

*LOST IN TRANSLATION? THE BUILDING OF THE ORIENTAL OTHER IN
LAWRENCE DURRELL'S JUSTINE AND ITS ROMANIAN TRANSLATION*

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*Abstract: The Alexandria Quartet, by Lawrence Durrell, depicts a group of European expatriates living in Alexandria, Egypt, in between the two world wars. The four novels in the Quartet oppose the West to the East, in an attempt to mediate between the two cultures. However, it could be argued that the Arab community remains silent, in the Orientalist attitude unmasked and analysed by Edward Said. This paper focuses on the first novel in the series: Justine. The analysis concentrates on **translation** from a double perspective: first of all, cultural translation, used in the original text to mediate between cultures and to build the sense of alterity in the construction of the Oriental other, and secondly, textual translation and a different type of mediation, in Catinca Ralea's translation of the novel into Romanian. In some rare instances, the translation succeeds where the original might be said to have failed. Translation brings the original text into its afterlife - which is, in a way, the true task of the translator.*

Keywords: Lawrence Durrell, translation studies, Justine, cultural translation, English to Romanian translation

Lawrence Durrell is a very difficult to place author. Given the ambivalent nature of both his personality and his work, Durrell has always been placed somewhere between modernism and post-modernism - he is, to all intents and purposes, an *in-between*, but a convenient play on words can easily turn him into the *go-between* (which is relevant under the scope of this paper). Critics never seem to fully agree on him. Moreover, given the main focus of his literary work (*The Alexandria Quartet* included), and his life as a British expatriate in several exotic countries, he has been analysed mostly from a post-colonial perspective (again, an approach that is somewhere in-between, that mediates between two cultures), sometimes with a focus on his view on Oriental spirituality. *The Alexandria Quartet* is Durrell's most notable literary work and is a series of four novels: *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958), *Mountolive* (1958) and *Clea* (1960).

The ostensible subject of *The Alexandria Quartet* is the clash between different cultures and the ensuing effects upon different individuals depicted as both major and minor characters. This has been identified as a long lasting interest with Durrell: critics have constantly related his novels to his disappointment with England and fascination with exotic cultures; moreover, the author himself spent most of his life as an expatriate by choice and subsequently transformed the essence of his foreign experiences into fictional matter. Thus, Harry Blamires writes:

Durrell called himself *an angry young man of the thirties* for his blistering attack on English smuggerly and respectability in *The Black Book* (Paris, 1938) whose sexuality made it unpublishable in England. The book harks back to the ethic of Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in its contrasting polarities of England old and devitalized and the Mediterranean sunny and alive. Durrell was posted to British Information Offices in Cairo and Alexandria during the war, and this provided him with material for his *Alexandria Quartet*, a tetralogy of overlapping novels (...) which is a many-stranded record of life in a lushly evoked Alexandria. (Blamires 227)

This paper aims at focusing on the first novel only - *Justine*. In view of the above, it is perhaps odd that one should identify instances of Western bias in the building of the Oriental other in *Justine*. But indeed it is so. In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said speaks at one point of what it means to hold a "textual attitude" (Said 272); it is a fault that he finds with Western discourse in its treatment of the East. In a nutshell, he accuses Western narratives of having created a different East by means of a manipulative use of language and textuality. This strategy also provides a legitimate reason for European expansion in the East: since the real Orient is disappointingly different from the magical Orient in Western texts (Said speaks of "the betrayed dream"), the need for a coherent and orderly authoritative presence appears as a possible solution.

There are certain general traits which can be identified in the Western representation of the Orient. Said integrates most of them in a general impression of "eccentricity": the Orient is seen as a background for abnormal practices and customs pertaining mostly to the sexual realm; Said illustrates this tendency with examples from writers such as Flaubert, for instance, who recognizes that the grotesque images he uses pertain to a limited category but nevertheless uses them in his representation of the Orient.

