

A Philosophic Interplay in Symphony: Lawrence Durrell's *Balthazar*

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Abstract

Lawrence Durrell is acclaimed as both a complex and a fascinating writer for his most significant work The Alexandria Quartet- a set of four novels that evoke the city of Alexandria in Egypt during wartime. Born in India during the British rule and later on sent to England for his education, Durrell disliked the restricted English environment and so resided in Greece, Egypt, Cyprus and France at various times of his life. Durrell's work was highly influenced by the Mediterranean places and cultures he experienced. The Alexandria Quartet serves as a link that connects the major literary movements of the twentieth century. It is most provocative and exciting as a work that traces the growth of a writer and his work- a story about the characters being the plot of the story, their life- journey, their psychological mind-set, changes in their impulses, emotions, motivation, their doubts and misgivings and the sudden turn of events that occur, which progress these books along.

This article highlights the interplay of music and philosophy and between genre and form in his second novel, Balthazar. The vast expanse of the novel is nearly taken up with the notes brought by the character Balthazar about the events of the first book Justine which, in a way fill in some missing information, add new perspectives, answer some puzzling events and create new dilemmas. The effective addition of a second narrator (Balthazar) means that not everything is filtered through the first narrator, Darley's sensibility, so the other characters develop greater individuality through the cross-lighting.

Keywords: characters events interpretations repetitions dimensions interrelationships Impressions perceptions

The form of *The Alexandria Quartet* parallels that of a musical quartet. The word 'quartet' suggests that the long meandering story with recurring motives is like a musical composition. The four volumes of the novel, *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive* and *Clea* stand in a quasi-musical relation to each other. This symphonic structure helps in understanding the interrelationships of the characters and themes of reality, love and art. Each movement in the symphony can be identified as each novel of *The Alexandria Quartet* which adds another layer of knowledge about the characters and themes. The resultant work gives a comprehensive view of the subjective-objective reality of 'Alexandria'. Durrell being a poet had an inner ear for timing, placing and variation like a music composer. He exhibited this quality while composing *The Alexandria Quartet*.

Music is the unifying force, which holds together the characters as well as the events as a unit. Identical incidents and situations can be seen in the *Alexandria Quartet*. These repetitions contribute to halt time in the first three novels by keeping it revolving around itself. These repetitions and duplications are a part of something alive within the work reiterating itself in the manner of music. The set piece descriptions appear to be static in relation to the overall movement of the story. Keith Brown in his essay titled "Lawrence Durrell" states

Sending a copy of *Mountolive* to Miller, he (Durrell) explicitly warned him that the book was not to be judged in its own right but as one movement of a kind of symphony.

Durrell has achieved this kind of a symphonic movement as the entrance and exit of the characters is marked by music. According to the narrator Darley in the novel: "Each man goes out to his own music."

Balthazar, the second novel of Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, is also designed around the city of Alexandria like the first novel *Justine*, with a set of cosmopolitan characters. It is concerned with the same set of characters as in *Justine* the first novel and it covers very much the same period of time. The title *Balthazar* is taken from the New Testament, and it is the name of one of the Magi or the three wise men who came to visit the infant Jesus Christ. The name seems to be quite appropriate as in the mythical past and in the fictional present, Balthazar is a learned man and a philosopher. The novel is not a sequel to *Justine* but in the author's phrase, a "sibling". Durrell in his note to *Balthazar* claims:

The three first parts, however are to be deployed spatially (hence the use of "sibling" not "sequel") and are not linked in serial form. They interlap, interweave in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. (B. Preface, 7)

The three parts are the first three novels of *The Alexandria Quartet* –*Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Mountolive*. Each succeeding novel covers approximately the same period of time as the preceding novel. Darley's initial version of a set of events in the first novel is corrected by Arnauti's novel *Moeurs* and by the diaries of Justine, the protagonist and Nessim, another main character in the novel: these versions are in turn corrected by Balthazar's *Interlinear* which is corrected by the objective history of events in *Mountolive* and by a number of sets of letters. And finally, time itself offers a shifted perspective and moves forward in the last novel, *Clea*. Thus these novels are consecutive in time except the fourth novel, *Clea* which takes the story forward in time and also has a more detailed exposition.

