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Bill Speckman
Western Michigan University

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The Style of Love in the Alexandria Quartet

BILL SPECKMAN

The trend in modern literary criticism is to accept the work as a whole, not speaking of such absolute elements as form, technique, style, and substance. The complete work is recognized as greater than the sum of all its parts, and is not fully explainable in terms of any of them. Indeed, we may think that even a comprehensive analysis of all parts does not finally render the total meaning of a literary work of art. The traditional nomenclature, however, still retains some meaning if used modestly. This paper may therefore be called an attempt to discuss the theme of the Alexandria Quartet: an investigation of modern love.

The peculiar technical scheme of the Quartet might not seem relevant to Durrell’s theme. But, even though current criticism did not suggest to us the wisdom of doing so, we would find it essential to study the basic unity of technique and theme in the Quartet. For the way Durrell goes about developing his theme, quite apart from explicit instruction, is probably the greatest single validation of the theme itself: the arrangement is as convincing as what is arranged. So my first section will deal with the relationship between what Durrell says and how he says it. This technical discussion will be, I hope, a useful preface to the later analysis of the theme.

Unity of Technique and Theme

The skeletal structure of the Alexandria Quartet is a carefully contrived and ingeniously executed illusion. Durrell’s note at the beginning of Balthazar1 is not much help:

... Modern literature offers us no Unities, so I have turned to science and am trying to complete a four-
decker novel whose form is based upon the relativity proposition.

Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix of a continuum. The novels follow this pattern.

The first three parts, however, are to be deployed spatially (hence the use of “sibling” not “sequel”) and are not linked in 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.

The subject-object relation is so important that I have tried to turn the novel through both subjective and objective modes. The third part, MOUNTOLIVE, is a straight naturalistic novel in which the narrator of JUSTINE and BALTHAZAR becomes an object, i.e. a character . . .

But this confusing suggestion of a blueprint is the sole formal statement Durrell makes of his intentions. It is like much else in the Quartet: that is, significant in retrospect but obscure in prospect.

Baldly, the plan is this: The narrator Darley, after having been raveled by Justine, leaves Alexandria and goes into a kind of self-imposed exile on a Mediterranean island. There he tries to “rework reality to show its significant side.” The result is Justine. He sends a manuscript to Balthazar, a strange blend of skeptic and mystic who knows the other Alexandrians well. Balthazar destroys Darley’s subjective interpretation of his affair with Justine with a great mass of comment, fact, ambiguity, and explanation—called the “Interlinear.” Darley must now integrate the new material with the old if he is to establish the meaning of the affair in his own mind. In the light of new perspectives got from Balthazar he constructs a different image of Justine—all the while pondering the duplicity of love, the manysidedness of reality, and the relation of art to life. The result of this painful re-evaluation of his life in Alexandria is Balthazar. Durrell now turns from Darley as a narrative device and explores the political motivations underlying the Alexandrians’ sexual goings-on. Mountolive provides another, more rational but no more valid, perspective from which to interpret the same basic occurrences. It is formally the usual naturalistic, omniscient novel.

The first three, “sibling,” novels establish the relativity
notion. Each serves as an equipoise for the others. Now the whole mass is advanced in time several years. Darley feels he must encounter Alexandria once more: he must check his newer, wiser dispositions against the Alexandrians themselves. Clea is a sequel to the first three novels, seen once again through the eyes of Darley. It is essentially Durrell's attempt to conclude the lives and loves we were introduced to earlier.

I said before that Durrell's theme is an allusion. By this I mean that his method of character revelation is admirably suited to his theme, but that its rightness is strictly internal. He could have developed his characters by the more conventional method of gradually unfolding them through a series of events arranged chronologically rather than violently switching perspectives so as to give us a kind of characterization by composite, a mosaic. The technique is somewhat like pointillism in art. This illusion, then, of brilliantly painted aspects of character which appear from a distance to melt into a solid figure, corresponds to his theme: that the individual creates a fantailed reality by an act of the imagination. Whatever order "reality" appears to have is provided by the perceiver; whatever meaning is private. The first three novels establish this moral and psychic universe that is egocentric.

