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The elegant velvet glove: A textual and visual reading of the gothicised female form in Lawrence Durrell's 'The Alexandria quartet'

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Chapter 2: Narrators, Focalisers and Focalisation

Introduction

The narrator is a central device in all fictional novels in one form or another. The identity of the narrator in the narrative of the *Quartet* is one of the major constructing devices of the story world. In combination with the voice of the narrator, the focalisers and the act of focalisation determine what the reader knows. According to Bal, the narrator, in general, tells the story and this narration should not be conflated with the concept of focalisation (2001: 47). Within the telling of the story, certain perceptions and viewpoints are offered through the eyes of particular characters. These characters, in turn, become what are termed focalising agents or focalisers; they are the subjects who provide the visual images, or do the seeing in the narrative (47). Their vision shapes the manner in which the reader views the story world. This vision is established through the relationship between the subject and object that is seen (Bal 1997a: 19; 2001: 47). Bal terms this form of vision and its presentation the “act of focalisation” and it is her definition and usage of this term that I will employ throughout the chapters that follow. Though it has been indicated that the narrator should not be conflated with the act of focalisation, this does not mean that the focalisers cannot be analysed in relation to the narrator (Bal 1997a: 19). Bal has indicated that analysing the relations between focalisers and narrator is particularly valid when these aspects do not overlap as a single ‘person’ (20). This becomes an important aspect of my examination of Durrell’s novels *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Clea* where the narrator-focalisor, Darley, acts as one of the main characters. However, though Darley remains the main narrator in the novel *Balthazar*, there is the insertion of another strange external narratorial voice and focalisation is through the eyes of other character-bound focalisers. The novel *Mountolive* is the oddity because Durrell uses an external narrator and the main character as focalisor. Durrell’s complex narrative functions to create a multiplicity of points of view within the *Quartet*.

Though focalisation and narrative belong together, Bal suggests previous narratological theorists have incorrectly conflated the narrator and focalisation. In this regard, these theorists have consistently regarded focalisation as part of the narration because it is

associated with the use of language as a system that shapes vision and not *vice versa* (1997a: 19). In contrast, Bal posits that the narrator tells the story and focalisation is an aspect contained within that story. All the events in the narrative are presented from a certain vision or perception that describes the events and sets up “the relation between the vision and that which is “seen”, “perceived”, or the act of focalisation” (Bal 1997a: 142). In her book on narratology, Bal has indicated how the term focalisation is preferable to point of view or narrative perspective, because it clearly separates those who see from those who speak (1997a: 142-143). The differentiation between these agents allows for a careful exploration of the technique of presenting vision in the narrative. Equally, Bal regards the use of the term perspective as problematic because it is ambiguous, indicating both the narrator and the vision (143). I shall employ the use of the term focalisation in my work to distinguish between where the narrator-focalisor and external narrator provide a vision that has come from a separate focalising agent. However, I will rely on the words perception, perspective, viewpoint and standpoint to reflect the notion of vision in its subjective nature. I will employ these words interchangeably alongside the term focalisation when referring to the vision of the character(s) doing the seeing and the representation of the result of that act.

The layering of the narrative into narrator, focalising agent and what can be termed actor (agents who perform actions) establishes the extremely complex nature of a text. Bal has suggested that these layers be analysed with regard to one another to understand the connection and coherence that exists between them (1997a: 19). This is particularly important when the relationship between narrator and focalising agent is unclear (19). The theory of the separation between the narrator and the focalising agent is particularly relevant to these agents in Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*. Here the distinction between the narrator and the focalising agent establishes the alternate perceptions of the different characters offered to the reader. The narrative of Durrell’s four novels contains a mosaic-like effect with the result that the characters are evoked from the shards of different, subjective perceptions. Hidden behind the perceptions offered by the focalising agents is the narrating subject. This ranges from the ‘I’ of the narrator-focalisor found in the novels *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Clea*, to an intruding and strange external narrative voice, that I have termed the palimpsestuous voice, in *Balthazar*. Finally, in *Mountolive*, there is the

presence of an entirely external narrator, yet, at the same time a continual and unnatural movement into the focalising consciousness of the main character David Mountolive.

In the following discussion of the narrative voice in the novels, I shall posit that the external narrator is merely an agent, one possessing no gender. I suggest this voice acts as an anonymous conduit for the telling of the story. Though the external narrator in the novel *Mountolive* appears to present a story about the characters that is objectively true, I put forward that this is not the case. In *Mountolive*, the depiction of the truth is heavily invested in the focalisation of the main character, David Mountolive, along with that of other male characters such as Nessim Hosnani and Ludwig Pursewarden. The external narrator presents the subjective positions of these focalisers' opinions as the truth of the events occurring in the novel. This underscores the suggestion that the external narrator is unreliable, lacks objectivity and access to the truth. The narration becomes visibly fictive and, in the presentation of truly unknowable facts, inventive.

Because focalising agents are what determine the coherence of a story, they are important to the construction of events in a manner that is understandable and in accordance with the knowledge of the reader. These developments will form the focus of my analysis of the narrative in Durrell's tetralogy. Particularly relevant to Durrell's story world is visual perception and Bal suggests this perception should not be "conflated with the events they focus, orient, interpret" (1997a: 146). What is seen, who sees it and how it is represented establishes the dramatic visual scenes in Durrell's four novels. This visuality adds descriptive atmosphere, whilst structuring and driving the story. In the analysis of the narrator, focaliser and focalisation that follows, I aim to consider how the act of focalisation establishes the visual images of the text and the reader's knowledge of the story. Congruent to my examination of focalisation and the focalisers is how the narrators influence what the reader knows. In the course of my argument, I will reveal how Durrell's employment of the narrative voice interrogates the reliability of the presentation of events and characters. This chapter will enable me to examine how Gothic conventions subtly inform the narrative structure of Durrell's tetralogy.

