

Reading Orientalism and the Crisis of Epistemology in the Novels of Lawrence Durrell

James Gifford
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Gifford, James. "Reading Orientalism and the Crisis of Epistemology in the Novels of Lawrence Durrell." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.2 (1999): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1036>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1701 times as of 11/07/19. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 1 Issue 2 (June 1999) Article 3**James Gifford,****"Reading Orientalism and the Crisis of Epistemology in the Novels of Lawrence Durrell"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss2/3>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.2 (1999)<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss2/>>

Abstract: In his article, "Reading Orientalism and the Crisis of Epistemology in the Novels of Lawrence Durrell," James Gifford argues that Edward Said's *Orientalism* has had a far reaching impact on the study of literature as well as in Comparative Literature, especially in works which depict the "Eastern Other." However, a question arises in those texts which have completed the philosophical motion from existentialism to epistemological skepticism such as the novels of Lawrence Durrell. For example, in *The Avignon Quintet* a provisional and even counterfactual form of knowledge becomes central and obvious to the reader. Subsequently, knowledge of the Other becomes deflated, and a poor means of defining. The Other -- all that is not the Self -- becomes universalized as the text reveals that (mis)perceptions of the Other are more of a reflection of the Self than they are a truthful depiction of any absolute reality. Acknowledgment of the artifice of art leads to a surrendering of the artist's power to communicate any body of knowledge. In *Monsieur*, Durrell's forceful realization of the fiction of his work, and constant dissolution of any knowledge it may be communicating is a potential confounding of the knowledge/power relationship in the East/West or Other/Self dialectic. As these theoretical elements serve an important role in Comparative Literature, a further redefining of them in general would be of value to their use in more specific circumstances.

James GIFFORD

Reading Orientalism and the Crisis of Epistemology in the Novels of Lawrence Durrell

Contemporary Comparative Literature, when seen as the study of varying world literatures, has been influenced by Said and Foucault's discourse on the relationship between power and knowledge. Moreover, "Othering," as a psychological activity expressed in the knowledge/power relationship, appears to be universal in its literary scope and origins, insofar as knowledge is based on observation of contrast and is expressed through a syntax demanding exclusivity, which intrinsically constructs an Other through which to define difference. This syntactic construct of exclusive binaries (in/out, Self/Other, East/West), has inevitably led to the present situation where the theoretical and philosophic descriptions of the act of Othering, such as Said's *Orientalism* and Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, are quickly coming to a point of contention with literary works which, while admittedly "observing" contrast, seek to make obvious the epistemological ramifications of an awareness of Othering, and the skepticism of truth in knowledge which is therein purported. This article is intended to serve as an investigation of the limitations which are placed on one's analytic approach to a work when such a work's epistemological skepticism becomes a fundamental part of the text itself. Moreover, this redefinition of our tools of analysis -- while applied to one author in this case -- is of equal application to many areas of world literature where questions of epistemology -- of either religious or philosophic origin -- are currently gaining favour.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* has left an irrefutable mark on the analysis and general consideration of literature which incorporates the mystical and sensual Orient as a setting, reference, or image. However, an interesting contention arises when his polemic is applied to a work such as Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* or *Avignon Quintet*, where an epistemological crisis forces characters into an entirely personal and provisional world. In such a world, the Oriental Other is no more of a construct than reality in general, with memory and sensory perception falling into troublesome ground. Sensory reality, in effect, becomes as much a discourse as is Orientalism, as both become an internal monologue in a world where multiplicitous reality is exalted and alienation is a fact of life. In this setting, representations of the Orient obviously reflect the observer alone, rather than any absolute external reality, and thereby lose their power to define. It should be made clear at the outset that this essay is an elaboration of Said's demarcation of Orientalism and its far-reaching effects. My purpose is a questioning of the level to which such an analysis is possible in works where exterior reality is brought into doubt, and is not a negative reaction against the application of the term Orientalist. In epistemologically skeptical works such as Durrell's, the superficiality which may suggest an Orientalist framework will be burrowed through by a universalization of the Other by a process of recognizing the Self's tendency to create the Other. Through such a process, it can only be the superficial application or the partial understanding of such a text which is properly termed Orientalist. In the realm where the human mind's tendency to create binary oppositions meets with our eventual recognition of the necessarily constructed nature of all knowledge of the sensual world, a problem arises, whereby one becomes unsure of one's previously held binary opposites and of the possibility of a realistic distinction between Self and Other. Essentially, once a person comes to believe that his/her internal knowledge of the world is suspect, he/she must then posit the likelihood that his/her construct of the Other -- all of the perceived world of which he/she has any "knowledge" -- is only a development or expression of the Self. The absolute reality of the exterior world, Oriental or otherwise, is an ultimately unknowable realm. Without the act of knowing, the Orientalist framework of power by knowledge is broken down.

