

## THE ARTS AND (ARTISTIC) CREATION IN LAWRENCE DURRELL'S THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET

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*Abstract: The paper explores the world of arts as presented by Lawrence Durrell in his novel The Alexandria Quartet. On the one hand, we shall focus on the art of writing, examining the various figures of writers that appear in the novel (Darley, Pursewarden, Arnauti), their ideas and the way in which their works complete and respond to one another. On the other hand, we shall analyse Durrell's exploration of the art of painting, which seems to be more utilitarian than artistic, being put at the service of medicine. We shall also see that, as the writer Darley and the painter Clea become a couple, their arts seem to merge into each other and they are on the point of moving from the city of books (Alexandria) to that of arts (Paris).*

*Keywords: art; painting; writing; creation; love.*

### **1. Introduction**

*The Alexandria Quartet* is a tetralogy published by the British writer Lawrence Durrell in 1957-1960. It is made of the novels *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive* and *Clea* and it is a very complex work, which can be read as a love story, a detective novel, a novel of espionage, a political novel or a metanovel. Its first three volumes cover approximately the same period of time, offering different perspectives on the same characters and events, while the fourth advances the action in time. The main character of the tetralogy is the city of Alexandria, which is seen in all seasons, at all hours, in all kinds of weather, in peace and war (cf. Iatcu), and which has both positive and negative traits. It is given such importance because it seems to influence and to a certain extent determine its inhabitants' life. But the novel also has many human characters, mostly complicated intellectuals, belonging to different nations and speaking many languages. Among them, the aspiring writer Darley, the narrator of three of the volumes of the novel, and the painter Clea occupy an important part.

References to art are made throughout the entire tetralogy. But though sculpture, music and dancing are not excluded from it, two of the arts are more thoroughly explored: the art of writing and that of painting.

### **2. Professional and "Amateur", Established and Aspiring Writers. Life and Literature**

The city of the largest library in the ancient world, Alexandria seems to be the meeting point of several writers. Besides Darley, we also encounter professional, established writers, like Jacob Arnauti or Ludwig Pursewarden, whose works have been published, being more or less famous, but also "amateur" writers, authors of diaries that are read only by close friends. The "native poet of the city" (Durrell, 1968: 30), Constantine Peter Cavafy, the only real figure among the fictional ones, is also mentioned several times, though not so much analysed.

Jacob Arnauti is a Frenchman of Albanian descent, author of the novel *Moeurs*, a little yellow-covered novelette whose “flyleaf showed it to have enjoyed numerous reprintings in the early thirties”. (Durrell, 1968: 58) To Darley, who comes to read it courtesy of his flatmate, it seems a well-written piece of literature, an accurate and penetrating account of Alexandrian life given by a foreigner. The novel is written in the first person and much of it is dedicated to the narrator’s relationship to a young Jewess whom he calls Claudia but in which Darley recognizes Justine, a married woman with whom he has an affair. Because of Arnauti’s extreme preoccupation with analysing Claudia, the book also becomes, in Darley’s and Clea’s opinion, “shallow and infected by the desire to explain everything”. (Durrell, 1968: 68) For them, analysing Justine means depriving her of her goddess-like quality.

*Moeurs* is read and reread by Darley many times, until he learns it by heart. He discusses it with other people, analyses it and quotes fragments from it in his own narration, which becomes an echo of Arnauti’s, as he also tries to capture Justine in writing and also dedicates much of his own story to her, trying to understand the reasons behind her marriage to Nessim and her apparent nymphomania.