The literary Gothic relies on the framing of narratives within narratives. Durrell extends this concept to the narratorial voice that acts as a framing device for other voices and multiple focalisations. This framing technique commences with the authorial notes placed at

the beginning of each novel. The many-layered focalisation of events in the novels establishes an apparent depth that, whilst pretending to locate the truth, only reveals reality and truth to be more fake than real. This becomes a counterfeiting of the past through the space and time device of memory. Durrell's prismatic fragmenting of images moulds the reader's response to the female characters. Throughout the four novels, the narrator enacts this fashioning through the recollections presented and through the appropriation of the image. These women become the screens onto which certain male desires and fears are projected, imbuing them with uncanny traits from the past so that they remain mere spectres of the narrator's imagination. Built up from pre-conceived notions of sexual difference, these women will be focalised in a number of ways pertinent to literary Gothic conventions such as the heroine, *femme fatale* or whore, and the monstrous-feminine. Central to the visual production of the female forms are the narrator, focalisers and the act of focalisation. Therefore, it seems imperative that I begin my examination of the novels by exploring the nature of Durrell's narrators, focalisers and focalisation in each novel of the *Quartet*.

Justine

A "Note", something for which Gothic novels are renowned, prefaces *Justine*, the first novel of the *Quartet*. In this note, the author sets the tone and authority manipulating just what he wishes the reader to know about the novel. He concentrates on emphasising the fictional nature of the characters, in particular mentioning that the "personality of the narrator" is an invention (J: 7). He is thereby separating himself from his characters, most notably the narrator, in order to gainsay any responsibility for opinions and viewpoints contained in the novel. He adds to this the strange rider "only the city is real", which the reader will come to learn is the biggest fiction of all (J: 7). The novel proceeds to open with an unnamed narrator-focaliser's description of the sound of the sea: "The sea is high again today, with a thrilling flush of wind" (J: 11). The opening is in the present tense and situates the reader immediately into the story through this evocative introductory sentence. The narrator, whose name is Darley, is in self-imposed exile on a Greek island, an escapee from place and circumstance, trying to "heal myself, if you like to put it that way" (J: 11). Memories dominate his life in exile. Filled with a sense of absence, these memories also provide him

with nostalgic moments that recall times past. Stimulated by the wind, his recall and memory follow the cyclical rhythm of the waves of the sea. This cyclical natural movement mirrors Darley's attempt to capture the waves of memory in his writing, as he seeks to understand and grapple with the threads of his past life in the city of Alexandria. In order to do this, he sets out to describe the events he believes occurred, thus becoming the narrator of his own story. As observed, Bal has indicated a character may be a narrator, but this does not necessarily mean that she or he acts as the focaliser, the one who does the seeing in the story.

However, in this novel, Darley is both the teller of the tale and the person through whose eyes and perceptions the events of the novel are envisioned. His is a memory narration within which he acts as the only agent of vision. This allows him to arrange the multiplicity of what Bal has referred to as episodic memory images that slide into one another and offer the reader a seemingly cohesive flow of happenings (2001: 46). The visual recollection of events by means of memory is an act of focalisation, but one that situates these events in the past tense, while being in the narrator's present. This apparent movement of time adds to the presentation of different subject positions in space which will be seen, in the following novels, to superimpose alternate images of the past viewed and presented through Darley's and other focalising agents' eyes. The vision of the narrator, concerning characters and events, always stems from a specific subjective position. As Crary, in connection with the nineteenth-century practices of looking, writes:

Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions and procedures of subjectification. (1990: 5)

The narrator is therefore only capable of presenting his memories based on his own subjective experiences, his own background and knowledge of the world. Darley reconstructs his past through the gaze of memory, which acts to limit his outlook and adopted position. This gaze represents a recognition and construction of his identity against the objectified images and actions re-created in memory. Yet, Darley is, in fact, a prisoner of the instability and otherness created by memory: "I lie suspended like a hair or a feather in the cloudy mixtures of memory" (J: 14). The image of being suspended or floating in a

colloidal solution, like a particle caught in jelly, haunts the narrator's interaction with his past. Darley seems trapped in this past, unable to disengage himself from what happened to him; yet, his experiences in the past are more intensely and vividly alive than his life in the immediate present.

The opaque nature of Darley's act of remembering blurs his narrative gaze, which remains caught and suspended in the stasis of his memories, where time and space meld together and nothing remains linear. Space and time seem to fold into one another, allowing for what Bal has termed a "mastering, looking from above, dividing up and controlling [which] is an approach to space that ignores time as well as the density of space's lived-in quality" (Bal 2001: 48). Darley's memories become a structuring tool of textual and spatial visuality lacking density whose structure Bal considers to allow space to be "focalized from within" (2001: 49). This internalised spatial focalisation is visible in how Darley experiences the past in the present tense, which is reliant on his physical remove from the space where everything happened as well as on memory as a distancing device. This interior and physical spatial distance enables him to understand and "see at last that none of us is properly to be judged for what happened in the past. It is the city which should be judged though we, its children, must pay the price" (J: 11). This statement is indicative of how Darley's past haunts his present, particularly his memories and obsession with Alexandria.

Mediated through the blurring unreliability of memory and the space of the city's landscape, Darley's vision will reconstruct the story of his time there. This attempt at a textual reconstruction will introduce the reader to the main characters, particularly the women with whom Darley was involved. Reconstructing them through the vision of his memory, Darley will engineer their content and presentation. His focalisation designs the initial screen or panel of the four novels establishing a single subjective "truth" and "reality". Darley's personal vision informs the story and his memories are open to interrogation because all subjective appraisals are limited, filled with misapprehensions and emotionally invested interpretations of events. The correction of this subjective and limited view is what the second novel *Balthazar* sets out to achieve. However, what the character Balthazar offers as representing the truth is an equally slanted focalisation based on his subjective recollection of events.