Clea, however, departs from the mood of the other three; it sums up rather than mystifies. Assuming that it is not merely a sloppy job on Durrell's part, Clea requires some imagination. It is primarily an attempt to tell us how things all turn out. But the illusion of time gets tangled up with the reality of it. There is no reason to believe that reality suddenly behaves itself and wears a straight face merely because a few years pass. Logically, Clea should be the end of one cycle and the beginning of another; it should occupy relatively the same position as Justine and have a Balthazar and a Mountolive written for it. I think we must allow such logic, if it be such, to lapse and accept the illusion of completion. Clea by itself is a weak and irregular novel; but it completes and perfects the Quartet just as a spire does a cathedral.

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Within the larger structure are several elements which, together and singly, contribute to the overall impression of wholeness in the Quartet. Two in particular deserve some atten-
tion: the quality of self-consciousness in the novels, and certain images and figures of speech.

The novels are full of oblique comments upon themselves. Darley, Pursewarden, and the offstage Arnauti are all writers (perhaps some kind of private joke); and Clea, Justine, and Balthazar theorize often about literature. These characters make observations which are quite obviously relevant to the Quartet. Without cataloguing these comments, the total effect they have is to keep us constantly aware that we are confronting a literary work which feeds back into itself. Frequent references to de Sade, Rimbaud, Lawrence, Tolstoy, and Cavafy serve a triple function: they again remind us that we are dealing with literature; they help develop Durrell’s writer-characters; and their associations with the themes of sex and the grander meanings of life transfer to the Alexandria Quartet. The most effective extension of this peculiar self-consciousness is the use of Darley as narrator. Darley ponders technical problems involved in the Quartet while at the same time serving as the prime subject for Durrell’s love-and-growth process, thus functioning as a bridge between the twin areas of theme and technique. In him chiefly, and in the other characters to a lesser degree, the two-edged quality of the scheme is epitomized. The cumulative effect of all this is a great awareness that the Quartet does indeed have a plan. We are constantly forced to recall, made to piece together, urged to wonder.

It is not important that we perhaps do not comprehend the plan until we have finished all four novels. What is important is that we are kept keyed up; we expect mysteries to be solved, questions to be answered. It is a trick, surely, an illusion. Durrell creates an inescapable intangible mood of presence. He makes the Quartet self-aware and self-binding. And since technique and theme correspond directly (as will be shown), the vague substructural mass transfers to the theme and reinforces it.

Certain recurrent key phrases and images operate in much the same way. “Sliding panels” refers to a literary technique of characterization which uses shifting perspectives to form a successively more approximate image. New aspects coupled with the memory of old aspects bring us gradually nearer (we think; but we forget that the person is not static, only the image is) a complete revelation. But, as Darley remarks, it also applies
to the human heart: in slides lover B, out slides lover A. “Playing-card characters” carries the same rich ambiguity. “Mirrors” imply a unity-in-duality, and also remind us of the problem of subjective perception. There are trick mirrors and faulty reflections. “Kaleidoscope” very admirably suggests the whole complex of elements in the Quartet. On one level it is pointillistic characterization again. On another it is an image for the whole plan: give the kaleidoscope a twist, and the same elements fall into an entirely different relationship. On still another level it implies our subjective view of the world, with just a hint of Nessim’s telescope.

* * * *

Until now I have assumed a definite relationship between theme and technique in the Alexandria Quartet without describing it fully. Basically, the relationship is made more than normally intimate by the use of the subjective relativity notion in both areas. Balthazar is the single most important ingredient in Durrell’s “soup-mix.” It establishes the intense complexity of the Alexandrians’ tangled love affairs. At the same time it is a technical device for the handling of the new material. Now we are aware of the double susceptibility of the characters; they are shown to be open at both ends, so to speak. Darley with Melissa and Justine; Justine with Nessim, Pursewarden, and Darley—each “presents selected fictions” to the other. Each exposes different areas of life and self to different persons. And each interprets “reality” in terms of his private image of his lover. Durrell’s theme, that the individual grows as a result of his love-involvement with someone whose qualities are mostly imaginary, is developed by the corresponding technique of allowing the characters to imagine about each other. The subjective reporting job not only describes the love affairs, but it also attests to the inevitability of partial vision. We get a subjective explanation of events which are already intensely personal and relative in their meaning.