Though not a writer proper, Justine herself is the possessor of some diaries that she presents to Darley as her own. The diaries, notes the latter, “lack clues – names, dates, places – and consist for the most part of wild flights of fancy punctuated by bitter little anecdotes and sharp line-drawings of people whose identity is masked by a letter of the alphabet. The French she writes in is not very correct, but spirited and highly-flavoured, and carries the matchless quality of that husky speaking-voice.” (Durrell, 1968: 55-56) Actually, in the third volume, the diaries are revealed to have been conceived by Arnauti as well, copied by Justine in her handwriting because he had broken his wrist and given by her to Darley to deceive him. What is remarkable is that he senses *her* voice behind the writing and does not question its authorship for a single moment, though both writings seem to explore Justine’s motivations and behaviour. Fragments from these diaries are also included in the narration.

Balthazar is another character of the novel that indulges in writing. He does so in order to complete the manuscript of *Justine* that Darley sent to him. When he brings it back it is “seared and starred by a massive interlinear of sentences, paragraphs and question-marks”. (Durrell, 1968: 213) Due to Balthazar’s remarks we get a different perspective on the events narrated in the first volume of the tetralogy.

The most famous of the fictional writers that inhabit Durrell’s Alexandria is Ludwig Pursewarden. Though he also works for the Foreign Office, he is better anchored in the world of literature than the other writers of the book. He has a pseudonym, as his real first name is Percy, which he changed to avoid the disturbing alliteration, he has relationships with real writers like James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, with whom he is reported to have exchanged letters, and, after his death, his death-mask is seen by Amaril in the National Portrait Gallery near those of Keats and Blake. And there are also discussions about writing his biography and conflicts over who would be most entitled to do it.

Still, though the author of a trilogy that “made such a noise in the world” (Durrell, 1968: 281), Pursewarden is reported by Balthazar to earn very little from writing, money that goes anyway to his wife and two children who live in England. The writer has a controversial personality and behaviour, being a nonconformist and liking to shock. Balthazar calls the way in which he addresses serious subjects with apparent frivolity “serious clowning” (Durrell, 1968: 282) and considers that he uses equivocation to defend himself from stupidity. As he is an ironist to the extent that sometimes he appears to violate the rules of common sense, he makes a lot of enemies. Women are not among them however. Balthazar considers that he is

Justine's true love. Still, he is just fooled by her and her husband as to their real intentions and when he discovers by chance that they plot against the British he commits suicide.

His true personality is revealed to Darley while he reads the letters he sent to his sister. Another woman who was fascinated by him, Liza had an incestuous relationship with her brother that ended after the death of their daughter, and thinks that he committed suicide in order to free her of himself and let her enjoy her relationship to Mountolive. Darley considers the letters unlike anything "in the whole length and breadth of our literature". (Durrell, 1968: 790) For him it is the letters that are actually Pursewarden's masterpieces, better than anything else he had published, because they are life itself and not a studied representation of it, life with its joys and sorrows, its pain and happiness, its passions, forbidden or not. It is in these letters that Darley discovers the real Pursewarden, the man behind the mask, the man that he can no longer envy or compare to himself, which he used to do, trying to belittle him in an attempt to feel a better writer than he was.

In Pursewarden's case, death "provided a new critical referent", a mythical quality to the man about whom they can no longer remember for sure whether he was tall or short, or what the colour of his eyes was. "It was amazing how quickly the human image was dissolving into the mythical image he had created of himself in his trilogy *God is a Humorist*." (Durrell, 1968: 137) Darley and Justine talk about him as if trying to fix the human memory before it becomes myth.

While we are not offered any fragment from Pursewarden's letters to his sister, which are as a matter of fact burnt by Darley and Liza after he reads them, we are offered several of his views on writing and on the relationship between life and literature. Balthazar tells Darley that whenever he worked on a book Pursewarden found that his life began to follow its curvature. "He explained this by saying that any concentration of the will displaces life (Archimedes' bath-water) and gives it bias in motion. Reality, he believed, was always trying to copy the imagination of man, from which it derived." (Durrell, 1968: 286) Elsewhere, Darley notes: "'We live' writes Pursewarden somewhere 'lives based upon selected fictions. Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time – not by our personalities as we like to think. Thus every interpretation of reality is based upon a unique position. Two paces east or west and the whole picture is changed.'" (Durrell, 1968: 210)

