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# Towards a *Literary Criticism*: Lowry, Durrell, Dolores, and the Alchemical Balance between Critical and Creative Writing

Mark Burlingame

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Towards a *Literary* Criticism: Lowry, Durrell, Dolores, and the Alchemical Balance between  
Critical and Creative Writing

by

Mark Burlingame

Thesis

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Thesis Committee:

Paul Bruss, PhD, Chair

Charles Cunningham, PhD

Christine Neufeld, PhD

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## Acknowledgements

Throughout graduate school I suspected that the tendency in literature departments to indulge in theory shortly before working it upon a literary text denied each voice the rigorous investigation it deserves. Paul Bruss's spirited Fall 2009 lectures on the overlooked and prophetic complexity of certain 20<sup>th</sup> century British authors encouraged me to push forward with an essay by Michael Oakeshott that had troubled me since Eric Kos's undergraduate political theory courses. Dr. Kos taught in a distinctly Socratic fashion, pursuing classic philosophical questions methodically before freeing them to mingle with the other voices of the conversation. Somehow this led to my writing a thesis that disavows the interdisciplinary approach to literature only to reaffirm it through creative writing.

My graduate committee has graciously allowed me to develop an unorthodox style of writing born of misgivings with our realm of scholarship: neither Charles Cunningham nor Christine Neufeld have condemned my work for its open irrationalism or sacrifice of a system. Instead, they read my early drafts with assiduous alacrity. Paul defended its strange methods, sympathetic to the tension I perceived in all things aesthetic; Charles expressed a helpful dose of skepticism for my proposal; and Christine commended the penultimate draft at one of her terrific graduate cocktail parties.

The community at Eastern is a fertile and exacting milieu; without its influence my work would likely remain a pile of scribbles in the basement. And if it were not for the life support and drifting sense of direction of Mary Pierce—my “elusive bunny”—I would not have found myself in Michigan, let alone earning an MA in Ypsilanti.

## **Abstract**

I begin this study with the formalistic essays of Michael Oakeshott and Susan Sontag, observing the precarious position of aesthetics in contemporary literary discourse. Rather than fit the novels *Under the Volcano* and the *Alexandria Quartet* into normative Kantian or New Critical frameworks, I follow the course of alchemical allusions in Lowry's novel and relate them to the troubled theme of modern love in Durrell's, writing in an experiential, plot-driven manner towards a narrative describing the effects of these texts upon my fiction. After I discuss the traces of Sade in Durrell, the metafictional novelette "Dolor" concludes the project, betraying numerous critical themes: the decentered subject, anxieties of authorship, and writing the body as text. My aim is to suggest that if literature is not beholden to logical truth, criticism might follow a more literary course by exposing itself to the elements of fiction—whose assimilative revenge upon theory seems long overdue.

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## Chapter 1: Surface Criticism

### Background: Formal Conversation

In “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (1959), Oakeshott differentiates the practical, scientific, and poetic voices, each of which speaks in its own idiom and cannot be appropriated by the other without a loss of authority over its “images.” When this occurs, one voice can be found using the other in its own service, such as when a scholar motivated by practical matters begs the question of what a poem’s political (e.g. Postcolonial) function might be or what the poem ought to teach us about morality; when a critic motivated by factual inquiry finds the “language of poetry only a worthless instrument of scientific communication”; or when a realist argues that poetry provides an impartial means of “seeing things as they really are” (533-34). Oakeshott writes that each voice participates in the great conversation, “making, recognizing, and moving about among images of a certain sort” (496). Whereas the scientific voice sets out “to make a rational world of consequentially arranged conceptual images” (492), the practical voice, motivated by desire and beset by aversion, seeks images of pleasure while avoiding images of pain. Included in the practical are moral judgments of good and bad, which stem from the broader sense of approval and disapproval. Because the poet (representing every artist) contemplates and delights in “make-believe” images rather than seeking pleasure, truth, fact, or morality, modernity’s “philistine concern with useful knowledge” has relegated this voice to mere entertainment, from which we may lift images to explain or advocate practical and scientific, especially psychoanalytic, concerns. Poetry too often seems a mere distraction or a crutch, an arbitrary and subjective element amendable to the more knowing voices of practice, science, and history. Such is generally the case in academic criticism.

Two generations after Oakeshott's essay on aesthetics, which is all but unknown in the literature department, formalism is a rare species of criticism apparently due to its association with the New Critics' calls for the "true" interpretation of a poem through the close study of its elements in isolation. Here I will attempt to remove the burden of truth—of claims-making—to follow an aesthetic path that explores the text with the only intrusion being that of the text upon my own writing, rather than my theoretical interests threatening the text's autonomous existence as a work of art. I will approach some of the most aesthetically and philosophically achieved novels of late modernism, Malcolm Lowry's and Lawrence Durrell's *Under the Volcano* and the *Alexandria Quartet*, respectively, adopting an aesthetic attitude that permits little interference from outside theorists while paying sufficient attention to the ideas of other critics. This shall not be an indictment against nonformalistic theory, but a sort of experiment to see where such an isolated reading can take me after several years of theoretical training. The introductory theme of alchemy—a way of exploring the alcoholism of Lowry's Geoffrey Firmin and to some extent the love triangulation of Durrell's Darley—will give way in the end to a Faustian conflagration of writing that collapses the boundary between fiction and criticism, as my interpretation of Oakeshott's aesthetics forbids the claims-making that is virtually inescapable in any critique. The only recourse, in appropriated Oakeshottian terms, is to delight in the poet's images, commenting on how they are arranged and the contemplation they evoke, without establishing in the New Critic's vein an absolute value for the poem's (or novel's) meaning.