Said contends quite clearly that Orientalism "has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12), for it is a mental and social construct used to gain knowledge -- and thereby power -- over the Orient. Essentially, Said's polemic regarding Orientalism is the recognition of the fact that "to have ... knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it" (32) to the extent that Occidental "knowledge" of the Orient becomes the Orient. Additionally, this body of knowledge, or discourse, "is best grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitation of thought [rather] than ... a positive doctrine" (42), which eventually limits personal experience and any development toward a "genuine" understanding. Most importantly for my argumentation here, this knowledge is expressed in

forms ranging from the purely political to the aesthetic. Neither of which can therefore be seen outside of a political arena. The novelist and the poet become vehicles whereby Orientalism is created, expressed, and perpetuated through the binary opposition of the Orient and the Occident, "for if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American ... there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality" (Said 11). In the line of such Occidental authors whose constructs of the Orient become expressed, stand Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, Ezra Pound, John Buchan, Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell, and perhaps Lawrence Durrell. In a likewise fashion, Occidentalism -- which is equally suspect in works of epistemological skepticism -- stands Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima, and Gabriel García Márquez. For Durrell, Said's contention that the revelation of Orientalism as a means of knowing and controlling "does not entail analysis of what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text's surface, its exteriority to what it describes" (Said 20), becomes vitally significant, for it is only in the very top layer of the exterior of Durrell's narratives that an Orientalist approach to the Muslim world can be seen. Below this layer -- even on the more obvious level of plot structure, form, and the stated focus of the novel -- a doubting of external reality and perception becomes primary to any understanding of the text. Moreover, as this philosophy of epistemological doubt -- or negative epistemological skepticism -- is expounded, the constructed nature of knowledge of both the Orient and the Occident must be assumed by the reader. Superficially, *The Alexandria Quartet* is an Orientalist text in that it stirs ideas of the mystical Muslim world which one must admit exists primarily in the Western mind. However, this superficial image evoked for mood, is quickly usurped by an Orient which is completely unknown. The relative nature of perception -- where one can take a step to either the right or left and be in an entirely different world -- is shown to exist behind the therefore false knowledge of the Orient and Occident alike.

With such a realization having taken place, representations of the Oriental Other must be analyzed as being a reflection of the narrator or a character's personal psychological construction of reality. When one comes to the conclusion that the Other is divorced by (mis)perception from the reality of the Orient, it follows naturally that the Other is in fact a construct of the Self. Darley's foreboding Alexandria in *The Alexandria Quartet* is no more meant as a true representation of the Muslim or Coptic Orient, than his construct of Justine is meant to be a depiction of her reality. Throughout the four novels of the *Quartet*, Justine is an ever changing figure who Darley must ultimately admit he has no real knowledge of. His knowledge is only provisional, and is more a reflection of his unstable and constantly developing ego than it is a "natural depiction" of her actuality. The same is true of his construct of the Oriental Other. A digression must be made at this point, in regard to Durrell's statement that "Only the city is real" (*Justine* 11), and the disagreement put forward by Mahmoud Manzaloui that Durrell's Alexandria is most definitely not real. In "Curate's Egg: An Alexandrian Opinion of Durrell's *Quartet*," Manzaloui shows very clearly that Durrell's Alexandria is not factually accurate, nor is his representation of Coptic and Muslim practices or relations. The discrepancies between Durrell's representations and Manzaloui's reality become a major conflict for Manzaloui's reading, despite his admitted awareness of Durrell's intention toward personal landscapes. Most interestingly, he comes to accept that the characters are a reflection of their situation more than they are meant to be individuals, yet is disturbed that "unlike Proust, he does not build up the complexity of his characters by his successive revelations, but, rather, cancels them out?" (148). This negation of one absolute character form for each character is a statement of both the unstable ego and the epistemological crisis which is acknowledged in various perceptions of them. Moreover, Durrell's statement that "Only the city [Alexandria] is real" (*Justine* 11) may be best seen as a commentary on the dependent relationship he creates between character and place, rather than as a statement of an absolute truth in a work which explicitly confounds any single absolute reality. The difficulty most intently scrutinized by Durrell is that of character and place in a realm of multiplicity. When one holds that a character or individual is greatly shaped by their perceptions -- and subsequently their environment -- a confusion arises when one additionally holds that uncertain perceptions of environment are influenced by the individual. It is in this manner that we find reality created through a combination of perceptions of environment which shape an individual, and individuals who shape their perceptions of their environment. Neither source of conflict between personal reality and