By juxtaposing interpretations and by shifting perspectives, an accurate approximation of “reality” is formed. But the truth presumably is never completed. Truth, reality, is a process composed of part-truths which are validated and placed in their proper perspective by retroaction. Each new experience feeds new material into the process. Durrell’s technique arranges relative views of each experience and plays them against each
other. His theme follows the course of such experiences from total subjective involvement to awareness resulting from shifting perspectives of the involvement. The process in each case is the same. Theme and technique truly "interlap and interweave."

Love and Growth

In the Alexandria Quartet love, the whole spectrum of love from the purest devotion to the meanest lust, is the avant-garde of psychic growth. Durrell sees it as the energy which keeps the love-and-growth process going, the stuff which feeds into it. The relationship between love and growth is intimate and interacting; but there is no single way to love or to grow. The details of the process are as diverse as the participants. Certain general properties and dynamics, however, are common to the individual loves and growth of all the characters. I shall treat these properties of love and the pattern of growth singly, then summarize the process as a whole.

* * * *

Love is inextricably grounded in the individual. It is self-seeking, whether consciously or not, for it serves individual self-realization. Attitudes of altruism, generosity, and charity are in a coldly objective sense non-existent. If one feels that his love is purely altruistic, generous, or charitable, to the extent that this subjective pose colors his love it is so. But such attitudes exist only internally and have no absolute meaning. The selfish aspect of love is neither moral nor immoral. It is merely one manifestation of the egocentric universe.

Closely related to the self-seeking quality of love is its essential narcissism. If the universe centers in the individual psyche, then the outlying regions are merely extensions of the self. No longer does the naive psychology of Locke and Hume suffice. Nor even can the hedge of stimulus-response interaction explain reality. Reality is an act of the perceiver, who creates his own order and meaning out of a nebulous mass of unstructured experience by what Durrell chooses to call an act of the imagination. (This old mystic and poetic motif is now being vindicated by modern science, one of the few areas in which Durrell agrees with science.) Again, the individual need not be conscious of his psychological processes. But he neverthe-
less creates subjective images which are in a very real sense his; they belong to him and are extensions of his self. The love-object is an extension of self. The character projects what he is into what he imagines his lover to be. So he is really in love with himself, though he does not know it. Pure narcissism is only one step removed, hidden in the next mirror.

The subjective creation of love images ramifies further. There is a small germ of the image which exists independently; a smile, the raising of an eyebrow, a word warmly spoken—these little hints invite imagination to create a lover. And they might well be the unconscious outcroppings of the other’s inner imagination. But such cues would go unnoticed were it not for a perceiver’s predisposition to make something of them. The “real” world is full of meaningless little bits of experience which, if circumstances are ripe, are the seeds of a full-blown affair—imagined or realized. Existing behind and before any love affair is the essence of love itself: an urge, a need to be involved. Once again the individual is the center of his own universe; everything begins and ends within his own skin.

The fact that little bits of life are subject to the caprice of psychic circumstance suggests why Alexandrian loves are so terribly unsatisfactory. Something that exists merely on the outer fringes of one person’s world—an insignificant act of kindness, a careless gesture, a fleeting mood—can become the focal point for another person’s whole existence. He will see, because he unconsciously wants to see, a whole universe in the smallest atom. Once a bias is established, what follows is interpreted in terms of it. Balthazar’s cruel pride in having created a tragic love affair between two incompatible persons merely by telling each that the other loved him illustrates this point. If the delusion continued indefinitely, there would be no problem. The characters would manage to fit everything into their rose-colored world. But even imagination cannot hold back the overwhelming tide of evidence to the contrary. Eventually a disturbing bit of information slips past the illusory armor, and the private world comes down in shambles. Perhaps this happens by the same dynamics that create a universe out of an atom; perhaps there is a secret wish to suffer love unrequited. Certainly if the primordial urge is to grow, this is so. For love is worthless if it is satisfactory. “One learns nothing from those who return our love.”
Several times Durrell makes the point that each person possesses a fixed and absolute amount of love. Clea explains Darley's involvement with Justine as an attempt to work out the same love which had earlier fixed upon Melissa. The "sliding panels" image also suggests that different love-objects serve the same basic love. Since the outcome of love is growth, which culminates in self-realization, and since the urge to love creates the object to love, the implication is that this fixed and absolute amount of love is actually growth-potential. Self-realization implies an essential personality which lies dormant waiting to be unfolded. So love in this sense is a quantity which establishes the upper limits, the ceiling, of the individual. It is an energy reservoir which can be exhausted or used efficiently; someone can simply dissipate his potential without ever realizing himself (though the Alexandrians never seem to run out of love-fuel).

