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**Sleight of Hand in *The Alexandria Quartet*:  
If the Right One Don't Get You ....  
Frank Kersnowski**

As I remember, and lived, the fifties were not nearly as dull as much of the fiction of the time depicted them. Not everyone aspired to middle class mobility and morality: from an apartment in the city to a ranch house in the suburbs to a mock Tudor in a subdivision in the country. And not everyone was angry because such a trajectory was impeded by moral slips, such as adultery or public intoxication. After all, tax loopholes could eventually cover such lapses. But finding fiction with other concerns was pretty damn difficult. Which is why I am so indebted to Herbert Howarth.

As a graduate student in the Irish Studies Program at the University of Kansas (Kansas was also a great deal livelier than its usual depiction), I found some relief in Yeats, Joyce, O'Casey, O'Brien. But the real change for me occurred when Herbert Howarth came to talk with us about his new book, *The Irish Writers, 1880-1940*. His most animated talk though was about a series of novels by his friend Lawrence Durrell: *The Alexandria Quartet*. They had served abroad for King and Country. But while Howarth dutifully slogged away at his work, at the desk next to him, Durrell was more nonchalant about his official duties and spent most of his time working on the novels that would bring him fame. To exist in separate realities was intrinsic to Durrell's life and writing, and not simply because he was bipolar, though that duality is immeasurably important. Perhaps being Anglo-Indian gave him a sense of conflicting realities or maybe it was because he was smarter than anyone else and chose not to go to university. Whatever the cause, he had a magician's understanding of the world: give the audience

(or the lover) something to concentrate on while creating the reality that is really important. Ah, misdirection.

And the reality he gave us in the Alexandria of his narrator Darley was fascinating as much for the justification of the place and people as for what actually occurred. From the beginning of the beginning, that is the opening of *Justine*, we are told that were not in the literature of the suburbs anymore:

Five races, five languages, a dozen creeds: five fleets turning through their greasy reflections behind the harbour bar. But there are more than five sexes and only demotic Greek seems to distinguish among them. The sexual provender which lies to hand is staggering in its variety and profusion. You would never mistake it for a happy place. The symbolic lovers of the free Hellenic world are here replaced by something different, something subtly androgynous, inverted upon itself. The Orient cannot rejoice in the sweet anarchy of the body—for it has outstripped the body. I remember Nessim once saying—I think he was quoting—that Alexandria was the great winepress of love; those emerged from it were the sick men, the solitaires, the prophets—I mean all who have been deeply wounded in their sex (14)

At this point, one could easily say, well, hell, except for the penchant for Orientalism, Durrell could be writing about Lawrence, Kansas, in 1959. But there is the Orientalism, perhaps stained deep in the psyche, and certainly in the prose style, of a man who never forgot his birthplace in the Himalayas and would return to write about the Levant with all the fascination of someone watching a catastrophe so extensive that only martial law could regain moral order, and armies don't actually impose moral order. In fact, they seem to relish the absence of a moral order or the presence of one so estranged from their own as to seem nonexistent. In the exotic, estranged, culture of Alexandria, Durrell allowed his narrator Darley to tell his version of its flora and fauna, those who thought they lived and loved without the restraint of local customs, protected by their wealth or

by their protective coloration as expatriots, people who could be ignored even if they thought the sun was theirs and theirs alone.

Their world is a small one in which everyone has a connection with everyone else, usually carnal knowledge or knowledge of the other's carnal knowledges. Of all this, Darley is a reliable narrator. Reliable here only means that he doesn't lie, not that he actually understands what he sees or is even capable of constructing theories that are other than limited by his own absolute trust in his understanding. Yet for three of the four novels, he is Durrell's chosen narrator, largely because he is caught in the psycho-sexual web that fascinated Durrell, but we must not fall into his error and become so caught up in the web that we lose our objectivity. Easy enough to say. But for a struggling graduate student haunted by bright sexual baubles not to pulled into the life and understanding of the struggling English teacher Darley was next to impossible. Darley, living on the generosity of his French diplomat friend Pombal is on the periphery until suddenly Justine, the wife of a wealthy Coptic banker, decides to make him his lover, not long after he has become the lover of Melissa, a cabaret dancer and call girl whom he asked to help when she has a seizure brought on by an aphrodisiac slipped into her drink. I'm sure we're not in Kansas anymore.