Durrell in his Preface to this novel was quite explicit in how he has achieved the dimensional effect of time by eliciting the past from the very present and said:

Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum. The four novels follow this pattern. (B. Preface 7)

Balthazar corresponds to the second dimension of space-that is breadth, for it develops the point of view and builds on ideas first introduced in *Justine* and offers a second view of the events which take place in that novel. This novel deepens and expands our cognition of the characters and events that were there in the first dimension, *Justine* from a generalized concept through a philosophical and psychological strain. Parallel interpretations of many occurrences of events such as Justine's marriage, her love life and the death of Pursewarden shift appropriately to formulate a reality which cannot be fixed.

Durrell adds depth and understanding to the scene and story already described in *Justine*, by looking at it from a different angle and through the eyes of different spectators, although the narrator remains the same. Darley, Justine and Pursewarden still remain the main characters in this novel, though it is named after Balthazar, the homosexual doctor, one of the characters in the novel. The title of the novel is *Balthazar* as he is the medium through which events and incidents of the past, present and future are seen. Self-realization is achieved by Darley only through the observations and interpretations of Balthazar who is the most philosophical and most benevolent of the men in *The Alexandria Quartet*. He is reflective and he ponders over the symbolic significance of the city for its history-conscious inhabitants. His remarks are not tainted with a tone of superiority. They provide the reader with a different point of view on the city and its multifaceted people from the similar perspective that had been Darley's. Thus being influenced by Balthazar's 'Interlinear', Darley revises his opinion about the city of Alexandria.

For my own personal Alexandria had become, in all this loneliness, as dear as philosophy of introspection, almost a monomania. (B. 19)

Basing on the notes supplied by Balthazar, Darley discovers that the past events were not quite true as he imagined them to be. Therefore, he revises his original interpretations and expands the events more elaborately than those that have already been given in *Justine*.

But in order to go on, it is necessary to go back, not
that anything I wrote about them is untrue, far from it.
Yet when I wrote, the full facts were not at my disposal.
The picture I drew was a provisional one the picture of a
lost civilization. (B. 14)

Thus the events in the novel are halted in time for an exploration of various aspects of the relationship. Therefore, Darley grows wiser by rethinking his original judgments of love which results in his failure to possess Justine. He learns specific lessons that appearances are deceptive and that the same facts can fit a variety of explanations. The realization dawns upon Darley that what seems to be true is not the truth and the same individual can turn out to be one person. Therefore the events presented finally bring Darley to a more mature view of life.

Indeed, I saw my lovers and friends no longer as
living people but as coloured transfers of the mind;
inhabiting my papers now, no longer the city, like
tapestry figures. It was difficult to concede to them
any more common reality than to the words I had
used about them. What has recalled me to myself? (B. 14.)

Balthazar starts by giving a picture of Darley living in seclusion, with the child of Melissa as his only companion, on the island where he retires to write his book. Balthazar, returns Darley's manuscript to which he has appended comments of his own. Darley refers to it as "The great Interlinear" and he gets most of the information which enables him to present another image of the city. Darley's comments on the Interlinear:

But I hardly listened, for his words had plunged me
into a ferment, a desire to study his interlinear,
to revise not my book (that has never been of the
slightest importance to me for it will never even be
published), but my view of the city and its inhabitants. (B.19)

On examining this 'great Interlinear', the whole situation slowly turns upon its axis, unfolds itself and acquires new dimensions. Darley begins to realize that he was deceived. For him the past grows blurred beyond recognition. He is mistaken and the result of his writing is far from the truth. His novel appears to him without any value or meaning. It is at this juncture that Balthazar offers him some technical advice that Darley is not yet ready to take. The advice is about the narrative of art itself:

I suppose writes (Balthazar) that if you wished
somehow to incorporate all I telling you into your

own *Justine* manuscript now, you would find yourself
with a curious sort of book- the story would be told,
so to speak, in layers....perhaps, like some medieval
palimpsest where different sorts of truth are thrown
down one upon the, other the one obliterating or
perhaps supplementing another. (B.183)

Darley proceeds scientifically and realistically as he is driven to his starting point. He learns that there is no possibility of arriving at objective truth in many scientific contexts and the very presence of the observer affects the results of the experiment he is observing. Accordingly, he sets out to write an explanatory report on the Alexandrians and in the process realizes that the traditional notion of personality has been shown to be illusory as the pre-Einsteinium notion of matter.

And as for human characters, whether real or invented
there are no such animals. Each psyche is really an
anthill of opposing predispositions. Personality as
something with fixed attributes is an illusion- but a
necessary illusion if we are to love! (B.15)

According to Pursewarden, the writer's personality of a human character is not fixed or constant. It undergoes change and no distinction can be made between the writer and his reader but both are co-sharers. Each one's personality and character is unpredictable and ascribing certain characteristics to a person, is a mistaken identity.

