DEUS LOCI

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". . . you remain,
small sunburnt
deus loci . . ."

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"A Mighty Shifty Strangeness": Time, Memory, and Narrative in Durrell's *Avignon Quintet*

Samuel Kessler

> "The philosopher was seated on the lawn. He said, 'Signs form a languge, but not the one you think you know.'"
>
> —Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

The five books that comprise Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet* follow the lives and relationships of nearly a dozen interlocking characters, set against the backdrop of the Second World War, the Occupation of France, and the war in North Africa. Beginning with *Monsieur* (1974), and progressing through *Livia* (1978), *Constance* (1982), *Sebastian* (1983), and *Quinx* (1985), the novels unfold around two sets of friends—ostensibly, one "fictional" and one "real"—who live in and travel between the cities of Avignon, Geneva, and Alexandria. Yet what is presented at the conclusion of *Monsieur* as a story–arc akin to Russian *matryoshka* dolls—narratives stacked one inside another—is, repeatedly and in various reversals and sleights–of–hand, revealed over the following four volumes to be something far more subtle and complex. As the novels of the *Quintet* unfold, the reader loses hold not only of the narrative's original timeline but also of the "doll" (that is, the separate "fictional" or "real" story) inside of which any given character is supposed to be residing. The books' various personalities encounter and interact with one another. Characters in later novels respond to events that they may or may not have experienced and meet others who may or may not be from the same storyline.

What is important about this narrative nonlinearity and what will form the crux of the argument in this article—is not only the liter-

ary expertise with which Durrell executes this overlapping of characters and chronologies—and that expertise is certainly something worth noting—it is also that this narrative interplay lies at the heart of what makes the *Quintet* an interesting and provocative creation in the first place, leading to questions about time, the writing and recording of memory, and the quest to convey meaning and experience in literary fiction. Furthermore, the non–linear storytelling that warps and wefts through these novels is part of the strategy by which Durrell devolves upon himself the right to make claims about philosophy, poetry, and psychology in the postmodern era, when the totems and holy cows of pre–War belief were being swept away. It is essential to note, however, that the *Quintet* absolutely seeks comprehensibility even while it unfolds and digresses in unusual ways. Indeed, if one were to set aside or overlook some of the more incomprehensible character associations, the volumes of the *Quintet* can be read as realist novels about Occupied France and Mediterranean society during wartime. Or, with their lengthy digressions into Freudianism, Gnosticism, and the Knights Templar, the books can be studied as philosophical treatises or as mystery stories. But focusing only on content does not do justice to the underlying literary provocations Durrell is quite clearly performing. As can be seen below, Durrell's narrative intermingling is done in the service of larger claims about time and memory and, specifically, about how stories function in the creation of meaning and the conveyance of human experience in an era of war and cultural tumult.

This article is divided into four sections, each of which builds on the one before, all ultimately creating an argument for a new theoretical conception of the narrative theory and philosophical purpose that structures Durrell's *Quintet.* Part one, "Peculiarities in the Narrative of the *Quintet,*" introduces the reader to examples of the more unusual non–linear movements that Durrell executes over the course of the novels. This section is not an exhaustive catalog of such literary moves. Rather, it is an exemplary selection aimed at illuminating and underlining the narrative intricacies that any theoretical explanation or apparatus would need to take into account. Part two, "Understanding the *Quintet* I: Past Theories," engages with extant critical scholarship on Durrell and the Avignon novels, explaining and analyzing prior metaphorical and theoretical models that have sought to characterize the narrative complexity of the *Quintet.* Although each of these theories has much merit, and all build on existing regimes of

metaphor and symbolism in Durrell's works, none fully accounts for both Durrell's intellectual ideals and his commitment to (and maintenance of) the *Quintet*'s readability. Part three, "Building Blocks of a New Theory," returns to the five novels. Here, instead of analyzing moments of non–linear narrative, the focus is on Durrell's descriptions (or on Durrell's characters' self–descriptions) of the project of the *Quintet* that occur within its own pages. Through his characters' philosophical discussions, Durrell points the reader toward a number of different but overlapping theories concerning narrative and its relationship to memory, meaning, and form.

The article ends with part four, "Understanding the *Quintet* II: A New Theory." Building on ideas from Paul Ricoeur, ways are discussed in which engendering meaning and truth in fiction need neither be constrained by linear storytelling nor require the sacrifice of narrative intelligibility. Fictions that allow for a displacement of linear time do so in the service of the pursuit of a deeper form of meaning, one in which, as Ricoeur claims: "fiction, by opening us to the unreal, brings us back to the essential" ("Fictional Narratives" 16). Furthermore, and, perhaps, just as importantly, this exploration of the *Quintet* can help us better to understand why the novels themselves are so entirely comprehensible. Much of postmodern fiction seeks to disturb the reader, to push him or her to the limits of imagination and detach experience and image from comprehension. What is striking about Durrell's Avignon stories is that these five books hang together as well as they do, and that at their conclusion the reader is not at all left feeling lost or astray. It is on this foundation—one of uneasy resolution, where the goal is to convey an experience but not to do so by resorting to usual linear narratives nor to diverge so far from comprehension that the work becomes a pastiche of signs and sounds and gestures without accessible form—that a new theoretical framework emerges through which the *Quintet* might be read.