Balthazar

The novel *Balthazar* opens with a much longer authorial note than that of *Justine*. This note informs the reader that the text is not a “sequel” but a “sibling” to *Justine* and, along with the final two books in the tetralogy, is based on Einsteinian relativity:

I have turned to science and am trying to complete a four-decker novel whose form is based on the relativity proposition. Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum. (B: 7)

The authorial note should again alert the reader to the tradition Durrell is referencing of an author prefacing his or her work with an outline of the nature of the story that follows. Critic Susanne Becker notes that the Gothic is replete with “notes that pretend to explain and assert the truth of the text” (1999: 26). The authorial interjection should be treated with caution. Writing on the *Quartet* the novelist Richard Aldington indicated that he was: “not convinced by the Note at the beginning of *Balthazar*” (1964: 5). The reader would be wise to heed the caveat of Aldington, because this authorial intervention aims to influence the reader’s perception of the structure of the novels, and is an effort to control the text by enforcing the intentions of the author, thus making his role god-like.

Balthazar is the most densely layered novel in the *Quartet*. Durrell relies on the interchange of various narrative voices and focalisers in order to reveal the provisional nature of reality and subjective perception. I consider that *Balthazar* is stylistically and structurally the most intriguing and inventive of the four novels. The many voices in *Balthazar* act to refute the perspective on events Darley offered in his manuscript, which he entitled *Justine*. Darley’s fleeing to a Greek island to escape the end of his relationship with Justine, and the events surrounding it, is the subject matter of this manuscript. In an effort to have his recollections verified, he sends the written manuscript to a doctor friend he knew in Alexandria. This doctor, Balthazar by name, returns the manuscript with many emendations to correct Darley’s incorrect perception of past events.

Seemingly objective, Balthazar’s revisions, in fact, provide an alternate but subjective view of the events described in Darley’s manuscript. The augmented memories of the original manuscript are:

Cross-hatched, crabbed, starred with questions and answers in different-coloured inks, in typescript. It seemed to me then to be somehow symbolic of the very reality we had shared – a palimpsest upon which each of us had left his or her individual traces, layer by layer. (B: 18)

A palimpsest is a parchment or document upon which a layering of texts occurs. The original text is imperfectly erased and overwritten with a new text, but ghostly traces of the first text remain. The palimpsest is fragmentary and it “feigns a sense of depth while always in fact functioning on the surface level” (McDonagh 1987: 211). The idea of the palimpsest becomes an important structuring device aiding the dense layering effect Durrell is attempting to achieve. The traces of the past that exist in the palimpsest introduce the major Gothic concern of the return of the past into the present. The palimpsest-like inscriptions of the many-coloured inks operate to imprint and construct the subjectivity of the female characters in the novel. Blank screens, or surfaces, they are inscribed and re-inscribed by the narratorial voices with layers of different motifs. In a later chapter, I will carefully explore the manner in which Gothic motifs such as silence (in this instance the lack of a female voice), the labyrinth; imprisonment; the double; automatism (especially the idea of the doll); the femme fatale; monstrosity, hybridity; spectrality and madness, fashion the female form as a gothicised palimpsest (Spooner 2004:4).²⁰

The layering of the characters continues in *Balthazar* as Durrell begins to provide different facets to their characterisation. Only during the course of *Balthazar* does the reader finally learn Darley’s name. This occurs halfway through the novel, during the Egyptian carnival, when, standing around a dinner buffet, the British ambassador, David Mountolive, greets him with “Ah Darley” (B: 175). None of the other characters in *Justine* or *Balthazar* has bothered, up until this moment, to address him by name. Darley appears to be both within and without the action of the novel, a spectral presence or unseen onlooker. Darley’s friend Clea Montis comments on this when she says, “Why do you never play a part in these things? Why do you prefer to sit apart and study us all?” (J: 200). Justine Hosnani, Darley’s main love interest, around whom his manuscript of memories is constructed, also remarks upon his status as onlooker, one who seems to regard everyone with a derisory condescension: “‘Regard dérisoire’ says Justine. ‘How is it you are so much one of us and

²⁰ For the nature and effect of the palimpsest, see Sarah Dillon (2007, 2005); Michael Boccia (1989) and Josephine McDonagh (1987).

yet... you are not?" (J: 34) She goes on to evaluate his in-between observer status with the accurate comment: "“You are a mental refugee”" (J: 34). The liminal position Darley occupies ensures that the reader has few characteristics with which to build an image of him. This lack ensures that Darley remains an unknown, vague and distanced entity. Darley’s one-dimensionality results in the reader being unable to identify with him as a character.

However, it soon becomes apparent that as narrator-focaliser Darley’s voice and focalisation in *Balthazar* is not the only one studying and commenting on the other characters. Woven into the narrative told by the voice of Darley are the voices of Balthazar and of what appears to be an external narrating agent. These multiple voices act as focalisers, but also rely on the stories told by other character actors in the course of the narrative. Durrell creates a very complex layering effect through his construction of these narrative voices and the different focalisations of reality proffered by multiple agents. The strangest narrative voice remains that of the external voice that interjects at odd moments. It provides inner information concerning characters’ thoughts and feelings that is implausible in context. This ensures that what is told about the characters seems invented - a fiction. This intimate, uncanny knowledge provides the strange external voice with a god-like knowledge and raises the rather problematic notion of the omniscient narrator. The complexity of the narrative further resides in the use of more than one narrator. Though as the original narrator-focaliser Darley remains the more important voice, the voices and focalisation of Balthazar and of the external narrator interweave with that of Darley in a polyphonic narrative that is both unsettling and multi-faceted. This use of more than one narrator conforms to the manner in which many Gothic novels are structured. I suggest that this convergence attests in some small measure to the position I have adopted with regards to Durrell’s own employment of Gothic elements.²¹

Destabilising events, through the use of alternate perspectives, *Balthazar* offers alternative ways of interpreting events. Narratorial reliability is called into question, as well as the validity of the perspectives that are presented. The other polyphonic narrative voices simultaneously augment, contradict and shadow the voice of Darley, in an uncanny doubling. By asserting their right to speak, they offer corrective viewpoints, which still remain unreliable because of their own partial knowledge. Literary theorist Shlomith

²¹ See for example Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein’s Monster* and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* where more than one focaliser and narrator are apparent.