The conversation of mankind, Oakeshott's way of characterizing human discourse and culture as a whole, is non-hierarchical, with no arbiter or symposiarch. The quality of any part of the conversation "springs from a tension between seriousness and playfulness" (493), not its argumentative success in arriving at a conclusion. It is a dynamic, non-teleological convergence

of ideas from the three major ways of describing the world. As it happens, history appears to Oakeshott as an up-and-coming voice, much as poetry gained autonomy only after the Renaissance. Nor is Oakeshott's discipline among the essential voices: "Philosophy, the impulse to study the quality and style of each voice, and to reflect upon the relationship of one voice to another, must be counted a parasitic activity: it springs from the conversation, because this is what the philosopher reflects upon, but it makes no specific contribution to it" (491). The philosopher demonstrates how the voices interact, much like the critic discusses how the poet's arrangement of contemplative images compares to the arrangements of other poets, and how other critics understand (dis)similar textual relationships.

Both philosopher and critic retain the freedom to stand apart from praxis and the more palpable contributions to the conversation—a stance which is certainly problematic if taken as the sole function of either commentator. Oakeshott does not pretend that the poet and philosopher speak within a vacuum, only that the nature of their discourse shares not the responsibility of advancing political ends no matter the contextual injustices to be righted or poverty to be quelled. As Efraim Podoksik describes Oakeshott's aesthetics, axiology is key: "A political system serves for the protection or modification of the legal and social order, but it lacks the ability to contribute to the permanent recreation of a society. This function can be fulfilled only by literature, art, and philosophy; and, paradoxically, in order to perform this role, an artist and a philosopher should abstain from any political activity" (723). Yet this is still not to say that those engaged in philosophy, poetry, or criticism should never step outside their idioms and engage directly with the world.

Stanley Fish makes a similar case when he argues for academic autonomy in *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2007). His corollary is that today's professors must step outside the



classroom to advance their political ends—especially to defend the university’s scarce economic resources—and that while standing in the classroom they must not politicize, but “academicize,” which he defines as the process “whereby politically explosive issues are made into subjects of intellectual inquiry . . . . *To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed*” (27, Fish’s emphasis). Fish demonstrates the inestimable value of an independent academic discourse that permits the most abstract inquiries for the sake of preserving traditions of thought that are too easily lost in the maelstrom of politics and ideology. Not even Marxism is in any way diminished by academic apoliticism. Fish claims that to “academicize” class struggle is to ask certain questions of it without advocating it—with scarcely any limits upon which source we pull these questions from, whether literary, legal, cultural, or any mixture thereof.

If I were more interested in coining terms (and committing tautology), I might call the following essay an effort to aestheticize the modern novel, as Modernism, notorious for its “deification of style,” should need no assistance in the realm of aesthetics. Yet the battle has already been won. The New Critics have been roundly rejected, as I have been reminded by my professors during the preparation of this essay. Beyond the absolutism of the New Critics’ approach, since my undergraduate days I have found it peculiar that to discuss the artistic qualities of a work of art has become almost unnecessary and beside the point. Virgil Nemoianu is also perplexed, asking how a “relatively minor issue produces an enormously overblown reaction. A few eccentrics choose to play with form rather than deal with the ‘serious matters’ of life, as everybody else does, and this causes harsh anger. Huge machineries are set up to smash

harmless butterflies.” Some highlights of this anti-aesthetic machinery include, as Nemoianu paraphrases the panic in the same passage, the view that

Aesthetic formalism is a seedbed of reactionary forces; it is the source of pernicious ideologies and indeed of the politics of traditionalism and fascism. It is a cunningly devised mask behind which malignant forces prepare hideous stratagems to stunt the collective happiness and luminous progress of humanity. Are we not entitled, then, to declare that form and meaning are fascist? (42)

Accordingly, the exclusivity of Oakeshott’s aesthetics carries a political burden that leads me to act as the champion of art for art’s sake. Yet this remains a position that will be difficult to maintain before questions of the content of the novels I will be critiquing overtake the analysis of their style—unless they both join forces to reveal one reason why aesthetics is a hazardous terrain, as if pure art is as explosive as pure oxygen.

Whereas Oakeshott wishes to see poetry discussed more on its own terms yet does not provide much in the way of an aesthetic framework (in my opinion to his credit, as this could impose yet another structure upon the work of art), Susan Sontag insists that we need a richer vocabulary to “reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (13). Yet I doubt that a mere vocabulary can be sufficient. Instead, the veritable fiction of the aesthetic attitude ought to be taken literally—crucially, strengthened by the freedom of an avowed subjectiveness that should have the effect of making such an aesthetics more inimitable than the average theoretical approach, for it seeks no absolute claim for the text’s meaning, let alone the proper state of mind the reader must adopt before appreciating the work of art in its phenomenological state. Naturally, as the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* points out,

There is considerable doubt about whether there is such a thing as an aesthetic attitude.

There is neither any special kind of action nor any special way of performing an ordinary action that ensures that we see a work as it “really is,” and that results in our having an aesthetic experience. Furthermore, there are no *purely* sensory experiences, divorced from any cognitive content whatsoever. Criticisms of the notion of aesthetic attitude have reinforced attacks on aesthetics as a separate field of study within philosophy. (11)

This does not prevent an art-minded critic from engaging with the text aesthetically, even when the text, especially the *Alexandria Quartet*, contains a dizzying variety of philosophies, e.g. Gnosticism, relativity, and philosophies of art and love.

