

‘The Truth Only Partially Perceived’:
(Mis)Reading/Writing, Rewriting, and
Artistic Development in Lawrence Durrell’s
Alexandria Quartet

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Abstract. Through the role of the *Alexandria Quartet*’s writer-narrator, L. G. Darley, Lawrence Durrell interrogates the writing process by demonstrating the co-existence of multiple interpretations of place and time. Both Durrell and Darley build an evocation of Alexandria and its inhabitants using myriad textual sources, including fictional writer-characters as well as well-known authors such as E. M. Forster and Cavafy. This article examines the use of this palimpsest as a device through which Darley learns to become a novelist, by reading, rereading, and rewriting his impressions of the city. The multi-vocal nature of the *Quartet* — in which each of the four books effectively retells the same story — demonstrates not only the inherently intertextual and self-reflexive nature of the novel form, but also the way in which stories take shape. Darley frames and structures the narrative, propelling it forward by demonstrating his evolution as a writer throughout the four books. Durrell illustrates this both structurally and thematically, presenting Darley’s growth as a novelist through the layering of different versions of the truth, whilst suggesting that only together do these disparate readings of ‘truth’ constitute something approaching reality.

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There, lying on the table in the yellow lamplight, lay the great interlinear to *Justine* — as I had called it. It was crosshatched, crabbed, starred with questions and answers in different-coloured inks, in typescript. It seemed to me then to be somehow symbolic of the very reality we had shared — a palimpsest upon which each of us had left his or her individual traces, layer by layer.¹

This article examines Lawrence Durrell’s use of writing and the writing process as a device through which to question the nature of truth alongside art’s representation of reality. Through the role within the novel of the *Quartet*’s writer-narrator, L. G. Darley, Durrell interrogates artistic creation by demonstrating the co-existence of multiple interpretations of place and time.

¹ Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 215.

The idea of creative practice is palimpsestic: an undertaking through which Darley learns to become a novelist by writing, reading, rereading, and rewriting his impressions of events that shape and inspire him. The four books of the tetralogy — *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958), *Mountolive* (1958), and *Clea* (1960) — use the unifying figure of the novelist-character, Darley, as a filter through which to examine the nature of truth. The first three books present the same set of events and characters in Alexandria from three differing perspectives; the fourth volume, *Clea*, is set some six years later, although revisiting the same events. Darley narrates three volumes (the exception is *Mountolive* in which he appears as a more liminal character) thus allowing his understanding of events to unfold and change.² Darley's consequent rewriting of his narrative establishes Durrell's intention to focus his work's philosophy on the concept that multiple truths can exist — overlaying each other — and that ultimately truth, which can only ever be subjective, is not the purpose of art. The importance of Durrell's work is in the way this motif is echoed within and throughout the very form of the novel sequence.

In the opening pages of *Balthazar* Darley describes himself as being 'landlocked in spirit as all writers are', yet it is only through the plurality of narrative voices and intertexts that Darley learns to become a more competent writer.³ Indeed the use of 'quartet' in the title of the sequence may be intended to symbolise a unity that can only come from an incongruent range of voices. Durrell, who gives his own initials to his narrator, L. G. Darley, ends his *Quartet* with the promise of new creation: something which Anne Zahlan has asserted is an 'affirmation of the artistic vocation'.⁴ By the end of the sequence Darley has developed and matured into a skilled writer and is, as Lionel Trilling writes, 'at last able to know that he has achieved salvation, that he is at the great moment of "an artist coming of age."' The 'once upon a time' beginning of Darley's own novel at the end of *Clea*, and thus of the *Quartet*, 'announces [...] that he is going to tell a story — really *tell* it as against representing it'.⁵

Steven G. Kellman includes Durrell's *Quartet* in his 1980 work *The Self-Begetting Novel*. The self-begotten novel is first defined by Kellman, in a 1976 essay, as 'an account, usually first person, of the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading'.⁶ However the *Quartet* itself is not a self-begotten work; Darley instead creates *himself* as an artist, freeing himself from the frame text to become a writer in his own right. We know Darley chooses to begin his own creative work with:

² See pp. 8–10 for fuller discussion of this feature of *Mountolive*.

³ *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 213.

⁴ Anne R. Zahlan, 'Crossing the Border: Lawrence Durrell's Alexandrian Conversion to Postmodernism', *South Atlantic Review*, 64.4 (1999), 84–97 (p. 84).