Melissa he understands, though: she too lives on the periphery at best; but Justine inhabits a world of privilege unknown to him. And when he becomes her lover, he drags along his inescapable middle class baggage: Justine's husband, Nessim Hosnani, would be quick and violent in dealing with an adulterer. That Nessim not only seems unaware of the affair but actually strikes up a friendship, Darley explains to himself with a theory somewhat similar to one of Durrell's. All events are understood from the perspective of a

particular place. Even a modest movement can change our understanding; thus actions and things, the components of external reality, are themselves fluid since for most, if not all, people that reality is inseparable from perception. When Nessim becomes distracted and troubled, Darley now elevated to the role of cynosure in his own mind, is convinced Nessim is suspicious and bases his understanding of the change in Nessim on this theory: “The phenomenal world had begun to play tricks on him so that his senses were beginning to accuse reality itself of inconsistency. He was in peril of a mental overthrow” (194). Invited to the great duck hunt Nessim hosts every year, Darley is very anxious and told by Justine not to go. He does, of course, go as do poor academics when invited to share, no matter how charitably, in the social life of the wealthy. Another guest, Capodistra, is killed, after which Justine disappears, In Darley’s mind she left a distraught husband who had avenged his wife’s early rape by the murdered man, and in her letter to Darley, she explains her absence as, in part, a way to keep Nessim from killing him.

The web of characters extends well beyond these: into the British diplomatic corps with Mountolve who had been the youthful lover of Nessim’s mother, Liela; to Narouz, Nessim’s brother who lives the life of a country lord, though deformed by an untreated hairlip; to Pursewarden, a highly esteemed British intellectual and novelist, who is a member of the diplomatic corps; to Clea, a beautiful but nunish artist; to Scobey, a retired British sailor who is homosexual and a cross-dresser and a member of the Egyptian police and then the British Secret Service; to Baltazar another homosexual who is master of a cabal that includes the fashionable and intelligent in the study of mysticism. Of all these, only Darley is the only one to be so self-conscious about his erotic life as to feel anxiety and guilt.

As Justine provides Darley the facet of the prism to view the assemblage in the first volume, Baltazar does so in the second and gives his name to it. Having left Alexandria with the child Melissa had with Nessim, after she died in childbirth, Darley goes to a remote Greek island with the child, a girl, much as Durrell did after his separation from his second wife Eve when he took their daughter Sappho Jane to Cyprus. There Darley begins to write about what he understands has happened to him, and everyone else, in Alexandria. Baltazar provides an interlinear version of what Darley has written, adding yet another narrative of partial truth.

Durrell explains his narrative intent (and is almost completely honest) in “Note,” which prefaces the second volume of the Quartet, *Balthazar*:

The first three parts, however, are to be deployed spatially (hence the Use of “sibling” not “sequel”) and are not linked in a serial form. They interlap, Interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. The fourth part alone Will represent time and be a true sequel (9)

He also writes that “The central topic of the book is an investigation of modern love” (9), not excluding the existence of other topics. And in *Balthazar* Durrell suggests that while we are concentrating on “modern love” as a psychosexual phenomena, he has at least one other concern: the Copts. The Hosnani family are wealthy Copts, bankers and landowners, who believe they must work with the other important Coptic families in a non-political manner to protect their particular concerns as members of a faith and culture significant neither to the western powers nor to the emerging Moslem power. At least that seems to be Nessim’s message to his brother Narouz, though confusion occurs when he says to Narouz that “they” trusted him more when he married a Jewess, Justine (97). The antecedent for “they” is conspicuously absent and not because Durrell was a careless writer.

