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City and landscape of remembering: The visual textual palimpsest of Alexandria in Lawrence Durrell's *Justine and Balthazar*

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Abstract

Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria quartet* is a tetralogy which explores the multi-perspectival nature of truth and reality. Using the first two novels, *Justine* and *Balthazar*, this article will briefly explore the palimpsestic surface traces of Alexandria and surrounding landscape as they are recalled through the memories of the character-narrator Darley. The inscription of these memories will be seen as many-coloured, prismatic, intangible and unstable, creating a city and landscape that are neither real nor unreal, but heterotopic. The article will examine how recall of the past visually and textually maps the city and its landscape through the stylistic use of metaphoric and painterly imagery within the palimpsest of memory.



Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria quartet* is a tetralogy where memory is seen to create a multi-layered representation of the city and landscape of Alexandria. The *pointillist* nature of the textual-visual memories resembles what is known as a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a parchment or document upon which a layering of texts occurs, where the original text is imperfectly erased and overwritten with a new text, but ghostly traces of the first text remain. The textual overwriting of the past through memory is most prominently visible in *Justine* and *Balthazar*, the first two books of

the *Alexandria quartet*. In this article I explore how the city and landscape of Alexandria is reshaped and re-visioned as simultaneously real and unreal. I will demonstrate how the palimpsestic nature of Darley's memories is most fully mapped through Durrell's imaginative use of words, syntax, metaphoric imagery, and, what critic George Steiner referred to as Durrell's "mosaic" style (Steiner 1964:15).

It is this style that is central to the evocation of the multi-layered nature of the city and its landscape. Since the release of the novels that make up the *Alexandria quartet*

during the late 1950s into the 1960s, Anglo-American critics have indicated their dislike of Durrell's writing style. It has been considered "dangerously opulent", "clogged prose", "stylistically overdressed" with a "proliferation of adjectives" (Tomlinson 1961:53). George Steiner considers Durrell's style to be "the vital center of Durrell's art" (Steiner 1964:13). Opposed to this is the comment of critic Martin Green, who while intimating that the descriptions of the sky and landscape possess a "Parnassian glitter", is quick to condemn the style as "bloated to the point of absurdity" and unable to "sustain such an elaborate and pretentious structure" (Green 1964:133). Whilst I agree with Green that the use of this language is unsound with regards to the structure, plot and characterisation in the novels, I concur with Steiner when he writes that Durrell's style uses "sensuous, rare expressions" with "long, glittering arabesques of adjectives" that offer a "command of the light and music of language" (Steiner 1964:15;18). I posit that these stylistic features are what capture the visual essence of the landscape and the city of Alexandria within the novels *Justine* and *Balthazar*.

The city and the landscape are played out in the character-narrator Darley's recorded textual memories that are central to the story world of the second book *Balthazar*. Darley has received back a manuscript he wrote about his life in Alexandria which he provisionally entitled *Justine*. The *Justine* manuscript has been annotated and augmented by Balthazar, one of the people Darley knew when he resided in Alexandria. Balthazar's annotations are his personal recollections of the events Darley described in the manuscript. The amendments are offered as an alternate perception of the past and as Darley says the manuscript is now:

Cross-hatched, crabbed, starred with questions and answers in different-coloured inks, in typescript. It seemed to me then to be somehow symbolic of the very reality we had shared – a palimpsest upon which

each of us had left his or her individual traces, layer by layer. (Durrell 1968:18)

Captured in the inscription of many-coloured inks, the characters and events Darley experienced are overwritten, becoming palimpsestic surface traces and layered accretions. On reading the amended manuscript, Darley realises that memory of the past can never offer a definitive version and that the annotated manuscript is one "existing in its own right, as the determined view of another eye upon events which I interpreted in my own way, because that was the way in which I lived them – or they lived me" (Durrell 1968:157).

This projection of being lived by events is what philosopher Henri Bergson, in his work *Matter and memory*, terms "an actively created image, identical with, or similar to, the object on which it comes to mold itself" (Bergson 1991:102;112). Bergson further conjectured that past and present were coterminous in memory, providing for the experience of the continuity of time. In *Balthazar*, this undulating flux of memory is present in the backwards-forwards-forwards-backwards movement of events portrayed in the narrative. This movement seems to hold the flow of time in suspension rather in the manner of Laura Mulvey's "embalming" time" (Mulvey 2006:59). The mapping in memory of Alexandria's spatial topography acts to circumvent chronological, linear time in favour of a cyclical movement. This flux of cyclical time adds to the palimpsestic layering of the narrative as different memories of the city and landscape overlay themselves one upon another.

