The Avignon Quintet Short Guide

The Avignon Quintet by Lawrence Durrell

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Contents

Characters/Techniques

T he Avignon Quintet (Monsieur: Or The Prince of Darkness, 1974; Livia: Or Buried Alive, 1979; Constance: Or Solitary Practices, 1982; Sebastian: Or Ruling Passions, 1984; Quinx: Or The Ripper's Tale, 1985) presents a large cast of characters of diverse backgrounds, professions, and ethnicities: doctors, diplomats, novelists, psychoanalysts, Nazis, gypsies, an Egyptian bankergnostic, a Jewish plutocrat, an Egyptian prince. Most of the principle characters have doppelgangers. Although many aspects of the characterization resemble The Alexandria Quartet, it is not so much a matter of prismatic perspective, of retelling the same story from different viewpoints, as Durrell attempted in The Alexandria Quartet (1957-1960), as it is a duplication and reduplication of character and situation. One of Durrell's writer-narrator figures, Sutcliffe, dreams of writing a book "full of not completely discrete characters, of ancestors and descendants all mixed up," who would "walk in and out of each other's lives"; it would be a "titanic do-it-yourself kit, le roman appareil . . .

full of spare parts of other books, of characters left over from other lives, all circulating in each other's bloodstreams." Critical opinion concerning the success of this approach has been sharply divided. Some readers feel that none of the characters have identity or voice, that all the names are interchangeable and they are all mere mouthpieces for Durrell's abstract musing. Others admire the metafictional sophistication, the intricate narration and disposition of character which, they feel, leads to profound illumination of fundamental questions about the nature of fiction, of reality.

The central characters who live the "reality" of The Avignon Quintet are presented in the last four volumes, Livia through Quinx, where readers come to know, after a fashion, the siblings Constance, Hilary, and Livia, and come to follow the course of their incestuous and inverted loves. The novelist-narrator Blanford is, at one point, married to the lesbian Livia and eventually finds love with Constance.

Blanford, readers learn, is the "author" of the first volume, Monsieur, which is inhabited by characters who are shadow-doubles of the characters in the rest of The Avignon Quintet. Blanford creates another novelist, Sutcliffe, his "alter ego" who is, readers are finally told, the author of sections of Monsieur.

(Blanford kills him off, but he comes back to life, independent of his creator's will.) By the fourth volume, Sebastian, they are talking about a novel they are writing together, which, the reader assumes, is Monsieur. Thus the reader is drawn into the metafictional game of retrospective derivation of character, theme and action in Monsieur from the four later books, whose action chronologically precedes the events and inventions of Monsieur. It is a very tricky business, yet it serves to underline the assertion concerning character in the final volume, Quinx: "The old stable outlines of the dear old linear novel have been sidestepped in favour of soft focus palimpsest which enables the actors to turn into each other, to melt into each other's inner lifespace if they wish. Everything and

everyone comes closer and closer together, moving towards the one." It must suffice to say here that this is a radical departure from conventional novelistic notions of character, and it scarcely permits character analysis in the usual sense.

Some readers may come away from the work with a vivid sense of such characters as Blanford, Sutcliffe, Constance, the gypsy Sabine. Yet Blanford, who constantly speaks and dreams of writing, who declares, "I want to saturate my text with my teleological distress yet guard its slapstick holiness as something precious" — this rather windy and elusive Blanford may leave some readers wishing he had done or lived or rendered the things he talks about so interminably. And Constance, who is meant to exemplify a major affirmation of femininity, a strong and creative character who has "dramatically assumed herself, her full femininity," who has achieved understanding of the "role of the female" which chimes with her art and craft, the female "principle of renewal and repair in the cosmic sense" that makes "things happen," "things grow" — is this Constance a character the reader knows, a character whose anguish and joy one participates in, whose voice one can hear? Or is she the abstract and highly forgettable mouthpiece for the author's notion of femininity? Such questions, asked with full consciousness of Durrell's "soft focus palimpsest" design, underline the risks he has taken in this experiment, and the risks the reader takes, the reader who still yearns for the stable outlines, the solid characters of the "dear old linear novel."

Social Concerns

The primary social and cultural concern of The Avignon Quintet has to do with the quest for significance, for illumination which is simultaneously and necessarily physical, aesthetic and spiritual, in a world that is given over to darkness. The modern world, here centered on World War II, is seen as broken, inverted, far gone in madness.