Durrell gives a description of the geographical locale which corresponds to the description of the characters. In his descriptions the inessential details are made essential. The dominant elements of the landscape are the wind and the sea which reflect Darley's frustration. In the New York Book Review of June 12, 1960 Durrell says:

I have evolved a private notion about the importance
of landscape, and I willingly admit to seeing characters
almost as function of a landscape...My books are always
about living in places, not just rushing through them. (Karl. 41)

Darley writes from his island retreat which is quite contrary to Alexandria in its beauty and exuberance. The island is barren, empty of variety but provides him with an opportunity to be analytical which results in self-realization. Alexandria casts a deadly spell on its inhabitants, it is so disorienting that –only after Darley returns to his island that he could comprehend fully the Alexandrians and their city “as one and the same phenomenon”. Being the prisoner of an oppressive landscape in Alexandria, Darley was unable to be fully creative as an artist or as a man. The city of Alexandria is like a dream city and so the memory of its inhabitants always rings in his mind. In *Justine*, Darley's impressions of the city were not concrete, rather many-sided.

I felt once more the equivocal power of the
city – its flat alluvial landscape and exhausted airs-
and knew her for a true child of Alexandria, which is
neither Greek, Syrian nor Egyptian, but a hybrid: a joint. (Justine, 7)

In *Balthazar*, the city which is symbolical of reality becomes something like a masked ball, but the masks are nothing less than our own numerous false faces and those false faces we project. While *Justine* is a book of mirrors, *Balthazar* is a book of masks. The desire in this novel is to break away from the sinister influence of the city.

In his changed mood and attitude towards the city, Darley's lovers and friends no longer appeared to him as real, living people but exist only in his mind as images which change like the city of Alexandria. Darley finds that the best thing to do is to write about them so that they live on in his memory. So Darley reluctantly comes back to the starting point realizing that what he had written is false and it is necessary at this point to revise some of his own views of the city and its inhabitants. Darley says:

The city inhabited by these memories of mine, moves
not only backwards into our history, studded by the
great names which mark every station of recorded
time, but also back and forth in the living present, so
to speak among its contemporary faiths and races, the
hundred little spheres which religion or lore creates
and which cohere softly together like cells to form the
great sprawling jelly fish which is Alexandria today. (B.151)

Alexandria fills Darley with a sense of introspection and obsession with this single idea- to know everything of this mysterious enigmatic city. To find the truth about its inhabitants, it was necessary to unwind the mystery of this ancient city. Darley realizes that the key to solve this problem is in him and as a writer it was his duty to paint an accurate picture of this city and its inhabitants. The faces of these characters appeared like a thousand mirrored images of various reverberating expressions each one mirroring one aspect and one side of the city.

Darley can return to the city only when he is stripped off his ego defenses and rationalized justifications. Only then, does it signify that he is coming to terms with life.

C.P. Cavafy, the Greek Alexandrian poet is one of the city's exemplars along with the historical figures- Alexander and Cleopatra. Cavafy becomes a character in the novels and it is through the figure of Balthazar that Durrell gives a portrait of Cavafy as he felt the presence of this poet in the city of Alexandria, Balthazar's room resembles Cavafy's in Rue Lepsius- 'a worm-eaten room with the cane chair which creaked all night'.¹⁸ Cavafy's poetry is repeated several times in *The Alexandria Quartet*. The poems 'The City' and 'God Abandons Antony' serve as a backdrop for the novel which help Darley to understand the city of Alexandria.

The pattern of *The Alexandria Quartet* reflects the pattern of the city. Alexandria, a seaport in the eastern Mediterranean, is a historical place lodging the dead body of the founder of this city – Alexander. The body of Alexander itself remains mysterious. Likewise in *The Alexandria Quartet*, Alexandria, the city as space and as history radiates from the dead body of Alexander the young conqueror. This fictional city – Alexandria, emanates from the dead body of Pursewarden. According to the critic Ambrose Gordon Jr. :

The surrounding city, Alexandria itself radiates from
this point- the dead centre- ‘ like the arms of a starfish’,
a spiral movement outward that that we may think of as
occupying both space and time. (B.20)

The central act in *The Alexandria Quartet* which takes place in this novel is the suicide of the Irish novelist, Pursewarden and the discovery of the dead body by Balthazar. The suicide of this brilliant, talented person appears to be mysterious. Darley and the other characters seek to unwind the mystery of his death to find some complex answers to the questions which are raised by this incident.