Peculiarities in the Narrative of the *Quintet*

Readers familiar with the first three novels of Lawrence Durrell's famed *Alexandria Quartet* are already accustomed to narrative sleights–of–hand. In that earlier work, the books *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958), and *Mountolive* (1958) recapitulate the same timeframe, telling one story from three vantage points, seeking to capture the complexity inherent in human individuality and the uncertainty

of claims to truth—emotional, political, or otherwise. Time itself, however, is not of particular consideration in those books, at least as a philosophical issue. Time is a function of the narrative; events happen one after another simply because that chronology is the usual way stories are told. Beginning again the time–space with each new novel is not meant to signal to the reader some alternative program of non–linearity. It is, quite simply, a convenience. The *Quartet* is about truth in romance and politics, about love and friendship in a time of war, and, most importantly, about the starkly different way two closely related individuals can see and understand the same situation. It is not, however, a meditation or investigation of time, memory, or narrative truth.

Monsieur, the first of the Avignon novels, represents a major departure from the literary form Durrell employs in the *Quartet.* Centered on a group of characters that includes Bruce Drexel (whose book, at first, we are perhaps reading), Pia, Toby, Rob Sutcliffe (another novelist who has written a book—or a set of books—about these friends), Piers, Sylvie, and Akkad; *Monsieur* opens with clear undertones of narrative unsteadiness. From its first pages, the book is both self–conscious ("I jot down these words") and deeply equivocal. Bruce Drexel tells us: "How well I remembered, how well he remembered! The Bruce that I was, and the Bruce I become as I jot down these words, a few every day" (*Quintet* 5). Yet, on the next page, the reader learns of another book by Rob Sutcliffe, entitled *Tu Quoque,* which purports to tell the same story and may be the source material for *Monsieur.* The narrator, whom we still assume is Bruce, says: "[I] must be trying to objectify [my] toughts and emotions by treating them as one would a novel, but it didn't really work. As a matter of fact, in Rob Sutcliffe's famous novel about us all, things begin in exactly this way. I was strangely echoing his protagonist [...]" (*Quintet* 6).

Already in the opening pages of the first novel, the reader is left to question whose story it is that is narrated. And the narrative confusion does not end there. At the novel's end, the reader learns that the characters and scenes in the pages just completed are the creation of one Aubrey Blanford, who tells the reader in no uncertain terms that *Monsieur* is about his own set of friends: the "real" Hilary, Livia, Constance, and Sebastian.

All of the above is only just the beginning. As the *Quintet* progresses, the interactions between the "real" characters of Blanford's

world and the "fictions" of Drexel's and Sutcliffe's become even more intermingled. Blanford and Sutcliffe hold long conversations; Sutcliffe and Toby move to Geneva and drink into the night with Constance and Sebastian; Drexel is always just around the corner. Breaking sharply with the *Quartet* model, Durrell in the *Quintet* repeatedly seeks to undermine the reader's trust in declarations of narrative voice and temporality. The narrative uncertainty in *Monsieur* only foreshadows the complex interplay of time and memory that underpins much of the poetic and philosophic foundation of the next four novels. Blanford, the reader is informed at the end of *Monsieur,* is meeting with the Duchess of Tu in order to discuss his new book, likely a novel similar to *Monsieur.* Yet Blanford actually turns out to be meeting with no one at all—the Duchess has died long before. The narrator (Drexel? Sutcliffe? Durrell himself in third–person omniscience?) says: "[The barkeeper] had come to respect this distinguished elderly Englishman who came so often to spend the whole evening talking in whispers to an empty alcove [...]" (*Quintet* 293). Thus, what had initially been presented to the reader as a shift in authorial perspective—from Drexel to Sutcliffe to Blanford (the Russian dolls motif)—loses narrative coherence altogether. Perhaps, the whole story of *Monsieur* is really just a long tale being told to an empty booth? What had, therefore, been presented as a linear story, albeit one with unreliable authorship, devolves into something without frame or form. Blanford, a man who speaks to ghosts, is a deeply suspect narrator. And he becomes all the more so when he befriends both his "fictional" characters—Drexel and Sutcliffe—in later volumes. Yet somehow the narrative all hangs together. That fact attests both to Durrell's literary virtuosity and the posing of the central theoretical question about these books.