With disenchantment and a generalized – not to say schizophrenic – view of the Orient, there is usually another peculiarity. Because it is made into a general object, the whole Orient can be made to serve as an illustration of a particular form of eccentricity. Although the individual Oriental cannot shake or disturb the general categories that make sense of his oddness, his oddness can nevertheless be enjoyed for its own sake. (...) The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness. (Said 280)

This situation can be exemplified by many instances in the pages of *Justine*. To a certain extent, it is exactly the same situation: the Orient is perceived in general terms as a peculiar place, a place of queerness different from Western patterns. At some point, Justine's eccentricities and bizarre behaviour are explained in a similar manner: she is a true child of the city. Alexandria is described as a place for pleasure and sexual encounters, in a liberal manner that is very different from the old European ways – a place burdened by a certain sense of sin. In a way certain peculiar and otherwise unorthodox events are explained through the general permissiveness of the Oriental way of life. Sexuality and abnormal sexual practices are seen as daily activities. Moreover, the Orientals are most of the times portrayed as primitive and superstitious in an excessive manner.

Another important issue is the fact that the Arab is not individualized in the book, with the notable exception of the members of the Hosnani family. But the voice of the commoner in the Arab world remains silent. At all times, the Arab community in its cultural and religious diversity is represented by an anonymous group, such as the Bedouins in the desert, the loud women and the beggars filling the streets, the gullible audience at public fairs and celebrations. Again, it is a group image which conforms to the Orientalist version of the Orient: the common people are depicted as ignorant, primitive and amoral, leading a simple life dictated by greed and superstitions. These superstitions are mentioned ironically in a subversive attempt at inducing a certain mood as a result of reading: thus, the Arab are afraid of blue eyes and red hair, they easily accept charlatans as saints; this attitude culminates in the depiction of the ceremonies at the grave of Joshua Scobie whom the locals call after his death *El Yacoub* and whom they treat as a saint. It is not randomly that the text at this point should focus on the character of Joshua Scobie: he is the most ironically sketched caricature in the novel; in this way, the gullibility of the Arab community is stressed even further.

A strange detail in the structure of the book is that the very few Arab characters that are slightly individualized are all disfigured either by birth or by illness. The first one is the

picturesque figure of Mnemjian the barber, who is a hunchback with a violet eye; he is the most reputable local spy in the sense that he is aware of all the events either public or private that are going on at any time (at some point in the novel, Darley, the narrator and Durrell's alter ego, calls Mnemjian *the Archives of the city*). The list of peculiar characters as illustrations of the Arab world in the novel should also include Nessim's faithful servant Selim, who is a mute, Nessim's mother Leila whose face has been disfigured due to a severe attack of smallpox, and most notably Nessim's brother Narouz, whose face is described as extremely ugly because of his having been born with a hare-lip. Last but not least, Hamid, the servant that Darley and Melissa share in their otherwise humble life together, only has one eye. Since it is a recurrent pattern to such an extent, the disfigurement of Arab characters cannot be a randomly used literary device. It may have been included as a manipulative, textual device in order to emphasize the Arab as the Other and the differences that burden the sense of alterity. According to Said, part of the Orientalist tradition is the unbreakable assumption that the Oriental is inherently different from the European. The development of the Orientalist tradition is in fact based on this core assumption. Thus, in *Justine* this assumption is rendered physically, by the presence of disfigurement. In addition, instead of individualising Oriental characters, this device adds to their overall treatment as a group, through repetition.

In view of the above, it could be argued that in *Justine* a lot is lost in cultural translation. Translation of any type presupposes movement - etymology can explain: to *trans-late* (Latin: *translatio*) means to transfer, to carry over, to lead across; to convert something or be converted into another form or medium. Translation - textual, cultural or any type of translation - involves the movement of meaning, in an attempt at explaining, at casting light, so ultimately it is a quest for truth. Furthermore, the movement of translation presupposes a direction, therefore a point of origin and a point of reception. At the beginning of this paper, we said Durrell acts as a go-between; in *Justine*, the text attempts at mediating between two cultures, operating with binary oppositions: East and West, exotic versus familiar, European vs Arab, chaos vs order, even the stifling weather and the Arabic climate are described in a similar binary manner. (It could be further argued that the flaw in *Justine*, if such a term can be used, stems from this persistent use of binary oppositions, instead of a multi-level, diversified approach, but this line of argumentation deviates from the scope of this paper).