Rimmon-Kenan explains: “the main sources of unreliability are the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement and his problematic value-scheme” (1983: 100). Durrell’s narrators and focalisers are subjective, limited and affected by an emotional investment in the subjective masculine value-system embedded in the narrative. All these factors combine to shape the presentation of the events and the reader’s response to them. This is nowhere more apparent than in the scene of the detached marriage negotiation Balthazar describes between Nessim and Justine.

The account of this negotiation is problematic due to the fact that neither Balthazar nor Darley were present during the meeting described. Hence, they can have no knowledge of the conversational details provided. The narrative becomes imaginary and, therefore, suspect. The reader becomes aware that within the recounting of Justine and Nessim’s conversation is an underlying external presence that is acting as a focalising agent. Warren Wedin (1972) argues that this external narration represents an imaginative reconstruction of events based on another voice’s interpretation. The narration of this scene, for Wedin, becomes an imaginative artistic technique adopted by Darley so that the narrative voice and focalisation appear to stem from an external all-knowing agent. This all-knowingness has correspondences to what is termed omniscient narration. Literary theorist Jonathan Culler has challenged the concept of omniscient narration in his article entitled “Omniscience”. In this article, he writes about the narrative effect in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where the narrator, Marcel, provides information to which he could not have had access. Culler makes the interesting remark that the knowledge and story that Marcel imaginatively presents to the reader is invented by the author much like Marcel who is himself an invention (2004: 30).

Michael Boccia indicates in his article on the palimpsestic nature of Durrell’s *Quartet*, that Durrell assumes “various personae in the novel, speaking through such diverse artists as Darley, Clea, Pursewarden and even Balthazar” (1989: 155). The word chosen by Culler to describe the transferral of knowledge between the author and the character is “telepathic”. Culler adopts this word from Nicholas Royle’s use of the term in his book *The Uncanny*. Royle regards telepathy or the telepathic as indicative of the uncanniness of the transfer of special knowledge to a character-bound narrative voice or what Jonathan Culler terms an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator (2004: 29). However, whilst positing alternative ideas

about omniscient narration, Culler does not offer a replacement term. The term “extradiegetic-heterodiegetic” employed by Jonathan Culler, Mieke Bal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, stemming from the work of literary theorist Gérard Genette, is rather awkward for my purposes. The term “paralepsis”, adopted by theorist Ruediger Heinze, also seems inappropriate (2008: 282). The idea of the intimate transfer of information between author and narrator that Culler discusses and Boccia alludes to, I deem more appropriate for my exploration of how Durrell transfers and invents the storyline through his narrators. In order to reveal the symbiotic nature of knowledge transfer between the authorial voice and the character-bound focalisers, and to avoid the paranormal and psychical associations with the word telepathy, I propose the term “palimpsestuous voice”. This seems an adequate description for the strange external voice that appears and disappears throughout the narrative of *Balthazar* and is apposite with the technique of the palimpsest Durrell is exploiting in the novel.²²

The word “palimpsestuous” is taken from Sarah Dillon’s neologism, “palimpsestuous”, which betokens “a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation ... preserving as it does the distinctness of its texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence” (2007: 3). The use of this neologism seems adequately to express Durrell’s polyvalent overwriting of voices whilst simultaneously allowing for the separate nature of the external narrator and the other character-bound focalisers. Durrell ensures that the palimpsestuous external narrator “never refers explicitly to itself as a character” (Bal 1997a: 22), but seems to offer an “objective” view of what is occurring in the narrative. I am therefore not in agreement with Wedin that the strange external narrative voice is merely an imaginative creation of Darley. I prefer to regard it, in the manner of Culler and Boccia, as representative of a transfer of knowledge from the author to an alternate external narrative voice. This strange voice disturbs the narrative, furthering the layering effect and the multiplicity of the angles of focalisation. However, my argument remains open to contestation. The palimpsestuous narrator assumes the role of focaliser perceiving, presenting and slanting the actions that create and drive the narrative. Bal writes that “... the focaliser’s bias is not absent, since there is no such thing as objectivity, but remains rather implicit” (2001: 50). What the narrator chooses to selectively omit or

²² For opposing theories that consider the author as narrator, see Ann Banfield (1982), Richard Walsh (1997).

include shapes the reader's knowledge of the story world. Whilst the story world comes to the reader through the visual textual reinterpretation of Darley, yet synchronously this world is scrutinised through the eyes of Balthazar and the palimpsestuous voice. The narrative density is enhanced through this constant movement of voices, focalisers and focalisation. Different memories, voices and perspectives form a multivalent matrix, which traps characters and readers alike, as truth, reality and narrative structures all become relative.

In the last chapter of *Balthazar*, there is a circular return to Darley on his island looking back at the past from the present. His is the single narratorial voice that now predominates, inserting the text of a letter from Clea for the reader. Darley inflects Clea's textual voice through his presentation of her words. However, within her letter she transcribes, as an enclosure, a portion of a letter written by Pursewarden, a joint acquaintance from Alexandria. Clea frames Pursewarden's voice in her letter and both these voices are, in turn, framed through Darley's voice-over of the two letters. The inclusion of letters, diary excerpts, and notes are all part of a strategy of textual fragmentation, a conventional strategy associated with the Gothic. This fragmentation feeds into the uncanny echoes of multiple voices in *Balthazar*. These voices keep evoking memories of the past for Darley. His introductory comment that Clea's letter is a "brief memorial to Alexandria" (B: 201) and the closing sentence of the novel, seem to act as parentheses and a form of closure to Darley's recollections of his past in Alexandria.

