Western culture is, as Durrell suggests, a major character, the least "unreal" character of the work.

Social Concerns

In his head note to Balthazar, Durrell indicates that his primary concern in The Alexandria Quartet is "an investigation of modern love." The range of "modern love" investigated includes everything from old-fashioned "womanizing" to entangled homosexual and bisexual passion, from rape to intricate incestuous relationships, from child and adult prostitution to inverted masturbatory fantasy, from unrequited love to traditional marriages compounded with political intrigue, from simple "loving-kindness" to life-affirming heterosexual relationships based on a "tenderness" which is at once sexual and spiritual. Some readers have been confused by or outraged with Durrell's ostensible refusal to moralize about these tangled lines of love, to establish parameters of "good" and "evil" in his teeming Alexandria of the flesh and spirit. Yet Durrell's design precludes judgment: He presents the ruck and moil of the terrain of the human heart, and he demonstrates, through a deliberate employment of notions of relativity and metaphors from physics, the intricacy of the "field" of sexual and spiritual entanglement which radiates from each character. Thus the emphasis in Durrell's phrase — "an investigation of modern love" — falls on modern, on the post-Einsteinian sense of subjectobject relationships. The very indeterminacy of relation and meaning, the misapprehension and distortion involved in the "field" radiating from each character, is intended to lead the reader to a fresh sense of a liberated cosmology, a radically free and creative universe.

Durrell may not be concerned with judging this Byzantine welter of sexuality and spirituality, but he is concerned with celebrating, with affirming the human condition and its rich possibilities of love and creativity. As Pursewarden, one of the many art ist-figures in The Alexandria Quartet, observes in Balthazar, Durrell hopes in his last volume to sound a note "of affirmation — although not in the specific terms of a philosophy of religion.

It should have the curvature of an embrace, the wordlessness of a lover's code. It should convey some feeling that the world we live in is founded in something too simple to be overdescribed as cosmic law — but as easy to grasp as, say, an act of tenderness, simple tenderness in the primal relation between animal and plant, rain and soil, seed and trees, man and God." Such a tenderness, conditioned by irony and intelligence and thus saved from sentimentality, is a fundamental concern throughout Durrell's work. His social concerns, then, are not homiletic; he is not a preacher, a reformer. "Me change the world?" Durrell exclaims. "Good lord, no. Or only perhaps indirectly by persuading itself to see itself and relax; to tap the source of laughter in itself."

Themes

Love, laughter, art, and the difficult struggle to break through to a fecundating tenderness and creativity may be described as Durrell's primary themes as well as his chief social concerns. Certainly the work is fundamentally a bildungsroman, and its basic thrust is the growth and education of its central character and narrator, Darley. This central quest — what Darley learns — carries him through, as Durrell writes, "the politics of love, the intrigue of desire, good and evil, virtue and caprice, love and murder," all of which move "obscurely in the dark corners" of Alexandria, move "like a great congress of eels in the slime of plot and counterplot." Slowly, with many visions and revisions, Darley learns love, and achieves maturity as man and artist.

Put more simply, the primary theme has to do with the quest to break through isolation and loneliness, to realize fullness of life and art through complete commitment to the creative process. This process, however straightforward as it may sound when stated boldly, is extraordinarily complex as Durrell works it out in the tetralogy, and it is everywhere dependent upon the structural and thematic force of the "relativity proposition."

For Durrell, the relativity patterns dictated by Einsteinian Space-Time considerations are reinforced and underlined by the process of psychoanalysis. Thus, in brief, Truth and Identity are discoverable only in relationships.

Another major theme in The Alexandria Quartet, and throughout the Durrell canon, may be summed up in the phrase: "character is a function of landscape." Beginning with The Black Book, where the protagonist is in flight from the "English Death," most Durrell characters flee the dark, drizzling, life-denying Protestantism of a gray, abstract, sterile world, seeking a Mediterranean world of warmth, fertility and affirmation, a world where the deus loci, the numinous spirit of place reigns. Under the ancient sun of the Mediterranean world, under the benediction history, characters may discover the "heraldic" universe. As Darley says: "We are the children of our landscape. It dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure in which we are responsive to it."

