Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria is a maze of shuffling relationships, loyalties, and allegiances where all participants struggle to define themselves through their love and work. Characters' beliefs, personalities, and even identities are constantly refined and reevaluated in the shifting maze of Durrell's city; lovers' motivations are revealed to be calculated, healers serve to inflict pain, and the dead find themselves suddenly vital with the turn of a page. The question, then, is how to search for the meaning of a literary work when the work defines that meaning as relative to the observer. As critical readers, where do we look to discover the truth of Durrell's masterwork when the text itself tells us that truth, in both our creative and romantic lives, is no longer absolute? Where would Durrell have us look to uncover the meaning of his *Quartet*? This paper argues that the work is a mirror for the reader and the critic, much as the lovers in the *Quartet* are mirrors for each other, providing meaning only in the reflection.

"Spellbound by the Image": A Reflective Response to Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*

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All the books on our shelves tell two stories.[1] First, there is the narrative the author relates, the tale constructed out of metaphor and allusion and diction and syntax and crafted into a cohesive and meaningful whole. This is the story that the author gives to the audience and that each reader shares with every other, and this story is (rightly) the object of the majority of critical attention any particular text receives. Whether critics are attempting to make meaning of the words on the page by examining them in a vacuum, comparing them to similar texts, relating them to the author's own life, or contextualizing them within their historical and social environment, most commentators focus their attention on the narrative the author has created. For each work that lines our shelves,

[1] I am indebted to the anonymous readers at *Agora* for their valuable comments and suggestions. Great appreciation is also due to Betty Sue Flowers, Jacqueline Foertsch, Thomas Garza, David Holdeman, and Robert Upchurch for their advice and support.

however, there is a second story: the account of our individual experiences with the book. For each volume we can articulate the major themes, motifs and characters, just like any reasonably attentive student of literature, but we can also relate our anecdotes that underlie these epics and tie them all together into our own personal narratives. Looking at my battered paperback copies of *Hamlet* and *The Sound and the Fury*, I think immediately of the perfect literary portrayals of madness in the former and a decaying family in the latter (or vice versa). But at the same moment that I reflect on these aspects of the works, I also remember that I bought the former in my favorite musty, used bookstore on Guadalupe Street in Austin, Texas, and that I was carrying the latter when I was mugged for the first time in Philadelphia's winter. I find it difficult to separate these subtexts from the texts themselves, and I am not certain that I should even try.

I suspect that we all carry these secret histories of our libraries, but rarely do they seem useful, relevant or even worth mentioning in our professional lives, whether as students, teachers, or critics. We are encouraged to approach literature from an analytical and objective standpoint that discounts our emotional and personal reactions to the work in question. This is a fairly orthodox critical stance, and, although it seems that there is something personal lost in this transaction, it is no doubt an effective and legitimate way of approaching a text. This is why it is so surprising to find support for a more personal and creative critical response to literature in the work of Lawrence Durrell, a writer who is considered at least moderately canonical. His use of the motif of reflection in *The Alexandria Quartet* and his commentary elsewhere on the same work imply that the second story, our personal stories of the literature we study, is as important to our critical response as the text itself.

Images of mirrors and reflection are vital to an analysis of the romantic relationships of the *Quartet*, informing and distorting the perspectives of both the lover and the reader. Darley, Durrell's narrator, firsts meets Justine, one of several women he will love in the course of the *Quartet*, "leaning down at [him] from the mirrors on three sides of the room" as he sits eating olives after delivering a lecture (*Justine* 31). This is a motif that will continue throughout the relationship; readers are constantly shown (through Darley's eyes) images of Justine's reflection.[2] A few pages later, Justine pauses on her way to bed to look into "the mirror on the first landing and say to her reflection: 'Tiresome pretentious hysterical Jewess that you are'" (36). She appears "sitting before

[2] The references to mirrors here and throughout the paper are only a very small sampling of those present in the entire work. Joan Mellard counts one hundred twelve references to mirrors and reflection in the first three books of the *Quartet*, or roughly one every seven pages (97). This lexical count does not include references to water; Mellard considers water as part of a different symbol set, in spite of its reflective qualities. The inclusion of these references would clearly make the above count even higher.

the multiple mirrors of the dressmaker's" and discussing multiple and relative perspectives in novel-writing (27). Justine seems almost aware of her status as a character in Durrell's *Quartet* here, suggesting that Darley ought to "try for a multi-dimensional affect in character, a sort of prism-sightedness" that will allow him to see multiple sides of his characters in a way that suggests a Cubist painting (27).[3] Even in her reclusive exile from the city in *Clea*, long after the end of their relationship, Justine makes reference to Darley's mistaken impressions and reflections, saying to him, "You see a different me... but once again the difference lies in you, in what you imagine you see" (53). Durrell encourages his readers to recognize that Darley always seems to be looking not at Justine but some reflection of her, waiting "in silence, holding [his] breath, lest the pane should cloud over" (*Justine* 72).