Throughout the novel, Darley's memories are manipulated by the intervention of other voices, whether Balthazar's or the palimpsestuous narrator's. As a result, truth and reality become suspect, forcing the reader to conclude that what is said and the events described are not to be trusted. Durrell's use of different narrative voices in *Balthazar* plays with the idea of an external narrator. This is prescient of the external narrator that dominates the third novel *Mountolive*. The framework of narrative voices within narrative voices and the inclusion of letters and notes hint at the conventional Gothic aspects I am investigating in Durrell's tetralogy. *Mountolive* is suggestive of a return to a 'realist' narrative with its external narrator. This voice provides information about the main protagonist David Mountolive and his development from a young diplomat visiting Egypt to his return as ambassador to Egypt. However, this realist voice is deceptive, because it glides into

Mountolive's stream of consciousness appearing to become him. An all-knowing external voice cannot, in fact, be part of any narrative scene, but can only remain a distanced presence observing its creation. So the voices in *Mountolive* intercalate in a strange and disturbing manner. This again underscores the structural strategy Durrell employs to fragment focalisation and make a multiplicity of interpretations available, thereby disturbing the concept of a given truth or reality.

Mountolive

The novel *Mountolive*, like its predecessors, opens with an authorial note. This note stresses the relationship of this work to *Justine* and *Balthazar*, terming it a sibling. Explaining to the reader that the characters are imaginary, the note goes on to state that the historical and diplomatic service themes have been creatively adjusted to suit the novelist's needs. The note ends with a Latin tag, one that means "shame on him who thinks evil of it" and is the motto of the English Order of the Garter. This order is the highest chivalric order that is dedicated to Saint George, the patron saint of England. This tag, rather excessive in relation to a work of fiction, is an amusing parody of the diplomatic world to which David Mountolive belongs. With its pretentious colonial attitudes, Oriental outlook and stuffiness, this corps of Victorian beliefs and ideals is something with which Mountolive eagerly conforms. The chivalric romantic quest, associated with the legend of Saint George, will act in conjunction with an Oriental Gothic motif as threads of a tapestry Durrell sets out to unravel in this third novel of the *Quartet*.²³

The most striking difference between *Mountolive* and its two sibling novels is the move to an external narrative voice that tells the story. In my discussion of this narrative voice, I will employ the terms external narrator or narratorial voice interchangeably rather than third-person or omniscient narrator. The external narrator acts as a spatio-temporally distanced, supposedly all-knowing voice, yet it is rarely, if ever, provided with a specific gender. The portrayal of the characters and events remains reliant on the perceptions provided through a focalising agent. This agent is, in general, gendered. The gaze of David Mountolive is responsible for the subjectively slanted focalisation, because what he sees the external narrator's voice then presents to the reader. However, though I consider this form

²³ Honi soit qui mal y pense

of voice in the main to be a genderless agent, in Durrell's novels focalisation and narration seems biased towards a masculine outlook. Consequently, the assigning of meaning in the story world stems continually from a masculine standpoint.

The nature of the external narrator in *Mountolive* has been widely discussed by a number of Durrell scholars and critics. Assessing these opinions will determine the importance placed on this narrative voice and the access it provides to the story of *Mountolive*. The subjectiveness of memory, so important in the previous novels, appears to fall away. In its stead, the external voice seems to offer an objective account of events. Durrell scholar Alan Warren Friedman, discussing the narrator in *Mountolive*, vacillates between positing David Mountolive as the narrator, or regarding the novel as simply a "totally detached 'objective' account" (1967: 36). According to critic Eugene Hollahan, other critics such as Weatherhead, Levitt, Fraser, and Unterecker (1990: 115) have supported Friedman's choice of the objective account. Warren Wedin, in his article "*The Artist as Narrator in the Alexandria Quartet*" (1972), postulates Darley as the narrator throughout all four novels. For Wedin, the novels are progressive stages in Darley's personal growth as a character. Eugene Hollahan in his article "*Who Wrote Mountolive? The Same one Who Wrote Swann in Love*" (1990), partially supports Wedin's hypothesis of Darley as narrator of *Mountolive*, but goes one step further by asserting that Darley is the writer of *Mountolive*, not just the narrator. Hollahan proposes that Darley's return to Alexandria, which occurs in the final novel *Clea*, allows him the time to obtain all the evidence and information necessary to write *Mountolive*.

In his book *Lawrence Durrell's Major Novels or The Kingdom of the Imagination*, Donald P. Kaczvinsky supports the idea of Darley as the writer of *Mountolive*. Kaczvinsky considers this the "the best answer... because it preserves the continuity, consistency, and coherence of the entire series" (1997: 59). The use of the words "coherence", "consistency" and "continuity" with regard to the identity of the narrator is a trifle odd. These words seem to be in direct opposition to Durrell's attempts to shatter the coherence of truth and reality in order to reveal their lack of unification and their multi-faceted nature. Continuing to argue in support of Darley as narrator, Kaczvinsky observes: "If the material and revelations contained in *Mountolive* are told from an omniscient 'objective' point of view, then the novel holds a privileged place among the four and undermines the 'relative' truth of all

experience" (1997: 59). This claim might initially appear convincing, but it does beg the question why an external narrator's "omniscient 'objective' point of view" undermines Durrell's proposed aim of revealing how truth or reality is relative. Is the 'omniscient' objective narrative point of view really a privileging device, or is it possible that it is equally unreliable and relative?