The following is one more example of temporal–narrative instability before beginning to grapple with a theoretical language that can do justice to such a complex linguistic structure. Take, for instance, another passage in *Monsieur* in which it is unclear whom the narrator actually is (Durrell? Blanford? Sutcliffe?): "It is still a moot point whether Socrates, in fact, exists as a something more than a character in a novel by Plato. And what of me, he thought? Am I possibly an invention of someone like old D—the devil at large?" (*Quintet* 279). Ostensibly, this quotation comes from Blanford (the outermost Russian doll) asking the question of Sutcliffe, his fictional creation, about a possible alternative narrative even to their own.

(Think of someone asking if Earth is really a snow-globe in someone's hand). As Lawrence Durrell is, perhaps, "D—the devil at large," it becomes nearly impossible to separate narrative voices: Durrell is writing a character who is asking if there is a writer who is writing him. Blanford is the "writer" of the books; yet, Durrell sometimes interjects. D—the devil at large, does presumably make appearances, as a third-person omniscient narrator, through the five books. Or, perhaps, "D" is not Durrell at all but Drexel, who is always moving about the edges of the page.

But again, while reading, all of the above feels in some way narratively defensible. That is, it does not disrupt the flow of the storyline. As Blanford says later in *Constance*: "Yet obstinately I dream of such a book, full of not completely discrete characters, of ancestors and descendants all mixed up—could such people walk in and out of each other's lives without damaging the quiddity of each other?" (*Quintet* 693). Blanford's is the foundational question of Durrell's desire for the *Quintet*: is such a book possible? Yes, it seems, because the *Quintet* has done it. The next step in the analysis, however, is to seek a language for what precisely has been done. How does one theorize such a narrative, which is neither linear (realist) nor "the writing of the disaster" (to steal from Blanchot)—that is, the mimicking in language of the utterly incomprehensible in a way that obscures storyline and plot?

Understanding the *Quintet* I: Past Theories

Scholars of Durrell have long been engaged in the task of understanding the philosophical and literary structures that underpin the *Quintet*. Some critics have called the work a meditation on otherness; other critics, an investigation of thought itself; still other critics, a *künstlerroman*, the evolution of an artist. Paul Lorenz focuses on the *Quintet*'s blending of Near Eastern and Western thought, of Egyptian and medieval traditions (104–17). John N. Lenzi interprets the Blanford–Sutcliffe relationship as "daimonic" possession (57–60). Richard Pine notes that, with the *Quintet*, "Durrell made books which are both spaceless and timeless[,] in the sense that while they have relatively ascertainable locations and timescales they might take place in any age and under any conditions" (349). This air of the "spaceless and timeless" has annoyed many of Durrell's reviewers in the popular press and might account somewhat for the disappearance of much of

his work from widespread study and public attention in the decade and a half since his death.

One of the more logical theoretical steps that some scholars have taken is to see the *Quintet* as an example of postmodern fiction, a rejection of linear storytelling altogether. Stefan Herbrechter sees in Durrell an author who plays so intricately with forms of knowing and expression that he articulates the very edge of our sense of being. Herbrechter describes a phenomenon whereby readers of the *Quintet* reflect its postmodern narrative tendencies back onto the novels themselves (16–17). The virtue in such a reading is that it builds on theories of memory, especially the observations that later thoughts, in becoming mixed with earlier ones, force the formation of new memory narratives and, therefore, of new aspects of identity. It likewise points toward what we might call a sort of reader's analepsis: we return in our memory to our reading of the *Quintet,* after newly finishing our reading of the *Quintet*, and search for narratives that seem bent in time, just as we are bending time in that very search.

But Herbrechter's proposal also assumes that Durrell is playing with the reader, keeping him or her in some ways at a distance rather than inviting him or her in. And that is where the reader misses the fundamental empathy of the *Quintet*, i.e., the reader's feeling of being a part of the unfolding story, by being a participant and not a bystander, fully cognizant of the narrative dissonances yet accepting of them all the same. Durrell recognizes that time is one of the feeblest elements of human experience. We pledge our allegiance to the clock and to the world built upon the mechanization of minutes and hours, but when we are released, or when we go insane, or when we simply forget to renew our vows, we thereby realize that we had never truly been operating along a linear, time-dependent plane at all. Many are the moments when time seems eternal, which is to say, when time seems to have disappeared as a factor in our lives. As Durrell notes, his earlier series (*Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive*) is time-repetitive, different views of the same location, each a conscious re–beginning from the same moment on the clock. They are not defeating linear quantification; they are simply repeating it so that by virtue of different angles we might arrive at a more–or–less complete perspective. The *Quintet* is geometric, a multi–dimensional creation inhabiting a landscape where temporal reality is as much a fungible factor as geography, emotion, or political allegiance.