Darley's facts and impressions of his relationship with Justine are described almost entirely from a viewpoint that has been removed from the subject, either in literal mirrors or in the metaphorical reflections of the limited perspectives of our narrator in the form of emotional investment in the story he is telling, as well as physical and temporal distance from the events in question. This emphasis on reflection is not unique to this relationship, however; this mirroring of perspective and character is present throughout all four books of the *Quartet*. In nearly all of the consummated pairings in the work, some form of reflection is present. Darley finds his poverty reflected back to him in Melissa the dancer, and much of his exposition concerning their relationship focuses on the shabby circumstances that surround them. Likewise, his creative urge is mirrored in Clea the artist, and the bulk of the novel that shares her name is centered on each of their quests to create worthwhile works of art. Both the painter and the writer find in each other a reflection of their own struggle to create, and the relationship ultimately helps them both to come into their own as artists. Pursewarden's relationship demonstrates perhaps the most extreme example of reflection, as he only finds himself romantically satisfied in a relationship with his blind sister, the closest person he could find to a living reflection (and ironically unable to see herself in the mirror). The reflective natures of these relationships all seem to point to Pursewarden's assertion (acting in at least some capacity as Durrell's spokesperson) that "[t]here is no Other; there is only oneself facing forever the problem of one's self discovery" (*Clea* 99). This is to say that in the end, the person who reflects us is less important than the relationship we have with that reflection.

The repetition and emphasis of this reflective distancing demands the audience's attention, and many readers have already commented on this motif. Ray Morrison claims

[3] Only the author and philosopher Pursewarden seems more aware of Durrell's prismatic novel in which all the characters find themselves.

that Durrell's mirrors are "of paramount significance in representing Durrell's Heraldic Universe[,]… a mystical unity resting behind phenomena and lives" (500). Ann Gossman argues that this mirroring theme is meant to suggest any number of things, from an allusion to the Narcissus myth, a reference to the characters' fractured senses of self, to an implication that "the first step in love is to compare experiences, like 'reflections in different mirrors'" (80-81). Moreover, Joan Mellard suggests that both the real and metaphorical mirrors are used "as a symbol of an easy acceptance of surface realties" and suggest emotional and psychic stasis (85). To these views, I would add the interpretation that all of the work's many reflections suggest a turning inward on Darley's part, implying an epistemology in which Darley's impressions of events are more meaningful than the empirical truth that surrounds him. Darley puts this most succinctly when he justifies *Justine* (and in many ways the entire *Quartet*) by saying that what he attempts to do "is to record experiences… in the order in which they first became significant to me" (*Justine* 115). This reliance on subjective impressions rather than objective fact, though supplemented by the significances of other observers, is never discarded, and through it Durrell models a similar reading strategy for the audience, in which the personal significance of the work is examined not in place of, but alongside the text itself.[4] Darley and several others in the *Quartet* find romantic fulfillment not in their partners, but in relation to the reflected image of themselves those partners throw back; the meaning of these romantic encounters is made (for the lovers) not in their beloveds, but in the transaction between the two. Likewise, Durrell seems to suggest that the meaning we make of the encounter we have with the *Quartet* is found not only in the words on the page, but also in the position we occupy as readers in relation to the work.

This argument is immediately complicated, though, by the fact that not all of the *Quartet*'s relationships are easily categorized as reflective. Nessim and Justine's union stands out as a prominent example of a relationship in which the parties are quite different. In fact, their differences seem to be the factor that draws them together, rather than their similarities. This is especially true regarding their religious beliefs; Justine's Judaism is one of the primary reasons that the Coptic Nessim is drawn to her, even if the motivation here is political. In fact, Nessim is unable to convince Justine to marry him on any merits of his own; instead, he persuades her to join him only by including her in his Palestinian plot and by thus giving her a sense of work and purpose. Likewise, the

[4] Critics who argue that *Mountolive* is where the "truth" of the *Quartet* may be found to assume too quickly that the narrator of the work is omniscient and objective. As Friedman puts it, "[t]he implied author of *Mountolive affords* us a third view of the *Justine-Balthazar* events…[and] must be considered in terms of its internal consistency and relationship to the whole and not, as would be all too easy and misleading, primarily with regard to an a priori evaluation of its 'omniscient' technique" (112, Friedman's italics).

relationship between Mountolive and Leila is clearly not a coupling in which either member reflects the other very well. Instead, their relationship flourishes through letters as Leila uses Mountolive to explore a Europe she is unable to access and subsequently educates him with some of the culture and refinement that his career as a diplomat requires. Although the romantic facet of their relationship is never revived after Mountolive's departure, their shared need for culture (an intellectual need for Leila, a diplomatic one for Mountolive) unites them in a bond that is no less sincere for its lack of romantic passion.