The full meaning of none of these elements of love is understood consciously by the characters. In fact, it is as if the unconscious urge to love and grow occupied a separate part of the psyche. It is strange that a process so vital to life, life itself, should not be felt as important as the civilized rational facade of life. Perhaps Durrell is implying that we are somehow out of harmony with our true nature, that we have become lost. This notion partially explains the allusions to Lawrence, who is associated with this "rupture" thesis. But the point is not developed. At any rate, the process must be completed before a person can understand the nature of love. Only hindsight can make sense of its properties, and then only if they have done their job well—that is, if they have indeed provided the stuff for growth.

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The process of growth, then, is the concomitant of love; and both are rooted in profound psychic dynamics which are primordial. This embryonic promise of life-to-be (which sounds faintly Jungian, though Durrell does not make the relationship) cannot be analysed clearly, but must be guessed at. In fact, our image of it is created in much the same way that Durrell's characters create a love-object. A hint here and there, a certain predisposition, a need to fill a vacuum—these force us into such a hypothesis. And if it works within the
larger scheme of the Quartet, as love serves growth, then it is vindicated, just as the eventual growth justifies and clarifies all the earlier subjective love-images.

Through the operation of principles already described, an Alexandrian becomes involved in a love affair. All the momentous private meaning he has at his command he reads into his lover and their affair. In time the union disintegrates, its back broken by the weight of intolerable "reality." A chink in the illusory armor is discovered, or perhaps the unconscious logic of the psyche realizes it is time to grow. For until now there has been no growth. The person has been extended, stretched, scattered; but he has not yet consolidated his gains. He has not grown around and to the advance-points he has imagined.

The tension now unbearable, he must retire into himself. Without knowing why, he feels he must get away from the physical area of love (Alexandria) and find some room to grow. Darley to his Mediterranean island, Clea to Syria, Justine to the Summer Palace at the desert oasis, Mountolive to the wilderness of European diplomatic capitals—all seek out a refuge where they can be alone with themselves. If they were torn apart and raveled by their loves before, now they must reinte- grate and baste themselves up. If the elements of their essential personalities were shaken loose from the old relationships, now they must be rearranged and reordered. And this must be done alone, in isolation. There can be no outside help in the grim coming to terms with oneself.

Actual growth itself is sporadic. The long periods of love-involvement, of gestation, give way to relatively short periods of intense growth. Although the early stages of gestation are passed without note as far as the process is concerned, the later growth brings with it birth pains and awareness. The pain of realizing oneself turns the individual's thought backwards. It is now in retrospect that the outlines of the whole love-and-growth process begin to emerge, the pattern begins to jell in the person's consciousness. Finally a threshold of growth is reached. Some persons simply do not have enough love to carry them to this threshold. Some are unimaginative, and have not the unconscious intelligence which directs their love. Some, like Scobie, reach self-realization comparatively easily, for they have modest essential personalities to achieve. And some, like Darley, Clea, and Pursewarden, realize their essential artistry.
The artistic threshold is highest, the artistic promise hardest to achieve. But the self-realization of the artist is the most significant of all success stories. For an integral part of the artistic personality is an awareness of the entire love-and-growth process. It is the artist who holds the key to life itself, for he understands the way it functions. The realized artist has no need to imagine anymore, he has already used his imagination in order to grow. This is why Durrell views the artist as a reporter, not as a creator. He is now privy to the secrets of life and no longer needs to exercise his puny imagination to make sense out of it. He now knows that "... poetic or transcendental knowledge somehow cancels out merely relative knowledge ..."  

