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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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## Afterword

The philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in an article entitled “Verdad y perspectiva” in *El Espectador* (1916) wrote “The truth, the real, the universe, life - whatever you want to call it - breaks up into innumerable facets ... each of which presents a face to an individual” (cited in Kern 1983: 151). Facets or sliding panels, I have argued in the preceding chapters of this study, represent Durrell’s attempt to fragment perceptions of reality and identity in an effort to show how all is relative. Furthermore, these panels function as Gothic framing devices, because they are marked by metaphorically excessive happenings or images. In discussing the idea of frames or framing, Bal remarks these are supposed to limit the possible meanings of a work because they are found within a socio-historical framework (2006: 290). In considering Durrell’s use of sliding panels, I argue that these attempts to circumvent reification are achieved through the employment of frames that constantly shifts the temporal. In so doing, Durrell contrives a multiplicity of divergent and overlapping interactions of memories past, present and future.

Through grammatical tenses he layers time in the space of the narrative in an exceedingly complex and palimpsestic fashion. In his work *A Key to Modern British Poetry* Durrell, in fact, indicated his idea of time functions like a mirror which takes “us backwards and forwards between reminiscences and description, between the present and the past: and packed closely into it, among the images are the fragments of culture” (1970: 151). In these fragments are the socio-historical past, relating to Bal’s argument concerning frames, and this past is imbricated with myth, art and religion that inflect the present and the past causing a multiplicity of possible meanings and realities. Lines from T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton* spring to mind with regards to what Durrell is trying to accomplish:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable. (T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton* Lines: 1-5)

Eliot’s poem refers back to the writings of Saint Augustine who said, “there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things and a present of future things” (1961: 269). Eliot’s idea that time is unredeemable solicits attention. In this word, there resides the

combined notion of unassuageable spiritual guilt, as well as the alternative notion of time not being recoverable because it is permanently in flux. Durrell's technique of 'sliding panels' of a space-time continuum represent a fragmentation in flux that reveals how different subjective perceptions influence the individual characters' focalisation of events. Simultaneously, it shows how these responses structure the manner in which reality and truth are perceived and become merely subjective constructs. These multiple perspectives are mainly transmitted through the consciousness of the male characters whose viewpoints construct the bodily forms of the female characters, along with the cityscape, as objects contained in the space-time of memory and the gaze.

Many scholars have critically approached Durrell's tetralogy from different perspectives. The novels have been explored as representing Modern love; they have been examined from a thematic point of view; a number of scholars have looked at the time-space aspects of the novels and related them to Postmodernism and Modernism, and the idea of the spirit of place has been analysed. In a more recent work, the topological relation between narrative and time in the novels has been focused upon. The visual-textuality of Durrell's novels was first brought to prominence in Diane Vipond's study *Art, Artist, and Aesthetics in Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet* (1980). Since then a number of visual-textual studies of Durrell's work have been and are currently being conducted by notable Durrell scholars Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Isabelle Keller-Privat and Murielle Philippe. Though these visual-textual studies look at the metaphorical representational aspects in Durrell's work, none of them have adopted a critical feminist approach nor have they explored the potential of the Gothic mode with regards to an exploration of Durrell's writing style and narrative structure. It would appear that only a few approaches to Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* have advocated or undertaken a feminist examination of the novels.

One of the first articles to raise the question of Durrell's depiction of the feminine was a paper entitled "Durrell's Fatal Cleopatra" by Jane Lagoudis Pinchin delivered at the 1981 First National Lawrence Durrell Conference. Making a direct reference to the misogyny that might be associated with Durrell's work, Lagoudis Pinchin was quick to revert to a denial that the female characters in Durrell's work are inspired by hatred of women or any hostility. She does make mention of Durrell's use of violence and deformity in his work, but does not directly link this to the representation of his female characters. Lagoudis Pinchin

makes sound observations about how sex is conquest and a form of murder as well as the fact that the female characters are constructions or creations of the male characters and therefore of Durrell as author. However, in her overall argument Lagoudis Pinchin refrains from an overtly feminist critique of Durrell's representation of his female characters.

A similar levelling of sexism but without overt criticism can be found in Claire Ellen Phillips-Peckosh's study of gender and determinacy in the *Alexandria Quartet* (1989). Phillips-Peckosh explores the space-time structure and how this frames the representation of the genderisation of the *femme fatale*. She considers the influence of psychoanalytic theories such as those of Georg Groddeck, Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung on Durrell's creation of the female characters. In line with Pinchin, Phillips-Peckosh refuses to challenge Durrell's misogyny, maintaining that she can understand and accept it because of his Modernist framework and to some extent the beauty of his prose. Pinchin's article is utilised in a study by Christopher Robert Reibling (1991), who attempts a detailed feminist reading of the tetralogy. He, too, approaches the novels from the angle of the *femme fatale* using a deconstructive reading based on Derrida's books *Of Grammatology* and *Spurs* to reveal how the female characters are written by the male artist/writers in the novels and thus by Durrell himself. Reibling does not really engage with the depth of violence and inherent misogyny present in the visual representations of Durrell's female characters. Instead, Reibling captures them in a distanced linguistic discourse that in many ways emulates that of Durrell and the male narrators/focalisers in the novels. Based on the paucity of scholarship within this area, I decided to adopt a specifically feminist reading in my exploration of Durrell's writing, in doing so, I wished to foreground the overt sexism in Durrell's writing.