The layering allows a rich and multi-layered palimpsestic landscape to spring visually to life. This rich layering is achieved through the use of what Durrell terms *landscape-tones*. The *landscape-tones* accomplish a spatial memory

bond between the city and the landscape by means of adjectival, prepositional and verbal devices:

Landscape-tones: brown to bronze, steep skyline, low cloud, pearl ground with shadowed oyster and violet reflections. The lion-dust of desert: prophets' tombs turned to zinc and copper at sunset on the ancient lake. Its huge sand-faults like watermarks from the air; green and citron giving to gunmetal, to a single plum-dark sail, moist, palpitant: sticky-winged nymph. (Durrell 1968:11)

The “steep skyline” provides the image with a sharp, horizontal plane which offers an aerial and atmospheric perspective. This horizontality is contrasted with the round shapes of the “low cloud” blurring the straight and the curved lines. This steep skyline, I propose, might be of a pale blue, intensely bright setting up a chromatic perspective between light and the dark tones of the “pearl ground with shadows in oyster and violet”. These strong dark colours offset the pale sky to ensure a colour perspective that provides tonal depth to the landscape.

To accomplish this stylistically, Durrell uses an adjectival phrase instead of a prepositional one, where the adjectives strengthen the coloured forms of sky, cloud and ground. The phrase “green and citron giving to gunmetal” uses colour patches which blur into one another; blending from green, to citron, into gunmetal. The movement of the colours is provided by the word “giving”, which is a present participle of the verb to give, indicative of time present and progressive. When “giving” is alliteratively linked to “gunmetal”, a poetic lilt is added to the movement. The only other verb is contained in the phrase “prophets' tombs turned to zinc and copper at sunset on the ancient lake”. Here “turned” is a past participle indicating a return into the historical past.

Jack Stewart indicates that “the prepositional shifters (to, with, at, on, from, under) articulate a moving viewpoint, drawing the eye into the text” (Stewart 2008:157). This movement is added to by the alliterative gradation of brown to bronze, like rising musical notes. The gradating browns moving from opaque to golden light-filled metallic, from pearl and shadowed oyster opalescent, are darkened by shadow tinged with deeper flecks of reflected violet in a chiaroscuro effect. These colours exude a sense of heat and of smell, as time, memory and perception mingle in this textual visuality. Thus it is the flowing together of time past and time present that fills the painterly imagery. The *landscape-tones* establish a vision of place as a palimpsest held in the imaginary of memory, a map of overlapping and shifting perspective that provides the reader with the uncanny feeling of *déjà vu* (Stewart 2008:157). Durrell's images are resonant with memories of the past that haunt this landscape; of the passing of time held in the present of infinite space. I suggest, following Bergson's contention about the continuity of time, that the adjectival, prepositional and verbal palimpsest in this evocation of visual-textual memories is indicative of the co-terminous nature of time present and time past in the novel *Balthazar*.

Placed in the foreground of this colourful spatiality, and central to the image, is the sacred lake Mareotis upon the shores of which stand both Alexandria and the place called Taposiris Magna, where rumour has it Cleopatra's tomb can be found. The tombs described are religious, however, only those of past “prophets' tombs”, which are bathed in the light reflected off the waters of the lake. The tombs become a fiery copper offset by silvery shades of zinc. The folding together of light and dark, rich colour, horizontal lines, curves and movement destroys linear perspective, creating a depth, a length and a breadth which provides a three-dimensional volume to the scene.

In the midst of the lake floats a single plum-coloured sail which, along with the tombs, brings human life and activity, as well as human demise, into the landscape. This sail is the only vertical in a picture of soft curved and horizontal shapes, and it resembles the masculine vertical bar Klimt inserted into his paintings. The plum-dark is reminiscent of a shade of purple, so the sail might be an allusion to Antony, or to Cleopatra's purple-sailed barge. The word "palpitant" provides a fluttering, pulsating movement referring back to the sail, but also forward to the image of the "sticky-winged nymph" the central textual and visual metaphor. Palpitant can also mean trembling or beating, and an impression of throbbing new life is established, something born from the sticky moisture of the lake, like a dragonfly or naiad. The sail comes newly alive as it flutters, pulsates and quivers constantly metamorphosing like a spirit of nature inhabiting the lake, an illusion of fleeting beauty. Again there is the sense of the oscillation of time past into time present, old into new.

