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Opening Extract from...

The Alexandria Quartet

Written by Lawrence Durrell

Published by Faber and Faber

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LAWRENCE DURRELL

The Alexandria Quartet

Justine Balthazar
Mountolive Clea

ff
faber and faber

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INTRODUCTION

by Jan Morris

This celebrated tetralogy from the 1950s was defined by its author as 'an investigation of modern love', but has often been regarded by its readers more as an evocation of a city – the Greco-Arab, multi-ethnic Alexandria of its title. Almost infinite variations of love are certainly explored in its 1000-odd pages, and the presence of Alexandria certainly permeates the work, but for myself I think the legendary fascination of the *Quartet* is essentially existential. The work itself is greater than its themes, and casts a spell that is neither precisely emotional nor specifically topographic.

Actually it is neither specific nor precise about almost anything. It was an experimental novel of its day, perhaps related to the work of Durrell's friend Henry Miller, perhaps to *Ulysses*. It was based upon the premise that people and events seem different when considered from different angles and periods, and that they can best be recorded, as Durrell himself put it, stereoscopically. The four volumes concern the same characters, but several narrators tell its complex tales from their several viewpoints, and they write at different times. It is a device, Durrell claimed, amounting to a new concept of reality, reflecting the ideas of Freud and Einstein and a convergence of Western and Eastern metaphysics.

If that sounds overblown, well, the *Quartet* itself is not without pretension, in concept as in performance. As has generally been admitted, it is often ornately overwritten, sometimes to an almost comical degree. The high ambition of its schema sometimes makes its narratives and characters inexplicably confusing, and its virtuoso use of vocabulary can be trying (pudicity? noetic? fatidic? scry?). But if there are parts of the work that few readers, I suspect, will navigate without skipping, there are many passages of such grand inspiration that

reaching them feels like emerging from choppy seas into marvellously clear blue Mediterranean waters.

For it is true that the city of Alexandria does colour the entire work. Durrell lived and worked in the city from 1942 to 1945, and he believed strongly in the effect of place upon human temperaments. Alexandria's peculiar Levantine character, as it existed during Durrell's time there, is insistently summoned into these pages. His responses to the place were moulded partly by E. M. Forster's elegant *Alexandria, A History and a Guide*, first published in 1922, and more especially by the greatest of Alexandrine poets, Constantine Cavafy – who had died in 1933, but whose drifting presence in the books is almost as haunting as the presence of the city itself.

It was Cavafy who wrote of Alexandria, 'There's no new land, my friend, no/ New sea; for the city will follow you,/ In the same streets you'll wander endlessly . . .'. One of this work's narrators goes further still: 'man is only an extension of the spirit of place', says Nessim in *Justine*. The several narrators of the *Quartet* are certainly enslaved by Alexandria's *genii loci*, and readers are likely to be entrapped too, because the work, so opaque in other contexts, is clear enough when it deals with the city. We soon learn the geography of the place, from the handsome Rue Fuad to the meshed Arab backstreets, from the elegance of L'Etoile or the Cecil Hotel to the hashish cafes of the slums or the sandy approaches to the Western Desert. We see inside the mansions of rich cosmopolitans and diplomats, we visit stifling attic bedrooms, brothels and pleasure pavilions by the sea.

Much of all this is factual. Durrell based much of his fiction upon personal experience, reminiscence and tittle-tattle, which gave the *Quartet*, for his contemporaries, something of the allure of a *roman-à-clef*, not least in its sexual allusions. In fact a general sensuality is the most Alexandrine aspect of the *Quartet*, but it does shows itself, too, in somewhat hazy illustrations of individual sex – 'modern love', as Durrell put it. These 'dark blue tides of Eros' are far from pornographic. Sometimes, it is true, we are unsure who is loving whom, and now and then

there are homosexual and cross-dressing deviations, but mostly the love elements are straightforward and moving, and really do dominate, as Durrell implied, the devious goings-on of the plot.