⁵ Lionel Trilling, 'The Quartet: Two Reviews', in *The World of Lawrence Durrell*, ed. by Harry T. Moore, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp. 58–59 & 64.

⁶ Steven G. Kellman, 'The Fiction of Self-Begetting', *MLN*, 91.6 (December, 1976), 1245–56 (p. 1245).

Four words (four letters! Four faces!) with which every story-teller since the world began had staked his slender claim to the attention of fellow-men. Words which presage simply the old story of an artist coming of age. I wrote: 'Once upon a time [...].'

And I felt as if the whole universe had given me a nudge!⁷

This contrasts with the opening of the *Quartet* itself, 'The sea is high again today',⁸ but more than this, it would make little sense in terms of Durrell's own sequence for this to be the *Quartet*'s beginning. His four volumes are designed to show the evolution of Darley as a novelist through the rewriting and revising of the narratives in the first volumes until the conclusion of *Clea* sets him free of the narrative we have just read in order that he write his own story. Alan Friedman writes that Darley's "Once upon a time" serves the same function as Stephen's "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and forever in good stead," at the end of Joyce's *A Portrait* [...] both figures have emerged not as identical with their authors but as artists in their own right.⁹ If the ending were to return Darley to the beginning then he would have learnt nothing. Durrell's introductory note to the first edition of *Balthazar*, as well as his two references to palimpsests within the story, indicate a thematic design that simply does not support the self-beggetting of the *Quartet*:

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 four novels follow this pattern. The first three parts, however, are to be deployed spatially [...] and are not linked in a serial form. They interlap, interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. The fourth part alone will represent time and be a true sequel [...] the third part, *Mountolive*, is a straight naturalistic novel in which the narrator of *Justine* and *Balthazar* becomes an object, i.e. a character.¹⁰

Through this note, Durrell sets forth his ideology of the novel: the *Quartet* takes the modern relativity principle as well as that of the ancient palimpsest to convey his thesis on the nature of truth and art's portrayal of it. In his 1959 interview with *The Paris Review* Durrell went even further, stating that 'ideally, all four volumes should be read simultaneously [...] but as we lack four-dimensional spectacles the reader will have to do it imaginatively, adding the part of time to the other three [...] a kind of *demonstration* of a possible continuum'.¹¹ Arguably, as readers, we are only intended to take what Durrell sets out as his scientifically-based design for the novel semi-seriously; his alternative intent

⁷ *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 877.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ Alan Warren Friedman, *Lawrence Durrell and The Alexandria Quartet: Art for Love's Sake* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 164.

¹⁰ Lawrence Durrell, *Balthazar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 7.

¹¹ Lawrence Durrell, 'The Art of Fiction No. 23', *The Paris Review*, Autumn-Winter 1959-60 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4720/the-art-of-fiction-no-23-lawrence-durrell>> [accessed 11/05/2016].

with the novel's form is to attempt a break-down of the dichotomy he observes as existing between life and art. In the same *Paris Review* interview he refers to what he sees as an 'artificial distinction between artists and humans'.¹² We may therefore see the multivocal nature of Durrell's novel sequence as intended to define writing as a *process*: artistic creation as evolution rather than any kind of romanticised inspiration that would set the artist apart from the rest of humanity. The profusion of flawed writing-characters, in addition to Darley's (at times painfully slow) development as a writer, reveal the fallible nature of artists and presents them in a more realistic and human light than many modernist texts which posit the author as god.

The effect of re-writing throughout the four novels not only depicts multiple truths and serves to illustrate how, through seeing the different versions of the story, Darley grows and matures as a writer, but it also comments upon the inherently intertextual nature of the novel form. Indeed as well as the four 'stories' within the *Quartet*, there is, too, a myriad of allusions to the writing and composition of Alexandria. Ray Morrison has noted that the narrator 'begins to reconstruct Alexandria and his life from notebooks, diaries, and materials by Justine, Nessim, Arnauti, E. M. Forster and Cavafy',¹³ assimilating real-life literary inspirations with the writing of characters within the novels and thus attesting to Roland Barthes's contention that the text is a 'tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.¹⁴ The character, Balthazar, in a note to Darley explaining his interlinear, suggests that 'if you wished somehow to incorporate all I am 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. Unwittingly I may have supplied you with a form'.¹⁵ Durrell's inclusion of this incredibly self-knowing passage arguably reveals more of his true intention than his own explanatory note at the beginning of *Balthazar*. That is, through Balthazar's influence on Darley's manuscript, Durrell plainly shows that writing goes through many stages; each completed manuscript is a palimpsest of these innumerable, various stages of production and revision.

