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Philip D. Miller

*Denison University*

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Contradiction Through Opposition: The Microcosm in Capodistria's Resurrected Self

Philip D. Miller '01

The Alexandrian Quartet is a series of four novels (Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, and Clea) by Lawrence Durrell set in pre-World War II Alexandria, Egypt. This paper traces Durrell's effort to break down the dualism of light and darkness in Durrell's work. "I have the express authority of Capodistria himself" [Balthazar explained]. Indeed he himself always pays for the flowers every year" (Clea 197). The introduction of the letter is thus marked by the absurdity of the situation itself: Darley, Balthazar, and Clea walk to the grave of the not-so-dead Capodistria to place flowers there on the anniversary of his birthday. The letter to Darley's lover, reads from a letter sent to Balthazar, their friend, a doctor and practitioner of Cabalism, by none other than Capodistria (Da Capo) himself. The first novel, Justine, concluded with the "accidental death" of Capodistria: we come to learn, however, gradually, that Capodistria is, in fact, fully alive, his "post-deceased" whereabouts being reported in his letter. In the essay, I investigate how this seemingly absurd set of circumstances (and details revealed in Capodistria's letter) exist as part of the larger structure of the Quartet, bringing to light the elements of philosophical opposition that underlie Darley's work.

Capodistria...how does he fit in? He is more of a goblin than a man, you would think. —Justine, 33.

In some way, then, Balthazar and Capodistria are both "of that age." And this reminds us of the "truth" articulated by Balthazar in the second book of the Quartet bearing his name: "Truth...is what most contradicts itself in time" (Balthazar 23). Thus it is appropriate that Capodistria's letter reveals this connection: Darley's story reveals this level of contradiction. Pursewarden recognizes that truth contradicts itself in time, and this is what makes meaningful human experience. How dull the story would be were it not for the contradictions revealed! The dichotomy between truth and (the possibility of) "good" or "bad," but denies this is the ethically evil: his position contradicts that which he would have taken earlier. Durrell makes explicit, then, another tension of the truth with which Capodistria confronts his "new self": he writes to Balthazar that in his previous correspondence he had evaded a substantive account of his new life—yet we wonder the extent to which he now reveals the "truth." His sense of the morally good and evil has contradicted itself in time to an effort in over to accomplish this dichotomy: he approaches his "new self," however, as if he were stumbling into a mirror. The picture he draws for us is one in which Balthazar is of the necessary mirror-image, the necessity of his "resurrected life" contradiction to his old, dead self. The contradiction is thus revealed, yet the tension remains: the truth is there, but it has been overturned, but contradiction (between light/ dark, good/evil)—despite his claim to the contrary—persists in his experience.

Capodistria proceeds to depict the "defrocked Italian monk" with whom he makes acquaintance, and his project of alchemy, concerned with "increasing man's interior hold on himself" (Clea 199). That this character/monk is "defrocked" is particularly relevant. The reference to the Coptic Church or the practice of Cabalism here is an ethical nihilism expressed by Capodistria in this passage. His "Luciferian" activities follow the path of Darkness, though this is not to be confused with the morally/ethically evil, nor should it reveal a dichotomy between good and bad. Rather, the path he follows is a necessary condition for the possibility of Light. We note an explicit tension, then, between the dualism of light and darkness and Capodistria's path through Darkness. And this reminds us of the centrality of these concerns within the other novels of the Quartet. In particular, the转换 (conversion) of Balthazar is expanded by the absurdity of Da Capo's "new-life." The reference to Balthazar's nickname coined by Pursewarden thus straightforwardly reveals this level of contradiction. Pursewarden recognizes that truth contradicts itself in time, and this is what makes meaningful human experience. How dull the story would be were it not for the contradictions revealed! The dichotomy between truth and (the possibility of) "good" or "bad," but denies this is the ethically evil: his position contradicts that which he would have taken earlier. Durrell makes explicit, then, another tension of the truth with which Capodistria confronts his "new self": he writes to Balthazar that in his previous correspondence he had evaded a substantive account of his new life—yet we wonder the extent to which he now reveals the "truth." His sense of the morally good and evil has contradicted itself in time to an effort in over to accomplish this dichotomy: he approaches his "new self," however, as if he were stumbling into a mirror. The picture he draws for us is one in which Balthazar is of the necessary mirror-image, the necessity of his "resurrected life" contradiction to his old, dead self. The contradiction is thus revealed, yet the tension remains: the truth is there, but it has been overturned, but contradiction (between light/dark, good/evil)—despite his claim to the contrary—persists in his experience.

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reference to Justine's "Jewishness": to make visible the

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disgust. But in the reference to an evil genius, Justine is likened to Capodistria's Austrian Baron.

