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PHYSICS AND THE "ALEXANDRIA QUARTET" BY LAWRENCE DURRELL

Of all sciences, physics can be said to exert the most powerful influence on man and his view of the world, since it seeks to answer questions concerning the very nature and structure of the universe and the mechanisms that govern it. One can venture a statement that our modern conception of the world has been shaped by just one great man of physics, endowed with enough talent and courage to undermine and, ultimately, completely shatter the three centuries' old notion of the universe developed by Sir Isaac Newton. By questioning Newton's assumption that space and time are absolute dimensions, space being uniform and immobile, and time flowing at a stable rate with no relation to anything else, Einstein has shaken the very foundations of the traditional belief in the world governed by natural law. Instead, he has proposed a treatment of the universe as a space-time entity, a continuum that cannot be separated into independent parts. One of the aspects of this continuum are gravitational interactions of matter that cause space-time to be curved rather than flat, and that affect the behaviour of the universe at large. By treating space-time and matter as interdependent, Einstein has designed a model of the world as a whole, which all previous theories had failed to do.

Perhaps this new synthesis in itself could not have made such a tremendous impact on the conception of man and the universe, if it were not for the consequences it entailed in several important domains. First of all, the concept of time in Einstein's new, curved world is also significantly different from the Newtonian. Time is no longer a single, metaphysical entity, by virtue of which all events occurring in the universe can be arranged in one sequence. With Einstein, time has become one of the dimensions of the continuum, integrally related to the three coordinates of space. Moreover, each of the separate coordinate systems remaining in relative motion has a different time system. Con-

sequently, instead of one single time, there exists a multiplicity of times in the space-time continuum and none of them is preferred to the other. The gravitationally curved shape of space-time, which ultimately forms an immense circle, also influences the nature, of time, which, in consequence, becomes cyclical. Thus, according to Einstein, the histories of particles of moving through space in the course of time are represented by curves, which in a sufficiently long perspective turn into circles.

Yet apart from the cyclicity of time, the most influential aspect of Einstein's model is the conception of relativity. Since time, as one of the coordinates of the space-time continuum, is in its nature multiple and relative, any assumption about space-time must also be relative and depend on the position of an observer. Consequently, "relativity theory implies that the space and time coordinates are only the elements of a language that is used by an observer".¹ Hence follows the subjective character of all truth.

Once it has been thoroughly digested and assimilated, such a revolutionary theory was bound to have had a very disruptive influence on human life and mind. It introduced an element of hazard and uncertainty where there used to be order and stability, impermanence where there was continuity, and relativity in place of absolutes. All these changes found their manifestations in all the various areas of creativity, literature being no exception. The beginning of the twentieth century was the time when the realistic and naturalistic novels of the previous century, with their omniscient narration and chronological plot showing "a slice" of a rational, ordered, knowable world, no longer reflected the new "reality". The new age called for new forms of literary expression for the existential content it brought. The relativity proposition, implying the impossibility of depicting any certain truth about man, facilitated the transition from the objective to the subjective mode of presentation. The aim of the Modernist novel was to show external world as seen through individual consciousness and the new form has been developed to its logical extreme by the stream of consciousness and the interior monologue technique. This entailed the reduction of linear plot and the elimination of any chronology other than that of a working mind. Along with the technical experiments came new, more universal themes, such as the very process of writing a novel—the only subject a writer could really know about.

Once these important changes have taken place, the door behind the traditional novel seems to have closed once and for all. The return to the old, realistic and naturalistic writing of the nineteenth century seems now unthinkable, and the writers still continuing this tradition in the

¹ M. Sachs, *Space-time and Elementary Interaction in Relativity*, "Physics Today", 1969, XXII, p. 53.

twentieth century have been with little exaggeration compared by Robert Scholes to "headless chickens unaware of the decapitating axe".²

Lawrence Durrell is certainly not one of this group. On the contrary, his work is regarded as a definite continuation of the Modernist tradition.³ Just as his great predecessors from the beginning of the century, Durrell treats the novel as an experiment and bases it on a scientific theory. In the case of his most famous work, the *Alexandria Quartet*, it is the relativity theory above described that constitutes the scientific basis for the experiment and determines all the structural elements of the book.