I will therefore emphasize the performative aspect of such a critique, privileging style over content not in a way that reduces content but performs and establishes yet another literary style, striving to write in a way that will “serve the work of art, not usurp its place” (Sontag 12). I will begin by offering “a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance” of the text (13), adopting Sontag’s view that “Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” (10). However, by peering so closely into the art object, particularly when alchemy is one of the central themes, I might allow it to overtake my critical faculties and turn the performance into a mimicry or the criticism into a fiction. My greatest fear is that I “tame” the text. For as Sontag writes:

In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content, and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable. (8)

The anxiety of influence compounds this nervousness in the presence of great art when the critic

has intentions of becoming an artist in his or her own right. Whether one begins recreating the work of art in the process of critiquing it too closely provides a perhaps exaggerated, though still viable, tension to this study.

## **Under the *Quartet***

For Malcolm Lowry's protagonist, Geoffrey Firmin, aka the Consul, alchemy is apposite for conceptualizing and ironically justifying his monstrous alcoholism, while Lawrence Durrell makes perhaps an even more elaborate use of the concept in his *Avignon Quintet* and *An Irish Faustus*, works that follow the *Alexandria Quartet*. In *Justine*, the first novel of the *Quartet*, the erotics of writing is explored as thoroughly as possible by a narrator (Darley) who is transfixed equally by a woman and her city of Alexandria. As a result, the reader is caught in an almost infinitely expanding puzzle of identity and narrative strategy that makes him or her responsible for assembling his or her own meaning from the scattered evidence. Lowry's *Under the Volcano* is subtler in the way it disorients the reader than Durrell's *Justine* and *Balthazar*, where the names of the shifting narrators—Darley, Arnauti, Pursewarden, Balthazar—are more immediately lost than Lowry's shifting perspectives, mostly within the hazardous terrain of the Consul's mindset. Upon the first reading, the disorientation is more constant in Durrell's text simply because he does not frequently remind us of whom Darley is quoting at such length. The quotation marks are consistent, but after several paragraphs one takes the narrative for granted, growing unconsciously accustomed to the single quotes indicating what is usually dialogue but could just as well be interior commentary. This serves the technical backdrop for the major problem of these first two novels—the personality of Justine, which kicks back every time Darley has established a credible theory as to the source of her mystery. Further, she has the complementarily muddling

trick of drawing hasty ill-defined designs round my character, throwing my critical faculties into disorder by her sharp penetrating stabs: ascribing to me qualities which she invented on the spur of the moment out of that remorseless desire to capture my attention.

Women must attack writers—and from the moment she learned I was a writer she felt disposed to make herself interesting by dissecting me. (*Js* 71)

Contrary to Darley's accusation that she merely invents the purport of her attacks, Darley admits in the same paragraph that Justine is too "acute" to grant him a reliable amount of delusions as to his own importance in her life. This also contributes to the uneasiness the reader experiences in *Justine* and *Balthazar* concerning who or what this Justine character truly is, whether she can be taken literally as she is written or whether there is anything literal whatsoever in her portrayal. The interpretative task is further confounded by the many writers who serve as key players in this narrative bazaar. The intersection of expositions on love—whether they are centered on Justine, Claudia, Melissa or Clea—is continuously rerouted back to the problem of Justine, whose identity is initially not to be trusted because Darley cannot take a linear course in assembling the scenes of his Alexandrian history. As a first-person narrative, *Justine* is caught up in what could be termed an imbroglio if the conflicts were more explicit; the most direct statements about love and writing tend to penetrate the characters' consciences while leaving the actual state of affairs in a deliberate haze.

Thus no matter how devoted Darley is to depicting Justine, the product will always be a tortured departure from the real Justine that is all the more piquant for the narrator's self-consciousness, like that of the narrator of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, in contextualizing his most precious character in the midst of other characters who demand faithful representation. In the *Quartet*, Pursewarden presents an especially ripe opportunity for jealous quandaries. As an established novelist, his commentary on the act of writing is not the only thorn that is stuck into the delusion that Darley (and perhaps all writers) must maintain for the sake of artistic creation. Within the first few pages of *Balthazar*, that novel's eponymous teacher of

mysticism gives it straight to Darley: Darley may think Justine loved him above all, but the truth is that he was only a “decoy” for her more consuming passion for Pursewarden, a means of forestalling her self-destruction or at least self-betrayal at the feet of an artist who responds to her effusions with unflinching, insulting honesty. Take for instance the coldness of the criteria Pursewarden supplies following her gushy letter about his monumental significance:

*First nobody can own an artist so be warned. Second what good is a faithful body when the mind is by its very nature unfaithful? Third stop whining like an Arab, you know better. Fourth neurosis is no excuse. Health must be won and earned by a battle. Lastly it is honourable if you can't win to hang yourself.* (125, Durrell's italics)

In *Under the Volcano*, however, one character, the Consul, is responsible for nearly all the confusion, illusions, and disillusionment, most of which is borne by his ex-wife Yvonne. Like Justine, the Consul represents an unsolvable riddle. He evokes Yvonne's sympathy during a year's silent absence, while she has tried in her imagination to “keep Quauhnahuac itself, as a sort of safe footway where his phantom could endlessly pace, accompanied only by her own consoling unwanted shadow, above the rising waters of possible catastrophe” (66). Yvonne's sympathetic imagination, rather than her better judgment, is to blame for her risky return to the Consul. Although the time which the Consul, Yvonne, Hugh and M. Laurelle spent partying in Mexico was fateful enough to serve as the catalyst for this entire novel, their yearning to return to a more cohesive and meaningful experience is largely due to the idealizing function of memory.