Which are full of surprises. Some, I dare say, really are Freudian or Einsteinian in origin, or metaphysically intercultural, but they often seem to me like twists in a skilful thriller, closer to Le Carré than to James Joyce, and sometimes embroiled in melodrama – 'the slime of plot and counterplot', as another of Durrell's characters defines it. He was particularly admired for his descriptive writing, and these books are rich in masterly set-pieces, but he was also a fine storyteller, adept in techniques of suspense and deception. Reader, watch out! Shocks are always around the dusty corner in *The Alexandria Quartet*.

The four books of the tetralogy originally appeared separately – *Justine* in 1957, *Balthazar* and *Mountolive* in 1958, *Clea* in 1960. They were immediately recognized as remarkable works of art, but the verdict on the whole work, while always respectful, was mixed. French critics adored it. Americans lapped it up. English reviewers were not so sure. Lawrence Durrell, a lifelong expatriate, never was an admirer of English culture, and his elaborate prose did not greatly appeal to more austere *littérateurs* like Angus Wilson, who called it floridly vulgar. Its pretensions were mocked, its avant garde excesses parodied, and although the books were commercial triumphs, he wrote nothing so publicly successful again.

But the whole thing itself, this immense imaginary construction, has stood the tests of time and taste, and has never been out of print – probably never will be. Half a century after its completion those florid vulgarities, those modernist pretensions, seem no more than incidental to its unique flavour, which lingers in the mind long after its labyrinthine plots (for they are myriad, and muddling) have been forgotten.

The Alexandria Quartet is one of a kind and, as I see it, on the whole a masterpiece.

PREFACE

THIS group of four novels is intended to be read as a single work under the collective title of The Alexandria Quartet: a suitable descriptive subtitle might be 'a word continuum'. In trying to work out my form I adopted, as a rough analogy, the relativity proposition. The first three were related in an intercalary fashion, being 'siblings' of each other and not 'sequels'; only the last novel was intended to be a true sequel and to unleash the time dimension. The whole was intended as a challenge to the serial form of the conventional novel: the time-saturated novel of the day.

Among the workpoints at the end I have sketched in a number of possible ways of continuing to deploy these characters and situations in further instalments—but this is only to suggest that even if the group of books were extended indefinitely the result would never become *roman fleuve*; if, that is to say, the axis of the work has been properly laid down it should be possible to radiate from it in any direction without losing the strictness and congruity of its relation to 'a continuum'.

It has been possible, for this edition, to correct a number of small slips pointed out by readers and critics, and also to add some small passages which were cut out of the original volumes in the MS. stage. The changes are not very great. *Balthazar* and *Mountolive* both lose half a dozen lines of text. *Clea* gains a small section and a new translation from C. P. Cavafy.

L.D.

France 1962

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JUSTINE

NOTE

The characters in this story, the first of a group, are all inventions together with the personality of the narrator, and bear no resemblance to living persons. Only the city is real.

I am accustoming myself to the idea of regarding every sexual act as a process in which four persons are involved. We shall have a lot to discuss about that.

S. FREUD: *Letters*

There are two positions available to us – either crime which renders us happy, or the noose, which prevents us from being unhappy. I ask whether there can be any hesitation, lovely Thérèse, and where will your little mind find an argument able to combat that one?

D. A. F. DE SADE: *Justine*

To
EVE
these memorials of her native city

PART I

The sea is high again today, with a thrilling flush of wind. In the midst of winter you can feel the inventions of spring. A sky of hot nude pearl until midday, crickets in sheltered places, and now the wind unpacking the great planes, ransacking the great planes. . . .

I have escaped to this island with a few books and the child — Melissa's child. I do not know why I use the word 'escape'. The villagers say jokingly that only a sick man would choose such a remote place to rebuild. Well, then, I have come here to heal myself, if you like to put it that way. . . .

At night when the wind roars and the child sleeps quietly in its wooden cot by the echoing chimney-piece I light a lamp and walk about, thinking of my friends — of Justine and Nessim, of Melissa and Balthazar. I return link by link along the iron chains of memory to the city which we inhabited so briefly together: the city which used us as its flora — precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own: beloved Alexandria!