Since one of the crucial assumptions of the theory is the concept of the space-time continuum, it is evident that of all the structural aspects of the novel it is the setting that should play a particularly significant role. Thus the aim of these considerations will be to examine the extent to which the setting of the *Alexandria Quartet* is permeated by the underlying theory, and the way it is manipulated to bring out the main ideas of the book.

The setting of the *Alexandria Quartet* is greatly varied, which in itself is functional for the underlying theory, since it provides a multiplicity of coordinate systems coexisting within the same span of time.

The central part of the scene is undoubtedly the city of Alexandria. Apart from being exotic, it is a cosmopolitan metropolis representing a variety of cultures, religious creeds, political interests and even sexes. Jews, Arabs, Copts, Greeks, the French and the British live there side by side, forming a strange cosmopolitan community where homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, etc. are treated with utmost tolerance and understanding, and where the Jews, Christians and Moslems coexist peacefully. The Alexandria of the *Quartet* is also a city where various political interests overlap and clash, and where the extreme opulence of the diplomats sharply contrasts with the primitive living conditions of the Arabs in the suburbs.

Complementary to the cosmopolitanism of Alexandria is the area around it, namely, the deserts. They are inhabited by two more cultures, both native and both strongly tied to their land: the nomadic Arab tribes and the Coptic community. In the village of Karm Abu Girg history and patriotic traditions are still much more important than time and money, the primary values in Alexandria.

² R. Scholes, *The Fabulators*, New York 1967, p. 21.

³ Cf. W. Allen, *The Modern Novel in Britain and The United States*, New York 1964, p. 284; F. R. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel*, New York 1972, p. 40; R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, New York 1975, p. 203; R. Stevenson, *The British Novel since the Thirties, Introduction*, Georgia 1986, p. 205.

Besides Egypt, the *Quartet's* setting includes several European cities where Mountolive, Nessim and Pursewarden meet, the mountains of Syria where Clea temporarily stays, and the Greek Island, the place where Darley is writing his book. Put together, all these settings exhibit a great variety of influences, foreign and native, and such account for the rich multiplicity of characters in the book. Due to their diversity the city and its surroundings gain a universal dimension and become a perfect ground for the operation of the principles of the space-time continuum. Anything that happens in this microcosm may be considered universally valid.

The influence of the relativity theory on the conception of the novel is perhaps best exemplified by the relation between the setting and the characters. As a melting pot of many cultures, the city exerts a strong influence on its inhabitants. Darley very often talks about "the gravitational field which Alexandria threw down about those it had chosen as its exemplars" (*Justine*, p. 16).⁴ He even interprets the story of his life as "part and parcel of the city's behaviour", not as "a personal history with an individual accent so much as a part of the historical fabric of the place" (*Justine*, p. 168).

Justine, Narouz and Nessim also experience the pressure of the city and want to free themselves from it, realizing that the city life is the cause of their distress and confusion. This crucial characteristic of Alexandria, described by Darley in perfectly suitable terms as a "gravitational field", is an important factor responsible for the ultimate curve of the space-time world. Alexandria is therefore a place which is a particularly effective example illustrating the working of the space-time continuum. Several characters lose their bearings in the city, while their sanity and identity are seriously threatened. In consequence, they all escape from Alexandria in a vain hope of avoiding the curving of the continuum.

However, the places outside of the city are by no means free of their own gravitational fields, though of a different kind. They are a source of peace and calm for the characters, capable of freeing them, if only for a brief moment, from the tensions of the city. That is why it is on the beaches outside Alexandria that Justine and Darley for the first time really talk with each other and that Pursewarden first realizes that Justine is truly in love with him. Also Pombal takes Sveva to the peace of the lake, hoping that it will provide a suitable background for their final conversation. Nessim often escapes to the surrounding deserts to find peace of mind and the sense of belonging that he never experien-

⁴ All subsequent references to the *Alexandria Quartet* will be made in the text and will refer to the following editions of the book: *Justine*, London 1984, *Balthazar*, London 1984, *Mountolive*, London 1985, *Clea*, London 1981.

ces in Alexandria. The outside of the city is also an oasis of peace for Leila; the quiet and natural atmosphere of the country helps her to come to terms with her misfortune.