So the first type of translation here is cultural translation: the translation between the European culture of the group of expatriates that act as main characters in *Justine* and the host

culture of the Arab community in Alexandria. Perhaps this attempt at mediation through cultural translation fails because the movement is linear and one-directional: the Oriental other is merely observed from a distance; the sense of otherness is rather a group feature; the descriptions have a static, painting-like quality (as will be further demonstrated in the fragments analysed below). In other words, the text of the novel has a clear centre of observation, which is also the centre of power, and this is why in *Justine* the Arab community remains subaltern and silent.

But the underlying interest of the text is a narrative one - or, more precisely, the intention of dismantling and doing away with traditional forms of narrative. Durrell admitted to being fascinated by the new, modern scientific theories of the 20th century, mainly Einstein's theory of relativity: the new ideas on space and time and the relationship between them - time as the fourth dimension. He wanted to create a novel that would be like a time-space continuum: this explains the narrative structure of the Quartet, which is three parts space and one part time, to put things mathematically. The first three novels retell the same story from different perspectives - so one space and time, but different narratives, intertwined in a sort of reversed literary kaleidoscope, like one image reflected by several mirrors at the same time; while the last one takes things forward in time. In view of the above, the dialectics between the surface structure and the underlying structure of the four novels can lead to a multi-level interpretation of the text: the apparent bias in building the image of the Oriental other, so the text's attitude to alterity and the clash of cultures, appears differently.

The second type of translation is, in simple terms, text translation: the translation of *Justine* from English into Romanian. (Interestingly, *The Alexandria Quartet* was translated into Romanian by two different translators, equally well-reputed: *Justine* and *Balthazar* were translated by Catinca Ralea and published posthumously after her death in 1981, while *Mountolive* and *Clea* were translated by the late Antoaneta Ralian). This is the second attempt at mediation: the transfer of meaning from one language into another; in this case, the transfer of meaning between two very different languages and two very different cultures. How does one go about operating this very difficult transfer and at the same time manage to subtly convey the fallacies of the cultural translation in the original text? How do the different narratives translate into each other in the novels? Where does the dominant white expatriate meet the submissive Oriental, and how do the two cultures translate - or how are they translated? How are these patterns reflected in the translation itself, in the Romanian text and in the Romanian

culture, localised in a specific time-and-space framework? How do the stories translate and how are they translated?

The debate in translation studies has been on-going since the emergence of this interdisciplinary field: the illustration of the saying that “translations are like women: the most beautiful ones are not always the most faithful”. Scholars have either argued that a translation should be beautiful, so oriented toward the target language, or, on the contrary, faithful, so oriented towards the initial text - until, more recently, new concepts have emerged, such as the falseness of these dichotomies, exposed by Mona Baker, for instance, or the translator’s invisibility, introduced by Lawrence Venuti. Moreover, Venuti speaks of two directions: on one hand, a domesticated translation, where the original text and the original language are assimilated to the extent to which the illusion is complete and the reader has the feeling they are reading an original text in their own language; on the other hand, a foreignised translation, where the target text and the target language accept the alterity of the original and manage to integrate it. With the translation of Durrell’s *Justine* into Romanian, there are different types of alterities to mediate: the alterity of the Oriental culture, the alterity of the English language and so on and so forth.

We will focus the analysis on two fragments from *Justine*, which illustrate the assumptions made above and can perhaps provide some answers to our questions. The first fragment is a description of the city of Alexandria in the summertime: an explosion of the senses that builds an overall sense of decay and death, in a bitter awareness of the irredeemable gap between the two cultures. At the end of the fragment, Justine walks royally among the streets of Alexandria, a child of the city walking towards her lover in an attempt at bridging the gap. The second fragment is a piece of frozen narrative: Darley and Nessim (the lover and the husband) rush to rescue Justine from a derelict building which houses a brothel of child prostitutes. The two men are frozen on the spot, mesmerized for a second by the queer beauty of the scene they have just stolen upon, before they spring to action: a dozen very young girls in night gowns, dressed like adult women, in a squalid, half-lit room, a French sailor caught in the act and Justine in the centre, holding a bottle as an improvised weapon in one raised hand. The fragments are included in the Annex to this paper, in both languages.