I have had to come so far away from it in order to understand it all! Living on this bare promontory, snatched every night from darkness by Arcturus, far from the lime-laden dust of those summer afternoons, I 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.

* * * * *

Capitally, what is this city of ours? What is resumed in the word Alexandria? In a flash my mind's eye shows me a thousand dust-tormented streets. Flies and beggars own it today — and those who enjoy an intermediate existence between either.

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 replaced here 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 who emerged from it were the sick men, the solitaries, the prophets — I mean all who have been deeply wounded in their sex.

* * * * *

Notes for landscape-tones. . . . Long sequences of tempera. Light filtered through the essence of lemons. An air full of brick-dust — sweet-smelling brick-dust and the odour of hot pavements slaked with water. Light damp clouds, earth-bound yet seldom bringing rain. Upon this squirt dust-red, dust-green, chalk-mauve and watered crimson-lake. In summer the sea-damp lightly varnished the air. Everything lay under a coat of gum.

And then in autumn the dry, palpitant air, harsh with static electricity, inflaming the body through its light clothing. The flesh coming alive, trying the bars of its prison. A drunken whore walks in a dark street at night, shedding snatches of song like petals. Was it in this that Anthony heard the heart-numbing strains of the great music which persuaded him to surrender for ever to the city he loved?

The sulking bodies of the young begin to hunt for a fellow nakedness, and in those little cafés where Balthazar went so often with the old poet of the city,* the boys stir uneasily at their backgammon under the petrol-lamps: disturbed by this dry desert wind — so unromantic, so unconfiding — stir, and turn to watch every stranger. They struggle for breath and in every summer kiss they can detect the taste of quicklime. . . .

* * * * *

I had to come here in order completely to rebuild this city in my brain — melancholy provinces which the old man* saw as full of the 'black ruins' of his life. Clang of the trams shuddering in their metal veins as they pierce the iodine-coloured *meidan* of Mazarita. Gold, phosphorus, magnesium paper. Here we so often met. There was a little coloured stall in summer with slices of water-melon and the vivid water-ices she liked to eat. She would

come a few minutes late of course — fresh perhaps from some assignation in a darkened room, from which I avert my mind; but so fresh, so young, the open petal of the mouth that fell upon mine like an unslaked summer. The man she had left might still be going over and over the memory of her; she might be as if still dusted by the pollen of his kisses. Melissa! It mattered so little somehow, feeling the lithe weight of the creature as she leaned on one's arm smiling with the selfless candour of those who had given over with secrets. It was good to stand there, awkward and a little shy, breathing quickly because we knew what we wanted of each other. The messages passing beyond conscience, directly through the flesh-lips, eyes, water-ices, the coloured stall. To stand lightly there, our little fingers linked, drinking in the deep camphor-scented afternoon, a part of city. . . .

* * * * *

I have been looking through my papers tonight. Some have been converted to kitchen uses, some the child has destroyed. This form of censorship pleases me for it has the indifference of the natural world to the constructions of art — an indifference I am beginning to share. After all, what is the good of a fine metaphor for Melissa when she lies buried deep as any mummy in the shallow tepid sand of the black estuary?

But those papers I guard with care are the three volumes in which Justine kept her diary, as well as the folio which records Nessim's madness. Nessim noticed them when I was leaving and nodded as he said:

'Take these, yes, read them. There is much about us all in them. They should help you to support the idea of Justine without flinching, as I have had to do.' This was at the Summer Palace after Melissa's death, when he still believed Justine would return to him. I think often, and never without a certain fear, of Nessim's love for Justine. What could be more comprehensive, more surely founded in itself? It coloured his unhappiness with a kind of ecstasy, the joyful wounds which you'd think to meet in saints and not in mere lovers. Yet one touch of humour would have saved him from such dreadful comprehensive suffering. It is easy to criticize, I know. I know.