The Greek Island and Syria have a similarly calming influence on Darley and Clea. The close contact with nature and the serene environment provide the long-desired solitude and detachment, essential for both of them to put their lives in order.

The influence of the European setting on the characters is equally strong. Having spent some time in cold and hostile Prague, Mountolive changes from an innocent, open-hearted man into a cool and reserved person. In contrast to Prague, London gives him a sense of reassurance and identity. Mountolive is even inclined to accept the spirit of melancholy and stagnation present in the city: "it nourished him, the gloom; he felt something like the fox's love for his earth" (*Mountolive*, p. 76).

The grim atmosphere of the British capital has quite a different impact on Pursewarden. While in the city, he feels restricted in his freedom as a writer and cannot bear the hypocritical moral code of the British society in which he finds lack of courage to enjoy life fully.

As Pursewarden is influenced by the stagnation of London, Mountolive is similarly affected by the atmosphere of Russia. Snow falling constantly behind the Embassy windows cuts him off from the rest of the world, and contributes to his feeling of imprisonment and hopelessness.

The impact of Paris on the protagonists is exactly opposite to that of Russia. The city's unique charm and glamour bring Mountolive, Nessim and Pursewarden closer together, and transform the extravagant writer into a different man, at last freed from the restraining, heavy atmosphere of London.

The instances quoted above indicate that each of the novel's diverse settings exerts its own specific influence on the characters. Different surroundings bring out different features of the characters' personalities, namely those which remain in harmony with the spirit of a given place. The protagonists always stay in a very close contact with their surroundings and the extent to which particular settings influence their lives is considerable. The idea of environment affecting human behaviour is explicitly stated by the omniscient narrator of *Mountolive*, who at one point says about Justine, Nessim, Mountolive and Pursewarden:

They were soon to be drawn along ways not of their choosing, trapped in a magnetic field, as it were, by the same forces which unwind the tides at the moon's bidding, or propel the glittering forces of salmon up a crowded river [...] (*Mountolive*, p. 192).

Furthermore, it can be noticed that in this respect the dependence seems mutual, namely, the observer's emotional state often alters the

way he perceives his surroundings. For instance, in strongly emotional moments certain parts of Alexandria acquire a special, new significance for the characters. It is so with Darley, when his unhappiness after Justine has left him transforms the places they visited together into strange and unfamiliar, merely because Justine is no longer (*Justine*, p. 77). However, when Darley recovers from the apathy caused by Justine's departure and regains the peace of mind, the city seems no longer hostile to him, but clean and beautiful.

Similarly, Alexandria changes in the eyes of Nessim Hosnani. After he has fallen in love with Melissa, even the business quarter which he previously hated suddenly looks nice and clean (*Justine*, p. 182). Most conspicuously, Nessim's state of mind seems to project itself on his surroundings during his nervous breakdown caused by the suspicion of Justine's infidelity (*Justine*, pp. 171—172). In the same way, after Pursewarden has learned the truth about Nessim's conspiracy, he feels as if "the whole city had crashed down about his ears" (*Mountolive*, p. 161).

Mountolive also experiences great excitement going back to Alexandria to see Leila again and then the city regains in his eyes the splendour it had for him during his first stay in Egypt. However, immediately after his disillusionment with Leila, Mountolive views his surroundings with apprehension and even the face of the room clock looks reproachful to him. He feels that "suddenly the whole of Alexandria, the whole of Egypt, had become distasteful, burdensome, wearisome to his spirit". (*Mountolive*, p. 255).