What is more notable is that even fewer scholars have broached the Gothic possibilities, not only in the *Quartet*, but in Durrell's oeuvre as a whole. The only slightly extended approach to the Gothic attributes of Durrell's work is a chapter by Gordon K. Thomas entitled "Black Parody: The 'Gothic Frankensteinery' of Nunquam", which appears in *Selected Essays on the Humor of Lawrence Durrell* edited by Betsy Nichols, Frank L. Kersnowski, and James R. Nichols. Seemingly, the influence of Gothic tropes on Durrell's writing has been overlooked or considered too minor for serious examination. The connection between the Gothic as a mode of writing that incorporates misogyny has been

overlooked altogether. This connection has been my red thread in this study. My objective has been not only to open up the rich possibilities offered in an exploration of the Gothic in Durrell's work, but to critically scrutinise how, through the deployment of certain themes and conventions Durrell textually and visually constructs a stereotypical masculine perception of femininity in his tetralogy. I chose to concentrate solely on the *Alexandria Quartet* as this is the best known of Durrell's works and has received the most critical acclaim. Therefore, although the novels *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive* and *Clea* all include Gothic elements, I have not tried to read them as a set of Gothic novels; rather, I have argued that Durrell makes recourse to certain generic conventions. I have chosen to fuse these Gothic conventions and motifs with a feminist theoretical perspective to interrogate how Durrell's narrative reveals inherent prejudice against the feminine other. Alexandra Warwick indicates that words such as spectres, haunting, ghosts, live burial, dead and death function as dead metaphors when considering writing about the Gothic (2007: 8-9). I suggest that, contrary to Warwick's contention, these and other dead metaphors can still be fruitfully read in order to expose how Durrell purposely employs them to enhance, disrupt and fragment the story world of his novels.

Consequently, my examination of the novels of the *Quartet* has uncovered the hidden undercurrents and nastier preoccupations at work in the narrative's story world. Durrell's Gothic discourse accentuates a deceptively fabricated signifying self that conceals subversive savage desires and perspectives. With this in mind, any reader engaging with Durrell's novels, and especially women, should feel deeply uneasy about the way the male characters respond to and think about women. Their reactions represent an all-encompassing patriarchal stereotyping of Woman that essentialises and demeans the female characters. This is further apparent in the treatment meted out to these women who are slapped, kept nameless, silenced, mutilated, bestialised, reviled and done away with when no longer considered necessary adjuncts to the masculine quest for identity. Throughout Durrell's oeuvre, the masculine portrayal of women is reduced to a pattern of scorn and cruel manipulation. Powerful female characters are either destroyed or, in the last stages of the *Quartet*, disavowed. Durrell seems unable to develop or allow these women to attain a selfhood and a pre-eminence. Instead, both the author and his male characters play God, as they create the fantasy of the female form only to destroy it.

The fact that so few feminist approaches and even fewer Gothic readings of Durrell's oeuvre have been attempted opens up the possibilities of further exploration within these areas. My feminist reading of the quirky and grotesque episodes of Gothic visual textual construction of the female characters represents a potentially viable area that could be engaged with in further studies, whether of an early novel like *Panic Spring*, or, equally, in the later novels that make up *The Revolt of Aphrodite* and *The Avignon Quintet*. All of these novels are, in one manner or another, reliant on Gothic images and themes. My approach to Durrell's novels might appear polemical because my intent has been to interrogate the conventional critical interpretations of his work. In these approaches, the general focus has been centred on the coming of age, emotional and artistic growth of the male character along with the theme of love. There is little love and even less kindness in the novels of the *Quartet*, but there is a lot of cruelty, anger and outwardly directed hatred, the brunt of which is borne by the female characters.

A recent book by James Nichols, *The Stronger Sex: The Fictional Women of Lawrence Durrell* (2011), advocates just the conventional interpretation of Durrell's female characters I am trying to question and debunk. Nichols essentialises these fictional women, indicating how they are there to be the saviours, to be dependent upon the male for completion, they are there solely to serve and protect the male. This book does nothing but replicate the whole masculine ideology of Woman and how she must act as servitor for male artistic endeavour reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's rather muddled and misogynistic ideas. There is no radically new ground covered in Nichols's book, which remains entirely uncritical of Durrell's work. What is presented remains firmly within the ambit of patriarchal thinking and dutifully props up and champions Durrell's own perspective and outlook. Nichols's mention of Durrell's apparent interest in the joining of the male and female principles to attain enlightenment is always a privileging of the masculine in an inherent subjugation of the feminine. In their responses, Durrell's male characters can hardly be considered to attain any emotional or artistic maturity, all claims to the contrary. I suggest that they remain as self-obsessed and narcissistic at the end of the novel cycle as at the beginning and, in fact, these male characters, in particular Darley, remain irresolute, unlikeable, unrepentant and emotionally underdeveloped. I conclude that, irrespective of what other conventional interpretations of Durrell's work indicate about his aim to attain

enlightenment and wholeness through the fusing of the male and female principles. This fusion ensures that feminine subjectivity is elided and the female body re-gendered into a dominating male morphology found throughout Durrell's entire body of work.