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Awareness is the object and culmination of the love-and-growth process. But awareness is contingent upon full growth; it is not directly proportional to the level of growth. It is rather in the nature of spontaneous insight, although the roots of it sink back into the subsoil of the individual's experience. Nor does a single turn through the process necessarily result in fulfillment. Usually several involvements and consequent spurts of growth are required to carry the person past the threshold of his realization. For those who complete the process, the final stage of awareness is reached only once—the last time. And for those who never do reach this point, whether because of an insufficient amount of love or because of a lack of imagination or because of a relatively modest essential personality, the harmonics and rhythm of the process remain forever unknown. They are the psychic morons of the world, for whom life will stay a muddle rather than becoming a mystery into which they are initiated. But for the artists (meaning those who understand, not necessarily those who produce), the achieved threshold becomes a platform from which to see the pattern of human life. 

From the vantage-point of this platform the artists may see their own lives as well as others'. They can now see their lives in retrospect, see the love which served their growth clearly and in perspective. The capability of the person to double back upon himself and validate earlier parts of his life once again establishes the egocentricity of the universe. He grew up to this point by the use of essentially internal elements; he now makes sense of the "external" world by working outward from himself.
He becomes an integral part of the cosmology—his own cosmology, to be sure. But he finally finds his place in the grand scheme of things, according to his own understanding.

The Process Drawn and Quartered

There is not enough space to analyse each character in the Alexandria Quartet in terms of the love-and-growth process, nor even each major character. But there are four who are particularly important to the development of the theme: Justine, Pursewarden, Clea, and Darley. The importance of Clea and Darley is obvious; for at one level the Quartet is merely the familiar story of the artist coming of age, and as such belongs to them. Pursewarden, as well as being an artist, is a curiously self-possessed figure amid the other Alexandrians' frantic scrambling about. He has already attained his growth before finding his way to Alexandria and serves as both ideal and foil for the others as we watch them grow. They, however, do not realize his pertinence to their lives until they too have reached their full growth. Justine is important in two ways: she is the starting point for so many others, and she lives a negative proof of Durrell's theme. Justine in part is a structural necessity for the theme, as Darley is for the technique. The fact that these four characters fit into a discernible pattern is not to suggest that the Alexandrians are merely "pattern" characters, servile to a technical machine. Rather, each lives an exemplary life within the Alexandrian mood, but remains a distinct personality.

This discernible pattern was developed in the preceding section. Briefly stated, the need to love operates subjectively to precipitate an actual affair. The whole growth process analyses into five more-or-less distinct stages: 1) The initial love-involvement, in which the individual is torn from his old way of life and stretched; 2) The breakdown of the affair, because of the intolerable weight of "reality"; 3) The pressured but unreasoned retreat from "the site of love," in order to reintegrate the scattered pieces of the self; 4) The burst of growth, which results in a more fully realized personality; and 5) The eventual complete self-realization, which also brings understanding of the process now completed (for artists only). Each of the four characters may be turned through these five stages of the love-and-growth process.

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Justine's first love-involvement was with Arnauti, a writer whom we know only through hearsay and his novel *Moeurs*. Justine was married to him before the time period encompassed in the Quartet. He was the first man to be infected by her peculiar power to drive one to a torment of doubting introspection. Justine lacked something, something which Arnauti called "The Check." As a child she had been raped, which evidently dislocated some part of her psyche. Arnauti, disturbed by this inadequacy of his wife's, tried to create a self for her on paper. The result is *Moeurs*. We never discover whether his creation is accurate; but the myth of Justine is born—a tortured, self-doubting, hysterical nymphomaniac. Nessim and Darley both see her in the light of this myth; and even Justine herself seems to be influenced by the paper creation, as if she wanted to perpetuate this mythical image of herself. Perhaps it is the only self she can be sure of.

This strange quality of Justine, this self-doubt in the literal sense, distinguishes her from the other Alexandrians. She strictly speaking has no self. This is "The Check," the inadequacy. Justine is tremendously self-conscious and self-aware; but it is a negative awareness, a sense of vacuum. The cruel paradox that the very thing which is the object of growth—awareness—should keep her from growing, because the initial stages of the process must be entered into unawares, dooms her. Justine is forever trapped because her negative awareness precludes the process by which she might have become fulfilled and aware in the positive sense.