The above examples show how the narrative makes the protagonists create their own visions of places and objects in their environment, the visions that are true and real only for them and only at a certain specific moment, thus achieving individualization and relativization, apart from self-characterization. In all the cases the elements of the surrounding world, changing in the characters' eyes, illustrate the subjective nature of human perception and, consequently, the relative character of truth in the space-time world.

This key assumption of the space-time continuum is very well reflected in the meaningful recurrence and symbolic significance of such secondary elements of the setting as light and darkness, disguise, mirrors, prisms and paintings.

A changing light may alter the appearance of certain parts of the city from vulgar to romantic and vice versa (*Justine*, p. 166). In a similar way, the unusual lighting in the cabaret make Melissa hardly recognizable to Darley. The faces of the carnival dancers at the ball also appear different than they do in reality; in photographs they look grim and distorted since they are lit by the indifferent light of an epidiascope, while the dim light at the ball transforms them into jolly and carefree. In the same way, the faces of the Alexandrians gathered in the candle-

light before the ball at Nessim's house blend with the faces in the paintings on the walls, making them all, the real and the artificial, look alike:

Faces painted in oils matched by human faces lined by preoccupations and maladies of the soul—all gathered together, made one in the classical brilliance of the candlelight (*Balthazar*, p. 164).

Further on, in the semidarkness of the Alexandrian night Narouz finds a moment of long-desired happiness in the arms of an old Arab woman, who is so transformed by the dim light that to Narouz she resembles Clea. Darkness, moonlight and candlelight create an atmosphere of unreality and mysticism, as opposed posed to bare reality exposed in the daylight. Consequently, Alexandria is most fascinating for Pursewarden at dusk, because then it puts on a different appearance, an air of unreality, due to the blurring of vision in the falling darkness (*Mountolive*, p. 145).

Darkness has also another function: hidden in it, the characters are not afraid to reveal the secrets from deep in their heart. It is so with Nessim, who follows Melissa into the dark inside of the Greek church and experiences a moment of genuine sincerity which he was afraid to show outside in the light (*Justine*, p. 181). Also Justine is more sincere in the darkness of Clea's studio and talks about her lost child, a confession she would never make in the daylight. The darkness prevailing during the duck shoot on the lake Mereotis makes it possible for Justine to finally escape from Alexandria, as it enables Nessim to kill Capodistria.

Generally, the effects of darkness and light serve to hide or falsify the reality perceived by the characters, as well as to offer a kind of illusory protection under which they can afford to commit acts they would not dare commit without that cover. In both cases the main function of darkness is to mask or conceal reality.

Basically the same role is played by another significantly recurring element of the presented world, namely, disguise. Wearing their dominoes and masks, all the Alexandrians are able to conceal their true identity and pretend to be somebody else, giving vent to their hidden desires:

The spirits of the darkness had taken over you'd think, disinheriting the daylight hearts and minds of the maskers, plunging deeper into the loneliness of their own irrecoverable identities, setting free the polymorphous desires of the city (*Balthazar*, p. 170).

The phrases "irrecoverable identities" and "polymorphous desires" are especially important here, since they stress the multifariousness and complexity of human personality. They point to the existence of many different, often contradictory "selves" of the same people, the "selves" that usually remain underneath the surface, and only become apparent

in highly unusual circumstances, as for example in the special atmosphere during the carnival. Thus the rich and respectable women of Alexandria dress as prostitutes and pursue men in the streets; Toto de Brunel, wearing a domino and Justine's ring, can at last openly act as a woman, and Amaril is able to meet his disguised beloved.

The misleading role of disguise as a factor creating false appearances is also illustrated by masks and numerous allusions to them. Leila describes her face as an "Iron Mask" (*Mountolive*, p. 131), while Nessim and Justine, engaged in their conspiracy, put on "a mailed mask of duty" (*Mountolive*, p. 194). Over Justine's bed hangs a Tibetan mask with a dark, blind face, under which Justine and Nessim talk about their secret plot. Finally, the death mask of Pursewarden, calm and "bloodless" (*Mountolive*, p. 165), does not at all reflect the fierce conflict that has driven the man to suicide. Masks and disguise in the book serve as means of concealing the truth and reality by showing only superficial, outward images of people and objects, making characters confuse reality with appearances.