Yet this Coptic concern is but a small sound in the background as the expatriots continue to live separately from the real life of Egypt, which Durrell continues to present as exotic or as Edward Said would have said of the “Other”. Durrell was a European, who was in Egypt because he and his family were swept south from Greece before the advance of the Nazi war machine. Alexandria was his stopping point, and he did not care for it, not the culture and not the climate and not the landscape. He responded the same way to Argentina when he went there for the British Council. In special collections at the UCLA Library, I saw a small notebook he kept during that time which contained a water color painting of a Greek village, complete with small harbor and white buildings. Like Darley, he longed to be on the other side of the Med (after far too much red wine with Durrell one time in Sommieres, I found myself being unable to keep from saying “the Med” and “Alex”; now of course I can, but I don’t want to), as he shows when Darley buys a small tin of Greek olives he cannot afford after he gave a public lecture. He intended to eat them all, without sharing with Melissa, until Justine sat at his table and began her seduction of him by eating some of his olives.

Just how much personal experience Durrell had of Egypt outside the expat community is very much in question. He may have relied on secondary sources for material, for anecdotes from friends. Herbert Howarth contends he never went to the desert areas he wrote about so movingly, such as the Feast of Sitna Marian which we see through the eyes of Narouz, who can move easily among the Egyptian hucksters, performers, and prophets who gather to entertain and enlighten. Sent to find a seer called the Magzub who may have information about Justine’s lost child, he is comfortable in surroundings that would have made even his city dwelling brother Nessim uneasy. After

forcing the Magzub to show him by a vision the death of the child, Narouz walks back through a crowd depicted with the full force of Durrell's which might be called out of Norman Douglas by Conrad and Miller:

It was the time when the prostitutes came into their own, the black, bronze and citron women, impenitent seekers for the money-flesh of men; flesh of every colour, ivory or gold or black. Sudanese with mauve gums and tongues as blue as chows'. Waxen Egyptians. Circassian golden-haired and blue of eye. Earth-blue negresses, pungent as wood-smoke. Every variety of the name of flesh, old flesh quailing upon ancient bones, or the unquenched flesh of boys and women on limbs infirm with desires that could be represented in but not slaked except in mime—for they are desires engendered in the forests of the mind, belonging not to themselves but to remote ancestors speaking through them. Lust belongs to the egg and its seat is below the level of the psyche. (164-65)

Perhaps in Said's view this is Orientalism of the post-colonial stamp. In part it may be. But more importantly, Durrell is genuinely aroused by the rich variety of a world so far removed from what he found in the England he called Pudding Island, a place of damp houses and dreary matrons. As his early novel *The Black Book* indicates, he was not a great deal happier in bohemian London than in the bourgeois Bournemouth in which his mother settled her family.

Granted, I was surprised on meeting him to hear the plummy voice, nurtured by long residence in the diplomatic corps and other official English locales. This meeting was in Paris in 1984, where my blushing bride and I had gone as a respite from our sabbatical in Ireland, at the time a pleasant island not yet an e.u. franchise. The voice put aside, Durrell was what one would expect: le homme sensual. In dress, he reflected the contrast I would later find indimic to the man: under a rough blue duffle coat he wore immaculate flannel trousers and a dapper tweed jacket. I recall one morning when on our way to breakfast, he bought a morning paper. Over coffee, he read to me an article

about sexual behavior among French men: "Average time for intercourse. 20 minutes. Well, they bloody well take their time." As his voice, and some of his attitudes, indicate, he carried with him some very Establishment views. But his ability, perhaps need, to enter into any life other than that in England, if there was some vigor to it, was real. Again, there is the divided self, which is probably in evidence even among the post-colonial theorists. Though they may wax indignantly about empires, they nevertheless enjoy their leavings, such as endowed chairs and vintage port. In contrast, Durrell spoke with pleasure about a small achievement in the Quartet: "I brought the red light district back to Alexandria". Then, too, he found in all people lust beneath the egg, even if as in Pudding Island it is smothered by pomposity.