Technique s Throughout his fiction, Durrell's narrative stance is to record experiences "not in the order in which they took place — for that is history — but in the order in which they became significant to me." Commentary on technique, form, structure in The Alexandria Quartet usually attempts to come to grips with Durrell's "relativity proposition" announced in his head note to Balthazar: "Modern literature offers us no Unities, so I have turned to science and am trying to complete a four-decker novel whose form is based on the relativity proposition. Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum." The first three parts, he stresses, are "deployed spatially," they are not "linked in a serial form." This leads to the interlapping, interweaving effects of the work. He stresses also the "subject-object relation" which is crucial to relativity and insists that the Quartet does not reflect "Proustian or Joycean method — for they illustrate Bergsonian 'Duration' in my opinion, not 'Space-Time.'" Some commentators have seen all this as a valuable key to the method and technique

of the work, and others have tended to regard it as pretentious mystification of familiar techniques of the Modern or Postmodern novel. In any case, Durrell's relativity proposition does provide a kind of premise for the shifting perspectives, the narrative hoaxes, the narrationswithin narrations which are the essence of his fiction, as well as for the image-patterns which bind the works: Justine, for example, is a book of mirrors, Balthazar a book of masks.

The point of all this might be made in a much simpler fashion, and again, Durrell provides the key when he says, in a lighter mood, "ideally, all four volumes should be read simultaneously." That is, he is after "stereoscopic narrative with stereophonic personality." Some of the implications of these preoccupations of technique have been discussed above, under the headings of character presentation and thematic concerns.

Durrell's style is rich, baroque, lyrical (sometimes "over-lush" and "too juicy," he admits), and it provides a striking contrast to the characteristic modern mode of stark understatement.

Indeed some critics feel that virtuosity of technique and style chokes his work, obscures rather than clarifies his material, his vision. Durrell, however, is a master of many modes, and is quite capable of writing the straight naturalistic novel (e.g., Mountolive). Still, unlike many modern writers, he refuses to surrender any of the resources of language, thought and feeling.

Finally, it should be noted that one of the conventional mainstays of Durrell's technique is the set-piece, especially the landscape set-piece, the apostrophe to place, a technique finely honed in his travel or "place" books and effectively used in his novels.

Adaptations

Justine, the only Durrell work made into a major Hollywood film, was directed by George Cukor (Twentieth Century Fox, 1969). It received unfavorable reviews and was regarded as a failure, both as film and as an effort to capture the spirit of the fiction. Hollywood has purchased the film rights to Tune and Nunquam, which remain unproduced. Recordings and B.B.C. radio programs involving musical settings of Durrell's poetry and fiction have been produced.

Literary Precedents

The question of literary precedents and influences is a bit trickier with Durrell than it is with other writers who, by virtue of an English university education and a literary career pursued in London, say, seem to stand in a clearer relation to tradition and the mainstream. Durrell is, of course, a born Colonial and a lifelong expatriate who began his literary career with a proclamation of his contempt for the "English death." However, that may be misleading for he is, as he once said, "as English as Shakespeare's birthday."

Indeed the very pattern of his life and work suggests his very English literary forebears, Norman Douglas and D. H. Lawrence. If one says, then, that he is very much an English writer, despite his paradoxical relationship with the place and its traditions, it is necessary to add at once that he is also Irish, French, Greek, and Indian. Influences from all of these streams are visible in his work: Joyce, Proust, Cavafy, and the Tantric wisdom of the East.

The question of influence is further clouded by the best-known mentor in Durrell's career: the American novelist Henry Miller. One would be hardpressed to pinpoint stylistic or formal indebtedness, Durrell to Miller. Indeed, the effects and techniques, the voices and visions of Durrell's mature works are quite distinct from, if not polar opposites of, Miller's. Clearly, Miller served the apprentice-writer Durrell as an emblem of liberation — aesthetic, sexual and linguistic — but the student of influences would do well to pay close attention to another Durrell mentor, T. S. Eliot, who, in every respect, is worlds apart from Miller.

Asked with which modern writers he found himself most naturally in sympathy, Durrell replied: "In France, with Montherlant and Proust; in America with Henry Miller; in Greece with Kazantzakis; in Argentina with Borges; in Italy with Svevo." He does not mention England. Affinity, of course, is not necessarily influence. The safest assumptions concerning Durrell's literary precedents would be the following: His work is a disciplined assimilation of the best of his forebears and contemporaries, English and European; and he learned important lessons from Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Miller, and D. H. Lawrence. Charting influence is, at best, a hazardous enterprise, and it may be that the Marquis de Sade, Freud, Groddeck, Jung and Tibetan Buddhism are just as important. The best course for the student of Durrell is to examine carefully his critical work, A Key to Modern British Poetry (1952), along with the extensive Durrell-Miller correspondence, which by the 1950s had come full circle, with Miller, once the mentor, saluting Durrell as the master.

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