Using an image developed elsewhere in Durrell's writing, Ian MacNiven employs the metaphor of the "labyrinth" in relation to the *Quintet.* The *Quintet* is, he writes, "the portrait of a labyrinth, physical as well as mental [...] [It] investigates the pattern of fiction–into–reality and its inverse, the reality–into–fiction, in an attempt to redefine the process of creation, the relationship of the author to his fictions" ("The *Quincunx*" 243). MacNiven then proceeds to describe a process by which he believes Durrell's life experiences were incorporated into his fiction. Fiction, in this setting, plays the role for Durrell of a psychologist's couch, somewhere on which to sit and tell one's life story, where all of it is "true" but with some parts more "real" than others. "*Monsieur* and its siblings sprang from a larger but less visible tapestry of [Durrell's] life, from his imaginings as much as from his experiences, his conversations and his reading" (*Lawrence Durrell* 589). (Following MacNiven's argument, the *Quintet* is about an attempt to capture the experience of living through the Occupation and the fears and joys of the war in the Mediterranean. As will be discussed below, a different reading is presented regarding the reading of the theoretical structure by which the *Quintet* achieves that end).

MacNiven's metaphor of the labyrinth arises out of Durrell's own work but at a point in Durrell's literary career before he had begun to experiment and speculate on the themes that would underpin the *Quintet.* A labyrinth, though it may appear infinite and complex, is, in reality, contained and comprehensible. It neither grows nor shrinks. Like the world of *The Alexandria Quartet*, it is repetitive, constructed from room upon similar room. Viewed from different angles, it appears to change but nothing different ever truly happens. When one attempts to map biography onto fiction, one falls into the habit of searching for correspondences, drawing straight lines, and assigning names. One writes "fiction–into–reality," without realizing that the conception of reality itself is already a fiction. The *Quintet* dispenses with such modernist practicalities—and that is exactly what any literary theory concerning its structure must take into account.

Finally, Donald Kaczvinsky, in his attempt to map the *Quintet*'s narrative landscape, argues that Gnosticism is the source of the novels' peculiar structure (110–11). The genesis of the *Quintet*, he writes, can be found in Durrell's "*Envoi*" on the final page of *Monsieur*, where we see the *Quintet*'s character relationships written like a three-tiered gnostic cosmos: Durrell wrote Blanford who wrote

Sutcliffe; Durrell fell in love with Constance and Livia who became Sylvie and Pia. Kaczvinsky further argues that the reader must always understand Durrell as standing outside his creations, "just as, for the Gnostics, the God of goodness stands separate from the fragmented, 'real' world" (112). As in the *Quartet* before it, Kaczvinsky claims that in the *Quintet* Durrell plays with his readers' sense of the "true" narrative while he himself remains aloof.

My differences with Kaczvinsky's subtle and nuanced argument should already be apparent. The *Quintet* should not be read as maintaining "separate" spaces; Durrell's engagement with his characters, and his characters' interactions with one another, are all of a piece. And it is this fact, coupled with the readability and accessibility of the storylines, that calls for new theoretical exploration. None of the theoretical options discussed above quite capture the unusual combination of non–linear narrative and yet (for lack of a more sophisticated terminology) easy reading that they engender. The *Quintet* is an engaging and absorbing story, lacking many of the harsh edges and overtly clashing symbols that define the avant–garde of postmodern fiction. But at the same time, Durrell is seeking to create a form of storytelling that, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, "brings to language aspects, qualities, and values of reality that lack access to language that is directly descriptive" (*Time and Narrative* xi). (For surely non–temporal and interacting "fictional" characters, creations of one another and of a third-person omniscient narrator, are anything but "directly descriptive"). The next section returns the reader to the text of the *Quintet* and the search for a new language with which to analyze Durrell's narrative structure.

Building Blocks of a New Theory

In order to understand the narrative cartography of the *Quintet,* and, therefore, to employ a critical theory that does a more complete justice to the subtle complexity of these works, the reader must look back into the books themselves. It is in pursuit of this end that Durrell's own geometric explanation of his novels proves helpful. Durrell bases his idea for the *Quintet* on the classical design called a *quincunx*, which features five points, one at each corner of a square with a fifth in the center. *Monsieur* is to be that center, the point that transforms it from a square to a quincunx.

Durrell believes that the quincunx provides a fabric that

links memory to both shape and symbol, or, rather, the quincunx is an attempt to capture a particular metaphysics in narrative form. In an interview, the interviewer asks Durrell: "You mentioned form again. That is your primary interest, isn't it, whatever the art? Durrell responds: "Yes, I think so" ("The Art of Fiction"). In the quincunx, Durrell offers a definition of postmodernity—its borders, patterns, and idealisms. What appears solid, slips into fragility with the slightest movement left or right. The quincunx is stable so long as each of the points is occupied, but who occupies those points is entirely irrelevant: "He thought: 'To commingle and intersperse contingent realities—that's the game!' [...] We are all fragments of one another; everyone has a little bit of everything in his make–up" (*Quintet* 693).