In the description of the city, a lot is lost in translation, perhaps because of the richness of the English vocabulary: it is sometimes difficult to identify any lexical equivalence, let alone a dynamic equivalence. Some examples: *to keel over*, which is not only a phrasal verb (so much

more appropriate in evoking a specific kind of movement), but also a nautical term (and Alexandria is first and foremost a port); a much more meaningful term than the Romanian term - *a se prăbuși*, which simply means *to collapse, to fall down*. *Aghast*, at the end of the fragment, leaves a more powerful sensory trail than the Romanian *însăimântat*, which simply means *frightened* and fails to render the mixed sense of fear and awe; similarly, something is lost in translation through lexical equivalences such *to incubate - a clocoti*. Another loss stems from the translator's choice to replace *east and west* with *stânga și dreapta* (*Peeling walls leaning drunkenly to east and west of their true centre of gravity. - Ziduri scorojite aplecate, ca chefliii, la dreapta sau la stânga față de centrul lor de gravitație.*) Perhaps the choice makes the description flow more naturally in Romanian, but at the same time one of the basic binary oppositions operating in the novel at all levels is lost. The powerful auditory and visual image of *some small delicately organised animal being disembowelled* is again perhaps insufficiently rendered by the Romanian equivalent: *țipetele unui animal mic și delicat pe care l-ar înjunghia cineva*. Something more is lost in the modulation of tenses: the gerundial passive in English, which suggests the happening of things now, as we speak, under our own eyes, is more vivid than the distant conditional in Romanian.

On the other hand, the fragment shows the skill of the translator in using adaptation so as to mediate between two different cultures and two different languages: for instance, *booth* is not exactly the same as *magherniță*, but the Romanian equivalent is much more evocative for a Romanian reader and draws a picture of the city that is closer to the original description. Similarly, *the water-bearing Saidi* becomes *sacagiul Saidi*: this time, it is English which perhaps lacks the resources to directly connect a signifier to a signified. Since the British culture lacks the concept, the term does not exist. In this way, the Romanian culture, in its Eastern and Balkan variant, is closer to this stifling Arabic universe and has the linguistic means of expressing this closeness.

The instances of transposition in the two versions of the text sometimes enrich the description, at other times, something again is lost in translation. It is as if parts of speech or sometimes only tenses were playing musical chairs: *shuttered balconies swarming with rats - balcoane cu obloanele trase* (here we see that over-translation is needed to compensate for the economy of English constructions, as compared to Romanian), *unde mișunau șobolani; peeling walls leaning drunkenly - ziduri scorojite aplecate, ca bețivii* - and the list could go on. Perhaps the description in English is more dynamic than the Romanian one, through its

extensive use of gerundial forms. On the other hand, the lexical equivalents show that cultural translation is more easily achieved between the local culture of the city itself and its depiction in Romanian.

The second fragment chosen for analysis is a much more focused description of a particular scene, interrupting the narrative flow. It is just as much part of building the peculiar sense of otherness as the description of the city, and painstakingly attempts at bridging the two cultures. It brings together elements from both cultures in a swirl of grotesque imagery: Darley, the European, and Nessim, the Arab; Justine, the child of the city but an individual of ambiguous origin, stands in the middle, ready to spring into battle; the French sailor, paradoxically embodying the image of the primitive, the uncivilised, the animal (he is standing on flexed calves and his face is twisted in torment) and the young Arab prostitutes, whose innocence manages to break through their grotesque dress and make-up; the blue handprints, a testimonial of local superstitions, and the Victorian bibles, finally, the shrunk up child, whose death-like state makes her the ultimate victim of this uncivilised world. It is apparently a frozen, static scene, like a blueprint of a single moment in a dimly lit theatre play where all the actors wear grotesque masks, yet it somehow manages to poignantly convey the impression of movement, the tension of cultural translation, the clash between the two cultures.