This pattern of romantic love as a reflection not of a person but of their work is continued in the brief assignation between Justine and Clea; the painter's attraction to Justine is discovered and based upon Clea's painting of her portrait. In Justine, Clea finds a meeting of her romantic and creative urges, and although their relationship is brief, the artist seems to find some enduring satisfaction there. Similarly, Amaril the surgeon also manages to find a love that reflects not himself, but his art. His lover Semira, whom he initially meets in costume at a festival, is disfigured and has no nose; Amaril's purpose and meaning in both his work and romance becomes to restore and remake her beauty, in part so that their relationship can be publicly acknowledged and consummated. The doctor even goes so far as to unite in Semira the physical beauty he desires and the career which he loves when he "train[s] her… to be a doll's surgeon" (*Clea* 90). While his initial attraction to her is founded in her anonymity, he finds a lasting happiness in their relationship only when it unites his romantic urge with his medical art.

Finally, Justine and Darley's relationship, while full of reflections and mirrors of each other, also operates on this level of artistic worth. For Darley, Justine is not only a romantic pursuit, but a creative one as well; his novel about her (presented to us in *Justine*) is a creative consummation of the love he believes they share. This creative consummation is a pursuit in all of Darley's relationships throughout the *Quartet*, leading him to question if it is possible that "I enjoyed you [Clea] better as a thought than as a person alive, acting in the world" (*Clea* 272). Taking this diversion from love to work even further, it is eventually revealed that Darley is hardly a romantic conquest at all for Justine; instead, she sleeps with him to determine his political value regarding Nessim's plot. The façade of her romantic interest in Darley hides his value to her as part of her artistic creation, the execution of Nessim's plan. Both lovers find reflection in each other not only in the romantic sense, but also in the work that defines them and provides their lives with a sense of purpose.

Nonetheless, these couples cannot all be read as direct reflections of each other. Often, the two lovers are more than dissimilar; it is their differences that seem to attract them to one another. However, rather than acting as mirrors for each other, these

relationships set up a similar motif in which the beloved reflects the lover's vision not back on himself or herself, but towards his or her artistic work. Thus, the beloved does not absorb the lover's attention nor directs it back, but bends this attention towards the creative pursuit that generates meaning in the lover's life. This prismatic function implies a connection between romantic love and artistic fulfillment while continuing to deflect attention away from the object of affection and towards either the observer or the observer's art.

In addition to illustrating the reflective nature of love and conflating love and artistic work into a single purpose, Durrell indicates that this work, too, can be a reflection of its creator. When Darley writes that "[w]hat 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 to me," the engaged reader is almost inspired to complete the parallel structure: "—for that is art" (*Justine* 115). Darley believes that the truth of his relationships, with Justine, with Melissa, with Clea, and with Alexandria, is not found in the chronological facts. Instead, Darley makes meaning in his *relationship* with those facts—the prismatic reflections of himself that the mirror of these facts throws back to him. Justine tells Darley when they finally meet again that he "would always prefer [his] own mythical picture, framed by the five senses, to anything more truthful," and he certainly does (*Clea* 55). Thus, when he says to her that he is "full of gratitude because an experience which was perhaps banal in itself (and disgusting for you) was for me immeasurably enriching," he is confirming and endorsing his mythical picture, which, while not strictly factual, nevertheless holds more meaning for him (*Clea* 54).[5] Darley finally finds some degree of both romantic happiness and creative impetus when he is able to see "the moods of the great verb, Love: Melissa, Justine, and Clea" and realize that the common factor in each of these relationships is himself (177). "The love you feel for Melissa," he tells himself, "the same love, is trying to work itself out through Justine" and continues to work in Clea, and it is only when Darley embraces his own reflection in these women that he is able to be happy in his work (97). It is only through his writing that Darley is able to recognize that he is capable of interpreting a system of meaning from his relationships, not only with Alexandria or his lovers, but with everyone around him. His ability to recognize that "life itself… was a fiction—we were all saying it in our