In his book *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette (1982) examines the relationships a text can have to preceding texts, something Genette sees as 'a universal feature of literarity: there is no literary work that does not evoke (to some extent and according to how it is read) some other literary work, and in that sense all works are hypertextual'.¹⁶ The palimpsestic nature of *The Alexandria Quartet* — in which each of the four books effectively retells the same story — denotes not only the inherently intertextual and self-reflexive nature of the novel

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ray Morrison, 'Mirrors and the Heraldic Universe in Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 33.4: II (1987), 499–514 (p. 501).

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 146.

¹⁵ *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 338.

¹⁶ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 9.

form, but also the way in which stories take shape.¹⁷ The significance of the various intertexts which permeate Darley's own writing illustrate the value of reading the writing of others. Darley is, as Kellman points out, not just a writer but crucially also a *reader* 'not only of Balthazar's "Interlinear" and of other documents that fall into his hands, but of a wide range of cryptic and conflicting codes'.¹⁸ His misreading of events leads to (what Balthazar and other characters see as) the inaccuracy of representation in the narrative, although Durrell is keen to point out that Darley's interpretation is still valid as it remains true to his recollections. Particularly in *Balthazar* and *Clea*, Darley's reminiscences of the novelist-character, Pursewarden, are used by Durrell to undermine the idea of an ultimate 'truth'. Pursewarden's aphorisms often relate the comparative worth of truth to art (always to the detriment of truth). He states, for example: 'Truth is independent of fact', 'We live [...] lives based upon selected fictions', and 'the so-called act of living is really an act of the imagination'.¹⁹ Ultimately the verification of fact is unimportant to Darley (and Durrell), rather what matters is his writer's imagination: 'his ability not simply to piece together the many fragments of his past but to reconcile and recreate them into a whole, coherent work — a complex but unified vision'.²⁰

The multiple texts and intertexts that make up the *Quartet* correlate with the characters' divergent points of view and understanding of events, in order that a fully realised portrait of Alexandria and its inhabitants can be construed. Parallels are drawn between the ways in which the city, the text, and the self more generally are constructed as palimpsests, each conceived as myriad levels of atemporal, imbricated experiences with no one level alone able to render the complexity of life. Balthazar describes his own reconstruction of Darley's text as becoming 'some medieval palimpsest where different sorts of truths are thrown down one upon the other, the one obliterating or perhaps supplementing another'.²¹ As well as the numerous references to palimpsests throughout his work, Durrell also uses the image of a mirror to evoke the multiple angles from which everything can be seen. Morrison counts 'more than one hundred and twenty mirrors',²² but the most famous mirror scene displays something of Durrell's design for the novel behind his multi-layered narrative:

Justine hated to hear the truth spoken [...] I remember her sitting before the multiple mirrors at the dressmaker's, being fitted for a shark-skin costume,

¹⁷ For further analysis of Durrell's use of the palimpsest throughout his works see James M. Clawson, *Durrell Re-Read: Crossing the Liminal in Lawrence Durrell's Major Novels* (Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Steven G. Kellman, 'Sailing to Alexandria: The Reader in/of Durrell's Byzantine *Quartet*', in *Into the Labyrinth: Essays in the Art of Lawrence Durrell*, ed. by Frank L. Kernowski (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), p. 118.

¹⁹ *The Alexandria Quartet*, pp. 386, 216, 210, 772.

²⁰ Donald P. Kaczvinsky, *Lawrence Durrell's Major Novels, or The Kingdom of the Imagination* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 38.

²¹ *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 338.

²² Morrison, p. 500.

and saying: 'Look! Five different pictures of the same subject. Now if I wrote I 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?'.²³

This mirror's relation to the fragmentation of the self also comments upon different potentials of the writer: he can act like the mirror and reflect multiple realities, but always only on the surface, or he can construct anew out of the various impressions. In the early volume, Darley fails in his design to 'completely [...] rebuild this city in my brain' because to begin with he only reflects upon events.²⁴ He tells us that he has 'no pretensions to being an artist. I want to put things down simply and crudely, without style'.²⁵ It is only later, after Balthazar's 'Interlinear' has revealed to him how mistaken he was about what he considered to be the 'truth', that he realises that truth itself is not vital, but rather what he himself makes of it in his role as the writer. Darley reflects on something Pursewarden had said to him earlier in the narrative: 'if things were always what they seemed, how impoverished would be the imagination of man!'.²⁶ Eventually, writes James M. Clawson, Darley is able to dismiss 'expectations of factual exactitude in favour of artistic merit'.²⁷ However at this stage of *Balthazar* he is seemingly unable to let go of his original intention of rebuilding, in his mind, the city, inhabitants, and events of Alexandria as he interprets them in order to make sense of what happened to him. Darley, although he accepts his misreading of the truth, cannot yet turn it into the stuff of fiction. Therefore he must continue to 'set it down in cold black and white, until such time as the memory or impulse of it is spent. I know that the key I am trying to turn is in myself'.²⁸ This key is his ability to use the skewed and varied truths in order to create something new, his own work of fiction.