Yet this fictive world of the exotic only partially represents the reality Durrell is concerned to reveal in the Quartet. Note that this novel is called *Balthazar*. This, title, as was true of *Justine*, does not mean that the book will be primarily concerned with the actions or life of the titular character. Instead, the title indicates that the story will be told based on the information that the characters choose. *Justine* was informed by Justine's explanation of all events in sexual terms: serial adultery, rape, various forms of polymorphous behavior. *Balthazar*, quite differently, begins to reveal the underside, the complexity, of behaviors, such as Justine's reason for taking Darley as a lover. Darley himself was at a loss to understand this, but his ego was not prepared for Balthazar's explanation: she did it to distract Nessim from her real lover, Pursewarden. As will be evident later, Balthazar is laying down another false trail with enough pungent life to make it believable.

Conflicting with the erotic is the slowly uncoiling of politics, which becomes evident as Leila, Nessim, and Narouz discuss the return of Mountolive. As a young secretary in the High Commission that governed Egypt during the British protectorate, he had become Leila's lover, and by her had been educated. She led him through not only the history and culture of Egypt, but in the following years of correspondence educated him about European art and culture. She would have lived in Europe if she had not been given in marriage to a wealthy, older Copt. Naturally, the Hosnanis expect Mountolive to support their cause, the maintaining of a place of significance in Egypt and the Middle East for the Copts (96). They were especially concerned, at this time, because the tokenly independent Egypt, a British protectorate since 1867, had become a real independent nation, though the British and the French would continue a military presence at Suez. The High Commissioner was replaced by an Ambassador, in this case Mountolive.

In *Mountolive*, the third sibling of the Quartet, Durrell changes narrators and writes a "straight naturalistic novel," as he wrote in the prefatory note to *Balthazar* (9). Considerable critical discourse has failed to reach an agreement on the identity of the unnamed narrator; but if I may (and I may), I can clear up that little critical tempest. Durrell attended a meeting of the International Lawrence Durrell Society at Penn State University in 19--. After a session discussing the identity of the narrator, I said to Durrell: "I believe I know the identity of the narrator. It's Lawrence Durrell". To which he replied: "Well, of course, it is". But the identity of the narrator is less important than the role of the narrator: to tell why the loves, intrigues, alliances actually occurred. In this novel, Durrell puts the cat in with the pigeons. Or perhaps, in keeping with the title of this

essay, while we've been watching the shifting cards of the psychoerotic drama, Durrell has slipped a whole new card into play, one he has craftily allowed us to fret over earlier.

The very first sentence of *Mountolive* indicates Durrell's narrative intent: "As a junior of exceptional promise, he had been sent to Egypt for a year in order to improve his Arabic and found himself attached to the High Commission as a sort of scribe to await his first diplomatic posting; but he was already conducting himself as a young secretary of legation, fully aware of the responsibilities of future office" (11). Confronted by an unknown and omniscient narrator, the reader has to evaluate the previous two novels with considerable skepticism, of their accuracy with the facts not with the two responses to those facts. After all, a story told anonymously always plays the devil with the mind, as anyone knows who has ever heard an unknown voice speak of them. As in the first two novels, though, here as well the attitudes and references of the titular character inform the narrative, giving context to the events. In this volume, the seasoning of a diplomat overshadows in importance even the exotic and the erotic, but not the political.