Here, the task of the translator is all the more difficult, as in the original every word seems to have been carefully chosen to fulfill a particular, well-designed purpose. Once more, the translation into Romanian makes use of similar strategies as in the previous fragment, mostly by means of transposition and compensation: *The scene upon which we intruded was ferociously original - Scena pe care am surprins-o acolo fără să fim invitați era orginială și înspăimântătoare.*

In some parts, the text is so powerful and so carefully knit together that the translator renders it in the target language in an almost literal reconstruction of the original: (...) *the light, pushing up from the mud floor, touched out the eyebrows and lips and cheek-bones of the participants while it left great patches of shadow on their faces - so that they looked as if they had been half-eaten by the rats which one could hear scrambling among the rafters of this wretched tenement - lumina care țâșnea dinspre podeaua de lut reliefa sprâncenele, buzele și pomeții celor prezenți, lăsându-le în același timp pete mari, întunecate pe fețe, astfel încât arătau de parcă ar fi fost pe jumătate mâncați de șobolanii pe care îi auzeai târându-se printre căpriorii acelei clădiri de mizerie.* Even the Romanian verbs manage to compensate for the

lack of phrasal verbs and the movement suggested by the English particles. The only notable exception here is *tenement*, which is in fact a particular type of rundown building in a poor area and therefore a hyponym of the Romanian equivalent *clădire*, hence some of the meaning is lost. However, in other parts of text, the translation leaves out elements of the imagery and in this way part of the meaning is lost: the most striking example is the *arch bead fringe* of the young prostitutes, which is translated as *cu păr zburlit* - the meaning is distorted and leads to a completely different understanding from the original; the English phrase builds up the grotesqueness of the hideous costumes that the young girls are presumably forced to wear, whereas the Romanian equivalent creates an image of innocent childhood, in contrast to rest of the costume. In this particular instance, the translation betrays the original and creates a unit of meaning which in the original is to be found somewhere else.

There are two more striking instances where the translation betrays the original, but in two different ways: in the first example, elements of the original text are translated literally, which leads to a loss of meaning for the Romanian reader: *the Victorian penny bible*, which an English reader could immediately relate to, is rendered in Romanian as *bibliile victoriene ieftine* - a word for word translation which holds no connotative meaning to the Romanian reader. Secondly, and this is even more surprising, the phrase *for a good half-second*, at the end of the fragment, is translated as *timp de mai bine de jumătate de minut*. Idiomatically, a half-second is slightly more than just a half-second, it is a moment, but the Romanian phrase chooses a much longer time unit and therefore the meaning is once again distorted.

Perhaps these two singular fragments are not enough evidence of how cultural translation works (or fails to work, in some cases) in the original, and of how the Romanian translator employs different strategies to mediate and bridge the gap between cultures and between texts. Oddly enough, the mediation between cultures works better in some instances in the Romanian translation, as in this case the reader may somehow feel closer to the Oriental world of Alexandria. But, most importantly, the analysed fragments show that the translator succeeds in bringing the original text to afterlife - which, according to Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the topic, is what the task of the translator ultimately is.

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Annex

Străzi care se depărtează, în goană, de docuri, cu îngrămădeala lor de case zdrențuite și putrede, suflându-și una alteia în obraz și prăvălindu-se pe neașteptate. Balcoane cu obloanele trase, unde mișunau șobolani și femei bătrâne, cu părul plin de sângele căpușelor. Ziduri scorojite aplecate, ca chefliii, la dreapta sau la stânga față de centrul lor de gravitație. Roiuri negre de muște care se lipesc de ochii și de buzele copiilor - peste tot numai mărgelile umede ale muștelor de vară, greutatea trupurilor lor făcând să se desprindă brusc hârtiile vechi și lipicioase atârinate de ușile violete ale cafenelelor sau maghernițelor. Mirosul berberilor cu fețele înspumate de sudoare, ca mirosul unui covor în descompunere așezat pe o scară. Și pe urmă, zgomotele străzii: strigătele sacagiului Saidi și zăngănitul cânilor de tablă pe care le lovește una de alta în chip de reclamă, țipetele pe care nu le ia nimeni în seamă și care străpung din când în când învâlmășeala - ca țipetele unui animal mic și delicat pe care l-ar înjunghia cineva. Rănille ca niște bălți unde clocotește o mizerie omenească de asemenea proporții că te simți înspăimântat și toate sentimentele tale umane se revarsă, transformându-se în silă și spaimă. Aș fi vrut să pot imita calmul și siguranța cu care își croia Justine drum prin aceste străzi aglomerate către cafeneau El Bab, unde o așteptam eu. (p. 54)