The latter idea is even more effectively expressed by the mirror-imagery. Mirrors are nearly everywhere in Alexandria, each one reflecting a reality in front of it from its own point of view. Only the confrontation of two or more reflections of the same scene or object proves how one-sided and short-lived these single reflections are as truths about the world. Justine, surprised to find five reflections of herself in the multiple mirrors at the dressmakers exclaims:

Look! Five different pictures of the same object. Now if I wrote I would try for a multi-dimensional effect in character, a sort of prism-sightedness. Why should not people show more than one profile at a time? (*Justine*, p. 23).

Apart from symbolically illustrating the point of the relativity of any single point of view of an observer, this short passage also contains one of the numerous comments referring to the very process of writing the novel and the essence of the whole conception of the work, namely, the notion of relativity of observation. Moreover, the comparison of the multi-sided character of personality to the refractive effect of prism and mirrors points to the inherent unity existing between these elements of the setting and the theory underlying the work. All throughout the novel we are confronted with various mirror images of Justine overlapping and often contradictory. The Justine Darley meets in the three mirrors in the grocer's shop is just one of her many personalities, obviously different from the Justine Arnauti met in the mirrors at the Cecil Hotel. Neither Darley nor Arnauti understands Justine fully, because they limit her personality to the one side they know from the respective mirrors. Consequently, there exist several different Justines,

and none of them can be described as more real than another. In this way the recurring mirrors symbolize the multifariousness of the characters and of reality in general, each reflection constituting only one of many existing images. Subsequently, the mirrors become a part of the whole set of devices, closely connected with the setting and, in wider perspective, with the idea of relativity in space-time continuum.

One more device of this set is that of the prisms, recurring in a variety of forms. "A snowflake on the eyelash suddenly bursts the world asunder into the gleaming component colours of the prism", says the narrator in *Mountolive* (p. 54). The snowflakes falling on the streets of London transform Liza Pursewarden into a Greek goddess in Mountolive's eyes. On another occasion the lamps in London streets "had begun to throw out their lines of prismatic light" (*Mountolive*, p.77), in which Mountolive disregards the imperfections of the city. Consequently, the prisms influence the character's perception and symbolize the distortion and relativity of vision in the space-time world, as did light, darkness and mirrors, and as do paintings.

Pictures and portraits constitute a particularly expanded element of the setting. They are present in nearly every room described in the novel, as for example the Burmese paintings and drawings in Mountolive's father's room, the sketches of noses in Clea's studio, Nessim's picture gallery of the Impressionists, Japanese paintings in Mountolive's residence in Cairo, etc. Mountolive has a portrait of himself in the full splendour of his uniform. It was painted by Clea at the beginning of his stay in Egypt. The picture is later discarded and finally ends up in the hall, propped against the wall, since what it now reflects is only a magnificent, empty appearance, quite unlike the real person. Similarly, Mountolive is surprised to see how happy he looks in the photographs in the press, because he knows he never feels happy performing his official duties. In this way the paintings, presenting only outward appearance, and occurring in such a significant number, together with other symbolic elements contribute to the presentation of the idea of relativity.

Equally important for the understanding of the novel as the idea of relativity of perception is the concept of time in space-time continuum. While the first three parts of the *Alexandria Quartet* define the three dimensions of space, time is represented by the fourth volume, *Clea*,⁵ whose action is moved forward in time. Darley, the subjective observer of events notices the existence of two kinds of time in his world and says: "Calendar time gives little indication of the aeons which separate one self from another, one day from another" (*Clea*, p. 9). This distinction between the time measured by the clocks and the one measured by the subsequent "selves" of a character is crucial for the concept of time

⁵L. Durrell, *Balthazar*, p. 7.

in *Clea*, as is the theory of the cyclicity of time. The setting of *Clea* seems to illustrate these two assumptions.