For the quincunx to carry its full theoretical weight, Durrell needs us to imagine it as being in constant motion, pulsing and wriggling and almost always nearly falling in on itself:

> The notion of an absolute freedom in the non–deterministic sense alarmed him [...] Then he said, "What would you give me if I wrote a book to prove that the great Blanford is simply the fiction of one of his fictions? E h ? You know the answer as well as I do, but I could not resist saying it out loud. "The top prize, Robin Sutcliffe, immortality in the here and now. How would that suit you?" This left him very thoughtful in a somewhat rueful way. He is lazy, he doesn't want to co–operate one little bit. He lacks my driving ambition. "No, Constance my dear, ours shall be a classical quincunx—a Q; perhaps a *Tu Quoque* will echo throughout it. We will try and refresh poetry and move it more towards the center of ordinary life." (*Quintet* 351)

We read (and even somewhat feel) how Durrell develops his "eastern" theory, one that emphasizes space over time. (The "West" for Durrell is about time; the "East" concerns space. It is the West that led the world into war and upended the societies of the Mediterranean. The East now promises its wisdom as a buttress against any such disastrous repetition). Capturing a non–deterministic freedom is only possible if linearity is ceded to complete three–dimensional expression. That is, when we interact with our memories as easily as with our fictive creations, when we live in the total present, we find what

Durrell calls the "center of ordinary life." Blanford jokes with his fictional protagonist Sutcliffe about writing a book that would make Blanford himself a fictional protagonist of Sutcliffe. He then remarks to Constance, in whose house he is living, that together he and Sutcliffe will write Sutcliffe's book, *Tu Quoque*, snippets of which we read throughout the *Quintet*. Richard Pine says, "'what happens' in the work of Lawrence Durrell is as much a matter for the reader as for the author" (325).

The visual of the quincunx is worth pondering for a few more sentences, though it remains somewhat elusive, an image without form, an action without space. Imagine the interactions of the various points of the quincunx as a fold. Gilles Deleuze develops this concept:

> Moving from a branching of inflection, we distinguish a point that is no longer what runs along inflection, nor is it the point of inflection itself; it is the one in which the lines perpendicular to tangents meet in a state of variation. [The fold] is not exactly a point but a place, a position, a site [...] a line emanating from lines. (19)

Something of the Deleuzian fold can be seen in the way Durrell describes his plan for the *Quintet,* with its language of ever-present motion rejecting the repetitive. Inflections and positions are sites of meeting. Recurrence has given way to emanation.

It is commonly understood that how we narrate our past reveals much about who we are in the present. What is more difficult to convey, and certainly to write, is the (mostly) unconscious assemblage of that narration itself. (This notion is a major theme for Paul Ricoeur, as will be mentioned below). Lines connect with other lines, each of unknown origin and inconceivable destination. Experience and assimilation of experience are both mediated processes. Much remains invisible. "'How real is reality?' Blanford asked his cat which gazed back at him unwinkingly, unseeingly" (*Quintet* 280). How we see depends on what we have seen before and what we expect to see later. Durrell "folds" us in (from the five points of the quincunx) upon his various narrators and, thereby, separates us from our pretensions to descriptive comprehension. He reveals the fractures that always define the boundaries between experience, memory, and speech. Indeed, he seeks to show that experience itself is mediated and conflicted. Any

attempt to capture it, most especially through the channels of narrated memory, is suspect from the start. According to Walter Benjamin, "All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder" (102).

Such studied erasure of chronological formalism, and of characters in their proper fields of imagination, has the remarkable effect of granting Durrell an immense amount of authorial freedom. In fact, it allows Durrell to question the idea of the author itself. As Michel Foucault writes: "First of all, we can say that today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority [...] [it is] a question of creating space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (102) [italics my own]. Durrell "unfolds" his writing upon his readers, and then "enfolds" his characters within that double relationship (Durrell's "double concerto"; Ricoeur's "redescription"): interior to the novel and exterior to the reader:

> It was curious, too, to hear them discuss the interminable sequences of the "double concerto" as Blanford called their novel now. He took the concerns of form very seriously and reacted with annoyance at Sutcliffe's jocose suggestions, namely that the whole thing would be much tidier as an exchange of letter. "We could have fun, spelling God backwards! You could sign yourself OREPSORP and I could sign myself NABILAC [...] In this way *enanteiodromion*, everything would be seen to be turning into its opposite, even our book which would take on a mighty shifty strangeness, becoming an enticement for sterile linguists to parse in their sleep." (*Quintet* 1093)

The realist novel's reliance on the trustworthy narrator makes way for a relationship of playfulness and investigation. *Enanteiodromion* is Greek for "running in opposite ways." It is a principle of Carl Jung's psychological theory, whereby any powerful force will produce another force in the opposite direction over the course of time. The purported author of a particular sentence, just like the assumed origin of a particular memory, is never assured. Foucault continues: "the writing subject cancels out the sign of his particular

individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (102–03). But absence is also just a marker for continued and renewed presence. Only the reader (or the linguist) can fill in the gap between the letters that might comprise Sutcliffe and Blanford's final work. "It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance" (Foucault 112).