When Yvonne appears unannounced in Quauhnahuac and the divorcees make their way from the cantina back to the crumbling home they used to share, the Consul has been drinking all night and can answer almost none of Yvonne's questions directly. Even when she asks if their

cats are still around, he interpolates the opposite species of pet, warmly uttering “Perro” to the “hideous pariah dog” who has been following them (69). When she remarks “Oh Geoffrey! Where’s my camellias?” he answers “God knows,” for this tea-bearing species of shrubbery has been overgrown by a year’s worth of inebriation. Yet even this broken chit-chat is an improvement from their dialogue in the cantina, where one of the Consul’s more direct responses, to her question of whether they might have some time alone together (as if he can take time off from drinking), is “Quién sabe?” (“who knows”) (64). Yvonne does not expect him to stop drinking altogether, and she has tried her best to mentally prepare herself for drinking even in the morning. Before she can begin reconnecting with him, however, their conversation is harassed from all sides, by other customers catching up (“—went down to Fort Sale. Took your shoeshot. And took your Brownings. —Jump, jump, jump . . .”) and bellowing (“—and like hell you can, you can’t do it, and that’s what you do in Alabama!”) (50-51). So relentless are these interruptions that several of the Consul and Yvonne’s more successful sentences are also set off with dashes, until, near the end of their distracted interview, the Consul throws in an accidentally suggestive “dash it all” (55).

Upon a first reading of *Under the Volcano*, it is at this point that the resemblance to Beatnik literature, which took off in the year of Lowry’s death with *On the Road* (1947) and ten years after the publication of *Volcano*, becomes less sure. Especially in such novels as Burroughs’ *The Ticket that Exploded*, the dash is used alongside the ellipsis far more frequently than the period and comma; the fragmentation and uncertainty in the Beat genre add up to a general sense that although modern life is irrevocably destabilized, a certain attitude has been forged for making this problem auspicious for high times and experimental writing. Lowry leaks no such attitudinal showiness. When he uses a dash it is for a limited and localized purpose,



namely to demonstrate how Yvonne has compromised herself by returning to her fallen man. During his extended visit to Mexico, the Consul has been absorbed so thoroughly by the overflow of sensuous delights, mostly alcoholic, that any conversation with him is in danger of permanent fracture, as if the gulf of incomprehensibility and distraction is just as deadly as the split through the great rock she mourns in the picture on the printer shop wall, situated ironically amid bold wedding advertisements. Like the road home from the cantina, the severance between her and Geoffrey is as “desperate as a winze” (56); it is as bottomless and divided as the rock underneath the volcano, the abyss that the Consul once fathomed with his friend M. Laurelle on “one of those occasions when the Consul had drunk himself sober” (16). All of this is reflected in the microcosm of a few dashed sentences, especially here:

“Surely this cannot be us,” she cried in her heart suddenly. “This cannot be *us* here!”—  
Divorce. What did the word really mean? She’d looked it up in the dictionary, on the ship: to sunder, to sever. And divorced meant: sundered, severed. Oaxaca meant divorce.  
(51)

Likewise, the two great volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl represent to the Consul the perfect marriage, as a double entity which angles a privileged slice of the community:

“Nearly all the large residences were . . . built far back from the road toward the barranca in order to face the volcanoes across the valley” (61). The volcanoes’ significance is so monumental and challenging that the nexus of Geoffrey’s perception arrives while looking down the layers of rock into the darkness of their underbelly, representing his own hell of course, but a hell which he is constantly trying to conquer via the perfect alchemical mixture of alcohol, to evoke the rarefied insight that gives way to a capacious, self-castigating interior monologue. Only at this point does his situation resemble to him the proper conflict to mollify his infernally

poetic mind—which, if not cursed by a proclivity for alcohol, could surely penetrate to the nucleus of his suffering rather more efficiently. But the Consul’s middle-class English upbringing, as we are informed by the reflections of M. Laurelle, is not of the typical rigor and application, but of an orphan falling under the influence of some Taskerson boys who were “unprecedented, portentous drinkers” (19) long before he himself had any interest in self-destruction.

As Stephen Spender writes in his introduction to *Under the Volcano*, the Consul is a “hero of consciousness.” His battle is internal in a way that makes the central action of the novel not pass as action at all, so that if he *were* to act, the novel would have a far more different outcome than if Joyce’s Leopold Bloom or Stephen Daedalus were to act any differently within their more historically and traditionally fixed universe (xxiii). Spender suggests that Lowry’s autobiographical mode of writing opens up the terrain tremendously. Even though Lowry makes a statement about the transitional moment of history of the late 1930s (as seen through the lens of the calamitous 1940s), Lowry himself is the battlefield. The method of warfare is encapsulated in the Consul’s summary of his occupation: “from alcohol to alkahest” (91), that is, a preoccupation with drinking that becomes the alchemical quest for the universal solvent. The various metallic and earthen substances mentioned in the text are suggestive, particularly the ones that were being transported on the S.S. *Samaritan*, the ship on which the Consul had some sort of commanding role so that the Germans who found themselves burning alive in the furnace below could have been ordered there by our hero, but no one seems to know. But before we learn, through M. Laurelle’s consideration of the scene, about the Germans being burned, we read that the Consul’s ship had “been steering a rather odd course” while carrying “a cargo of antimony and quicksilver and wolfram” (33), each related to the pursuit of forging gold out of base substances. First,

