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Philip D. Miller '01

Author's Note:

The Alexandria 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 examines a scene from Clea in which Darley, Clea, and Balthazar visit the gravesite of Capodistria on the anniversary of his birthday. Darley, the narrator, and himself a writer, depicts the strangeness of events surrounding their "pilgrimage," as Clea, an artist and 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 Durrell's work.

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

—Justine, 33.

In somewhat a strange sense, Capodistria's letter to Balthazar in Book III of *Clea* encapsulates elements of contradiction pervasive in the *Alexandria Quartet*. ("Strange" because the letter seems so "out of place" within the narrative of *Clea*.) The reader is absolutely taken aback by the letter itself—despite Balthazar's warning about its "fantastic" contents. In presenting the letter, it seems as though Durrell has taken us completely out of the world of Alexandria to create a pseudo-science fiction story in embryonic form. It is most appropriate, then, that the letter itself should be penned by a character "resurrected" from the dead, and situated in a place far from Alexandria. The letter is remarkable, specifically in relation to the rest of the novel (from which it seems so removed), in that it makes explicit the tensions between light and darkness, free choice and determined actions, and ethical ambiguity from an ambiguous "facticity," that are implicit in the construction of the four books. I am interested in exploring the ways in which Capodistria's story reveals the centrality of these concerns within the other novels. To do this, I look at Capodistria's letter and uncover the elements that shed light on Durrell's conception of the diametric oppositions underlying the *Quartet*.

We begin with a strange enough occasion: "This was the ceremonial placing of flowers on Capodistria's grave on the anniversary of the Great Porn's birthday.

'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 (Capodistria's) birthday—flowers that Da Capo has, in fact, paid for. That this is an absurd pilgrimage to the gravesite of Capodistria is noted by Balthazar in a brief introduction to the letter: "His gravesite is, now I come to think of it, a most appropriate place to read his account of his experiments!" (197). In one sense, the gravesite is an appropriate location to reveal Capodistria's recent activities for their "Luciferian" nature—Capodistria having plunged into "Black Magic." Additionally, the letter seems, on face, an absurd account of, to say the least, bizarre occurrences; it seems proper, then, that such a tale should be recounted at the apex of such a bizarre journey.

Finally, Da Capo's grave is an appropriate place to read the letter in that it is, itself, the source of the polar opposition reflected by the story. Here we stand, at the grave marked "Not Lost But Gone Before"—the place of "eternal rest" for a man not yet dead, marking the anniversary of his birth at his own request; it is consistent that this *physical point* of opposition (between life and death) should ultimately reveal the opposition that underlies the novels. We can imagine the stillness of the deserted cemetery, belied by the "high and bright" sunshine, warm enough to compel Balthazar to remove his coat and hat. We stand facing an imposing grave that "had achieved a fearsome vulgarity of decoration which was almost mind-wounding," (197) adorned with cherubs, scrolls, and floral wreaths, all for a man who "sits all day on the terrace of the Brokers' Club watching the women pass, with the restless eye of someone endlessly shuffling through an old soiled pack of cards" (*Justine* 34). The irony, noted by Darley, is striking; but such a setting prepares us to realize the force of the letter. It is utterly absurd, it seems wholly "fantastic," it is out of place with the story, yet perfectly suited to the *Quartet's* sense of contradiction; in sum, it is completely Alexandrian.

Balthazar asks Clea to read the letter: "I would like to hear it through once, to see if it sounds less fantastic or more" (198). Obliging, she begins with Capodistria's address to Balthazar: "My dear M.B." It seems interesting that Capodistria should borrow the nickname affixed to Balthazar by Pursewarden—*Melancholia Borealis*—a strange nickname for Balthazar himself: "A tribute to my alleged Judaic gloom," he re-

marks. The reference seems especially out of place in relation to the "restored" Balthazar, having "rubbed out the age" revealed by his hair, becoming "once more, the old Balthazar, with his sapient dark eyes turned ironically on the doings of the city" (197). The "ironic" characterization, is, however, fitting: Balthazar's eyes are turned ironically on the doings of Capodistria, ironically on the actions perpetrated and recorded by a man already dead. But certainly Balthazar can no longer be characterized as melancholy, certainly not in response to Da Capo's letter which he seems to regard with an air of not-so subdued humor. Even in this brief prelude to the letter, then, Durrell indicates the tension between the old and the new: the alleged melancholy of Balthazar set up against his renewed vigor and ironic disposition. Analogously, we contrast the old and new Capodistria: the old, goblin-like, *dead* Da Capo, against his resurrected self.

In some way, then, Balthazar and Capodistria are both "rubbed out of their 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). The truth of Capodistria's death is, *prima facie*, contradicted; Balthazar's age and infirmity are contradicted by Mnemjian's "ministrations" (*Clea* 197). Thus it is appropriate that Capodistria's letter reveals this connection to the contradiction of truth in time—Balthazar's sentiment is immediately followed by Pursewarden: "If things were always what they seemed, how impoverished would be the imagination of man!" (*Balthazar* 23). Our imagination is made more fruitful by the contradiction of Capodistria's death. Likewise our view of the *Quartet* 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) reality drives the experience detailed in the *Quartet*. And this is precisely the point of *Balthazar*. In *Justine*, Darley got it all wrong. Why?—because reflection from the present does not allow us to capture the past: truth contradicts itself in time, hence we cannot ascertain the truth that *was* from the situation that *is*.