absolute reality can be disregarded, and both add to the argument that a single absolute reality is beyond human perception. In a like manner, Pursewarden's murder/suicide is left as an unresolved possibility wave, whereby one single absolute reality of it is never realized. The reader is never given a clear truth in regard to Pursewarden's reasons for his act. Whether he was murdered, depressed by his work related errors, or desperate over his incestuous love for his sister is never clearly developed. The most compelling reason given for Pursewarden's act is symbolized in his breaking of his mirror just before his death. The suicide is the collapse of his attempt to break through the reflexive mirror world -- where the self defines reality -- into a world of absolute truths. Such a realm devoid of psychological misinterpretation or subjective knowledge is, as a matter of course, also devoid of the self.

The epistemological crisis of the novel is mirrored in this representation of Pursewarden's own crisis and subsequent act. Individual interpretations of events such as Pursewarden's suicide -- or areas of knowledge in general -- must inevitably be seen as created in order to express the psychological make-up and temporary moods of characters, rather than for the purpose of reducing reality from its multiplicitous state to a single absolute truth. For Darley, all these concepts of Pursewarden, Justine, and Alexandria are true in their moment, but can change freely depending on new information, or his changing attitudes toward the knowledge he already holds. The provisional "reality" is a reflection of Darley, not any absolute truths, and as such can hardly be considered a statement or body of knowledge, except through a grossly inaccurate reading. In this stance, the Oriental world which is depicted must be seen as a constantly shifting construct of multiple possibilities. How an individual or a narrator sees this world is, by necessity, a reflection of that character. To take any single, or even frequent representation, and to then use it as a form of absolute knowledge would be entirely contrary to the spirit of a text wrapped in the post-modern epistemological crisis. In order for a work to be considered Orientalist, it must first be held to contain knowledge. When such a work is clearly and systematically shown to contain only reflections of the varying states of an unstable ego (which adamantly refutes the contention that these states represent an absolute reality), this condition is not met. As such, it can only be a reader's limited reaction to or understanding of this work, or the misapplication of the work's depiction, which may properly be considered Orientalist.

In the *Avignon Quintet*, the reader is forcefully made aware of a constructed reality, when characters such as Akkad are given a variety of appearances depending on who is observing him, and when he is being observed: he "sometimes looked heavy and fat, and sometimes thin and ascetic" (103), just as "with every advance the visage of nature change[s]" (97). Between novels, a greater change of reality occurs, with Akkad transformed into Affad, as the reader becomes rapidly aware of the artificiality of the art form of the novel. Just as Akkad/Affad has no single realized identity, so too is the Orient without one. Even the city of Avignon grows to replace Alexandria, and becomes as much of a construct as any images of the Orient. Just as "British knowledge of Egypt is Egypt" (Said 32), so too is any personal experience of Avignon a constructed reality of the city which places limits on the unknowable nature of absolute reality and the multiplicity of perspectives existing around any event. One's personal experience of Avignon is Avignon, to the extent that we individually have no other way of constructing reality from our personal sensory perceptions. Durrell suggests nothing short of replacing our sense of an absolute truth derived from our sensory experiences with a realization of the necessarily multiplicitous and unrealizable nature of absolute truths. In furtherance of these images of the post-modern epistemological crisis -- the growing disbelief in absolutes and the realization of the relativistic nature of knowledge -- are the metaphysical images in the novels. Gnostic heresies play a large role in *Monsieur*, just as the occult and mysticism appear in *The Alexandria Quartet*, leading the reader into "a steady denial of the world as it is" (*Avignon* 141). As Stephanie Moore summarizes, "this is the pessimistic truth: that Man is exiled in the world, imprisoned in the tomb of his body. He is thrown into this life, from which he must liberate himself" (101). Viewing the physical world as the sole domain of the Prince of Darkness, or the great deceiver, necessitates a new view on sensory perceptions and the subsequent personal sense of reality. Such a reality must be suspect, with truth in knowledge of the world becoming unreasonable, and growing to resemble a metaphysical belief. As Durrell states plainly in *The Key to Modern British Poetry*: "Man is simply a box labeled personality. He peers out of the box through five slits, the senses. On this earth he is permitted access to three dimensions of space, and one of time. Only in his imagination can he inhabit the whole -- a reality

which is beyond the reach of intellectual qualifications: a reality which even the greatest art is incapable of rendering in its full grandeur" (5).