Streets that run back from the docks with their tattered rotten supercargo of houses, breathing into each others' mouths, keeling over. Shuttered balconies swarming with rats, and

old women whose hair is full of the blood of ticks. Peeling walls leaning drunkenly to east and west of their true centre of gravity. The black ribbon of flies attaching itself to the lips and eyes of the children - the moist beads of summer flies everywhere; the very weight of their bodies snapping off ancient flypapers hanging in the violet doors of booths and cafés. The smell of the sweatlathered Berberinis, like that of some decomposing stair-carpet. And then the street noises: shriek and clang of the water-bearing Saidi, clashing his metal cups together as an advertisement, the unheeded shrieks which pierce the hubbub from time to time, as of some small delicately-organized animal being disembowelled. The sores like ponds - the incubation of a human misery of such proportions that one is aghast, and all one's feelings overflow into disgust and terror. I wished I could imitate the self-confident directness with which Justine threaded her way through these streets towards the café where I waited for her: El Bab. (p. 24)

Scena pe care am surprins-o acolo fără să fim invitați era originală și înspăimântătoare, dacă nu din alt motiv, măcar pentru că lumina care țâșnea dinspre podeaua de lut reliefa sprâncenele, buzele și pomeții celor prezenți, lăsându-le în același timp pete mari, întunecate pe fețe, astfel încât arătau de parcă ar fi fost pe jumătate mâncați de șobolani pe care îi auzeai târându-se printre căpriorii acelei clădiri de mizerie. Era o casă cu prostituate-copii, și acolo, în întuneric, îmbrăcate în cămăși de noapte grotești și biblice, cu buzele fardate, cu franjuri provocatoare, din mărgele, și cu inele de doi bani, stăteau vreo douăsprezece fete cu părul zburlit, care nu păreau să aibă mai mult de zece ani: nevinovăția copilăriei ce strălucea sub costumul lor de bal mascat alcătuia un contrast izbitor cu figura marinarului francez, adult și primitiv, aflat în mijlocul încăperii, ghemuit pe vine, cu fața pustiiată și chinuită, lungind gâtul ca să se întoarcă înspre Justine, căreia nu-i vedeam decât jumătate de profil. (...) Pe o canapea putrezită, într-un colț al camerei, luminată halucinant de umbra fierbinte reflectată pe pereți, zăcea, îngrozitor de chircită, într-o atitudine care sugera moartea, una dintre fete, îmbrăcată în cămașă de noapte. Peretele de deasupra canapelei era acoperit de amprentele albastre ale unor mâini juvenile - un talisman care în această parte a lumii păzește casa de deochi. Era singurul element decorativ din cameră și, de fapt, un element obișnuit în întregul cartier arab al orașului.

Nessim și cu mine am rămas timp de mai bine de jumătate de minut pironiți locului, uimiți de scena care avea un fel de frumusețe înspăimântătoare, ca gravurile acelea colorate și hidoase din bibliile victoriene ieftine, al căror subiect ar fi fost oarecum denaturat și deplasat. (p. 81)

The scene upon which we intruded was ferociously original, if for no other reason than that the light, pushing up from the mud floor, touched out the eyebrows and lips and cheek-bones of the participants while it left great patches of shadow on their faces - so that they looked as if they had been half-eaten by the rats which one could hear scrambling among the rafters of this wretched tenement. It was a house of child prostitutes, and there in the dimness, clad in ludicrous biblical night-shirts, with rouged lips, arch bead fringes and cheap rings, stood a dozen fuzzy-haired girls who could not have been much above ten years of age; the peculiar innocence of childhood which shone out from under the fancy-dress was in startling contrast to the barbaric adult figure of the French sailor who stood in the centre of the room on flexed calves, his ravaged and tormented face thrust out from the neck towards Justine who stood with her half-profile turned towards us. (...) On a rotting sofa in one corner of the room, magnetically lit by the warm shadow reflected from the walls, lay one of the children horribly shrunk up in its nightshirt in an attitude which suggested death. The wall above the sofa was covered in the blue imprints of juvenile hands - the talisman which in this part of the world guards a house against the evil eye. It was the only decoration in the room; indeed the commonest decoration of the whole Arab quarter of the city.

We stood there, Nessim and I, for a good half-second, astonished by the scene which had a sort of horrifying beauty — like some hideous coloured engraving for a Victorian penny bible, say, whose subject matter had somehow become distorted and displaced. (p. 45)