But Pursewarden is also the author of *My Conversations with Brother Ass*, a notebook in which he records his imaginary conversations with Darley. The manuscript is an exploration of writing, discussing European art, the relationship art has with love and sex, the relationship between the sexual and the creative energies or the role of the artist. Pursewarden recommends to Darley to get to know what he calls the "heraldic" reality, something that is revealed only to the chosen, a reality that only a real artist can plunge into and then communicate bits of it to others. At one point he even suggests to Darley that he "might try a four-card trick in the form of a novel; passing a common axis through four stories, say, and dedicating each to one of the four winds of heaven. A continuum, forsooth, embodying not a *temps retrouvé* but a *temps délivré*. The curvature of space itself would give you stereoscopic narrative, while human personality seen across a continuum would perhaps become prismatic? Who can say? I throw the idea out. I can imagine a form which, if satisfied, might raise in human terms the problems of causality or indeterminacy ... And nothing very *recherché* either. Just an ordinary Girl Meets Boy story." (Durrell, 1968: 757-758)

All these are included in Darley's narration, most of the novel that we are discussing. Darley seems to be the alter ego of Durrell, whose initials he shares, besides having a similarly sounding surname (L.G. Darley vs. Lawrence George Durrell). He is an Irish schoolteacher and an aspiring writer. At the beginning of the novel, we find Darley retired on

an island in the Cyclades with a few books and with Melissa's child by Nessim to heal himself and to understand what has happened to all of them in Alexandria. Thus, we are warned that his narration will have a cathartic function. We are also told that he will not meditate over the past in a chronological narration. "What I most need to do is to record experiences, not in the order in which they took place – for that is history – but in the order in which they first became significant for me." (Durrell, 1968: 97)

Pursewarden's idea about the relativity of our views on reality and his above-mentioned idea of a four-volume novel are illustrated by Darley's and Durrell's narrations, as in the first three volumes of the *The Alexandria Quartet* we find different details and interpretations of the same events. What Darley thinks he knows and presents to us in the first volume is contradicted by Balthazar in his interlinear and offered to us by Darley in the second only to be further on contradicted by the third person omniscient narrator of the third. Thus, we get a kaleidoscopic narration and consequently a reality that is continuously changing. Darley refers frequently to his book as to a palimpsest "upon which each of us had left his or her individual traces, layer by layer". (Durrell, 1968: 215) Another object that can be viewed as a symbol of the book is the mirror. Very often characters see themselves and each other in mirrors. Like the mirrors, the novel offers us not the reality, but various reflections of it.

The reading of Pursewarden's letters helps Darley understand not just the dead writer, but also himself, his role and his place in the world. And again he affirms one of Pursewarden's ideas, that of life as fiction.

"And in brooding over these terrible letters I also suddenly stumbled upon the true meaning of my own relationship to Pursewarden, and through him to all writers. I saw, in fact, that we artists form one of those pathetic human chains which human beings form to pass buckets of water up to a fire, or to bring in a lifeboat. An uninterrupted chain of humans born to explore the inward riches of the solitary life on behalf of the unheeding unforgiving community; manacled together by the same gift.

I began to see too that the real 'fiction' lay neither in Arnauti's pages nor Pursewarden's – nor even in my own. It was life itself that was a fiction – we were all saying it in our different ways, each understanding it according to his nature and gift.