[5] It seems that Durrell, too, shares this conclusion; while the 'facts' of *Justine* are certainly far from the literal truth, they are also certainly more meaningful than the historical record recorded in *Mountolive*. In the former, very few of the underlying events and motivations of Darley's relationship with Justine are interpreted factually by him, but the archetypal truths of passion and love are present. In *Mountolive*, on the other hand, the factual truth of Nessim's scheme and its influence on all of the characters is presented as completely as possible, but Darley and Justine's relationship is almost entirely insignificant. It is factually true, but the meaning is lost.

different ways, each understanding it according to his nature and gift" serves as a model for the audience's own understanding of the fiction before it (177). Only when Darley is able to write his about his own understanding of Alexandria without regard for *Mountolive*'s detached facts or *Balthazar*'s Interlinear corrections, only when he is able to write the ahistorical, afactual, mythic beginning "Once upon a time" is he able to create and love truly, confirming Pursewarden's notion that love (and, by extension, art) is "the problem of one's self discovery" (99, 282). And if the parallel holds, it is only when the audience examines its own relationship with the text alongside the text itself that that audience is able to discover either.

All of this brings me back to my first experience with the *Quartet*. I read Durrell's masterpiece for the first time sitting on my apartment balcony overlooking a black tar parking lot and a cracked and burnt field, roasting in the hot Texas sun. When I look at the books on my shelf, Alexandria's heat is mirrored in the heat their black spines would absorb, and I can remember reading about "the sweet voice of the blind *muezzin*" at the same time as I heard the jingle of the summer ice cream truck going by (*Justine* 25). And if Durrell is asserting through the pairings of the *Quartet* that relationships, be they with another person or with one's creative work, are at their heart self-reflective and self-enlightening, then it stands to reason that the same applies to our relationships with a literary work, especially if that work is the subject of our critical attention and effort. In a parallel of the love relationships in the novels, our relationships to the *Quartet*, my experience of reading in the heat and seeing my reflection in its pages—these are where meaning is made and located. If the motif of reflection in the *Quartet* is ambiguous, Durrell confirms this himself in a letter to one of the *Quartet*'s scholars:

> I like and respect critics and criticism, but the best always seem to have more to do with the insight of the critic and his expression of his own understanding than anything else. The work under review is only the springboard for a new creative enterprise. Would you rather have Coleridge on Shakespeare than Shakespeare? I wouldn't, but nor would I surrender Coleridge. The variety of response to the quartet has been really remarkable, but in what I read about it I seem to find that each one remakes it according to his own needs and intuitions; and this is consoling. The poor thing may turn out to be a decent work of art (Friedman 189-190).

Like love and work, Durrell insists that the art of reading is meaning-making to the extent that the audience finds itself reflected in the text. While the text exists

independently of the reader (much like the loved of the beloved, or the art of the artist), for Durrell it is the human agent that makes the work meaningful. It is not in the least surprising that Durrell, whose greatest literary achievement is itself a reflection of Einstein's ideas of relativity, asserts that in love, in art, in work, and yes, in reading and criticism, meaning is relative to the human knower. Certainly it is true that in *Mountolive*, Justine seduces Darley in order to obtain political information; no one could argue otherwise, but because meaning and truth are relative both in Alexandria and on the page, the motivations and passions and loves that Darley documents in *Justine* are no less true and no less significant for being contradicted later in the *Quartet*. For Durrell, truth and meaning are relative to the seeker of truth; love and passion are relative to the lover; and finally, the meaning, the passion, the truth of any work, and particularly the truth of his *Quartet*, is relative to the reader. Durrell would not be the least bit surprised that his work is inextricably bound to my sweltering balcony in north Texas, for he believes that his work, like the beloved to the lover, is a mirror, throwing back the reflection of the observer.

As readers and as critics, then, Durrell asks us to approach the *Quartet* not to define the valid truth of the work—or any other work of art—for a platonic ideal of Truth no longer exists in a post-Einsteinian Alexandria. Literary truth, like anything we perceive, is true only in that it is relative to the cultural position and perspective of the observer; Durrell would have us embrace this and attempt to define not the work, but ourselves in relation to it, describing the way our reflections come back to us. For Durrell, Alexandria is "a thousand dust-ridden streets," and a "great wine-press of love" brightened by "light filtered through the essence of lemons" (*Justine* 13-14). But, while it seems at first to have no critical weight, it is also meaningful that Alexandria is, for me, the view from my apartment balcony, the broken dirt of the empty field and the melting asphalt glittering like Mareotis. Both Alexandrias are equally true, and in the reflection of myself that I see in Durrell's polished Alexandrian mirror, the meaning of the work is made and remade. Durrell himself endorses this remaking of his city; like Pursewarden, he is astute enough to know that "[i]t is not really art which is at issue, it is ourselves" (*Clea* 128).

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