But she must always try to fill the void. Her seeming complicity in perpetuating the myth which Arnauti created around her is such an attempt. And so also is the fact that she agrees to marry Nessim only after he offers her a role in the conspiracy to set up an independent Jewish political state in Palestine. This conspiracy represents a personal mystique for her, a chance to find a self through an external source. Of course, this is impossible according to Durrell; the source of the self is completely internal. But the illusion—that here is something to BE—absorbs her. The basis of her relationship with Nessim is her utter devotion to this mystique. The affairs with Pursewarden and Darley exist as exigencies of the conspiracy. Justine's life is completely absorbed by her commitment to the
conspiracy, her involvement with the mystique which offers the illusion of a self.

But the involvement defeats its own purpose. Justine cannot pass beyond the first stage of the process because she cannot surrender the illusion. Her hell is to become involved time after time, but never to escape from the stage of involvement. She is cursed with a sense of inadequacy, without knowing why she is inadequate. For in order for the involvement to be valuable, in order for it to be the starting-point of the process, one must extend the self into the love-object. And Justine can only fasten herself onto something which offers the illusion of fulfillment. She must ever be, she can never become—because there is no essential personality to unfold through the process.

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Pursewarden has already reached his growth by the time we meet him in the Alexandria Quartet. We do not observe him, as we do the others, in the process of growth. But his sister Liza supplies the information necessary to reconstruct the process after Pursewarden’s death. He and Liza were orphaned at an early age and grew up alone. They became lovers in perfect innocence and happiness. She was blind and saw through his eyes; he created a fantastic world of poetry for them to live in. But then Liza gave birth to their blind child, which eventually died. The child was the “reality” which broke down the involvement; Pursewarden felt guilty about the incestuous affair now. The image of his love, Liza, became obscured.

After the death of the child Pursewarden placed Liza in a home for the blind in London and married a completely unsatisfactory woman. The marriage has no meaning except as an item in his withdrawal from “the site of love.” It is merely one way to separate himself from Liza, which he must do if he is to grow. The third and fourth stages of the process, the exile and the reintegration of the psyche resulting in growth, take place now. He is not only separated from Liza, but he has also left his wife and is presumably wandering about somewhere in Europe. We are not told much about his life at this point. But by the time he finds his way to Alexandria he has reached his full growth as an artist.

Pursewarden’s greatest relevance to the process is as an exemplar of the fifth stage, self-realization and artistic aware-
ness. He now understands the way in which people grow. Although Durrell does not unequivocally commit the artist to such concern at any one point, there is a vague obligation for him to help others reach their fulfillment if they can. But the problem, as Pursewarden knows, is how—how to help someone else grow. He cannot tell others in specifics how to grow, because each must find his own particular way. He cannot lay bare the general outlines of the process, for “. . . Truth disappears with the telling of it. It can only be conveyed not stated; irony alone is the weapon for such a task.” The only thing he can do is try to arrange for conditions favorable to growth.

In his personal life Pursewarden discharges this obligation by killing himself. He committed suicide, aside from certain political reasons, in order to free his sister Liza to love and to grow. For although he had gone beyond the stage of involvement and completed the process, she had not yet done so. The “tall stranger” whom Pursewarden had prophesied would be Liza’s final involvement appeared in the form of Mountolive, the British Ambassador to Egypt. And now his (Pursewarden’s) existence blocked her life; the only thing he could do was kill himself, remove himself completely. And so he did.

As an artist Pursewarden tries to discharge the obligation in a somewhat less self-effacing manner. The object is to create a milieu favorable to growth. And this means especially getting rid of the artificial puritan morality which constricts the operation of love; for according to Pursewarden (Durrell?) the whole magnificent human structure, all knowledge, all sensitivity and awareness, all art, is rooted fundamentally in sex:

For culture means sex, the root-knowledge, and where the faculty is derailed or crippled, its derivatives like religion come up dwarfed or contorted—instead of the emblematic mystic rose you get Judaic cauliflowers like Mormons or Vegetarians, instead of artists you get cry-babies, instead of philosophy semantics.