* * * * *

In the great quietness of these winter evenings there is one

clock: the sea. Its dim momentum in the mind is the fugue upon which this writing is made. Empty cadences of sea-water licking its own wounds, sulking along the mouths of the delta, boiling upon those deserted beaches — empty, forever empty under the gulls: white scribble on the grey, munched by clouds. If there are ever sails here they die before the land shadows them. Wreckage washed up on the pediments of islands, the last crust, eroded by the weather, stuck in the blue maw of water . . . gone!

* * * * *

Apart from the wrinkled old peasant who comes from the village on her mule each day to clean the house, the child and I are quite alone. It is happy and active amid unfamiliar surroundings. I have not named it yet. Of course it will be Justine — who else?

As for me I am neither happy nor unhappy; I lie suspended like a hair or a feather in the cloudy mixtures of memory. I spoke of the uselessness of art but added nothing truthful about its consolations. The solace of such work as I do with brain and heart lies in this — that only *there*, in the silences of the painter or the writer can reality be reordered, reworked and made to show its significant side. Our common actions in reality are simply the sackcloth covering which hides the cloth-of-gold — the meaning of the pattern. For us artists there waits the joyous compromise through art with all that wounded or defeated us in daily life; in this way, not to evade destiny, as the ordinary people try to do, but to fulfil it in its true potential — the imagination. Otherwise why should we hurt one another? No, the remission I am seeking, and will be granted perhaps, is not one I shall ever see in the bright friendly eyes of Melissa or the sombre brow-dark gaze of Justine. We have all of us taken different paths now; but in this, the first great fragmentation of my maturity, I feel the confines of my art and my living deepened immeasurably by the memory of them. In thought I achieve them anew; as if only here — this wooden table over the sea under an olive tree, only here can I enrich them as they deserve. So that the taste of this writing should have taken something from its living subjects — their breath, skin, voices — weaving them into the supple tissues of human memory. I want them to live again to the point where pain becomes art. . . . Perhaps this is a useless attempt, I cannot say. But I must try.

Today the child and I finished the hearth-stone of the house together, quietly talking as we worked. I talk to her as I would to myself if I were alone; she answers in an heroic language of her own invention. We buried the rings Cohen bought for Melissa in the ground under the hearth-stone, according to the custom of this island. This will ensure good luck to the inmates of the house.

* * * * *

At the time when I met Justine I was almost a happy man. A door had suddenly opened upon an intimacy with Melissa — an intimacy not the less marvellous for being unexpected and totally undeserved. Like all egoists I cannot bear to live alone; and truly the last year of bachelorhood had sickened me — my domestic inadequacy, my hopelessness over clothes and food and money, had all reduced me to despair. I had sickened too of the cockroach-haunted rooms where I then lived, looked after by one-eyed Hamid, the Berber servant.

Melissa had penetrated my shabby defences not by any of the qualities one might enumerate in a lover — charm, exceptional beauty, intelligence — no, but by the force of what I can only call her charity, in the Greek sense of the word. I used to see her, I remember, pale, rather on the slender side, dressed in a shabby sealskin coat, leading her small dog about the winter streets. Her blue-veined phthisic hands, etc. Her eyebrows artificially pointed upwards to enhance those fine dauntlessly candid eyes. I saw her daily for many months on end, but her sullen aniline beauty awoke no response in me. Day after day I passed her on my way to the Café Al Aktar where Balthazar waited for me in his black hat to give me 'instruction'. I did not dream that I should ever become her lover.

I knew that she had once been a model at the Atelier — an unenviable job — and was now a dancer; more, that she was the mistress of an elderly furrier, a gross and vulgar commercial of the city. I simply make these few notes to record a block of my life which has fallen into the sea. Melissa! Melissa!

* * * * *

I am thinking back to the time when for the four of us the known world hardly existed; days became simply the spaces between dreams, spaces between the shifting floors of time, of acting, of living out the topical. . . . A tide of meaningless affairs

nosing along the dead level of things, entering no climate, leading us nowhere, demanding of us nothing save the impossible — that we should be. Justine would say that we had been trapped in the projection of a will too powerful and too deliberate to be human — the gravitational field which Alexandria threw down about those it had chosen as its exemplars. . . .