The word sticky is very tactile implying gumminess, but it is imbricated with the humid haze rising off the water. The sail and the sticky-winged nymph are the only two living creatures within the artistry of this landscape. In the backward and forward movement of the sail lies a resemblance to the fluttering and vibration of just opened wings still sticky from being shed. The stickiness of memory flutters backwards and forwards like the sail on the lake, or the wings of the nymph. Time is held in the suspension and haziness of memory's attempt to fix the visual essence of the landscape using a resinous gum.

In the novel *Balthazar*, Durrell further captures, in small *workpoints*, the essence of this landscape through the more polychromatic alteration of the seasons with their colours and tactility:

Summer: buff sand, hot marble sky
Autumn: swollen bruise-greys.
Winter: freezing snow, cool sands.
clear sky panels, glittering with mica.
washed delta greens.
magnificent starscapes. (1968:11)

This text is centred and in italics, which immediately gives it prominence. These descriptive metaphors are like a poem; a lyrical evocation of the seasons and the natural beauty of the landscape. Using a pluralized conjunction in "swollen bruise-greys and washed delta-greens", Durrell provides an enhanced sense of colour: smeared, swirled and washed onto a canvas. These colours are stronger and more expressionist in nature than the *landscape-tones*.

Verbs in these *workpoints* are minimal: "washed", "freezing" and "glittering", setting up a movement between sky and earth that seems to join them. The colours are vivid and sensuous and add to the "treasure vault of memory" (Steiner 1964:21). The spatial layering is visually caught in the memory-time of *Balthazar*. These miniature landscape vignettes of colour and density are used to present the natural world in all its beauty. I propose that the *landscape-tones* and *workpoints* in *Balthazar* establish a vision of place as a palimpsest held in the movement of time located in memory. The cyclical movement of time past into time present is seen to provide a map of overlapping and shifting perspectives.

This mesmerizing map is replicated in the representation of the cityscape of Alexandria found in the first novel of the *Alexandria quartet: Justine*. The power of Alexandria's presence in Darley's memory forces him to recreate the city, re-member it within his narrative. As memory unlocks the past for the narrator, it allows him to view the city from a distanced perspective, almost from an aerial position, as though he were

looking down upon it. As theorist Michel de Certeau says, this elevation “transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes” (de Certeau 1984:92). Alexandria becomes the text the narrator maps as a colour tone image which is readable. These colours construct the space of memory, time and place with a plasticity, light and rhythm that are poetic in tone and style. The textual description of the city world makes use of “bewitching” visual and painterly perspectives:

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. (Durrell 1966:12)

This beautiful memory of Alexandria is captured in an artistic medium of bright colours, golden light and mauve-green shadow, with an overlay of vibrant red-brown, the colour of blood. Durrell mixes and matches his words stimulating a sense of the colours of the landscape through contrasts, tone and nuance. Virginia Woolf supports this painterly quality of literature when she writes:

It is a very complex business, the mixing and marrying of words that goes on, probably unconsciously, in the poet’s mind to feed the reader’s eye. All great writers are great colourists, just as they are musicians into the bargain; they always contrive to make their scenes glow and darken and change to the eye. (Woolf 1950:182)

Using a textual metaphoric process, Durrell produces inter-sensory imagery, which could be considered as literary synaesthesia. This inter-sensory imagery combines both the visual and the transfer of the seen onto the canvas of the page, creating the movement

of the brush and brilliance of the light and colour. This play of light and dark, of shape and tactility conjures the cityscape as it is envisioned in the memories of the character-narrator Darley.

Using patches of opaque pigment Durrell’s “pictorial writing” provokes a questioning of both writing and representation. In the quotation provided, the poetic conjoining of the words dust-red or chalk-mauve as compound adjectives is used to enforce the vividness and physical presence of these patches of colour within the textual visuality of the writing. The shards of textual colour seem to resemble sharp, abrupt brush stroke applications made by the artist’s memory, which possess a visual violence that allows the patches, as theorist Mieke Bal writes, to act as “active or performative signifiers, rather than referents ‘put down in writing’” (Bal 1997:84).

These active shards of colour are fast drying on the memory. They are of long duration, as revealed in the use of the word “tempera”, extending through the past into the present, where they are varnished by “sea damp” like “gum” to enhance and retain their resonance. This provides a sticky blurriness to the picture replicating the fuzzy nature of images recalled in memory. Time and space become blurred and past slides into present on the lemony light made gentle and soft by dust. This dusky soft light provides a further blurring, as though the finger of memory has smoothed the image. Durrell evocatively links metaphors of the natural world, such as “light filtered through the essence of lemons”, with those of painting technique, such as “tempera”. Unlike the *workpoints* and *landscape-tones* found in *Balthazar*, the description contains a number of present and past tense verbs which add movement and blend time past and time present within the memories evoked by the city. The chiaroscuro play of light and dark allows for the contrast needed to establish

a sense of spatial perspective in the visual delineation of Alexandria. The living city is brought to life through the movement, the smells, light, sound and tactility provided by Durrell's stylistic devices: adjectives, verbs, metaphors, punctuation and short, tight sentences.