(Again we hear the echoes of Lawrence, Cavafy, and de Sade.) The fulfilled artist’s image of the world becomes a prophet’s vision of a better, more humane world. The artist by nature is in some sense a preacher trying to create a world which will allow more persons to become what they essentially are, without being obstructed by unnatural encumbrances. All this is the fifth stage of the love-and-growth process, as exemplified by
Pursewarden—the only qualified preacher in the Alexandria Quartet.

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The noble Clea’s first involvement was a lesbian affair with Justine. A kiss of pure sympathy on Justine’s hand was the germ of a love which overwhelmed her. In time the sterile lesbian involvement breaks up. (All homosexual liaisons are sterile. Love must have both male and female elements, solar and lunar parts, in order to be complete. Understanding this, Balthazar wisely and meticulously keeps himself emotionally uninvolved in his homosexuality. He recognizes his perversion, satisfies it with little ado, and goes about the business of significant living.) Clea remains in love with Justine for the time being; she is too good and loyal to take refuge in hurt bitterness. But she abstains from overt expression of her love. And she remains, curiously, a psychic and physical virgin. The first involvement, with Justine, is by its very nature not enough to carry her all the way through the process.

Feeling her virginity to be a block to her art (but only in the usual bohemian sense, not in Durrell’s particular meaning), Clea enters once more upon an affair. While in Syria she becomes involved with a mysterious man who later turns out to be Amaril, an Alexandrian doctor. She aborts a child and withdraws from the affair. By her own testimony she grows to the point of turning to abstract art; but this growth is insufficient to bring her to the threshold of growth both artistically and personally. This episode has a metallic, hollow ring to it when Clea later tells Darley about it. Perhaps her imaginative and emotional involvement was not intense enough. It is as if she tried to conjure up the illusion of fulfillment, a false finish. At any rate, it will be a few years yet and back in Alexandria before Clea completes the process, this time with Darley as the love-object. At this point the patterns of growth for Clea and Darley merge, so Clea’s final involvement and ultimate self-realization will be discussed in conjunction with Darley.

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Darley’s initial love affair, with Melissa, was a blind alley. They lived together in mutual commiseration, Melissa charitably giving herself and her meager earnings as a prostitute to
him. Darley giving her the warmth and tenderness she craved. But it was an unprofitable love for him, for she could not hurt him and thus make him grow. The deep urge to grow and the primordial intelligence of the psyche therefore divert his love from Melissa to Justine. It is at this point that Clea remarks that the same love which had fastened upon Melissa was now trying to work itself out through Justine. Gradually his love-object shifts from one to the other.

The affair with Justine is immeasurably more intense than the one with Melissa. The image Darley creates of Justine, drawn partly from his reading of Arnauti's Mœurs, is built upon his need to love profitably—that is, painfully and unsatisfactorily. It is a fantastic dream which inevitably must crumble before the pressure of "reality," as it eventually does when Justine goes to Palestine. The involvement now having broken down, Darley retreats from Alexandria to his Mediterranean island, there to "rework reality to show its significant side." The attempt to impose some kind of order upon his chaotic memories of the affair is Justine. But Balthazar's Interlinear destroys this attempt. Darley, therefore, must once more come to grips with his image of Justine, this time refashioning it to harmonize with the additional information supplied by Balthazar. Balthazar records Darley's growth at this point. But, as with Clea, the process has not yet been consummated. He must find his way back to Alexandria and the final climatic affair with Clea which pushes them both past the threshold.

Upon returning to Alexandria, Darley first of all confronts Justine. He sees her now as she "really" is, not as he imagined her to be. An indication of both his freedom from Justine and his new-found (but still incomplete) self-possession is his comment:

Could it be that a few items of information merely, facts like sand trickling into the hour-glass of the mind, had irrevocably altered the image's qualities—turning it from something once desirable to something which now stirred disgust? Yes, the same process, the very same love-process, I told myself.

Freed now from Justine, Darley is ready to complete his growth with Clea as the love-object, as she completes hers with him.