The revelations in *Balthazar* set Darley on his way to becoming a writer, but it is between the third and fourth volumes that he really begins to develop and see the errors of his previous work. Between *Balthazar* and *Clea* is *Mountolive*, which, unlike the other three volumes of the *Quartet*, is not narrated by Darley but by an unknown and supposedly omniscient narrator: 'an account of the thing by an invisible narrator, as opposed to somebody engaged in the action',²⁹ states Durrell. There is much scholarly debate over *Mountolive* for this reason.³⁰ This issue of authorship in *Mountolive* is also crucial in regard

²³ *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²⁷ Clawson, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

²⁹ Durrell, 'The Art of Fiction No. 23'.

³⁰ See particularly Donald P. Kaczvinsky, *Lawrence Durrell's Major Novels, or The Kingdom of the Imagination* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997); Eugene Hollahan, 'Who Wrote *Mountolive*? The Same One Who Wrote "Swann in Love"', in *On Miracle Ground: Essays on the fiction of Lawrence Durrell*, ed. by Michael H. Begnal (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 113–32; and Carol

to the sequence's focus on the evolution of the novelist. Durrell tells us, in the note to *Balthazar*, that in *Mountolive* the narrator (Darley) will become 'an object, i.e. a character',³¹ but that does not necessarily negate the possibility that Darley himself authors *Mountolive*. His authoring of *Mountolive* also prefigures his eventual unique composition, which he is finally able to begin after the conclusion of the *Quartet*. As Kaczvinsky notes 'it preserves the continuity, consistency, and coherence of the entire series [...] that Darley himself "wrote" *Mountolive*'³²

Warren Wedin, who initially proposed this hypothesis, points out that several sections of *Balthazar* are written by Darley but narrated in the third person, thus smoothing the narrative link between the second and the third volumes' narrative style. Wedin suggests that this device is used to discuss 'events about which Darley could have no personal knowledge [...] the point here is that Darley is writing an imaginative reconstruction of the events in the third person, based on someone else's information. In other words he is writing fiction'.³³ That Darley narrates the first two volumes, trials his writing style within the third, and then resumes narration in the fourth (where he can garner the techniques he has learnt in the writing of *Mountolive* to master the problems in the narrative and finally embark upon his own creative work) would logically fit with Durrell's design for the *Quartet*. No doubt Durrell intended the uncertainty; his biographer, Ian MacNiven, writes that he regarded the third volume 'as the *clou*, the nail holding together the entire structure of the *Quartet*'.³⁴ Eugene Hollahan calls it 'the most puzzling piece of *The Alexandria Quartet* as the only piece that could be construed as "written" in the usual novelistic sense'.³⁵ In the second edition of his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Wayne C. Booth places the narrator of *Mountolive* in his 'Gallery of Unreliable Narrators and Reflectors'.³⁶ Friedman comments that 'Durrell [in *Mountolive*] deliberately misleads us in many ways, perhaps the most significant of which is his narrator's presumably accurate knowledge of the solutions to factual mysteries [...] the naïve, unreliable narrator would have us believe that all motives, all causes, are precise and unambiguous'.³⁷

Arguably, as part of Durrell's design for the sequence, *Mountolive* is offered as a supposed contrast with Darley's subjective 'truths' in the preceding volumes; however it in fact further confounds the idea that truth can exist by

Pierce, "Wrinkled Deep in Time": The Alexandria Quartet as Many-Layered Palimpsest', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 33.4 (Winter, 1987), 485-98.

³¹ *Balthazar*, p. 7.

³² Kaczvinsky, p. 59.

³³ Warren Wedin, 'The Artist as Narrator in *The Alexandria Quartet*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 18.3 (July, 1972), 175-80 (p. 177).

³⁴ Ian MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 466.

³⁵ Hollahan, p. 128.

³⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 492-94.