By the end of *Balthazar*, Justine had disappeared; but none of the circumstances had been revealed, leaving the mystery intact but suggesting erotic complexities. *Mountolive*, however, which as a sibling shares the others time, lays out in crushing detail the actually circumstances. The posting first real indication for *Mountolive* that all may not be as he expects occurs when he is in Berlin before his assuming his post in Egypt. Dining with an embassy friend, he sees Nessim in the club and learns from his host that Nessim dines with people associated with Krups, the munitions manufacturers. He has no reason, at this time, to be suspicious. But cast into his post in Egypt, he is also between his friend Pursewarden and Maskylene, the military representative at the embassy.

Maskylene is convinced of a plot involving the cabal and the Hosnanis, which Pursewarden rejects. Pursewarden's suicide seems to be his way out of having unintentionally misled Mountolive. Not so even though he leaves him a letter detailing the plot. He actually wants to free his sister from their incestuous affair to marry Mountolive. Again occurs an event that would have caused Freud to turn the page in his book of sexual complexity. Whew.

Though this reads like a crowded list of intrigue and dalliance, the novel itself is just as crowded with activity. Not overlaid with interpretations as in *Justine* and *Balthazar*, Mountolive relates the sequence of events and indicates the causes that give rise to almost all the action to the plot that ultimately compromises the Hosnanis and members of the cabal. Only Pursewarden's sister and Melissa are not motivated mainly by the plot. But it is Melissa who provides Pursewarden with the information that undoes just about everyone. She had been the mistress of Cohen, whose pillow talk was intended to flatter him: "He was working with Nessim Hosnani and told me things. He also talked in his sleep. He is dead now. I think he was poisoned because he knew so much. He was helping to take arms into the Middle East, into Palestine, for Nessim Hosnani. Great quantities. He used to say, 'Pour faire sauter les Anglais!'" (178). Pursewarden, of course, wrote to Mountolive about the plot in detail, and Mountolive informed both the Home Office and the local Egyptian authorities. He remembered well, the advice of the last ambassador under whom he served never to act on a minority position.

Placing Copts at the center of the plot seems, at first, an anomaly, a willful attempt to add yet a bit more of the exotic to a novel that already is a heady experience. The choice is even more complicated by George Baron Weidenfeld's mentioning in his

memoirs that he himself had visited houses that were the models for the residence of the Coptic Hosnanis and that those houses were the homes of Jews (187). Add to this that the arms smuggled into Palestine by Nessim were for Jewish guerillas and the plot becomes more tangled. These were the guerillas who bombed the headquarters of the British command in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 and who were part of the movement that would lead to the establishment of Israel and the removal of Palestine from the map. We may well ask just what card is Durrell playing.

Chronologically, the issue of the Copts enters the narrative when the young Mountolive meets Nessim and is taken to visit the family estate; his inexperience is revealed in gaffe at dinner one night which causes Leila to say: "But my dear David, we are not Moslems but Christians like yourself" (39-40). The response of her elderly husband is less measured: " It is good that we should mention these matters openly because we Copts feel about them here, in our deepest heart. The British have made the Moslems oppress us. Study the Commission. Talk to your companions there about the Copts and you will hear their contempt and loathing of us. They have inoculated the Moslems with it" (40). The old man then gives a lecture on the debasement of the Copts by the British from the Crusades to the present day. Implicit is that the British made the Copts scapegoats as a sop to the anti-Christian sentiment of the Moslems. The real result of this meeting between young Mountolive and Hosnanis is the indoctrination of the diplomat in their culture and history. They intend to bring him into their fold even if they must, as Narouz believes, prostitute Leila, who does become the lover of Mountolive. That she and Mountolive keep in correspondence all the years he is away from Egypt serves to continue the bond they believe they have established.