* * * * *

Six o'clock. The shuffling of white-robed figures from the station yards. The shops filling and emptying like lungs in the Rue des Soeurs. The pale lengthening rays of the afternoon sun smear the long curves of the Esplanade, and the dazzled pigeons, like rings of scattered paper, climb above the minarets to take the last rays of the waning light on their wings. Ringing of silver on the money-changers' counters. The iron grille outside the bank still too hot to touch. Clip-clop of horse-drawn carriages carrying civil servants in red flowerpots towards the cafés on the sea-front. This is the hour least easy to bear, when from my balcony I catch an unexpected glimpse of her walking idly towards the town in her white sandals, still half asleep. Justine! The city unwrinkles like an old tortoise and peers about it. For a moment it relinquishes the torn rags of the flesh, while from some hidden alley by the slaughter-house, above the moans and screams of the cattle, comes the nasal chipping of a Damascus love-song; shrill quarter-tones, like a sinus being ground to powder.

Now tired men throw back the shutters of their balconies and step blinking into the pale hot light — etiolated flowers of afternoons spent in anguish, tossing upon ugly beds, bandaged by dreams. I have become one of these poor clerks of the conscience, a citizen of Alexandria. She passes below my window, smiling as if at some private satisfaction, softly fanning her cheeks with the little reed fan. It is a smile which I shall probably never see again for in company she only laughs, showing those magnificent white teeth. But this sad yet quick smile is full of a quality which one does not think she owns — the power of mischief. You would have said that she was of a more tragic cast of character and lacked common humour. Only the obstinate memory of this smile is to make me doubt it in the days to come.

* * * * *

I have had many such glimpses of Justine at different times, and

of course I knew her well by sight long before we met: our city does not permit anonymity to any with incomes of over two hundred pounds a year. I see her sitting alone by the sea, reading a newspaper and eating an apple; or in the vestibule of the Cecil Hotel, among the dusty palms, dressed in a sheath of silver drops, holding her magnificent fur at her back as a peasant holds his coat — her long forefinger hooked through the tag. Nessim has stopped at the door of the ballroom which is flooded with light and music. He has missed her. Under the palms, in a deep alcove, sit a couple of old men playing chess. Justine has stopped to watch them. She knows nothing of the game, but the aura of stillness and concentration which brims the alcove fascinates her. She stands there between the deaf players and the world of music for a long time, as if uncertain into which to plunge. Finally Nessim comes softly to take her arm and they stand together for a while, she watching the players, he watching her. At last she goes softly, reluctantly, circumspectly into the lighted world with a little sigh.

Then in other circumstances, less creditable no doubt to herself, or to the rest of us: how touching, how pliantly feminine this most masculine and resourceful of women could be. She could not help but remind me of that race of terrific queens which left behind them the ammoniac smell of their incestuous loves to hover like a cloud over the Alexandrian subconscious. The giant man-eating cats like Arsinoe were her true siblings. Yet behind the acts of Justine lay something else, born of a later tragic philosophy in which morals must be weighed in the balance against rogue personality. She was the victim of truly heroic doubts. Nevertheless I can still see a direct connection between the picture of Justine bending over the dirty sink with the fœtus in it, and poor Sophia of Valentinus who died for a love as perfect as it was wrong-headed.

* * * * *

At that epoch, Georges-Gaston Pombal, a minor consular official, shares a small flat with me in the Rue Nebi Daniel. He is a rare figure among the diplomats in that he appears to possess a vertebral column. For him the tiresome treadmill of protocol and entertainment — so like a surrealist nightmare — is full of exotic charm. He sees diplomacy through the eyes of a Douanier Rousseau. He indulges himself with it but never allows it to engulf what remains of his intellect. I suppose the secret of his success is his tremendous idleness, which almost approaches the supernatural.