Through this stylistic technique, Durrell manages to establish a relation between art, natural forms and the space of the city. This relation provides a text in which the co-terminous nature of time past and time present helps establish the multi-layered time-space-place palimpsest located in memory which enhances the textual-visual power of the city's image within the novel *Justine*. Darley remains enslaved by his memories of the city, returning

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. (Durrell 1966:11)

The heavy iron chains and their links harbour him to the past in his present. His emotional entrapment is elicited in the expression “beloved Alexandria”. She is regarded as an exigent but loved mistress, whose human occupants are merely brief blossoms in the games that she plays. Chained like a lover to the city, the landscape shapes Darley's identity, his history and the enclosing spatial perception of his memories.

The enclosing spatial perception of memory in which the palimpsestic nature of the city resides is established through Darley's comments on the seasons in Alexandria where:

One is plunged out of winter into: wax effigy of a summer too hot to breathe. But here, at least, in Alexandria, the sea-breaths save us from the tideless weight of summer nothingness.” (Durrell 1968:11)

This “wax effigy” is an encaustic fusing the stifling appearance of the city in lustrous enamel, or in a death mask. There is an emptiness and suspension of time, past and present held in stasis, contained in the words “summer nothingness”. This image of the city with its sinister, stifling stillness recalls the deserted piazzas with their colonnaded architecture that feature so prominently in the works of the artist Giorgio de Chirico. These piazzas, in which time seems suspended, are filled with light and deep shadows, but emanate an ominous sense of fatidic and oppressive silence caught in the louring green tonalities. Like Durrell's real but unreal depiction of Alexandria, critic Ian Walker notes:

De Chirico's city was not only a space to put next to the actual city, but also one to place – palimpsest like – over it, so that the actual city and the imagined city were fused. Reality was infiltrated by the dream, the present infiltrated by the past. (Walker 2002:37)

The theatrical prop-like nature of De Chirico's piazza paintings represents a world of eerie stasis enveloped in enigmatic imaginary space that mirrors the portrayal of Alexandria in the quote from Durrell's novel. The fact that the critic Ian Walker uses the word “palimpsest” points to the similarity between the images created by both artist and writer. Durrell and De Chirico create an “unreal” city held in memory and imagination that is mapped like a palimpsest over the geography of the “real” city. This palimpsestic geography of the city is exposed in the Bergsonian co-terminous ancient past and contemporary present that oscillate within Darley's memories:

The city, inhabited by these memories of mine, moves not only backwards into our history, studded by the great names which mark every station of recorded time, but also back and forth in the living present, so to speak – among its contemporary faiths and races: the hundred little spheres which religion or lore creates and which cohere softly together like cells to form the

great sprawling jellyfish which is Alexandria today. (Durrell 1968:127)

Memory mingles with time and the glorious past mingles with the “living” present in its multiplicity of creeds, races, colours and smells, a living creature made up of “cells”. The “soft coherence” of the cells imparts a gelatinous nature to the city, which is emphasised through the use of the word “jellyfish”. This gelatinous ambience relates to the functionality of both memory and the movement of time as colloidal. All boundaries appear amorphous doing away with the concept of linearity, evoked in the descriptive style of the passage which reveals Darley’s memory of the city as possessing a timelessness and pictorial stillness.

This timelessness is enforced in the quoted passage through the long, winding, almost serpentine sentence construction. Structuring the sentences like this, I suggest, allows Durrell to provide the passage with a suspension of linear time, the sinuous motion creating a multi-layered temporality. This coiling motion is further embodied through the description of the city as a “great, sprawling jellyfish”. This intimates the city is an invertebrate and viscid thing, whilst simultaneously imparting spatial size to the image. The viscous nature of memory, along with the tentacles of this sprawling jellyfish, hold Darley in thrall, as he returns “night after night” to thoughts of the city and to his textual re-examining and overwriting of it (Durrell 1968:11). Time past and time present are collapsed together in these palimpsestic overwritings that map the city.