From this philosophical stance of negative skepticism, or "soft" skepticism in relation to epistemology, develops a narrative form and approach which directly challenges assertions of single absolute realities and the tenuous basis for belief. The clearest statement of agreement for the critical system established by Said -- within the context of a still functioning novel which allows symbols and representations -- comes in Durrell's *Monsieur*. The problem of knowledge and representation is expressed in an extended monologue regarding "knowing" versus "realizing," which is ultimately resolved into the gnostic's realization of the trap of both words. Durrell contends that "Powerful imaginations can be dangerous; they live ideas out so powerfully that when the time comes to 'realize' them, to perform with a real woman, say, a Muse, they are either impotent or experience the taste of ashes.... [We] try to still [our] fears by classifying them, by making an index of them" (*Avignon* 142). In this manner, we are left "turning in the trap" (*Avignon* 142) of a false reality. Said contends the same point, namely that the representations we develop or read, grow to such an extent that they govern our "realization" of an actual event; our knowledge of the Orient becomes more real than any experience of it could ever be. In this manner, representation overreaches reality; however, the two authors -- scholar and writer -- split on the extent to which they are willing to follow this chain of reasoning. For Said, this analysis of epistemology, or specifically its role in Orientalism, comes to an end with the analysis of books or words. While this is as far as a theorist would have to go, Durrell takes a step further, which comically restores the reader's ability to read without becoming caught in the trap. Durrell suggests that one cannot be a skeptic in matters of words without following to become a skeptic in matters of perception. Since it is perception which forms each of our individual senses of reality, it then follows that one cannot ignore the role of chance and uncertainty when pronouncing truths. Each reality represented is circumspect, and can be said to contain an endless array of suppositions, assumptions, outright flaws, and contradictions, whether Oriental, Occidental, comparative, or cross-cultural. Such is the inevitable nature of human knowledge, whether gleaned from histories, or from direct experience. Said's suggestion of the existence of "natural depictions" (21) is therefore confounded, and with it goes the ideal of an unconstructed reality. From such an epistemological crisis is resurrected the reader's ability to consume works in which the content is flawed, or Orientalist, without being coaxed into assuming that such content is absolute or true. At its best, such knowledge can only be seen as provisional and as a reflection of its source, much as Said suggests.

As a consequence of the downfall of "natural" depictions and absolute realities, comes a universalization of the Other, both Oriental and Occidental. One must first grudgingly come to the conclusion that the Other must be defined as all that is not the Self, or all that we do not have absolute awareness of. From this acceptance, it easily follows that any such Other must be based on one's sensory perceptions, prejudices, and assumptions. This is in agreement with Said's contention that Orientalism "has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12). If, then, the Other is constructed from these highly personal elements, and is more a reflection of oneself than any true exteriority, then the polarization between Other and Self -- or Orient and Occident -- collapses. A reader who has become aware of an author's or their own construction of an Other must desist in the polar opposition, as one's self and one's construct of reality are one and the same. The Oriental Other in such a fiction, or in such a reader's mind, becomes universalized or part of a new unity without a polar duality. In this sense, Orientalism suggests a process intrinsic to the nature of all knowledge, and it is only negative epistemological skepticism which allows for an escape from the tendency to polarize. Detailing the unattainable status of "natural" depictions, Durrell shows that ironically, even if one feels that an author has stated the absolute truth of their experiences, one cannot make the leap that an individual's direct experiences necessarily reflect reality. In *Monsieur*, when Bruce tries recording events from beginning to end, he finds "It has done me good to put so much down on paper, though I notice that in the very act of recording things one makes them submit to a kind of ordering which may be false, proceeding as if causality was the real culprit. Yet the element of chance, of accident, had so much to do with what became of us that it seems impossible to search out first causes" (*Avignon* 169).