Durrell, I suggest, is defiantly mocking and playfully transgressing the question of "who is speaking". This playfulness causes me to find Wedin, Hollohan and Kacvinsky's hypotheses concerning Darley's role as narrator-writer somewhat problematic. Instead, I would contend, in line with Bal's narratological theory, that in literary narration an external narrator cannot be personified and should only be treated as a "narrating subject" or agent (1997a: 22). Durrell, in my view, is employing an external narrator specifically as a distancing technique in accordance with the more straightforward 'realist' plot. This external narration is in keeping with the character of David Mountolive, the protagonist of the story. External objective narration works to provide authenticity to the revelation of the 'true' events taking place. This form of narration aids to build the thriller-like suspense of the deception practiced by the Hosnani with their gun-running scheme. Durrell's external narrator becomes a device used to set up a sense of truth. However, Durrell almost immediately debunks and dismantles this truth by revealing the narrator as unreliable and what this voice presents to be relative and lacking in any objectivity. In order to achieve this implosion of an 'omniscient', 'all-knowing' narrator, I posit that this voice cannot be one of the characters in the novel. Instead, it must remain, as Bal proposes, an 'it': "not a 'he' or 'she'. At best a narrator can narrate about someone else, a 'he' or a 'she' – who might, incidentally, happen to be a narrator as well" (1997a: 22). The external narrator, according to Bal's argument, acts merely as an agent that tells the story and remains neither a person, nor objective or reliable.²⁴

In further support of this argument, narratological theorists Poul Behrendt and Per Krogh Hansen indicate that external narration can function "with focalisation (internal as well as external) that establishes a limited or perhaps even distorted point of view, not unlike the one we find in homodiegetic [first person] narratives" (2011: 222). The story told

²⁴ Elizabeth Ermath writing on realism in the novel, also regards the "the narrator as nobody... a narrating instance... really not intelligible as an individual" (1983: 65-66). Also see Seymour Chatman who posits that all narratives have a narrator, in the sense of an agent of narration, but that this agent might only be a non-human recorder or presenter of signs one that acts as a transmission device (1990:116).

by the external narrator in *Mountolive*, I contend, allows Durrell to construct a limited and subjective argument in what seems, on the surface, to be an objective, truthful account of the happenings in the narrative. Concerning objectivity in narration, Bal argues, “objective narration is by definition impossible because the linguistic constraints imposed on narratorial voice and the subjective focalisation no speaker can avoid adopting shape the fabula or content of the narrative decisively” (1990: 732). This subjective position is visible in Durrell’s external narrator’s reliance on the subjective experiences of the character focalisers to fashion the content of the story world in *Mountolive*.

As argued in the introduction to this chapter, the focalisor provides a subjective perception concerning other characters or events, which the external narrator then presents to the reader as objective truth. In *Mountolive*, this distancing allows the reader access to the story world through the eyes of the focalisers. The reader, therefore, sees through the focalisor’s gaze entering into how these focalisers experience the situations in which they find themselves. This establishes a limited point of view based on what the characters perceive. An external narratorial voice does not withhold information, but still retains access to the characters’ inner lives and all the facts and events of the story. However, these are, as narratologist Peer Bundgaard has discussed, limited to the perceptions and horizons of the focalising characters (2011: 96). The preceding discussion therefore contests the approaches advocated by Wedin, Hollohan and Kacvinsky regarding the external narrator’s objective status and Darley’s access to this position. Consequently, the unreliable and subjective narratorial presentation of *Mountolive*’s fictional reality is, I propose, integral to Durrell’s denial of an objective approach to reality, truth and identity.

Alan Warren Friedman makes an interesting point when he writes that it is “the superficial ‘facts of reality’ which become the most unreliable narrator ... thereby tending to negate themselves” (1967: 36-37). Objectively proffered facts deceive the reader, accessing as they do subjectively adopted standpoints and interpretations of the truth. The shift to an external narratorial voice and the manner in which focalisation occurs in *Mountolive* have caused the textual representation of the fictional world of the narrative to alter. The change in narrators, focalisers and focalisation in *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Mountolive* establishes a prism-like effect that shifts and destabilises the gaze and calls into question the nature of reality, identity and truth. The move into and out of the stream of consciousness of

Mountolive makes the narratorial situation stranger because no clear separation exists between voices. This encourages what narratologist Brian Richardson, writing on extreme narration, calls “a free play with voice, person and perspective” (2006: 139). In *Mountolive*, there is a feeling that the separation between external narrator and the character focaliser has in some manner collapsed. Durrell, I would argue, is transgressively flouting; he destabilises this convention in order to provide a spectrum or prism of narrative voices and perspectives, and these stylistic features I see as resonating with Gothic strategies and motifs. I contend these elements form a necessary part of the duplicity of Durrell’s narrative, which challenges meaning and identity through the play with voice, text and image.

The external narrator’s ability to slide into Mountolive’s thought processes provides the reader access into Mountolive’s memories. However, this stream of memory is often destabilised by a sudden jarring intervention of the external voice. In this manner, the external narrator appears to establish a dialogue between himself, the reader, the characters and the story world. This is overtly visible in the external narrator’s intervention concerning the story of Nessim and Justine. This is a history of which Mountolive is entirely unaware, and it is unlikely that any other character would have access to this knowledge either:

There were many facts about Justine and Nessim which had not come to his knowledge – some of them critical for an understanding of their case. But in order to include them it is necessary once more to retrace our steps briefly to the period immediately before their marriage (*Mountolive*: 193; henceforth M).

This sudden interjection and interference of the external narrator, resembling that in a nineteenth-century novel, uses rhetoric to allow the reader access to information of which the main characters are unaware. The narrator creates a pause in the story in order to introduce a brief, apparently realistic, aside. In his book on the force of the Gothic in nineteenth century narratives, Peter Garrett observes that this pause, to establish complicity between the narrative voice and the reader, is undertaken by an “‘author’ who self-consciously reflects and provokes the reader to reflect on the narrative transactions in which they are both engaged” (2003: 25). For Garrett’s use of the word ‘author’, I substitute

that of narrator to avoid the risk of conflating the biographical author with the narrator of the text. The use of the word “our” in the passage quoted aims to establish complicity between the narrator and the reader. Durrell employs this pronoun in order to endow the facts presented with an objective veracity. These facts, it is implied, have remained carefully hidden, dark currents underlying the plot the reader has followed through *Justine* and *Balthazar*. The nature of the interpolation disturbs the reader, because it raises questions about the reliability of the external narrator’s factual presentation and what information the voice has chosen to elide. Yet, the external narrator’s intervention is strange and uncanny, a haunting of the narrative by the conventions of its literary predecessors furthering the palimpsestic layers contained in the novel and the return of the past into the present.