It is the playful construction of the palimpsestual nature of the city, as well as its real and unreal status that encourages the idea of it resembling a heterotopia. Philosopher Michel Foucault, in his article entitled *Of Other Spaces*, contrasted utopias with what he

termed heterotopias. Utopias are considered “sites with no real place” (Foucault 1986:24). He goes on to indicate that, in society, there are also real places:

which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 1986:24)

Foucault uses the mirror as a utopian “placeless place”, where the reflection is a virtual space below the mirror’s surface. This allows one to see a shadow that “reflects me back to myself where in fact I am entirely absent” (Foucault 1986:24). In contrast to the reflection stands the real, where the mirror:

functions as a heterotopia ... it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal. (1986:24)

The difference between the real and the virtual or unreal reflection, is shown to establish confusion, the mirror providing two notions of space that are entwined. This entwined space is very much what Durrell achieves in Darley’s memories enact this double image of the spatial topography of Alexandria as simultaneously existing as real and unreal. The city, like a heterotopia, is an eclectic mirror-like image, elusive as mist and as fragile it possesses an otherness and alternate order that can be considered as possessing the absence of a centre (Tcherepashenets 2008:82-83).

In the front note to *Justine*, Durrell writes that “only the city is real” (1966:7). In *Balthazar* in the authorial note he writes: “Nor could the

city be less unreal” (1968:7). Then again on the opening page of *Balthazar*, the narrator Darley says “The city half imagined (yet wholly real)” (1968:11). Here the “real” is juxtaposed with the “imaginary” or “unreal” to create a city that paradoxically represents an irreducible space within a single space. I propose the space within space mirrors the time within time, in what Durrell will refer to as a space-time continuum. This space-time is melded with place and located in memory. Foucault, himself, associated heterotopias with “slices in time”, where time is held in suspension and linearity is destroyed (Foucault 1986:26). I postulate that Durrell attempts to achieve this suspension of linear time throughout the *Alexandria quartet* by making use of the metaphor of memory. Memory is an alternate manner of ordering reality, in its ephemeral and elusive qualities, the space of memory can be seen to function in a similar manner to a heterotopia. The real and unreal spaces of Darley’s memories of the city act as a palimpsest of time and space that reflect the city’s heterotopic nature.

It is Darley’s continued nostalgic reconstruction of the city through the aid of memory, that causes him to create a fantasy cityscape, one that is mirage-like and intangible filled with brilliant colours and prismatic reflections that rise up in his memory as “luminous and trembling as if painted on dusty silk” (Durrell 1968:13). The evanescent nature of this image reveals the city as an entity that is simultaneously visible and invisible, before it melts “slowly into the horizon mist” (Durrell 1968:14). The city is an illusion mapped within memory; an imaginary, dream-like image, elusive as mist and as fragile. The memory of the narrator is revealed as unreliably subjective, a personal and imaginative viewpoint that recreates an imaginary city.

No longer a “real” city, Alexandria becomes only an uncanny dissolving palimpsest of memories painted onto the canvas of Darley’s

text. Darley’s immersion in memory abolishes the distance that separates time present and time past, creating a reversible continuity. Time and memory seem to fold into one another. The past as Deleuze says “does not represent something that has been, but simply something that is and that coexists with itself as present” (Deleuze 2000:58). This coexistence of past and present is to be seen in the stasis of time in space that Durrell indicates he is attempting to achieve, “Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum. The four novels ... interlap, interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed” (Durrell 1968:7). Durrell uses the imbrication of all times, the folding of one time into another, to evoke the fugitive and haphazard nature of memory, time and space in Darley’s portrayal of the city and its landscape. The absent present, found in the reconstructions of memory, constantly transforms his perception of his present, as there can be no perception that remains unaltered by memory, and memory is always transformed by other memories (Olney 1998:339).

In this article I have examined how memory collapses time past into time present which continually recreates the landscape and city of Alexandria as a palimpsest. I have intimated how Darley’s visual-textual evocation of the city and its topography causes them to be simultaneously real and unreal. Alexandria becomes a mirage, a mere palimpsestic projection of Darley’s present yearning for a past that never existed, but resides entirely within his memory. I have further suggested in this article that Durrell stylistically achieves his time-space-place-memory palimpsest by means of metaphor, sentence structure, and the “arabesques of adjectives” (Steiner 1964:18). Durrell’s ability to locate the perfect adjective or create one is, as I have argued, instrumental in conjuring up the light, colour, smells, sounds and textures which pervade the topographic descriptions in the *Alexandria quartet*. This sumptuous language is still a

point of issue with critics of Durrell's writing, but I claim, that in similar fashion to D.H. Lawrence's descriptions of "spirit of place", Durrell's jewel-like language creates a visual-textual city and landscape that is vividly alive.

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