wolfram, later known as tungsten, was isolated and purified in 1783 by the Spanish chemist and mineralogist Fausto Elhuyar (along with his brother Juan Jose). The name Fausto, along with a brief sketch of his career, makes it appear likely like that Lowry cogitated alchemy and social revolt when he included this substance as cargo, as if it were metaphorically involved in one of the crucial moments of the Consul's history, that is, long before he settled in a Mexico ridden with la Guardia, the officially sanctioned thugs contemporaneous to the Spanish civil war. For "In 1788 [Fausto] was appointed supervisor of the Mexican mining industry; his work was ended by the reactionary movement early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (*Britannica*). And as for antimony, according to Todd Helmenstine it "was sometimes symbolized by the wolf," representing "man's free spirit or animal nature." Finally, Mackay writes that quicksilver, or mercury, was the mythical substance supposed to turn base metal into gold. Even cobalt, the substance which Yvonne recognizes as constituting the many swimming pools in Quauhnahuac, has mythical origins. It was discovered by the copper miners of Germany's Harz Mountains, a region famous for its look of dark enchantments and sorcery, and was named after the "kobolds" who were responsible for the ruse of implanting this "false copper ore" as a sort of fool's gold ("Alchemy," web).

Admittedly, a generous portion of the substances that make up the modern world were discovered and altered by alchemy or have been associated with mysticism of some sort, but the direct references to Faust and alchemy in Lowry's text and the preoccupation with mixed drinks and altered mindsets make each substance jump out as a suspicious item of a protracted metaphor. While reflecting upon the problem of the Consul and Yvonne over a few cautiously sipped anises, M. Laurelle, the Consul's childhood friend and quasi-brother, is handed Geoffrey's book of Elizabethan plays that he left with the bartender six months prior. After

alighting upon a line from Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, with more deliberate randomness Laurelle drops his finger upon some other place in the book only to hit *Faustus* yet again. Within a few moments, like a textual Mephistopheles the Consul is summoned in the form of a letter that he never sent to Yvonne. It falls out of this leather-bound and intaglioed edition of some of the greatest pieces of English literature, which, in addition to its containing one of two integral versions of the Faust myth, is ripe with antiquity, harkening to the "secret knowledge" theme that the Consul first mentions in passing while ranting inhospitably to Yvonne about his supposed book on Atlantis, complete with chapters on alchemy.

The letter summoning the spirit of the Consul resembles an introduction to its author, the novel's protagonist and fictitious version of Lowry himself, all in the form of Geoffrey Firmin. Its prose is saturated with mescal and is even demarcated at the beginning of two paragraphs by the phrase "several mescals later" (49, 52). The style of the letter is vivid, heated, and compulsively poetic—yet not the ravings of a madman or an incoherent louse. For neither Lowry nor Firmin, though each was an incorrigible alcoholic, cannot be termed so pejoratively as a *degenerate* drunk, as the novel itself tempts us to charge. The seriousness of their struggles, the depths of consciousness they suffer and force us to wade through, are not to be taken lightly, although a perfunctory reading of *Under the Volcano* is tempting, treating it as if it were merely an associative or stream-of-consciousness purging rather than a tortuous river. Instead, *Volcano* is akin to *La Despedida*, which signifies "gutter" and "farewell" and is interpreted by Yvonne as "the parting." Like the modernist self, it is a faulty passageway through a once seemingly unbreakable unity, in *La Despedida*'s case of earth and stone, that has calcified over millennia only to break apart, throwing the onlookers dependent upon its image of unity into chaos. That Yvonne weeps over the contrast between *La Despedida*'s portrait and the bridal advertisements

shows not only that she suffers from the rupture of the divorce, but also that she shares Geoffrey's metaphorical and even alchemical understanding of their mutual alienation.

It was inevitable, so it said on the picture... Was it really? Wasn't there some way of saving the poor rock whose immutability so short a time ago no one would have dreamed of doubting! Ah, who would have thought of it then as other than a single integrated rock? But granted it had been split, was there no way before total disintegration should set in of at least saving the severed halves? . . . Oh, but why—*by some fanciful geological thaumaturgy*, couldn't the pieces be welded together again! (57 emphasis added)

The Consul peering into the abyss of the volcano's multilayered depths is the other side of the same coin representing both their marriage and Lowry/Geoffrey's identity. To explore the many layers of the suffering cannot be as fleeting a process as the Consul's letter and to a lesser extent Lowry's narrative suggest—more like stumbling with all the stubbornness of a mule that is blinded by the darkness of a psychological gorge. One hopes to shed light on the journey so as to have an idea of where it may lead, and upon a close reading it turns out that *Under the Volcano* does have a profound sense of direction, namely, to the chance assassination of the Consul and the tossing of his body into a ravine. The poetic clarity of Lowry's writing is astonishing given his habitual state of mind, the constant awareness of which takes a prejudicial toll on the first-time reader.

This presents even further justification for a scrupulously aesthetic critique of Lowry's text, considering also how the production of Lowry scholarship has slowed to an intermittent trickle. Few novels take the fractured state of the modern world more seriously than *Under the Volcano*, which is written from within a modernist tradition but with vital points of departure from other exemplary texts. Simply put, Lowry writes more subjectively than his predecessors,

less for the “deification of style” than for a personal unification that is no less sacred. By the 1940s the epic struggles and the mundane machinations of consciousness were established themes of modernism, but Lowry’s approach was substantially more affective. As Grace writes: “The cool, ironic distance, the parody, the anti-realist foregrounding of language in Barth, Nabokov, or even Joyce are foreign to Lowry’s work because the reader must respond with and to Lowry’s writing emotionally” (121). Relating to the apparent bleakness of Lowry’s narrative structure, the theme of alchemy describes the Consul’s disingenuous process of intoxicating himself: he prevaricates for the discovery of the combination and succession of drinks that will deliver him into the starkest insight. The drink he most often prefers is mescal, famously ubiquitous in Oaxaca and certainly not much less prevalent in Quauhnahuac, and he is self-conscious and ironic in his alcoholic deliberations. “He thought: 900 pesos = 100 bottles of whiskey = 900 ditto tequila. Argal: one should drink neither tequila nor whiskey but mescal” (80). *Random House* defines “argal” as “Therefore: used facetiously to indicate that the reasoning that had gone before or the conclusion that follows is specious or absurd,” while an alternate spelling of “argol,” a “crude potassium bitartrate, a by-product of winemaking” (*American Heritage*) is none other than “argal.”