Visiting his old flat in Alexandria again after a few years, Darley is surprised that it evokes so few memories of Melissa.

He cannot even recognize himself walking with Melissa down some street in the photograph shown him by Hamid. The narrator has travelled too far away in time to be able to bring this memory back to mind. His old unchanged room with the same bed and the photograph make him realize that he is now a different person, very much unlike his old self.

In comparison with Darley's, Hamid's memories of the girl and the past are very fresh. Apparently time has flown much slower for the loyal Arab servant, since he does not even notice how much his host has changed. His personality has not evolved as much as Darley's. The photograph that for the narrator is a sign how much time has passed, is cherished by Hamid as a living memory of Melissa. What is more, Hamid still lives in the small room where Darley and Melissa once slept, as if he were guarding the past which is so close to him.

Such details of the setting as Darley's room, the photograph, etc., help to emphasize the great gap between the two characters as regards their sense of time. The reasons for this difference are also connected with the setting of the novel.

Living far away from Alexandria, on his isolated island, Darley has developed a new awareness of time. Hamid, on the other hand, spent all that time in the city. Each of them lived according to his own, personal clock. When the two men are finally brought together, they only seem to meet in the same moment of clock time. In fact, their internal clocks show different times, Hamid's being several years slow in relation to Darley's. It is because in the space-time continuum

there is no longer one universal time. There are only various times proper to various bodies in the universe, which will seem to agree for bodies close together [...] but will never agree for bodies far apart.⁶

Another theoretical postulate illustrated by the novel's setting is the cyclicity of time. Some of the elements of the surrounding world already present in *Justine* and *Balthazar*, appear in *Clea* in exactly the same situational context.

Thus, Darley meets Clea at the same little coffee-table in the square where he once met Melissa. Clea, after her accident, lies on the same hospital bed Melissa lay on when Darley came to see her dead body. These apparent coincidences are a hint to Darley that instead of moving forward in time, he has actually made a big spiral. In Clea's unchanged

⁶ J. A. Weigel, *Lawrence Durrell*, New York 1965, p. 84.

studio, which represents the seemingly gone past, Darley recalls Pursewarden's meaningful comparison of reality to "sliding panels" which overlap and interweave, just as now the past and the present do for him. Time seems to repeat itself and the recurring elements of the setting suggest that Darley's new love affair is in fact merely an extension of his love for Melissa and Justine. Consequently, the end of the fourth volume is almost exactly like the beginning of *Justine* and the cycle seems to have closed.

The cyclicity of time is also illustrated by some other components of the setting, namely the figures and places connected with the dead.

Clea is full of objects which used to belong to the now dead characters. Talking about the omnipresence of love, even in the world of the dead, Justine mentions finding Narouz's candles and the wax flowers with which he once intended to propose to Clea and Narouz's unsent letters to her. It is significant that Justine tells Darley about these objects, because it is he who falls in love with Clea next, and writes letters to her, as if taking Narouz's place. Another part of the presented world evoking Narouz's presence is his island, which he has bequeathed to his living friends. Importantly, it is there that Clea and Darley enjoy their moments of perfect happiness of which Narouz may have dreamt when he stayed alone on the island.

An important object symbolizing Narouz's continuing nearness is his harpoon gun, which he once gave to Nessim who in turn passed it on to Clea. However, neither Clea nor Darley are able to use it, and when the harpoon is finally fired, it is as if it were handled by Narouz himself: the arrow hits Clea who is swimming in the pool, and pins her hand to the wreck of an old ship which, just as the harpoon, belongs to the world of the dead: it lies on the sea bottom on the verge of great black depths, covered with slime. In this way the whole scene symbolizes the constant intrusion of the dead in the world of the living.

Just like the ship, the presence of the dead sentinels in the pool also has a symbolic significance. The layer of mercury preserves them in the same way as time seems to preserve some of the dead people who are not forgotten with passing time but continues to interfere with the world of the living as does Pursewarden with his writin and Scobie with his cult and shrine. The decoration of Capodistria's grave and Fosca's funeral, both being a clear negation of death and an affirmation of life, seem very functional in this respect. "In spacetime the dead are everywhere and always",⁷ since time is constantly coming back to the past.