In the course of reading *Mountolive*, the reader participates in constructing the prismatic alternative realities through an engagement with the production of the narrative. Though it appears that the external narrator controls the production of the story world, there is a strange slippage between this voice and the interior monologue voice of David Mountolive. This results in the presentation of information that is not possible for even an external narratorial voice to have had access to. These aspects of the narrative establish the inherent unreliability of Durrell’s external narrator whose presentation of ‘facts’ is reliant on internal focalisers along with a multiplicity of other voices in the text. *Mountolive* offers an apparently ‘realistic’ perspective on some of the events previously described in the novels *Justine* and *Balthazar*. Throughout the alteration in narrative voice and structure in the novels, the main characters in the story remain the same. It is only the perceptions of events that fragment and alter. The novel *Clea* marks the return of the original narrator-focaliser Darley and is also a move from the distant past to the present. Nonetheless, this present is in the near past of Darley’s textually transcribed remembrances of the events that take place in the narrative of *Clea*.

Clea

Clea, like all the preceding novels, commences with an authorial note. This note indicates that the “present set of four volumes may be judged as a completed whole” and states that “a suitable descriptive title would be ‘a word continuum’” (C: 7). The term continuum refers to how space and time are relative and how objects in motion experience time differently to

those at rest – time moves more slowly for objects in motion. Durrell seems to be alluding to the theory of relativity and Einstein’s space-time continuum. Space and time are the hinge upon which Durrell constructs the story world of the narrative. The question that springs to mind is how words resemble the space-time continuum.

However, there are other meanings associated with the word “continuum” which is defined as “a continuous thing” or “a continuous series of elements passing into each other” (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 1993: 495). The authorial note is, therefore, ambivalent and deceptive, offering contradictory possibilities for interpretation. I suggest the note becomes a further attempt at shaping the reader’s approach to the novels and their structure. In this instance, Durrell has not indicated the imaginary nature of either the characters or the events, but concentrated solely on the nature of the structural devices employed in the novel. The reader is cognisant of the fact that time in the novels does not really slow, but is held in the murky solution of memory that splices past into present and present into past. However, the objects, in the form of the characters, do not move through time per se, rather, these objects remain static in time, which flows around and through them. In the present in the past of the novel *Clea*, the voice of Darley returns to alter, yet again, the angle of perception and truth.

Throughout *Clea*, Darley presents what happens to him in an almost autobiographical manner. This narrative structure marks a return to the more simplistic one found in the opening book *Justine*. Durrell seems to be creating a cyclical movement, one resembling the time-space continuum and the narrative device of memory. In this final novel, Darley presents his subjective inner deliberations and thoughts to the reader, his emotions and his perceptions of life and experience. He informs the reader that a letter from his friend Nessim Hosnani has finally summoned him away from the Greek island and

back inexorably to the one city which for me always hovered between illusion and reality, between the substance and the poetic images which its very name arouse in me. A memory, I told myself, which had been falsified by the desires and intuitions only as yet half-realized on paper. (C: 9)

The motion of time is emphasised in the words “draw me back” which is both an act of memory and a future act of physical movement in time and space as Darley travels back to Alexandria. But this is a different Darley, one who regards what previously happened to him

“as falsified by the desires and intuitions only as yet half-realized on paper” (C: 9). Committing his previous experiences and visual recollections to paper has allowed him to establish a distance from who he was then, to who he perceives himself to be in his present. Still, this textual expression has failed to allow him to come to a realisation of the truth of his past. His attempt to codify his observations was impossible because “new knowledge disrupted the frame of reference, everything flew asunder, only to reassemble in unforeseen, unpredictable patterns” (C: 9).

Thus, reality is fragmented, truth becomes multiple, and the story world transforms into a prismatic and densely layered space-time narrative. Darley’s previous attempts to fix his knowledge of the past have revealed what he thought had happened to be a subjective illusion. He undertakes his new narrative on the presumption of having gained knowledge through his writing about the past, even if this knowledge is only “half-realized”. However, his present, like his narrative in *Justine*, remains a journey into the past. In a limbo between sleep and wakefulness, he thinks it is “memory’s heavy plum-line” (C: 20) which guides him, like a ghost, back to Alexandria: a “newly acquired city” (C: 25). Past melds with present, old experience with new, in a vague palimpsestuous repetition and recurrence of ideas presented in slightly altered form. Overlaying old and new experiences provides for another deepening of the palimpsest of memory, narrative structure, time and space. Everything is uncannily haunted by the ghosts of the past that continually creep into the past present that Darley is now re-creating fictionally.

Darley’s narration of the story, though it appears to be in the present, continues to be a deception; the text is a later recreation, one of Wordsworthian “emotion recollected in tranquillity”. Use of the present tense often collides with use of the past in a strange manner. This is an indication to the reader that this novel is a recreation of the not too distant past recalled in the memory of the present writing. Darley’s presentation of events of the story world in *Clea* is selective; an indication that the retelling of the story about his return to Alexandria is a continuation of the subjective narrative found in *Justine* and *Balthazar*. In believing his exile has provided him with the objectivity necessary to see the people he knew differently - as they really are, Darley projects the change or growth he feels he has achieved onto the people he has known: “if I had changed, what of my friends – Balthazar, Nessim, Justine, Clea? What new aspects of them would I discern after this time-

lapse?" (C: 10). On his return, and during his final meeting with Justine, it is she who points out what he has failed to recognise: "'You see a different me' she cried in voice almost of triumph. 'But once again the difference lies in you, in what you imagine you see!'" (C: 47). Presciently, Justine is indicating to him that how he perceives others is reliant on a fantasy of visual observation and subjective response.