I will take this opportunity to return to *Justine* with Nessim’s comment that “Alexandria was the great wine-press of love; those who emerged from it were the sick men, the solitaires, the prophets—I mean all who have been deeply wounded in their sex” (14), for while the city of Alexandria rivals Justine as the novel’s main character, together they represent the perilous passion that one must delve into full force in order to discover—or create—one’s identity. As Dasenbrock writes: “Alexandria may be the capital of memory, but it is also the capital of sex, a sexuality incarnated for Darley in Justine” (520). In the *Avignon Quintet*, the later *postmodern*

work, Durrell explores Carl Jung's notion of alchemy and its implications for modern literature. Raper writes, quoting Cirlot (300), that "In our century the philosopher's stone of alchemy has come to represent "the conjunction' of opposites, or the integration of the conscious self with the feminine or unconscious side," for the self has transmuted into "a symbol of the All" (420-21). According to these critics, in the *Quintet* Durrell uses alchemy in the sense of psychological transference, the projection of unresolved emotions one associates with figures from the past onto present acquaintances, departing radically from the modernist elements of the *Alexandria Quartet*. In the *Quintet*, as Raper demonstrates:

By thematizing the actual [alchemical/transference] process and examining it directly, Durrell has created a series even more challenging than Darley's stories, which used the various supporting characters . . . in the traditional literary way: to tell Darley's inner story in terms of the outer story of his friends taken as real characters. (424)

In the *Quintet*, by contrast, Durrell is said to have turned his characters inside-out to demonstrate the phenomenon of interpreting one's friends through one's own image. Yet he takes this even further, as most of the characters that surround the protagonist, Aubrey Blansford, are transparent projections of various aspects of Blansford himself—especially Sutcliffe, an alter ego that rivals Blansford for narrative control. In the *Quartet*, the various levels of narrative and commentary disorient the reader even while reminding us that each character is meant to be taken literally. In the *Quintet*, so writes Dasenbrock, the metafictional aspects are emphasized to a much more disorienting degree: "In so radically disrupting the tacit compliance with accepted taste that had been behind the great success of the *Quartet*, Durrell also lost much of his audience, both popular and academic. (He even lost his American publisher)" (521). However, I have chosen not to pursue the *Quintet* despite its dealings with alchemy in fidelity to the tension I perceive in

the *Quartet*. The earlier series may be loyal to established modernist characteristics and hence might seem less challenging, but the questions it poses about the nature of love and creative writing are far from settled, nor have scholars worked consistently enough to explore the sophisticated, disruptive, and poetic manner in which Durrell posed those questions.

Furthermore, although Dasenbrock writes that the *Avignon* novels “not only fail to conform to those modernist modes within which the *Alexandria Quartet* can be placed; they deliberately confront, mock, and subvert them” (521), I suspect that at least the first two novels of the *Quartet* remain such a high aesthetic achievement of romantic destabilization that cannot be eclipsed even by their latterly postmodern-leaning creator. Dasenbrock also comments on Durrell’s effort of ordering the metropolitan chaos of Alexandria, which as a city and not a Wordsworthian wood represents to Dasenbrock a particularly modernist approach to self-realization. Although the series begins with “Darley experiencing the chaos and fragmentation of his life in Alexandria,” by the third novel this chaos has been tamed, represented but also “ordered by art, by the complex structure of a the work of art” (518). The modernist project of ordering the chaos, rather than the postmodern tendency of embracing and exploding it even further, is also seen in a biographical critique of Malcolm Lowry. As Grace writes, Lowry sought to harness “the considerable synthesizing powers of . . . imagination,” viewing “life ‘in terms of polarities that must be balanced. He felt that the activity of unifying or balancing opposites reflects the vitality of the universe and illustrates the creativity of the mind’” (quoted by La Bossière 174). This is, at one level at least, the effort (but certainly not the effect) of *Under the Volcano*, especially in the Consul’s constant playing with fire for the sake of the philosopher’s stone of perception. For instance, when he is affronted by Yvonne’s assumption that the day after she has arrived he will be capable of speaking comprehensibly with her, he asks himself just



what this moment of insobriety has to do with a few moments ago, when he held himself suspended at a commendably clear level of consciousness, standing up with remarkable “aplomb” to address the Englishman who woke him from his slumber on the road (89). The shifting yet apparently vigilant marking of the time he spends drinking and drifting corresponds, with a mordantly humorous undertone, to the specific drink he should take for the right adjustment in consciousness.