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erty—up to the end of the century—lies beside Da Capo

Baron and his project

choose their own paths, though confined by

or another

how does I know?" (27). Or later, he

the city itself and the necessity of contradiction in time.

have only been able to hint at some of the ways

in which Capodistria's letter is a microcosm of the Quar-

tet itself (consider also, e.g., the role of the war as it

relates to the Baron's project—his suspected spying—

and the experience of war in Alexandria, or the "sta-

tory—up to the end of the century—lies beside Da Capo

in which he wrote to Balthazar, but this knowledge must be

by the mention of an "evil genius."

sents "something which eminently fitted [his] na-

ture and the necessity of contradiction in time. It does

not seem to follow, for Capodistria, that alchemy could be

something fitted to his nature: that his "self" has been

contradicted (at least through death) seems to

problematicize any project that seeks to investigate

man's" hold on his own nature. The reference to es-

sentialism, however, shows another way in which we

can view this notion of contradiction. In Balthazar, for

example, Balthazar's "interlinear" notes reveal the

"mistaken perception" of Darley's Justine. In what

sense, though, we ask, can Balthazar's revisions be any

correct? This tension gives rise to a perspectivism that is

reflected in Da Capo's new-found "nature." Though truth may contradict itself in time, it is

ultimately subject to one's perspective, which conditions the

nature of any contradiction. In Justine, for example,

following the "death" of Capodistria, Darley remarks:

"It was clearly an accident" (218). Maybe so and maybe

not; in any case, it turns out that "it," viz. Capodistria's

dearth, actually refers to nothing. From Darley's perspec-

tive, this is a meaningful statement that contradicts it-

self in time; for Capodistria, however, the suggestion

that his death was an accident could never be mean-

ingful in the first place. Thus the contradiction (or lack

thereof) is the product of one's perspective, which al-

low for the possibility of different truth-claims and

reveals the tension in the (prospect of) a notion of es-

sential truth or essential self.

From this general discussion of alchemy, Capodistria's letter moves to a completely new level

of strangeness with the introduction of the Austrian

Baron and his project of generatio homunculi. He writes:

"If this Baron had...ah! My dear Balthazar, had actu-

ally produced ten homunculi which he called his

"prophecying spirits" They were preserved in the huge glass

carstainers which they use hereabouts for

washing olives or to preserve fruit, and they lived in

water...They were produced or "patterned," to

use his own expression, in the course of five weeks of

intense thought and ritual. (Clea 200)

The absurdity of the story seems, at this point, to

remove us completely from any sense of normalcy

which may have preceded the letter. Even in this de-

scription, however, we note references to themes of con-

tradiction already present in the Quartet (not to men-

tion the apparent "fantasy"/ "reality" dichotomy). Two

such references seem explicit: (1) In Arnauti's Monas, the

author writes of (Justine): "I had fallen in love.

The very thought filled me with an inexplicable despair

and disgust. It was as if I unconsciously realized that in her

I had met my evil genius" (Justine 73). The project of

generatio homunculi and one's falling in love certainly

seem disparate events, though they are connected,

somewhat ironically, by the mention of an "evil genius."

arnauti's characterization of love actually seems to

be consistent with Capodistria's story—evoking despair

and disgust. But in the reference to an evil genius, Justine is likened to Capodistria's Austrian Baron.

Durrell does this in another way, as well, viz. through

reference to Justine's "Jewishness": to make visible the

red and blue spirits, the Baron repeats words in He-

brew: also in Hebrew he questions the homunculi about

future events.) This reference to Justine makes appar-

ent the tensions in the love-relationship, with respect to

the absurdity of the creation of the homunculi. Love,

like all other "truths," contradicts itself in time, and in

all its wonder and awe ultimately produces despair and
disgust. The love-relationships involving and sur-

rounding Justine are, like the homunculi, both real and

fantasy (witness, e.g., the interlinear of Balthazar, or

the relationship between Mountolive and Leila).

Love is the creation of our own perspective; produced, by

us, only to be contradicted or destroyed in time, like

the ten homunculi of the Austrian Baron.

(2) Darley writes: "We were all held there, so to

speak, in the misty solution of everyday life out of

which futurity was to crystallize whatever drama lay

ahead" (Justine 169). The inhabitants of Alexandria, the

subjects of the Quartet, just like the Baron's homunculi,

are held in a misty solution, waiting for the future to

"crystallize" itself. This reference to subjects floating

in the misty cloud of experience shows the dichotomy

between one's free will and the (pre)determination of

one's actions. This tension runs throughout the quar-

tet and is complicated by the factor of place as indicated

through reference to the influence/role of the city

itself. In the first novel, Darley quotes Justine: "You talk

as if there was a choice. We are not strong or evil enough to

everything. All this part is an experiment ar-

ranged by something else, the city perhaps, or another

part of ourselves. How do I know?" (27). Or later, he

writes: "We are the children of our landscape; it dic-
tates behavior and even think in the measure to

which we are responsive to it. I can think of no better

identification" (Justine 41). And more succinctly:

"man is only an extension of the spirit of place"

(Justine 175).

That we are free to choose is a fact of our experi-

ence, and the Quartet is grounded in this supposition.

But so often this freedom is complicated by factors be-

Bibliography


