

**THE TWO FACES OF JANUS: FEMININE VOICES AND ROMANTIC LOVE  
TRIANGLES IN LAWRENCE DURRELL'S THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET**

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*Abstract: Lawrence Durrell is neither a modernist, nor a post-modernist writer. His work is very difficult to place. Durrell's masterpiece is The Alexandria Quartet, a series of four novels that depict the life and opinions of several expatriates living in Alexandria between 1933 and 1945 – before and during WWII. When writing and then re-writing The Quartet, Durrell had a very specific purpose in mind: he aimed first and foremost to innovate in terms of form. Durrell was fascinated with the scientific progress of his time, most notably with Einstein's theory of relativity, and his purpose in the four novels was to enact what he called the relativity proposition. This innovation in form is perceived in the four novels at all levels – characters included.*

*This paper aims at analyzing the ambivalent and often unclear interaction between Darley, Durrell's alter ego in the novels, and the two most notable women in his life: Melissa and Justine. The young writer oscillates permanently between the two faces of Janus – or the two faces of love and his own life: Melissa, the generous and fragile type of femininity, and Justine, the powerful and destructive type, who feeds on the despair of her lovers. The paper aims at discussing the meaning of these clashes between characters and their contribution to the overall aim and structure of the novels.*

*Key Words: Lawrence Durrell, the heraldic universe, the relativity proposition, Justine, The Alexandria Quartet*

In our modern era, we have simplified the two faces of Janus and read into the symbol the ambivalent nature of theatre: a happy face and a sad face together, comedy and tragedy reunited in their dramatic representation. But to the ancient Romans, the two faces of Janus meant much

more than this. Janus is an obscure god – one of the few not to have an equivalent in Greek mythology, for that matter. He is always depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions, both seen from the side, never from the front: Janus never looks us straight in the face, he is always looking towards the past and the future at the same time. He was the god of beginnings and endings, the god of passage and transition, of war and peace, of open and closed doors. He symbolizes, perhaps more so than any other god, the ambivalent nature of mankind, of life, of time – of everything.

In *The Alexandria Quartet*, Lawrence Durrell wanted to innovate in terms of narrative form, bearing in mind the relativity theory that had been recently formulated by Einstein. Durrell was fascinated with the scientific progress of his time and with the connection all this had to the allegedly mundane nature of everyday life: this is what he aimed to capture in his four novels. This is why *The Quartet* plays on the ambivalent nature of time: the four novels are, in their author's own words, three parts space and one part time. The first three novels retell the same course of events from different perspectives and from the viewpoint of various narrators (none of which prove to be reliable) and it is only the fourth and final novel that takes the story further in time, towards what can be seen as a narrative attempt at closure (but the door never closes completely). Similarly to Janus and his two faces, looking towards the past and the future at the same time, the novels in *The Quartet* are trapped between the past and the future in an everlasting, unreliable present. Everything is frail and fickle: the course of events, which changes with each retelling of the story, the characters, who always appear from a different angle, the relationships, the words, the parts played as if it were all a moving theatre play. In the author's own words, "*only the city is real*".

Lawrence Durrell is neither a modernist, nor a post-modernist writer. His work is very difficult to place: he started writing under the influence of Henry Miller, who would become one of his closest friends, and he started writing with a purpose that diverged from pure literary art. Durrell's masterpiece is *The Alexandria Quartet*, a series of four novels that depict the life and opinions of several expatriates living in Alexandria between 1933 and 1945 – before and during WWII. The scope of the novel is grand and the plot unfolds on the background of various settings in Alexandria, Cairo and an unnamed island in the Cyclades. The novel begins with the Englishman Darley's arrival in Alexandria in 1933 and concludes in 1945 after his second stay

there through the war. Darley – the most obvious alter-ego of the author, but not the only one – is an English teacher and a struggling writer. In the first novel of the series, *Justine*, Darley writes a first person narrative retelling his simultaneous love affairs with Melissa, a tubercular dance-hall girl, and the mysterious Justine, the title character, a Jewish socialite married into one of the most powerful families in Alexandria. The second novel, *Balthazar*, is what Darley calls an *inter-linear* – a new version of the initial manuscript written by Darley, annotated and allegedly brought closer to reality by the title character, who is an Alexandrian homosexual doctor studying the cabbala and the leader of a group of followers that includes Justine. The third novel, *Mountolive*, is a third person narrative and the first attempt at omniscient story-telling, rewriting the first two novels from a different perspective, with Darley as one among a series of characters. Mountolive, the title character, is the British ambassador to Egypt and in this third novel the clash between the two cultures is the most obvious; naturally, the apparent narrative in the first two novels is yet again put into a very different perspective. Finally, the last novel in the series, *Clea*, brings Darley back as the narrator and takes the story forward in time, ending it on what seems to be an attempt at closure and atonement. Clea is a young painter that Darley falls in love with, trying to deconstruct and make sense of his former loves and past experience.