They do not, however, understand the culture which Mountolive represents any more than he understands that of Egypt. To wear the same clothes, to speak the same language does not assure a culturally shared identity. Nowhere is this lack of understanding more evident than in the plot of Nessim and the Copts. It dominates his thoughts and feelings and is even central to his proposal to Justine, a proposal as much of political conspiracy as marriage, though in families of significance the two have often been the same. In *Justine*, Nessim is quoted as telling Justine that his proposal is lessened by her thinking it is erotic or even romantic, but only in *Mountolive* do we actually learn the real reason for his proposing marriage to a divorced Jewess, a proposal that seemingly did not upset his mother or anyone in the Coptic community. In making this “Faustian pact” with Justine, he explains that the day of Britain and France is over and that they will be helpless against “the miserable Moslems” and that only “one nation can determine the future of everything in the Middle East”: Palestine (200-201). But he is not referring to the Palestine that existed at the time, one controlled by the British and the French. He is looking forward to a new Palestine, that would of course be called Israel, thus laying the groundwork for a claim to all territory with biblical authority: “But with the Jews—there is something young there; the cockpit of Europe in these rotten marshes of a dying race” (201),

With the exposure of the plot, the mysteries of most of the affairs became evident to Darley, including his being a dupe. While he thought he was in danger of retribution by Nessim and then was misled by Balthazar to think he was to distract Nessim from learning Justine’s real lover was Pursewarden, he was but a distraction while Justine tried to get information from Pursewarden. With the plot revealed, Justine tries out a kibbutz

in, only to return to verbally eviscerate Nessim, now having lost an eye in the war (yes, World War 2 has arrived) and most of his money to the venal minister Memlik Pasha in order to stay out of jail. They all survive in one exotic form or another, reduced in size, though Justine does bring Memlik Pasha to heel. And the chance violence of war ends lives and loves without reason and without recompense of any human order.

Only those outside the plot experience any fulfillment. Mountolive, of course, disafe; and he marries Pursewarden's blind and beautiful sister. Clea, though she loses her painting hand, find new power in the replacement. Members of the plot who had fled, such as DaCapo, survive, as does Balthazar, though enfeebled and distracted. Darley is saved to write, having walked out on his job with British intelligence when Pursewarden leaves him money. There is an interesting scene when Pombal and Darley reveal to each other their roles as spies, which reminds me of a conversation I had with Durrell when I asked him if he had been a spy. He laughed, said no and then recalled a time he was with Le Carre and Fleming: "So there I was with these two spies". A spy or not, he certainly was conversant with both personnel and craft.

Yet there is another mystery to deal with. Why did Durrell concoct this absurd plot: Coptic Christians risking their lives, fortunes, and future on the success and benevolence of Jewish guerrillas. I do have an answer to suggest. Durrell was playing out his view of the future of the Middle East as he viewed it in the fifties, playing it out as a novelist would do, through characters caught up in a narrative. The conclusion he draws has proven quite accurate historically. With the establishment of Israel, Muslims in general in the Middle East distrusted the Christians within their borders. As Daphne Tsimhoni concluded: "Although supportive of the Palestinian cause during the mandate,

Christians were marginalized by the Arabs who believed they “were collaborating with the West”. Christians, mainly Arab, did achieve a favorable status in Israel during the 1948 war because of the intervention of the support of western Churches. But the Christian population in all parts of the Middle East has steadily declined since then, and the Coptic minority has shared this decline though it retains people of wealth. The general lack of opportunity for Christians, of course, contributes to the exodus, but perhaps as well the rise in militant Islam and militant Judaism have left even Arab Christians without voice. An article in *National Geographic* detailed the problems: declining populations and influence. That the title of the article is “The Forgotten Faithful. Arab Christians” indicates as well the severity of the situation of the Copts. So Durrell was right to describe, and predict, a Middle East without a viable Christian community, certainly not a Coptic one. With this observation, I think the mystery is laid bare. I do not intend, however, to suggest that the power of *The Alexandria Quartet* is in its political musings, now matter how seminal they are to the plot. Love and psychosexual dramas are complex and may count among their playthings the appeal politics and power just as much as physical attraction and that all to human desire to live in a dream. Though Durrell never simplified the human condition, but reached into the marrow of the species to present it as bright and dark, loving and vindictive, kind and venal. He left room for us all.

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