³⁷ Friedman, pp. 119-20.

offering the reader deliberately false deductions and solutions to the puzzles via the supposedly omniscient narrator. Friedman concludes that in fact the ‘truth abstracted from “felt reality” is neither beautiful, nor important, not even very reliable.’³⁸ Thus the reader is forced to realise that Darley’s previous misunderstandings are not that severe and actually they are important for the development of both the narrative and Darley as a writer; if he has written *Mountolive*, then there is an evident continuation of theme in the disregard for the importance of truth.

Darley’s infrequent appearances within *Mountolive* are limited to the filter of the titular character, David Mountolive, although he is always described with what Henry Miller saw as ‘characteristic self-deprecation’.³⁹ He participates in *Mountolive* much less than in the other three volumes, arguably because his writing (and rewriting) of the story has forced him above the action. He returns himself to the action as the narrator in *Clea*, but the change in him is evident from the first page, in which he redresses his authorial intentions:

I had set out once to store, to codify, to annotate the past before it was utterly lost — that at least was a task I had set myself. I had failed in it (perhaps it was hopeless?) for no sooner had I embalmed one aspect of it in words than the intrusion of new knowledge disrupted the frame of reference, everything flew asunder only to reassemble again in unforeseen, unpredictable patterns [...]

‘To re-work reality’ I had written somewhere; temeritous, presumptuous words indeed.⁴⁰

Darley not only recognises but freely admits his failure to follow through with his self-appointed task, seeing that his plan for writing the truth was ultimately unworkable and unrealistic. He seemed far further away from reaching this conclusion at the end of *Balthazar*, and we see so little of the character Darley in *Mountolive* that we are unable to perceive how exactly he has come to this realisation unless we accept that he learnt through doing: that he *did* write *Mountolive*. He has been able to step out of the shadow of the *Quartet*’s other novelists, moving ‘from a reliance on the literature of others to the creation of his own’.⁴¹ Even the overbearing Pursewarden’s input in *Clea*, in the form of ‘My Conversations with Brother Ass’,⁴² augments Darley’s position as a writer to one of equality by calling him ‘brother’. Darley begins the *Quartet* feeling threatened and jealous of Pursewarden’s success, he tells us: ‘I disliked this literary figure for the contrast he offered to his own work — poetry and prose of real grace. I did not know him well but he was financially successful

³⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

³⁹ Letter from Henry Miller to Lawrence Durrell: ‘*from Le Chambon 9/7 [i.e., 9 July] 59’, in *Durrell-Miller Letters, 1935–1980*, ed. by Ian MacNiven (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 345.

⁴⁰ *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 657.

⁴¹ James Van Dyke Card, ‘“Tell Me, Tell Me”: The Writer as Spellbinder in Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*’, *Modern British Literature*, 1.1 (1975), 74–83 (p. 80).

⁴² *The Alexandria Quartet*, p. 749.

as a novelist which made me envious'.⁴³ Yet, by the concluding volume, he has come to appreciate him as he furthers his understanding of himself as a writer. He is finally able to exorcise the fixation that the works of Pursewarden, as well as those of the other major novelist figure, Arnauti, have held over his understanding of the narrative:

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 different ways, each understanding it according to his nature and gift.

It was only now that I began to see how mysteriously the configuration of my own life had taken its shape from the properties of those elements which lie outside the relative life — in the kingdom which Pursewarden calls the 'heraldic universe'. 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!⁴⁴

The education Darley has received at the hands (or pens) of these other novelists — as well as from subsidiary writing and artistic characters like Balthazar and Clea — is vital to the thematic structure of the *Quartet* as it demonstrates how these various intertexts go towards the creation of his own eventual narrative. Chiara Briganti asserts that, 'Darley renounces any claim to invention and originality. Writing becomes for him a question of assemblage in which the writing subject undoes itself and becomes dispersed and fragmented'.⁴⁵ He learns to accept he cannot control the hypertextual nature of his narrative, that it is by nature something protean, even unstable. Darley is the central figure of the *Quartet* in that his presence frames and structures the narrative, propelling it forward as he evolves as a novelist throughout the four books. Durrell illustrates this both structurally and thematically; he uses the idea of the palimpsest to represent Darley's growth as a novelist through superimposed versions of the truth, with the prevailing suggestion that only together do these disparate readings of 'truth' constitute something approaching reality.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 792.

⁴⁵ Chiara Briganti, 'Lawrence Durrell and the Vanishing Author', in *On Miracle Ground*, p. 50.