We cannot have any absolute knowledge of reality, and consequently knowledge of the Orient or the Other. Instead, we must rely on an always provisional world view. Such an accomplishment is difficult, but is a necessary step in escaping the trap of an unreal world, since ultimately "there is no final truth to be found -- there is only provisional truth within a given context" (Durrell 1952, 3). From the acceptance of such a world view, comes a return to reading and writing, but not quite as we have done before. Our return is one of the great twists in doubt, whereby proof and disproof are both made doubtful. In *Monsieur*, Piers discovers a magazine article revealing Akkad to be a hoax. The gnostic belief system which Piers has come to adhere to, and which has displaced his Christian faith, is subsequently untrue; however, Akkad -- out of sympathy -- reveals that the "proof" of the magazine article is likewise untrue. The article is a fake, planted by Akkad as a didactic tool, encouraging new "disciples" to draw the conclusion that it is entirely possible to believe something one knows to be untrue. Thus, the greatest trick of the epistemological crisis is that proof and trueness or untrueness are still subject to doubt. Sensory perception, or knowledge of something's falseness, cannot negate belief, just as we must doubt that which we hold to be true. Belief can never be completely removed. It is only certainty which becomes impossible. One can therefore imbibe an offered metaphysical belief system -- just as one can read an Orientalist text -- without the act of conscious acceptance of truth which describes Orientalism. As Akkad writes in *Monsieur*: "They refuse to accept the findings of direct intuition. They want what they call proof. What is that but a slavish belief in causality and determinism, which in our new age we regard as provisional and subject to scale (Avignon 195).

In a like fashion, it is impossible to expect any history, novel, or anthropological study to reveal an absolute truth, for any reflection of a culture is caught in the trap of representation, rather than the "truth" of direct experience -- which we know to be equally suspect. However, with the acceptance of this epistemological crisis, or negative skepticism, we are freed to experience the multiplicity of reality, and begin to improvise. Mirroring Durrell's own aesthetic creation of the five novels of the *Avignon Quintet*, is the painting of the rape of the hart which receives periodic interpretations throughout the books. (Here I should like to point out that Durrell's alleged incest is not significant to the subject of my study). Just as Durrell reiterates through plot, form, religious content, philosophical discussion, and historical revision in his fictions, this painting reveals the ever broadening spire of realities which he intends his work to contain, in an attempt to reach a breaking point where the center cannot hold and we begin accepting a tale without causality or absolutes. Such uncollapsed possibilities of truths -- wherein two incompatible realities coexist without collapsing into a singular self-consistent truth -- cannot be held to contain knowledge which may be defined as Orientalist or otherwise. They are innately skeptical of absolutes in knowledge, and force on the reader a provisionality in regard to epistemological concepts, leaving Orientalism and knowledge/power relationships outside of the scope of a knowledge system which is overtly lacking in truth. Paul Lorenz argues for a provisionality in the *Avignon Quintet* based on a reflection of Relativity and Quantum Theory, positing that "Durrell, like his contemporaries John Fowles and Margaret Drabble, uses his fiction to investigate the possibility that the world we live in is only one of many possible worlds" (Lorenz,

<<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive/archive%20B%20Vol.%201116.1/Vol.%2014.1/14.1Lorenz.htm>>, with the main distinction existing in perspective and perception. In Lorenz's model, perception effects innately the perceived, leading to a state of multiplicity through indeterminacy. Akkad presents "Piers with the Liar's Paradox when he ... suggests that" (Lorenz, <<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive/archive%20B%20Vol.%201116.1/Vol.%2014.1/14.1Lorenz.htm>>) truth cannot be required of his "knowledge" of the gnostic faith. This model, however, breaks down, as the eventual outcome of a collapse to a singularity does not occur in Durrell's novels; however, it does recognize multiplicity through incompatible knowledge systems in the discussion of Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy (the two incompatible possible outcomes to an event are both simultaneously true, until an observation is made, which collapses them into a single reality). In contrast, I am arguing for a complete sense of epistemological skepticism, where an eventual collapse to singular truths cannot be expected to ever occur. Truth is an unnecessary and indiscernable constituent of knowledge in all the forms of reality expressed in the *Avignon Quintet*, not just those involving a delay or obvious distortion of perception.

The interpretations Durrell voices in regard to this painting mirror the interpretations he expects his reader to have for the books -- and reality in general: varied and often conflicting. While each novel of the *Quinx* holds various readings of the painting, no single truth is ever established, nor is any one interpretation given greater value over another. In a like manner we must read the *Avignon Quintet*, with our desire to voice a single body of knowledge held in check by the realization that Durrell's representations have been created with full knowledge of the artifice of art. Just as the rape of the hart is not a "natural" depiction -- as shown by the variety of possible interpretations of it -- so are the novels constructs, meant to be read as such. The natural symbolic content of the painting is reality in general, where all events or "depictions" are not natural, but are clouded by the prejudiced sight of the mind's eye. All personal reality is a reconstruction of partially observed events, and as such is subject to varied interpretations.