This includes a strychnine mixture concocted by his half-brother, Hugh, who has prepared a medicine diluted almost to the point of a placebo in hopes of straightening out the Consul. Geoffrey seems already possessed by the devil, for such is the strength required to forestall the severe muscle spasms leading to death by asphyxiation which strychnine should deliver. He drinks enough even of this adulterated concoction to all but assure us that death is near. As he returns to the strychnine with the intention of clearing his mind, or to achieve the appearance of wanting to sober up so as to impress Yvonne, he alternately muddles and cleanses the ether of reality. Whereas marathon runners and boxers have in the past used small doses of strychnine for a last bolt of energy, the Consul, in his battle for the ultimate state of consciousness, speeds up his guilt-ridden inner dialogue, justifying himself as if to his friends and scolding himself on their behalf, all in the effort of “drinking himself sober.” Such a feat is the rare reward for all his epic suffering for a semblance of order that is strictly limited to his occasional way of seeing.

## Interim

A critique written in the idiom of poetry and the medium of criticism should comprise quite the devious duality, one which I have barely approached in the previous section. Any poetic language that may have crept in was loyal to the primary texts; theory has not been threatened in the least by dictionary entries and dutiful explications. The contentions I entertained while penning the proposal have dissipated in the honest effort to understand the texts, for previously, I characterized the general tendency of criticism thus: “If it’s a flux of impermanent ideas about writing, if it avoids enjoining the reader to take a similar path or laying out a process, instead submitting the text to a natural flow of questions (not predetermined); if it enters into an honest conversation with the text rather than *interrogating* it; if it seeks in some way to contribute to the pleasure and epistemology of reading—the joy more than the science of textual consumption—then perhaps we shall finally have a *literary* criticism. As for where I presently stand on any of these points and what at this point constitutes the ideal criticism for a student hoping eventually to write fiction, this can only be inferred from the hallowed pejorative, *aesthetics*....”

If purely aesthetic questions were at stake, questions of love and alcoholism would not be so paramount to this study of Durrell and Lowry, as they are paramount to the novels themselves. Both writers deserve unflinching attention to their style, yet their themes touch upon aspects of the human condition which must be treated philosophically before aesthetically—arguments as to why writing or making love under the influence (of alcohol and thoughts of another, respectively) continue simultaneously to draw out the worst and best of the subjectivity presently at risk. I hesitate to refer to the identities of Lowry and Durrell: the impression their authorship makes of their personality is propitiously hazy. Such is the achievement of their art that

regardless of how autobiographical it appears, always present is the distance that reminds the reader of that troublesome notion—the autonomy of art—and its blameless separate sphere that is most blameworthy in the eyes of political-minded critics, e.g. Terry Eagleton. As Levine writes, “The Eagletonian kind of appropriation of the aesthetic by politics is almost a given of much contemporary theory. Questions of literary value are for the most part beside the point of criticism, as are the arguments for literature’s distinctiveness, and when they occur they can be felt to be an embarrassment” (381). The itch to treat a text with aesthetics alone is a sort of reaction against the loss of literary distinction, which is itself an exaggerated notion. In no literature course I have taken has the question of formal value been entirely absent, even if it serves only as the subtext, the underlying reason for a text to be discussed in the first place. Still, the question of aesthetics ever gaining *primacy* is moot, and carrying the pro-aesthetics argument to its conclusion smacks of prophecy. Levine continues: “If *everything* is political, discriminations between, say, a classroom debate and a political debate, between a novel and a campaign speech, are mere mystifications” (383). To me, such a view calls for a brand of criticism which is itself an artistic mystification, the rampant admixture of ambiguities rather than a realist’s reduction. Art is still to be conceptualized as a flight from reality no matter how contingent upon reality it will inevitably prove itself; yet danger lies in wait for the artist too desirous of that flight’s permanence. Charles Baxter, in an almost apocalyptic paragraph, connects the Consul’s futile efforts (or intentions) to write his book on alchemy in a purely symbolic fashion to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics’ efforts in the same vein, suspicious of

the effort to abstract, or to subtract, substance out of meaning, to furnish the reader with a set of universals wholly independent of experience, and whose justification is the validity of the poet's vision. Texts of this sort that do get finished as literature tend to void the ego

by means of invoked spirits, or automatic writing. Artists who engage in such projects often find themselves writing allegories that do not demonstrate their intentions in a credible way: the poem's mechanics begin to reflect the agony involved in sustaining vision that consistently contradicts actual facts. Such writers are caught between solipsism and an objectivity they do not believe in; it is as though meaning and significance, grown intense and gigantic, had somehow burst out of the natural world that had given rise to them, and refused to be re-embodied in a representation of that world for literary expression. The Consul knows that he is part of this tradition (at the end of the line, to be sure) and that the solution to the problem, if he can find it, will reunite him with Yvonne, end his alcoholism and its inflammations, and, not least, solve the symbolist division of fact and meaning. (119)

The same conundrum might characterize my own efforts to write an especially literary criticism, but it is fine to know I am not alone. Throughout the *Volcano* we cannot escape the pain of creation, where it smarts even more because the protagonist is devoted dualistically to the idea of writing and the actuality of drinking. Throughout the novel, Geoffrey's book smolders in the background while his formidable library is mentioned as a source of inspiration and facts but not the alleviation of his misery. The Consul's contention with learning is that he has reached his own apex though he is no wizard. He has put his sources together on paper while increasing his tolerance for tequila, realizing mescal has as much of the philosopher's stone as he will ever acquire. He is possessed of the line of thinking, common and well-intentioned enough, which prompts the Director in the "Prelude in the Theatre" of Goethe's *Faust* to call for a studiously-prepared drink:

Your talk of moods kindles no flame,

The waverer always waits and loses;  
If you are poets as you claim,  
Then prove that you command the muses.  
You know just what we need, I think:  
We want a potent brew to drink.  
Concoct it now without delay!  
Tomorrow we still miss what is not done today. (81)

Such a decisive action lays the groundwork for an all-out poetical assault, one for which the Director says the theater party must

Employ the sun and moon, do not hold back!  
Use all the stars we have in stock;  
Of water, fire, walls of rock,  
And beasts and birds there is no lack. (81)

Before the muse is called forth to turn the natural world into a consuming fantasy, so much depends, in the case of Geoffrey Firmin, on the right mixture of alcohol and sleep deprivation.