Understanding the *Quintet* II: A New Theory

The conversations between Blanford and Sutcliffe, as well as Durrell's own discussions of the quincunx, provide the reader a new starting place from which to think about the narrative structure of the *Quintet.* It is from here that we must also begin to grapple with the question of how the *Quintet* is so remarkably readable, why the intermingling of characters and the in–folding of time do not negate its relatability. When the reader engages with memory and remembrance, when a story is told in the present that is about the past, he or she alters the relationship with time. Mechanical time, linear time, is forgotten. We cease to think of ourselves as living in perpetual forward movement. According to Mircea Eliade, when a story is narrated, history "is thus abolished, not through consciousness of living an eternal present [...] nor by means of a periodically repeated ritual [...] [rather,] it is abolished in the future" (111–12). History is "abolished in the future" because in the act of narration the future ceases to be a state of possibility. History becomes part of a recurring present—that is, a narrative accounting of the past ever renewed in the present. It is not an eternal present nor a flat present. The elimination of the linear (past, present, future) allows the three–dimensionality of the present in itself to become visible. Such a three–dimensional present always exists but it can be hidden beneath a narrative of linear time. As Eliade might say, when one becomes aware of the fullness of consciousness—which already incorporates all memories—one thereby eliminates both history and potential. Or, as Durrell writes: "Past tense, present tense—what does it mean?" (*The Dark Labyrinth* 239).

In the *Quintet*, Durrell creates a world that simulates a remembered narrative unfolding in the present. Elsewhere he philosophizes: "You may say that such an instrument could not possibly predict; but

the future is only the memory of the past extended into the future. The backside of the moon of memory, if you like. The prediction of stars in the sky as yet undiscovered by the lens—that is a fair analogy" (*Tunc* 338). Durrell's Avignon novels seek to create the simulacrum of recount, of reminiscence. But unlike novels simply told in the past perfect progressive or just in the pluperfect, Durrell seeks to tell a progressive story, starting from the assumption of the present, without ever gaining much in terms of time toward that present. Whereas the pluperfect suggests an end to the events being described, the *Quintet* is set in a sort of ongoing present remembrance. "In the *Quintet* [...] storyline is surrendered to the exploration of a state of ideas; atmosphere predominates over occasion" (Pine 325). The separation between present and memory—the moment when now begins and before now ends—simply does not matter.

The work of literary critic and philosopher of hermeneutics Paul Ricoeur offers a language that will guide the discussion in these final pages. In his article "Can Fictional Narratives Be True?" he articulates a theory of the difference between historical writing and fictional writing in an attempt to maintain the "truth–value," i.e. the idea that one can learn something real about human experience, belief, action, etc., of both forms. Historical and fictional writing, he says, "refer to human actions although they do so on the basis of two different referential claims" (11). History, Ricoeur continues, "articulates its referential claim in compliance with rules of evidence common to the whole body of science" (11). In other words, historical writing, though obviously in some sense "fictional" (since it imposes a constructed, constrictive narrative on past events, which were themselves not originally formed in that manner, is still directly tied to some obvious referent in the visible world, e.g. an archival text, an early film, an archaeological site). Historical writing, therefore, has obvious claims to truth–value. It is only one level removed from its referent and, if done well, does not obscure the original source.

Fictions, however, "redescribe what conventional language has already described" [(10); italics in original]. Here, Ricoeur means that fictional narratives create meaning precisely through their lack of direct referent to some real event. Unbounded by reliance on such near-at-hand sources, they are free to play with "symbolic structures" (11) not only with "reference back to the familiar pre–understanding we have of the order of action" but even with "a new configuration

[...] of the pre–understood order of action" (*Time and Narrative* xi). Fictional narratives, for Ricoeur, can be almost endlessly creative because at their core they remain tied to a "pre–understood order of action," one that is rooted in a common human experience of life. Fictional narratives are true because they are constructing their expression of experience (what Ricoeur calls "mimesis") based not on a referent directly at hand but on some deeper, more profoundly meaningful, and more universal, narrative elements. Identity is the perpetual construction of a story about oneself, built from both personal experience and inherited, "pre–understood" templates. Time is merely one aspect of that construction. And though many narratives rely on it for their foundation (especially in order to create ease of intelligibility, such as what Durrell does in *The Alexandria Quartet*), this construction is not a law of narrative form. *The Avignon Quintet* remains intelligible because it cobbles together its narrative structure from a wider set of "pre–understandings," both allowing it to dispense with the centrality of linearity while simultaneously maintaining its literary comprehensibility.