From the very first novel in the series, the reader is acquainted with an intricate interplay of recurring patterns and symbols: the two most poignant ones are **the mirror** – which, like Janus, has two faces – and **the triangle**. These two symbols are dwelt upon almost obsessively at all levels throughout the narrative in the four novels.

**The mirror** is the key symbol to interpret the shifting perspectives in *The Quartet*; it is the foundation upon which Durrell builds his heraldic universe, as the author himself called it, and which is to be read in the medieval interpretation of the concept of *mise-en-abyme*: the central, largest image on the coat of arms which was then reiterated in its entirety or through fragments on the four edges of a coat of arms. The symbol of the mirror as a key to reading the novels appears from the very beginning of *Justine*, in the words of the title character herself: "*I remember her sitting before the multiple mirrors at the dressmaker's, being fitted for a shark-skin costume, 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 one profile at a time?'*"

**The triangle** is the second most recurrent pattern in the novels. Everything can be divided into groups of three: the three writers – Darley, Pursewarden and Arnauti, all three lovers and writers of Justine. The three novels retelling the same narrative – *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Clea*. The shifting love triangles: Justine, her husband Nessim and her lover Darley; Justine and her two lovers: the acknowledged one, Darley, and the secret one, the unrequited love, Pursewarden; Darley and his two great loves – the two face of Janus, the past and the future: Justine and Melissa; Darley and the three women in his life – Justine, Melissa and Clea. And so on and so forth. What is remarkable is the symmetry to Durrel's life: he had three wives, he had two siblings, so there were three Durrell children – and the list can go on. The magical number *three* dominates *The Quartet* and its shifting perspectives.

The focus of *Justine*, the first novel, is the love triangle between Darley, the unreliable narrator and Durrel's alter-ego, and the two women in his life – Justine and Melissa. Justine is the red thread piecing together the puzzle in the first novel – she is present everywhere and the lives of the other characters, the city itself, everything revolves around her. Yet, it can be argued that through multiple perspectives, shifting mirrors and ever changing reinterpretations, Justine herself remains silent – she is silenced through mirroring multiplications. It is one instance where *heteroglossia* leads to chaos, to a tower of Babel where the ultimate result is the silencing of the main character's voice. We do not know Justine – we know Justine solely through what the others know of her. This is the first feminine voice in the novel that is ultimately silent. The pattern of the mirror re-emerges: there are so many voices and so many faces of Justine in the novel(s) that, in the end, Justine remains silent. Darley is permanently placed in a relative position among different writers – first of all, the elusive **Jacob Arnauti**, a French national of Albanian origin, who is Justine's first husband and the author of a book where she is the main character. Jacob Arnauti's novel is called *Moeurs* and the main character, Claudia, is the embodiment of the young Justine. Justine's different lovers pour incessantly over the pages of the novel in order to make sense of the real, flesh and blood Justine – only to be disappointed time and time again. Darley's manuscript is strewn with quotes from and references to *Moeurs* and Justine's husband, Nessim, studies the novel as well in an attempt to understand the complex personality of his wife.

In the first novel of the series, when the love affair between Darley and Justine unfolds for the first time, Darley constantly reads what is happening to him through the pages of Arnauti's novel. It is indeed difficult for the reader to distinguish between Darley's Justine and Claudia, the image of Justine in Arnauti's novel. The novel within the novel is constantly referred to as a commentary on current events, or as a mirror image seen from a slightly different angle as the reality unfolding in what is allegedly presented as real time. This is why the voice of Justine remains silent, lost among the sliding panels of all the voices she is given in all the narratives built around her. Here are two examples. The first one depicts one of the first love encounters between Darley and Justine:

“I had not read these pages of Arnauti before the afternoon at Bourg El Arab when the future of our relationship was compromised by the introduction of a new element. Indeed, so fascinating did I find his analysis of his subject, and so closely did our relationship echo the relationship he had enjoyed with Justine that at times I too felt like some paper character out of *Moeurs*. Moreover, here I am, attempting to do the same sort of thing with her in words — though I lack his ability and have no pretensions to being an artist. I want to put things down simply and crudely, without style — the plaster and white-wash; for the portrait of Justine should be rough-cast, with the honest stonework of the predicament showing through.”