The central symbol of the quest is the lost treasure of the Knights Templar, towards which the five volumes of The Avignon Quintet conduct the patient reader.

The madness of the modern world is delineated in a number of ways, but the fundamental premise, as expressed in Monsieur, concerns the failure "to face the bitter central truth of the gnostics: the horrifying realisation that the world of the Good God was a dead one, and that He had been replaced by a usurper — a God of Evil." Monsieur, the Prince of Darkness, rules the world.

This results in phenomena such as rampant materialism and greed, the messianic madness of Hitler and Nazi atrocities. The chief social concern, then, is to chart strategies of resistance to the Prince of Darkness, to elaborate the tactics for reinverting the terrifying inversions which characterize the modern age.

Themes

Informing The Avignon Quintet, as theme, form, structure, and source of image and symbol, is the notion of the quincunx, the arrangement of five objects in a square, one at each corner and one in the middle. The most obvious quincunxial arrangement in the work is the familiar planting pattern of trees in a quincunx, an arrangement, as announced in Monsieur, which will provide the key to the lost Templar treasure. There are numerous allusions to the quincunx throughout the books, including quincunxial aspects of character, art, and architecture. The Avignon Quintet itself is, of course, a quincunx, five novels, with Monsieur at the center.

Finally, in Quinx, when readers learn that the lost Templar treasure is buried in the quincunxial caves beneath the Pont du Gard, they are told that "in architecture the quincunxial shape was considered a sort of housing for the divine power — a battery, if you like, which gathered into itself the divinity as it tried to pour earthward, to earth itself." Thus the quincunxial theme is resolved when one realizes that cathedrals, caves, reliquaries, novels (such as The Avignon Quintet) are all forms of "housing for the divine power," and the true secret treasure of the Templars is "the Grail, the lotus of insight."

The other major theme revolves around what Durrell calls the "four Ms": Monotheism, Messianism, Monogamy, and Materialism. These four Ms characterize the modern age, and the "cornerstone of culture" is yet "another M — merde." In the dying, cancerous, death-ruled world, Durrell asserts, "possession for Marx and possession for Freud have dictated excrement as the basic term upon which the calculus of our philosophy raises itself." The manifold thematic reverberations of the four Ms syndrome include the following: rigid Western Monotheism has prevented the recognition that the Prince of Darkness has usurped this world (the antidote would seem to be Eastern polytheism); Messianism has resulted in a world of crusading, egoridden individualism (antidote/prescription: self-effacement, passivity); Monogamy, intense and possessive, denies the complexity and polyphonic sexuality of human nature, thus forcing inversion and madness (antidote/ prescription: multiple relationships); finally, Materialism, the possessive mode which consumes everything (antidote/prescription: replace hoarding with giving, having with being).

These four Ms add up to the fift h M in the center of the dark quincunx — the merde of Monsieur. The solution, the way out of the labyrinth, is continued in Durrell's statement: "We can make amends by loving correctly." As memorable as this phrase may be — and it is the most frequently cited thematic summation — it is important to note that it is not as easy as it sounds, to judge from the wrenching inversions throughout the work, nor is the notion of making amends by "loving correctly" the simple, sentimental affair that some readers would like it to be: It includes, among other things, quite precise notions of yogic sex, of mystical union through simultaneous or gasm. While some critics find Durrell's vision in this work a compelling synthesis, an intricate record of a healing quest, others find it pretentious, muddled and interminable religio-literarysexual-psychobabble.

Adaptations

Justine (1957), 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 Tunc and Nunquam, which remain unproduced. Recordings and B.B.C. radio programs involving musical settings of Durrell's poetry and fiction have been produced.

Related Titles

The Black Book (1938) is Durrell's first important novel, his portrait and testament of the artist as a young man, and although long regarded as obscene, it is indispensable for an overview of his career. The Revolt of Aphrodite (i.e., Tunc, 1968 and Nunquam, 1970), after the The Alexandria Quartet and The Avignon Quintet, is his most important fiction and his clearest examination of the malaise of contemporary culture.

Some readers prefer this work because of the straightforward approach and the contemporaneity of setting, closer to the present than Durrell's other work. Also indispensable for a satisfactory overview of Durrell's career and a comprehension of his notions of landscape and character are The Greek Islands (1978), and the collection of letters and essays, Spirit of Place (1969), a revealing compendium of major Durrellian themes and concerns.

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