What Ricoeur teaches is that though we narrate our lives on a line we do not live them there. We live in the ever–present, constructing a backward-looking story about life from an array of possible memories, experiences, beliefs, and dreams. The intermingling of narrative chronologies found in the *Quintet* has the effect of "generating a surplus of meaning" (*Figuring the Sacred* 17). Yet neither the circling of time nor the search for abundant meaning is meant to flatten experience, where life remains still, hidebound in some random, ever more archaic forever–now. Instead, the piling of narratives of time and character are merely an erasure of beginnings and endings, a nod to the rhetorical truth that memories and stories are made by choosing a selection of past details and arranging them into a coherent and plausible story. But the past is a near infinity of details and, therefore, an uncountable multitude of narratives. In his interweaving of narratives Durrell is taking up Ricoeur's challenge about the potentials of fiction, where "we reflect upon events by retelling and rewriting them" (Ricoeur, "Fictional Narratives" 12–13), all the while knowing that "the narrative intelligibility displayed by the activity of storytelling exceeds the resources of philosophy" (Ricoeur, "Fictional Narratives" 13). Fiction allows for an evocation of meaning in a way that systematic thought can only point toward. (A case in point is an article, such

as this one, which gestures and describes Durrell's style but has no means by which to replicate—or even evoke it).

A Ricoeurian lens indicates that Durrell's narrative of mapping different temporalities and spaces one over another is engaging with "familiar pre–understood" narratives. In other words, his multi-temporal and multi–memory spaces are doing the same work that a traditional linear narrative already does but in what Ricoeur calls "new configurations." Durrell's playfulness with character and temporality is in the service of expressing meaning and assigning moral or historical value in ways that cannot be accomplished through realist literary methods (but that still necessitate the reader's comprehension. Durrell here does not want to make a pastiche–like postmodern novel). The story of the *Quintet* builds within itself something beyond metaphor, something not just representing reality but mimicking it, capturing in language a human experience outside of direct referent or the capacity of history to describe—what one interpreter of Ricoeur has elsewhere called "an expanded view of the world and a deeper capacity for self–hood" (*Figuring the Sacred* 8). In a sense, therefore, on the one hand, the *Quintet* remains on the surface a realist fiction, since it never seeks incomprehension on the part of its reader, never strives to confuse in the service of some larger literary or philosophical aim. Yet, on the other hand, the *Quintet* uses "redescription," the mapping of characters over one another, because that is the narrative strategy which can best express its "expanded view of the world," one that is not built on the usual foundation of temporal certainty (what Ricoeur calls "conventional language").

There is one final theoretical vocabulary to consider (still in the Ricoeurian frame) for engaging with the narrative structure of the *Quintet*. Durrell has written a "mythopoetic" novel, one that conveys meaning and experience because it recognizes that, as Mark Wallace (commenting on Ricoeur) writes: "human beings are tethered between freedom and nature, between the self–transcending powers of the imagination and the always limiting character of perspectival, fragmented experience" (Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* 4). The *Quintet* builds up and out where normally one assumes motions only forward and backward. In what can be described as a mythopoetic novelist's ontology, the *Quintet* can be defined, in the words of Mircea Eliade, who was an influence on Ricoeur, as: "the abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures

[...] [where] there is an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of 'history'" (Eliade 35). In such an ontology, the contours separating life from story, story from existence, and author from character, begin to crumble and swerve. There is whom we are in the present, whom we are in the past, and whom we are as we narrate ourselves in the past. All three sets of "we" are at once interlocking and exclusive.

A narrative, such as the *Quintet,* erases the implicit bias of linear time by replacing it with something that mimics the experience of the interplay of life and memory. Walter Benjamin notes: "All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance" (72). The *Quintet* is a search for just such expression and representation—in friendship, in war, in loss, in religion—through the medium of words and sentences. It cannot offer taste or touch or smell, so it offers a narrative unmoored from linearity but flush with mythopoetic significance. With the *Quintet*, Durrell wrote a set of novels that knowingly dispenses with the boundaries of linear time yet still feels like a description of the way one might experience life. As Blanford explains:

> The old stable outlines of the dear old linear novel have been sidestepped in favor of soft focus palimpsest which enables the actors to turn into each other, to melt into each other's inner lifespace if they wish. Everything and everyone comes closer and closer together, moving towards the one. (*Quintet* 1265)

Durrell's interwoven constructions of time, experience, and memory reflect the form of the stories we tell daily about our lives and ourselves.

A narrative mostly unmoored from space and time allows Durrell the freedom to use the books of the *Quintet* to investigate different aspects of the human experience. In an attempt to express an experience of the world, to describe the unadulterated, unmediated, visceral feeling of being alive, the "transcultural form of necessity" (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 52); Durrell's fiction relies on playing with the bindings that usually unite temporality and narrative. According to Durrell, space and time are conceived differently in the East and the West. The East, he claims, values space, the three-dimensional plane

in which life occurs; the West cares about time, the mechanization and automation of life's activities. He describes *The Alexandria Quartet* as a Western novel, in which the recurrence and then the forward motion of time overwhelm the "eastern," gnostic proclivities of his characters. *The Avignon Quintet*, for Durrell, is Eastern, caring more for space and spatial relations than linear forward movement. Time does not altogether vanish in this alternative, Eastern model. Instead, it folds in on itself, mimicking the ways in which memories interact with daily experience. After all, one does not remember in the past; one remembers in the present.