Capodistria writes: "I did not know then that my path was not the path of Light but of Darkness. I would have confused it morally or ethically with good and evil at the time. Now I recognise the path I am treading as simply the counterpoise—the bottom end of the seesaw, as it were—which keeps the light side up in the air" (*Clea* 198). There is a certain 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 effort to break down the distinction between good and evil. The path he follows is that of the Dark, though this does not affirm the polar opposition of Light/Dark and Good/Evil.

The language of Light and Darkness and the necessity of one to support the other is reminiscent of much of the "mirror-language" that pervades the *Quartet*. Of the initial romantic encounter between Mountolive and Leila, Durrell writes: "But she was there so close, harmlessly close, smiling and wrinkling up her nose, that he could only take her in his arms, stumbling forward like a man into a mirror" (*Mountolive* 28). The mirror-reflection is, itself, amoral. We cannot say that the reflection is "good" or "bad," but rather *necessary* for the image itself. Similarly, Capodistria's path through Darkness, he claims, is merely a necessary aspect of the dualism of Light and Darkness. We imagine Mountolive stumbling forward, arms extended, prepared to crash into his own mirror-image. In the scene with Leila, this depiction reveals the unease with which one encounters oneself, and the dread of "crashing" into one's own reflection. In the letter to Balthazar, Capodistria avoids precisely such an encounter. He recognizes that he follows the path of Darkness, 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 in an effort to overcome this dichotomy: he approaches his "new self," however, as if he were stumbling into a mirror. The picture he draws for Balthazar is of the necessary mirror-image, the necessity of his "resurrected life" in contradiction to his old, *dead* self. The contradiction is thus revealed, yet the tension remains: the truth of Da Capo's past, his death, has been overturned, but contradiction (between light/dark, good/evil—despite his claim to the contrary) persists in his experience after death.

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 alchemist/monk is "defrocked" is particularly relevant. The reference to a religion "perverted" can be made with respect to the Coptic Church or the practice of Cabalism by Balthazar, et al. This reference establishes the diametric nature of religious practice as witnessed in the *Quartet*. As Coptic Christians, the Hosnanis are defined in opposition to the Islamic majority and the

Roman Catholic (or Protestant) Church(es). Balthazar's study of the Cabal is done in secret: a practice of Darkness, perhaps, hidden from the Light, while itself devoted to the explication of such dichotomies. Most explicitly, this reference legitimates the "Black Magic" practiced by Capodistria as the Dark side of religious practice: alchemy is concerned with "man's" hold on himself (his soul), through practice, while not evil, that exists necessarily to keep "acceptable" religious practices "in the air."

Further, Capodistria suggests that the practice of alchemy is "something which eminently fitted [his] nature" (Clea 199). The suggestion here of essentialism seems to reveal yet another tension, between one's nature 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 problematize any project that seeks to investigate "man's hold" on his own nature. The reference to essentialism, 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 more 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 death, *actually* refers to nothing. From Darley's perspective, this is a meaningful statement that contradicts itself in time; for Capodistria, however, the suggestion that his death was an accident could never be meaningful in the first place. Thus the contradiction (or lack thereof) is the product of one's perspective, which allows for the possibility of different truth-claims and reveals the tension in the (prospect of) a notion of *essential* 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:

[T]his Baron had...ah! My dear Balthazar, had *actually* produced ten homunculi which he called his "prophesying spirits." They were preserved in the huge glass canisters 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-

piction, however, we note references to themes of contradiction already present in the *Quartet* (not to mention the apparent "fantasy" / "reality" dichotomy). Two such references seem explicit: (1) In Arnauti's *Moeurs*, 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 Hebrew; also in Hebrew he questions the homunculi about future events.) This reference to Justine makes apparent 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 surrounding 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 quartet 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 exercise choice. All this is part of an experiment arranged 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 dictates behavior and even thought 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 experience, and the *Quartet* is grounded in this supposition. But so often this freedom is complicated by factors be-

yond our immediate awareness (or control): this is the tension pointed to in the creation of "prophesying spirits" by Capodistria's "evil genius." The sequence of history—up to the end of the century—lies beside Da Capo as he writes to Balthazar, but this knowledge must be tempered by the recognition that time contradicts that which we hold to be true. We ask, then: in what sense is it even possible to predict the future, if that future itself will contradict the present from which the prediction is made? This complication is made evident by Capodistria himself: "And so, my dear friend, I have chosen the Dark Path towards my own light. I know now that I must follow it wherever it leads!" (Clea 204). At the same time, Capodistria purports to choose his path toward the Dark (which leads to his own "light"), while acknowledging that he *must follow* this path wherever it leads. In the same way, the subjects of Durrell's *Quartet* choose their own paths, though confined by the city itself and the necessity of contradiction in time.

I 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 "station" of each homunculus and parallel relations to the "real" characters); most fundamentally, however, it points to the tensions in diametric oppositions that underlie the four novels. Near the conclusion of *Justine*, Darley writes: "Somewhere in the heart of experience there is an order and a coherence which we might surprise if we were attentive enough, loving enough, or patient enough. Will there be time?" (221). In the heart of the final novel, Durrell gives us a clue to interpreting the whole. The letter from Capodistria does not reveal a basic order or coherence, but rather a primitive tension that shapes the *Quartet*. In its strangeness, its absurdity, its break from "traditional" narrative, the story makes explicit relations that exist throughout the novels, encapsulated here, appropriately, in a story which is, itself, so ripe with contradiction. Only through overturning expectations of normalcy in narrative is Durrell able to convey precisely that: the *Alexandria Quartet* confronts contradiction and reveals how diametric oppositions, overturned in time, shape our experience.

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