The subjectivity of observation is crucial to the narrative of *Clea*, because Darley again resumes the role of main focaliser. His vision and outlook structure the story world and he presents this information to the reader as the apparent truth. Descriptions of the city and the characters are all transmuted through his gaze. The only alternate focaliser in the novel is Darley's friend and lover Clea. Her vision is contained in letters to Darley, and in her descriptions of Liza and Justine. Clea's descriptions of these women are presented, as Bal notes, with "a certain far from innocent interpretation of the elements" (1997a: 150). Analysing the other women from within her own personal prejudices, which are not innocent, Clea situates her focalisation firmly within the masculine textual discourse of the narrative. Appropriating Clea's voice, Darley seems to mould what she writes to conform to his own interpretation of events and characters. There is always the question of unreliability with regards to a character-focaliser, such as Clea. Does the narrator provide a reliable account of what this character said or wrote? Or has the narrator edited and arranged the information to suit certain purposes? Therefore, what information the focalisers or narrators retain and what they alter to suit a certain standpoint is something the reader has to consider carefully when approaching Durrell's story world.

Throughout the novels the narrator, whether character-bound or external, assumes the perspective of the reader will resemble his own. This is equally valid when it comes to the focalisation in the *Quartet*, which seems to stem from a masculine perspective. In Clea's case her gaze, or her appropriation of the image of other female characters can, according to Bal, be considered an identification with an all-encompassing and controlling male vision (1997a: 157). In this instance, the controlling male vision would be that of Darley. This visual control manipulates and objectivises both the words and physical characteristics of these female characters. There is little empathy in Clea's, at times, scathing critique of other women and this makes her complicit with Darley's own outlook. Therefore, what remains central to the novel, as it has been throughout *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Mountolive*, is the

visual textual construction conducted by the focalising gaze. *Clea* remains less layered than *Balthazar* and is less wide-ranging in space-time than *Mountolive*. Representing the closure of the novel cycle this novel, like a Gothic text, attempts to provide a “happy” resolved ending. *Clea* lacks depth and narratively is, at times, verbose and filled with tedious monologues, particularly the section devoted to Pursewarden’s “conversations with brother ass”. These philosophical maanderings and trite attempt at Nietzschean aphorisms, lend little to either the narrative structure or the plot. *Clea* is possibly the least realised of the novels and as a result the least enjoyable and most pedestrian.

It is in the visual imagery of *Clea* that Gothic motifs are most visibly present. Dominated by the return of the past into the present and uncannily supernatural events, *Clea* is the novel that exhibits a clear reliance on the textually transgressive and excessive images filled with extravagant colours associated with the Gothic. The visual scenes in *Clea* emulate this excess, vividness of colour and use of ambiguous language that adds to the ambivalence residing at the heart of Durrell’s narrative. Reliant on the focalisation of panoramic scenes set in nature, Durrell’s visual textual images derive entirely from male focalisers. In Durrell’s work, the presumption I am making, even when dealing with an external narrator, is that the voice and the gaze in the text are masculine.

Conclusion

Although it might appear that some of the female characters in the *Quartet* possess the gaze, I propose this is an illusion. A feminine gaze would pose a challenge to the male textual discourse. So this gaze is quickly repressed in Durrell’s narrative because a position of visual dominance is proscribed for his female characters. Susan Wolstenholme, writing on women readers and writers in the Gothic, notes the following about the gaze: “Evidently the female gaze, as well as the woman’s body that forms the object of the man’s gaze is frightening, something to be avoided, perhaps disallowed or repressed” (1993: 9). I suggest that in the novels of the *Quartet*, the gaze has been assigned to the male artist and the female characters are there to play the culturally assigned role of object. Durrell’s visual and textual inscription of the female characters’ embodiment as object accords with film theorist Laura Mulvey’s suggestion that the female body “stands in patriarchal culture as

signifier for the male other bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions" (2006a: 343).

Fantasy and obsession are reactions of excess and form the basis for the relationships between Durrell's characters, leading to delusion, repulsion, fear, death, maiming and transgressive sexual behaviour. All these elements, in one manner or another, belong to the darker undercurrent running through the Gothic literary tradition; therefore, I would allege, this tradition is peculiarly pertinent to an examination of the four novels of the *Quartet*. In the next chapter, I shall take up the question of this male gaze, relying on the psychoanalytical theoretical work of certain feminist film theorists and art historians. Though these theorists have concentrated on the cinema and art, I am making the assumption that both film and art are dependent on narrative discourse to read images, and Durrell's writing, with its pronounced use of visual textual imagery, can be read in the same manner.

Consequently, the translation of theory from the text of the film to the visual image of the novel does not seem to pose irrefutable issues for my critical approach. Inherent to my argument concerning the narrator and the gaze is the association these have with the Gothic genre. Stylistically very dependent on visual representation, this genre presents readers with framed scenes in which the focalisation occurs sometimes through a character focaliser or through the gaze of a narrator. I argue that the complex structure of Durrell's narrative, with its employment of highly visual scenes and the layering of multiple narrators and focalisation, is very much located within the thematic concerns of the Gothic genre. Characters in the Gothic, particularly female ones, offer themselves as spectacle to the reader's gaze. In Durrell's novels the image of woman as spectacle is a prominent feature of the text, ensuring the female characters are visual objects of pleasure and fear. Vision within the *Quartet* is implicated in representation that is preoccupied with gender. In the following chapter, I will investigate the manner in which the gaze establishes the female form as sexual Other. Adopting feminist film and art theory, my argument will consider how the gaze not only constructs the identity of the male characters in Durrell's novels, but how the gaze interprets and visualises the female characters according to certain stereotypical conventions. These constructed embodiments are then written into the text as 'truth'; a truth I wish to scrutinise and challenge.