What Durrell ultimately writes is less a set of realist novels about friends in an era of war and more a prose–poem about the relationship between time, history, and memory. As Ricoeur writes:

> between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity [...] time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence. [(*Time and Narrative* 52); italics in original]

When Durrell undermines our belief in narrative linearity, when he introduces characters from one timeline into another, it is out of this Ricoeurian sense of wishing to articulate through a narrative mode. It is to make us question "the securest among our possessions" [in Benjamin's phrase] (72)—our sense of the present and our belief in the past. Yet, Durrell destabilizes us in order to show us some of the mechanisms by which stories come to be told, the "mediations," the "mimeses," involved in constructing a coherent narrative about ourselves and the worlds we inhabit.

NOTES

[1]Dianne Vipond calls *The Avignon Quintet* "the apotheosis of historiographic metafiction as it foregrounds the complexity of the relationship between history and narrative" (117).

[2]In an interview, A.S. Byatt comments on this unusual narrative arrangement:

> Lawrence Durrell once did something I don't think he ever got enough credit for, which was inventing a novelist who was writing a novel about a character and then making that novelist walk into the character as if both these people were now in the same story. They start acting together. It was an incredibly brave thing to do as a bit of narrative effort, and nobody ever seemed to notice it. (57)

[3]Durrell's friend Henry Miller reacted to these events in his own inimitable style.

[4]These discussions are important and necessary and have by no means been exhausted in the critical literature.

[5]Interestingly, Durrell seems to hint at this project of re–organizing our conception of time decades before he ever put it into a novel. In a letter to Henry Miller, dated Corfu, fall 1936, Durrell wrote:

> Art nowadays is going to be real art, as before the flood. IT IS GOING TO BE PROPHECY, in the biblical sense. What I propose to do, with all deadly solemnity, is to create my HERALDIC UNIVERSE quite alone. The foundation is being quietly laid. I AM SLOWLY BUT VERY CAREFULLY AND WITHOUT CONSCIOUS THOUGHT DESTROYING TIME [...] I have discovered that the idea of duration is false. We have invented it as a philosophic jack–up to the idea of physical disintegration. THERE IS ONLY SPACE. A solid object has only three dimensions. Time, that old appendix, I've lopped off. (Durrell and Miller, *Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller: A Private Correspondence*. Ed. George Wickes. NY: Dutton, 1963: 19)

[6]Durrell experiments with just this sort of anti–form literary anarchic

postmodernism in *Tunq* (1968) and *Nunquam* (1970). These works were not well received by critics in the popular press and have been little studied by scholars.

[7]When that series does advance in years, with *Clea* (1960), Durrell is honest about time's renewed progress and does not look back. Durrell maps out the time and space relations of the *Quartet* at the beginning of its second novel:

> 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 on the relativity proposition. Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum. The four novels follow this pattern. The three first parts, however, are to be deployed spatially [...] and are not linked in a serial form. They interlap, interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. The fourth part alone will represent time and be a true sequel [...] This is not Proustian or Joycean method—for they illustrate Bergsonian "Duration" in my opinion, not "Space–Time." (*Balthazar*, "Note")

[8]Interviewed by *The Paris Review* in 1959, long before the *Quintet* was conceived, critics were already noting Durrell's penchant for narrative overlapping: "[Interviewer:] You seem to use the same kind of material, and often the same characters again and again, in your novels, in your poems and in the travel books. One of your critics has said, 'Durrell has never made any proper distinction in his writing between real people and imaginary persons.' Would you agree with that? [Durrell:] Yes, certainly" ("The Art of Fiction").

[9]For a thorough tracing of the *Quintet*'s reception, see Siegumfeldt (109–23). Roger Cohen makes a jab at Durrell in a recent column:

> There are books one has read, or believes one has, but they are read too soon or too late and so carry no weight. No emotional frame in which to fit them exists. Some novels, like Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, seem ripe at any age. Others, like Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, lose their precocious luster. ("Herzog at 50")

[10]As modern physics has demonstrated, time is not only speed-dependent but can be bent by such "weak" forces as gravity.

[11]Durrell published a novel called *The Dark Labyrinth* in 1962.

[12]*The Dark Labyrinth* does not experiment in any noteworthy ways with space or time, though it is a rather fun adventure story.

[13]"[Lulu Miller:] [A]n image, even though it feels like it's out there in the world in front of your eyes actually exists behind the eyes. [Lore Thaler:] The image, it's something that your mind constructs" (Miller, "Episode 544").

[14]See note 5 above, in which regarding *The Alexandria Quartet* Durrell speaks of a "four-decker novel."

[15]As he did with *Tunc* and *Nunquam*.

[16]For a different interpretation of space in the *Quintet*, focusing on the idea of the "center," see Alustrué (116–25).