Their affair begins idyllically. They "fecundate" and enrich each other. But inexorably a stress begins to creep into their
love. A mounting tension on Clea’s part, a strange unexplained agita
tion, makes a separation necessary. The rupture is crudely symbolized by an underwater accident in which Clea loses a hand—thus releasing the hold Alexandria has on them forever. Darley returns to his island, Clea stays in Alexandria temporarily to recover from her accident. But both of them by this time are far enough along in their growth to sense that all is not over between them. It will be a temporary separation, only.

After a period of several months during which they have no contact, Darley writes to Clea. He feels the old life of Alexandria passing away. He expects something definitive to happen, but feels the decision will not be made by him. He waits for the current of the future which he is sure will bring them togeth
er. Immediately after mailing the letter, too soon for it be a reply, he receives one from Clea. The mood of hers matches his exactly. She has reached her growth: “I wait, quite serene and happy, a real human being, an artist at last.” She also anticipates Darley’s new life:

As for you, wise one, I have a feeling that you too perhaps have stepped across the threshold into the kingdom of your imagination, to take possession of it once and for all. Write and tell me—or save it for some small cafe under a chestnut-tree, in smoky autumn weather, by the Seine.”

Not yet, but in a short time she will be right. One unexpected and unpremeditated day, Darley begins to write with perfect naturalness and ease. We are sure that it will be great literature. And we are sure that Darley and Clea will unite in Paris, each self-fulfilled and realized.

Conclusion

The basic outlines of Durrell’s love-and-growth theme have now been described and illustrated. The case for this theme has been somewhat overstated, of course; any crystallized aspect of a work as profuse and complex as the Alexandria Quartet is bound to sacrifice inclusiveness for the sake of clarity. And any work as deliberately ambiguous as the Quartet invites different readings. Durrell undoubtedly would applaud cocktail-hour controversies over his masterpiece. This, after all, is merely an external validation of his theme. But there are a few qualifications that should be made.
Although as we have seen it, growth must occur as a result of some love-involvement and consequent withdrawal, the journalist Johnny Keats seems to be a minor exception. After having been an insensitive peripheral character in the first three novels, in Clea Keats goes off to the desert as a war correspondent and grows up. He does this without involving himself in a love affair and without withdrawing himself from the scene of his experience—by his own report. But on second thought the Keats incident seems to be merely a necessary invention. Pursewarden’s wife had intended to take out her hate of her dead husband by commissioning a lurid biography, to be done by Keats. But such a biography would destroy the budding love between Liza and Mountolive—a direct slap in Pursewarden’s prophetic face. So the simplest solution was to have Keats grow up quickly, understand the poetic and moral significance of Pursewarden’s incestuous affair with Liza, and refrain from doing the scandalous biography. This, in my opinion, is a fair interpretation, since the incident occurs in the bustle of winding things up in Clea and has no other significance.

Balthazar might also seem to be entirely too wise to have gotten that way without loving. But the wise Balthazar does not have much confidence in his own vision. He vacillates between skepticism and mysticism, rationality and intuition, profundity and absurdity. He is not sure of the nature of the world, as Pursewarden is and Darley and Clea come to be. Balthazar is a third-rate doctor, a hermeticist, a Jew, and an Alexandrian; but he is not an artist. He is best seen as a human flower of the plant Alexandria.

The major hesitancy I have about the Alexandria Quartet is a theoretical one. After having been convinced that we all live in private worlds which are creations of our imaginations, after having been shown how the need to love makes an image to love, after having been taken on a guided tour of truth’s hall of mirrors, are we not correct in wondering whether growth is just as much an illusion as anything else? This thematic question corresponds to the technical one of asking if Clea is logically consistent with the plan of the Quartet. And the answer must correspond also: I think we must drop such fine reasoning and allow the artist (Durrell) his bag of illusory tricks. As Clea is necessary to create the illusion of technical completion, so the growth of the artist is necessary to create the illusion of
thematic completion—the sensation that something has been accomplished. Art is not bound by the rules of life. Literature is not an encyclopedia but an image; it can be held in the mind. And the Alexandria Quartet is a brilliant image of tangled loves whose meaning, as Durrell suggests, probably lies somewhere within us.

7. Clea, p. 144.
9. Clea, p. 56.