The evidence quoted above seems sufficient to conclude that the setting of the *Alexandria Quartet* plays a significant part in illustrating

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

such crucial concepts of the theory as the interdependence of man and his environment, the relativity of perception and the functioning of the world as a space-time continuum. The centre of novel is undoubtedly the city of Alexandria with its overwhelming "gravitational field", which is the ultimate cause of the curving of the space-time. In the world continuum thus curved, time proceeds in cycles, completing one great circle and beginning another, as is demonstrated by setting of *Clea*. It must be stressed that all these assumptions of the underlying theory are not only illustrated by the main complexes of the presented world, such as Alexandria, its surroundings and Europe, but also by the smallest details of the setting, from mirrors and masks to falling snowflakes.

Such a consistent and purposeful use of various elements of the scenery points to the special attention Lawrence Durrell pays to the form of his works. He successfully "incorporates in his work new formal innovations introduced by the Modernists".⁸ As did the great Modernist writers, Durrell seeks new formal means to express the modern spirit of uncertainty and the relativity of reality and truth. He employs a scientific theory that raises these problems, and serves as a basis for his technical experiments and appropriate literary equivalents, such as dislocations of time, which stress its relative nature, and the crucial for the concept of relativity use of limited, multiple narrators, who in their quest for truth find only contradictory interpretations. In consequence, things and events that are established as true in the first volume of the novel, later turn out to be either untrue or only partly true, depending on who narrates them. This holds true not only about certain events, but also about all the most important themes of the *Quartet* such as love, death and art. In this way Durrell challenges the traditional notions of probability and verisimilitude, so characteristic of the realistic novel.

Another significant difference between the *Quartet* and the traditional novel is the fact that Durrell leaves his novel open-ended, permitting an almost infinite number of variants and combinations, whose lists, obviously far from complete, are enclosed at the end of each volume. The "Workpoints" constitute one more element of the novel that stresses the infinite possibilities of exploring the space-time continuum; they are a way of saying that the *Alexandria Quartet* never properly ends, since there can be no endings in curved spacetime.

Another formal element of the novel which betrays its affinity to the great Modernist works is Durrell's use of language. The language of the *Quartet* is rich and baroque: and the naturalistic fragments are intertwined with highly poetic descriptions. This elaborate form of the

⁸ R. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

work is a rebellion against the transparent style of the mimetically oriented realistic fiction.

The *Alexandria Quartet* is also a clear manifestation of typically Modernist self-consciousness about the process of writing and the nature of fiction. Durrell's main interest in the *Alexandria Quartet* is not only life, but also art, with its aesthetic paradoxes, such as the famous Proustian dilemma of how to distinguish between reality and illusion⁹ and how to convert one into the other in art. Durrell's novel is peopled with artists: writers, painters and poets, of whom Darey, Pursewarden, Arnauti, Justine and Clea are perhaps the most important. Pursewarden's considerations about literary technique are most prominent, since they seem to contain Durrell's own theory of fiction. Pursewarden finds the realistic and naturalistic traditions very limiting and expresses this view in a short, but shrewd question: "Would you rather read Henry James or be pressed to death by weights?" (*Clea*, p. 249).

Thus, as if in answer to Pursewarden's criticism, the characters of the *Alexandria Quartet* lack the usual, realistic motivation of the traditional novel. Instead, they are isolated individuals, who strive, just as did their predecessors in Modernist novels, to achieve fullness in life and in art. Durrell's answer to this Modernist search is love—and, more precisely, "art for love's sake", as one critic has pointed out.¹⁰ Consequently, Justine often associates work with love, Mountolive fails in love because he hates his work, and Clea and Darley can be creative only when they are in love.