Lastly, the most dominant formal element expressing this state of multiplicity in *The Avignon Quintet* is its quincunx structure. This structure is revealed in both the large and small scale, existing between the five books of the Quintet itself, and within individual books. *Monsieur*, the first book, mirrors the Quintet as a whole, being divided into five independent sections where authorship of the book is brought into question. It is this constant remembering of the authorship -- or constructed nature of fiction -- which most strongly brings the reader's mind to the epistemological crisis, and refutes the concept of the work revealing a single absolute truth. *Monsieur* is a work of multiplicity. In "Outremer," the reader is given a narrator, Bruce, who contends that we are viewing his personal reality; however, as the novel moves into the second part, "Macabru," this authorship is thrown into contention. The reader is unsure if the "flashback" to Egypt is a reality, or if it is the book by Sutcliffe about Bruce, Piers, and Sylvie, which Bruce discusses so much in "Outremer." Following this, "Sutcliffe, The Venetian Documents" moves into an omniscient narrator, in contrast to the first person which existed in the first two parts. Despite the omniscient frame, the book is meant to appear as a work by Sutcliffe about himself. Additionally, in his musings for his own novels, he echoes "The southbound train from Paris" (*Quintet* 185) which opens Bruce's "Outremer," thereby opening the possibility that he wrote the previous portions, and that Bruce is his character. The fourth portion of *Monsieur* is "Life With Toby," where we briefly return to Bruce as narrator, continuing to confound any concrete decision on which character is writing the Other. "Dinner at Quartila's" removes both Bruce and Sutcliffe from our fictional realm of reality, as Sutcliffe's arch-rival Blanford is revealed to have written all four portions or "books" which make up the main part of *Monsieur*. Neither Bruce nor Sutcliffe are now seen as real, but exist only as creations of Blanford, who reminds us that he too may not be real. Blanford points out the distance between reading and reality, in that: "It is still a moot point whether Socrates, in fact, existed as 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).

Durrell's reference to himself as the Devil fulfils his character's gnostic musings that their world was created by the devil while God was not looking. "Dinner at Quartila's" asserts the importance of a personal view of reality and the unstable nature of absolute realities which dominates the remaining four novels of the *Quintet*. The realm of absolute knowledge is refuted as being outside of human nature and the nature of human reality. In these respects, a Said-inspired Orientalist interpretation of Durrell's fiction is neither plausible in all but the most superficial reading, nor realistic in its consideration of the author's aesthetic vision. This is despite apparent Orientalist content in the superficiality of images and constructed depictions in Durrell's works. Where Said states that "in short, Orientalism is best grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply a positive doctrine" (42), he is perfectly correct for a text which represents a truth. This interpretative position become entangled when an author comes along who accepts that the constraints -- or models of reality -- presented by the Orientalist text can be legitimized as a particular vantage point true to a unique and prejudiced perspective. In such a case, the perspective is not revelatory of any absolute truths, but is a representation of a personal reality (as all realities are personal) and psychological state. With such a distinction in mind, a reader can synchronically hold that this one personal construct is in no way necessarily reflecting any absolute truths, but reflects the personal and provisional ones which form every reader and author's world. Orientalism as posited by Said relies

entirely on the contention of a work that it is in some manner representing the truth of a given society, but in Durrell's fictions truth is the most apocryphal form of knowledge.

Works Cited

- Durrell, Lawrence. *The Avignon Quintet*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.
Durrell, Lawrence. *Justine*. Toronto: Penguin, 1991.
Durrell, Lawrence. *The Key to Modern British Poetry*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1952.
Lorenz, Paul. "Quantum Mechanics and the Shape of Fiction." *Weber Studies: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal* 14.1 (1997):
<<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive/archive%20B%20Vol.%201116.1/Vol.%2014.1/14.1Lorenz.htm>>
Manzaloui, Mahmoud. "Curate's Egg: An Alexandrian Opinion of Durrell's Quartet." *Critical Essays on Lawrence Durrell*. Ed. Alan Friedman. Boston: Hall, 1987. 144-57.
Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Toronto: Random House, 1994.
Moore, Stephanie. "Turning in the Trap: Or, Can You Escape the Prince of Darkness?" *Deus Loci* NS2 (1993): 100-15.

Author's profile: James Gifford works in English at the University of Alberta. His interests include literary studies and early and Baroque music and has directed several chamber music concert series. E-mail: <gifford@ualberta.ca>.