[...] We were three writers, I now saw, confided to a mythical city from which we were to draw our nourishment, in which we were to confirm our gifts. Arnauti, Pursewarden, Darley – like Past, Present and Future tense!" (Durrell, 1968: 792)

### 3. Artistic and Utilitarian Painting

Though there are other characters in *The Alexandria Quartet* that paint occasionally, like Nessim, the painter of the novel is Clea. An English woman whose mother died a long time ago and whose father would like to see her decently married, Clea "lives without lovers or family ties, without malices or pets, concentrating with single-mindedness upon her painting which she takes seriously, but not too seriously. In her work, too, she is lucky; for these bold yet elegant canvases radiate clemency and humour. They are full of a sense of play – like children much-beloved." (Durrell, 1968: 108) Clea made a chalk drawing of Nessim, in "swift, flowing strokes" (Durrell, 1968: 548), but she also painted Justine's portrait and started a relationship with her in the process. "She was 'white of heart', in the expressive Arabic phrase, and painting the darkness of Justine's head and shoulders she suddenly felt as if, stroke by stroke, the brush itself had begun to imitate caresses she had neither foreseen nor

even thought to permit.” (Durrell, 1968: 240) She fell in love with her model due to the latter’s feelings of loneliness after the loss of her daughter.

But Clea’s art also takes a different path, being put at the service of medicine. She is the clinic painter. Balthazar, the doctor, is not content with recording medical anomalies by photographs as he gives importance to the pigmentation of skin that the camera cannot record. Therefore, he assigns this job to Clea, who manages to fulfil it brilliantly. “The ravages of syphilis, for example, in every degree of anomaly, Clea has recorded for him in large coloured drawings of terrifying lucidity and tenderness. In a sense these are truly works of art; the purely utilitarian object has freed the painter from any compulsion towards self-expression.” (Durrell, 1968: 109) It is in this capacity that Darley first sees her, involved in her utilitarian work with as much passion as she puts in her artistic one: “Clea’s capable and innocent fingers moved back and forth upon the white surface of the paper, surely, deftly, with wise premeditation. Her face showed the rapt and concentrated pleasure of a specialist touching in the colours of some rare tulip.” (Durrell, 1968: 110)

Moreover, when Amaril falls in love with Semira, a woman who lost her nose because of a severe form of lupus, Clea is entrusted with looking for and drawing noses from which they will choose the one that best suits her. Clea is the one to whom all characters go when they have troubles and she has some kind words for all.

The only character whom she cannot relieve from suffering is Narouz, the man who loves her dearly with a love that is unrequited because of his terrible ugliness. Terrified by his feelings, she cannot go to Narouz’s deathbed. After he dies, however, Narouz seems to want to take her with him. Swimming near his favourite island she has her hand pinned by his harpoon to an underwater wreck and Darley manages to get her out of the water only after cutting it. But she can be said to benefit from the healing powers and maybe utilitarian drawings of others. She gets a new steel and rubber hand, which, in addition to being able to write, can also draw with a talent that seems its own, not its possessor’s: “One day it took up a brush and lo! pictures of truly troubling originality and authority were born. I have five of them now. I stare at them with reverent wonder. Where did they come from? But I know that the Hand was responsible.” (Durrell, 1968: 874)

#### **4. The Artist as Shaman. Painting and Writing. Love and Art**

In *The Artist as Shaman: Durrell’s “The Alexandria Quartet”*, P.M. Bynum states that the novel under discussion is centred on the theme of “the artist as tribal seer”. (1995: 83) According to her, Pursewarden, the most accomplished artist in the novel, is already a “seer”, but the book presents the gradual “awakening” of Darley, being thus “a shaman’s story”. (Bynum, 1995: 94) Pursewarden is already initiated, but Darley goes through all stages of the process, retreating from Alexandria to the island and passing through a series of sufferings that will help him become an artist with a profound knowledge of the world and of people’s inner nature.

We can say that in the case of all three characters – Pursewarden, Darley and Clea – art has a healing function. For Pursewarden and Darley this function is cathartic. Pursewarden expresses his true feelings in his letters to his sister and can then die in peace. Darley writes his story and this helps him get over his feelings for Justine and Melissa, leaving him free to start a new love affair, with Clea, a relationship that finally brings him peace. Clea’s art, on the other hand, and her kind words cure others.