All these features of the *Quartet's* form and content suggest Durrell's close affinity with the Modernist tradition. Untypical for his time—the age of the realistic, social fiction of the British 1950s—the author of the *Alexandria Quartet* escapes definite categorization. Robert Scholes has termed him a "fabulator", pointing to the way Durrell ends the novel—with the familiar "Once upon a time..." beginning.¹¹ According to Scholes, this not only marks a return to the time in the history of fiction when the art of the novel was mainly the art of story-telling, but it also suggests Durrell's "revolt against the constraints of the empirical, pseudo-scientific tradition of realism and naturalism".¹² By this Scholes implies that science constitutes a hindrance to fiction and that the rejection of science is a necessary prerequisite of a good modern novel. However, Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* is also an important argument to the contrary. It is a proof that instead of a limiting constraint, science can be an inspiration to a very ambitious experiment.

⁹ R. Scholes, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁰ A. W. Friedman, a critical evaluation of Durrell's work in: *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. B. L. Kirkpatrick, London 1986, p. 260.

¹¹ R. Scholes, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

FIZYKA A „KWARTET ALEKSANDRYJSKI” LAWRENCE DURRELLA

STRESZCZENIE

Fizyka jako nauka badająca strukturę wszechświata i mechanizmy nim rządzące zawsze wywierała duży wpływ na człowieka i jego wizję otaczającego świata. Wpływ ten uwidocznił się szczególnie w wieku dwudziestym, gdy rewolucyjna teoria Alberta Einsteina zastąpiła tradycyjną siedemnastowieczną koncepcję absolutnego czasu i przestrzeni Isaaka Newtona. Definiując świat jako jednolite *continuum* przestrzenno-czasowe, w którym czas funkcjonuje jako czwarty wymiar, Einstein uzależnił wszelkie sądy o rzeczywistości od położenia obserwatora, wprowadzając element względności w miejsce newtonowskich absolutów. Tak gwałtowne przejście od stabilizacji absolutów do chaosu wszechobecnej względności musiało znaleźć swoje odbicie we wszystkich dziedzinach ludzkiej myśli, a więc także i w literaturze. Literacką reakcją na teorię względności i jej kluczowe założenie, że wszelka prawda jest subiektywna, były innowacje formalne powieści modernistycznej, doprowadzone do punktu ekstremalnego w formie monologu wewnętrznego strumienia świadomości, eliminującego całkowicie klasyczną chronologię i tradycyjny narracyjny obiektywizm.

Wśród pisarzy kontynuujących tradycje modernistyczne współcześnie Lawrence Durrell zajmuje miejsce szczególne, gdyż tak jak wielcy pisarze początku wieku, traktuje on powieść jako eksperyment.

Kwartet Aleksandryjski jest taką właśnie powieścią — eksperymentem opartą na hipotezie naukowej. Hipoteza ta — teoria względności Einsteina — w znacznym stopniu kształtuje i przenika wszystkie elementy strukturalne utworu.

Ponieważ w teorii Einsteina pojęciem kluczowym jest przestrzenno-czasowe *continuum*, praca niniejsza zajmuje się przede wszystkim przestrzenią — a więc tłem powieści i jego funkcjami w ukazaniu podstawowych pojęć teorii. Bliższa analiza czterech części kwartetu wydaje się potwierdzać, że zarówno główne kompleksy świata przedstawionego, jak i jego najdrobniejsze nawet elementy służą zilustrowaniu takich założeń teoretycznych, jak wzajemna zależność człowieka i jego otoczenia, względność wszelkiej obserwacji i cykliczny charakter czasu w rzeczywistości *continuum* przestrzenno-czasowego.

Tak konsekwentna konstrukcja świata przedstawionego powieści sugeruje ogromną uwagę, jaką Durrell przywiązuje do formy swych utworów. Jednocześnie jest ona jeszcze jednym, obok wysoce subiektywnej narracji, nieprzejrzystego języka i autotematycznego charakteru powieści, dowodem związków pisarza z wielkimi twórcami epoki modernizmu. Sam *Kwartet Aleksandryjski* jest zaś poważnym argumentem, że nauka, miast ograniczać swobodę pisarza, może być inspiracją do bardzo ambitnego eksperymentu.

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