Darley retreats to the island and recollects his past acquaintances to rebuild the city of Alexandria. In order to recollect memories of his stay he embarks on an ambitious plan of writing about these characters. Balthazar’s letters reawaken Darley’s mind to creative writing. The huge bundle of manuscript sent to Balthazar is returned with a list of fallacies and misapprehensions. Balthazar has added new truths, Darley states:

So much has been revealed to me by all this that I feel
myself to be, as it were standing upon the threshold
of a new book- a new Alexandria. (B.184)

Darley sets himself the task of trying to recover his acquaintances in words, to allot his or her position in time. A provisional picture of their lives and characters are drawn, as the full facts are not at his disposal. Darley’s curiosity to find out the truth leads him to a search of the diaries of Justine and Nessim and also the novel of her first husband Arnauti, titled ‘Moeurs’ which is a testimony of Arnauti’s obsessive desire to understand his disoriented and tormented wife.

Justine flees to Palestine without leaving any word either to her husband Nessim or to her lover, Darley. There, she takes up work on a large estate in Palestine. Meanwhile, the gentle and tender Melissa dies in Alexandria. Darley realizes Melissa’s true love for him but could not fulfill his desire to marry her and so missed the chance of seeing and talking to her before her death. Clea goes to Paris and is engaged in her painting work. The most startling information is that Justine in fact loved Pursewarden and used Darley merely as a decoy to protect her lover from the jealousy of her husband Nessim. He also reads with emotion that Pursewarden did not reciprocate Justine’s love. Realizing that what he had known is false he

proceeds to make corrections of his previous thoughts and opinions. He comes to accept with chagrin what Purse warden had written:

Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in
space and time-not by our personalities as we like to
think. (B.14)

Darley reluctantly accepts what Balthazar had once very casually had
said

Truth is what most contradicts itself in time (B.23)

Darley also realizes that Justine had surrendered to him “only one of the many selves she possessed and inhabited”. Eventually Darley observes that he had been excavating facts, piling up more and more data, yet completely missing the meaning of the space-time pattern. Justine, a rare phenomenon of the city stands out among the rest of the characters. As a true child of Alexandria her feelings and desires were influenced by this city, spiritually and emotionally. The meaninglessness of her existence in this world of action developed a frightening image of herself. Hence Darley could not understand Justine’s love for him and was puzzled by her mysterious nature.

An idea springs out of the void that he, Darley must be a decoy trying to camouflage her love for Pursewarden. In Justine’s world of treachery and deceit, love is only a part of the game she plays with all those who were kept under her firm grip. The hidden meaning of her life disguised itself in her elegant stylish manners and her superficial love entanglement. Darley learns more facts about her marriage to Nessim through the great Interlinear. He discovers that Justine is distraught at the disappearance of her small daughter and also her agreement to marry Nessim on the condition that he would help her financially and retrieve the missing child. In her interpretation of Nessim’s character she realizes that he is good, cultured and westernized. Educated in Oxford, he was sensitive and understanding and controlled the banking business all over the Mediterranean.

Darley’s observation of Justine and Nessim brings out a few more facts to light. He realizes that their esteem for each other decreased and there was absolutely no love between these two. All the observers were deceived on the surface by their relationship which appeared brilliantly executed. In his innocence and immaturity, Nessim does not realize the fact that it is impossible to live with Justine without loving her. Likewise, Justine is dismayed by the fact that their relationship based on a financial contract does not give her any satisfaction and in fact demands more loyalty towards her husband.

One does not as a woman(if passion seems to
sanction it) think twice about being unfaithful to a
husband: but to be unfaithful to Nessim seemed like
stealing money from the till. (B.100)

Gradually Justine becomes aware of Nessim's jealousy as he suspects her actions. On hearing Nessim's telephonic conversation, it becomes evident to her that he has located the missing child or had some information which he does not want to reveal. She is unable to comprehend the reasons behind his actions. She loses confidence in him and several questions arise about the withholding of information about her lost child. To her shock and dismay she comes to know of her child's death and estranges herself from Nessim and it is only later that it becomes clear that Nessim is involved in some deep political conspiracy which requires the greatest secrecy and she had been used only as a ploy. Reality has not steeped into the consciousness of these characters when they were involved subjectively in outwitting each other. It is only in introspection and recollection of events in time past that make them understand the hidden side of truth. Experiences gathered in the social and the spatial context become meaningful in their quest for matured perceptions.