The second example comes on the background of a violent scene between the two new lovers, where Justine vividly represents to Darley the cruel nature of their betrayal through their adulterous love affair – his betrayal to Melissa and hers to her husband Nessim. Darley's reaction is this time conditioned by what he has been taught to expect by reading the novel within his novel:

“And getting out of bed she walked over to the dressing-table with its rows of photos and powder-boxes and with a single blow like that of a leopard's paw swept it clean. ‘*That*’ she said ‘is what I am doing to Nessim and you to Melissa! It would be ignoble to try and pretend otherwise.’ This was more in the tradition that Arnauti had led me to expect and I said nothing.”

The inter-play between the two writers and between the two novels – Arnauti's novel featuring the young Justine and Darley's manuscript on his version of Justine, that will be later on amended painstakingly by Balthazar – relativizes everything in the first depiction of events in the tetralogy. Justine herself is denied her own voice and her own version of events: she is

reduced to a character, a symbol, a model that other study in their art. Significantly enough, Clea, the painter (another version of the artist, who also falls in love with Justine) chooses Justine as a model for her sketches and, in this way, fails to grasp the real Justine, who remains yet again elusive.

**Melissa** is the other silent voice in the novels, gliding quietly through the narrative but remaining forever outside of it. If we return to the metaphor of the two faces of Janus, Melissa is the mask, the tragic, quiet feminine voice who embodies the end, if Justine is a new beginning. She is only seen through the eyes of others and only depicted in relation to what is happening **to** her, never **with** her involved.

Justine and Melissa are depicted as opposites: Melissa, the generous and fragile type of femininity, and Justine, the powerful and destructive type, who feeds on the despair of her lovers. When Darly meets Justine, this is the beginning of the downfall of his relationship to Melissa, the transition from innocent bliss to feverish torment. The two faces of Janus and the two silent voices of the two women slash at the serenity of everyday life once again:

“At the time when I met Justine I was almost a happy man. A door had suddenly opened upon an intimacy with Melissa - an intimacy not the less marvellous for being unexpected and totally undeserved. Melissa had penetrated my shabby defences not by any of the qualities one might enumerate in a lover — charm, exceptional beauty, intelligence — no, but by the force of what I can only call her charity, in the Greek sense of the word. **I used to see her**, I remember, pale, rather on the slender side, dressed in a shabby sealskin coat, leading her small dog about the winter streets. Her blue-veined phthisic hands, etc. Her eyebrows artificially pointed upwards to enhance those fine dauntlessly candid eyes. I saw her daily for many months on end, but her sullen aniline beauty awoke no response in me. Day after day I passed her on my way to the Café Al Aktar where Balthazar waited for me in his black hat to give me ‘instruction’. I did not dream that I should ever become her lover. I knew that she had once been a model at the Atelier — an unenviable job — and was now a dancer; more, that she was the mistress of an elderly furrier, a gross and vulgar commercial of the city. I simply make these few notes to record a block of my life which has fallen into the sea. Melissa! Melissa!”

Melissa is seen, by others, and is painted as a model- the perfect embodiment of the experiencer in the passive voice. Similarly to Justine, she has become her own representation in

art, and her voice remains silent. At the end of the first novel, Justine disappears and Melissa is dead – their silence is, for the first time, justified. The tragic character of Melissa is denied redemption even through art: mourning for her, Darley concludes: “*After all, what is the good of a fine metaphor for Melissa, when she lies buried deep as any mummy in the shallow tepid sand of the great estuary?*”

The feminine voices in *The Quartet*, even those of the two main protagonists, are silent – or at least they do not tell us the truth. (Only the city is real...) Everything is de-constructed and re-constructed over and over again in this oriental palimpsest viewed from a westerner’s perspective. Durrell breaks away from traditional narrative forms and, in this break, relativises not only the form, but also the content – and the characters as well. Perhaps the fate of Melissa and Justine, these two faces of Janus, are best summarized in the short metaphorical exchange between Melissa and Pursewarden: “*Comment vous defendez-vous contre la solitude?*” ‘*Monsieur, je suis devenue la solitude même*’.

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