The importance of Darley and Clea for each other is implied throughout the entire novel in the fact that their arts seem to blend. Clea’s letters end the three volumes narrated by

Darley, telling facts, discussing characters, bringing things to a close, while Darley's descriptions become at times pictorial. It is the case of the following passage, which is by no means singular and which resembles the notes taken by a painter in preparation for exercising his art: "Landscape tones: brown to bronze, steep skyline, low cloud, pearl ground with shadowed oyster and violet reflections. The lion-dust of desert: prophets' tombs turned to zinc and copper at sunset on the ancient lake. Its huge sand-faults like watermarks from the air; green and citron giving to gunmetal, to a single plum-dark sail, moist, palpitant: sticky-winged nymph. Taposiris is dead among its tumbling columns and seamarks, vanished the Harpoon Men... Mareotis under a sky of hot lilac." (Durrell, 1968: 209)

Moreover, Darley establishes a connection between the two arts, that of painting and that of writing, from the very beginning of his narration. "The solace of such work as I do with brain and heart lies in this – that only *there*, in the silences of the painter or the writer can reality be reordered, reworked and made to show its significant side. Our common actions in reality are simply the sackcloth covering which hides the cloth-of-gold – the meaning of the pattern. For us artists there waits the joyous compromise through art with all that wounded or defeated us in daily life; in this way, not to evade destiny, as the ordinary people try to do, but to fulfil it in its true potential – the imagination." (Durrell, 1968: 20)

Art gives order to the chaotic universe and fulfils people. But becoming a genuine artist seems to involve making sacrifices as well. At first sight, Pursewarden, Darley and Clea give up love in the process of finding their real potential. Pursewarden wrote wonderful literature after losing his sister as a lover and their child. Darley and Clea discover their artistic "voices" after separating from each other. But this is only apparent. In order to develop, the characters need to let go of their egos, to love without attachment (cf. Curtis 2013), to understand that if one truly loves somebody, one has to let them go if this is what they desire. Pursewarden sets Liza free to start a new, happy life with Mountolive. Darley lets Clea go to heal from her physical wound. He himself takes time to heal from emotional ones.

On the one hand, an artist needs to experience the whole of life and losing someone dear is part of it as well. On the other hand, love as possession seems to prevent characters from expressing themselves through art. During her love affair with Justine, Clea cannot paint at all, while after letting go of Amaril and aborting their child in order to set him free she becomes a better painter.

Pursewarden is at the time of his death a fulfilled artist. The other two become genuine ones at the end of the novel. After Clea writes to Darley about the miraculous hand that "can *paint!*" (Durrell, 1968: 874), he finds himself writing one day "the four words (four letters! four faces!) with which every story-teller since the world began has staked his slender claim to the attention of his fellow-men [...]: 'Once upon a time...'" (Durrell, 1968: 877) Though they are separated, they are planning to reunite in France, possibly in Paris, by the Seine. And since *Once upon a time* is the traditional beginning of fairy tales, their story seems to acquire a mythical quality.

## 5. Conclusion

Durrell's Alexandria is no stranger to art. At the city's *Atelier des Beaux Arts*, gifted amateurs meet, rent studios, admire or indulge in producing artistic creations or in listening to lectures about the others'. Nessim's house is full of statues and loggias, Courbets and Bonnards. Even nature is artistic. The bottom of the sea near Narouz's island is like an amphitheatre whose sides seem carved into galleries filled with statues, sculpted by men or by the sea. But most attention is given in the novel to painting and literature. Though neither

mirrors the exact reality, only the artist's view of it, both communicate certain visions and make us visualize things. Durrell sees the true artist as having access to a hidden reality that s/he then reveals to others. But each artist does it in his/her own way. Thus, we get a very complex exploration of art, the role of the artist, artistic vision and creation. The meditation on literature and painting is important for understanding the evolution of the forms of artistic expression in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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