Darley and Pursewarden are British Embassy Intelligence agents. While Pursewarden is a brilliant novelist and a high official in the Embassy, Darley is his subordinate representing an artist in making but Pursewarden is a confirmed artist. In his relationships with his acquaintances, Darley desires to see the depth of these relationships. The self in him hastens him to go forward and get more experience. His inner self assists him to understand his relations in a broader perspective and involves him in various incidents. It is through the description of the outer world that Durrell brings out the inner consciousness of the characters. Reality is not a visualized reality but one which is experienced by Darley.

Darley admires Pursewarden for his genius and embarks on delineating his character. The admiration that Darley had for Pursewarden is mingled with envy as his personality was a sort of enigma to Darley. Pursewarden's genius was apparent when his book, his trilogy, *God is a Humourist* became a best-selling novel. Pursewarden dominates the action of the novel without apparently being active and his remarks become a spirited commentary of Alexandrian life. He is the *Quartet's* primary symbol of the self. His character reflects a fulfilled psyche formed of bright and dark principles of growth which can be equated with Durrell's concept of ultimate reality.

Pursewarden is a committed novelist who never has time for flirting with Justine. His aim is to approach her to gain more knowledge of her mind to find out her attitudes. His close business rapport with foreign countries provides him a wide knowledge of people and languages which gain reflections in his works. In his novel, he speaks about the role of the artist in life. Impressed by Pursewarden's personality, Justine feels at ease as he treated her as a human being with unnatural feelings. His repudiation of '*Meours*' an autobiographical novel written by her first husband, Arnauti delights her and she is overwhelmed by his philosophic ideas and profound statements. Her life entirely takes a new turn after she comes into contact with Pursewarden- the one whom she could 'really love'.

In Darley's relationship with Melissa, Balthazar puts forward his view that Melissa in fact loved Darley truly but her love had never been reciprocated as his love for Justine overwhelmed his love for Melissa. Darley returns to Alexandria and finds that Melissa had died and that Justine had aged and become bitter and cantankerous. He therefore forms a mature love relationship with Clea who had undergone her own withdrawal from Alexandria before returning to it with new insights. Darley falls in and out of affairs and seems unmasculine despite his success with Melissa, Justine and Clea. His appeal lies in his detachment and his lack of apparent desire. Devoid of will- power, he engages himself in temporary love affairs and leaves Alexandria.

My lengthy hiatus between volumes led me to newly discover the remarkable deftness with which Durrell portrays the women involved, each rendered with sympathetic exactitude and leaving me stunned with the resonance of lines such as these:

She knew that the heart wearies of monotony, that habit and despair are the bedfellows of love, and she waited patiently, as a very old woman might, for the flesh to outgrow its promptings, to deliver itself from an attachment which she now recognized was not of her seeking.

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Justine the seductress is a little more than a vampire whose attraction is not that of a female personality, but of an evil spirit, who tortures the male. She is much influenced by the spirit of the place and her inability to give herself is itself a mark of her lack of will-power. She lives a life of mundane existence having no specific traits or personality to make her exceptional. But when seen alone with the other women characters like Melissa, Clea and Leila she appears different and it is through her relationships with Darley, Pursewarden and Nessim that she is revealed to be an enigmatic woman. Balthazar is centrally concerned with the search for valid identity .The undiscovered self lies somewhere beyond

the compost of secret pleasures and treacheries which are an inseparable part of every human relation. (B.223)

At the end of the novel, Darley remains on his island, brooding upon the dismaying revelations put forward by Balthazar. He is too perturbed to serve further as a narrator until he comes to terms with the past, which is not dead but far more alive. In Darley's life, art has been a purifying factor and unmistakably his endurance becomes a real teacher. Darley's mind becomes like a mirror in which the heraldic universe suggested through a confluence of Western science and Eastern metaphysics, manifests itself in moments of vision. This bridging of East and West occurs in Pursewarden's 'Notebook' entitled "My Conversations

with Brother Ass". Alexandria, the embodiment of ideas from the East and West has been shaping the events of Darley's life and consequently he attunes himself to the space- time flow. His illuminated mind reflects the spiritual order at the centre of heraldic reality. Darley makes the enigmatic leap into this heraldic dimension to find a world which promises unique happiness as he is well- equipped to grasp this truth from his past experiences. *Balthazar* therefore is an attempt to put people and events in perspective and precipitate a second effect. Thus he assigns the aesthetic theory an integral position within his fiction, thereby combining fiction and theory.

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