Geoffrey is strangely persuasive in his defense of these methods in a conversation with M. Laurelle, who reminds Geoffrey that his heroic drinking is only a stage for the disgraceful neglect of his wife (whose defense is made not disinterestedly by Laurelle, a one-time lover of Yvonne). Thus accused, Geoffrey says to Laurelle, “You are interfering with my great battle... [a]gainst death. . . . My battle for the survival of the human consciousness.” Laurelle concedes for the moment that “the truth is, I suppose, that sometimes, when you've calculated the amount exactly, you do see more clearly,” while Geoffrey returns to the theme of mescal, the dread yet most celebrated last resort, “I have to have a drink or two now, myself—so long as it isn't mescal

of course—else I shall become confused, like yourself.” Laurelle identifies his own most enticing poisons as Oxygenee and petrol: “If I ever start to drink that stuff, Geoffrey, you'll know I'm done for.” Considering the end of Lowry's almost interminable novel, Geoffrey wins this debate between mutually exclusive positions—the incomparable heels of two Achilles—when he says that “‘It's mescal with me...Tequila, no, that is healthful...and delightful. Just like beer. Good for you. But if I ever start to drink mescal again, I'm afraid, yes, that would be the end’” (226). The chaos of the Consul's last stand in a cantina—when “Time was circumfluent . . . mescal-drugged” (379), when “the pimp, the stool pigeon, of the mingitorio . . . had apparently been talking to him for the last five minutes” (377) through “the clamour—the Babel. . . the confusion of tongues” (381)—is held precariously in check as the Consul reads the letters Yvonne wrote before returning to his selfish hell in Mexico.

The failure of language to convey and retain meaning transcendently has overtaken the entire show, including my own. We are reminded yet again that the Consul's demise is as inevitable as his next drink, as his failure to complete his book, to reunite purposefully with Yvonne, and to become a solid and embodied subjectivity removed from linguistic vapidness. As Baxter writes, “The Consul is, in a sense, the first author in literary history who is shot for existentialist inauthenticity, for his silence and his writing block” (123), as his sentencing by a Mexican police officer resounds: “You are no a de wrider, you are de espider, and we shoota de espiders in Mejico” (p. 371), accusing him of being a spy and a Jew whose presence in Mexico or existence anywhere on earth is not justified by any substantial or nationalistic contributions. With this literary fatalism in mind, it is to Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* that we must solipsistically return.

## Chapter 2: The Attempted Return

### *Justine in the Real*

Lawrence Durrell's *Justine* is a metempsychosis of the author's soul into an almost unreal lover—a flight out of real situations in love to the place where we conduct the imagining for our affairs. As a character, Justine knows too much.

I might succeed in a critique of *Justine* despite the fact that this novel hits close to home with my own story about a playwright named Dolores. Dolores is every inch of the text; she is invested in the fissures, extending my creative writing into others' works so as to mock and cut knowingly into me just as Durrell's Justine responds to Darley. Yet the emphasis, the force, the very severity of Durrell's prose is that he is not shy about issues of love, whereas the problem of objectivity makes a certain shyness inevitable with all criticism.

Commenting on the *Alexandria* novels has been the riskiest enterprise I have known as a graduate student. The only approach that seems to work is approximate autobiography. In a more or less abstract way, one must offer one's experiences to the multilayered view of the *Quartet*, vowing not to make the theories of Freud, Lacan, Kristeva or even Zizek (perhaps the most readable psychoanalyst) more significant than the most personal meanings that can be extracted from the text. For as Pursewarden says in regard to Arnauti's psychoanalysis of Justine, "I do not believe there is any system which can do more than pervert the essential idea" (*Js* 138). I hesitate to call this criticism, unless it is to be in the reader-response vein. Is it so absurdly subjective that anything I write will strike Durrell's tone of voice while substituting his characters for my own? Will this projection throw the literature out with the criticism—just how sinful is the process of writing my own story on top of Durrell's?

Anyone who subscribes to the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might rejoin, “What else have we been expecting?” The line between *objective* and *subjective* has been challenged for more than a century—long enough, at least, for an American graduate student bombarded with media to celebrate the truth in Wilde’s declaration that “The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” (3) without blushing, for we invest ourselves in the literature we read, without which process life would risk utter meaninglessness. John Ruskin famously wrote of subjectivity and objectivity that they are “two of the most objectionable words . . . ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians” (cited by Cudon, 874). Perhaps worse than that dichotomy is the anxiety over what life and art could possibly maintain in the prevalence of anti-humanistic theories of the self and the ideological infusions in criticism, which allow isolated questions of aesthetics to be most objectively defended by Oakeshott’s view that a work of art is that which evokes *contemplative delight*. Yet how much of the text’s meaning is denied a place to play in that phrase, and how much can one reinsert without digging it out of one’s life and writing?

For even Darley, living the literary high life with apparently too much material from which to draw, is awakened by a friend who has lost herself, yet who can only revive by alerting him of *his* slumber. When their relationship entered the advanced stages, Clea (Darley’s final lover, the painter of an unfinished portrait of Justine, who was in turn responsible for Clea’s sexual awakening) became prone to “periods when she fell into silence and moroseness, became a nervous and woebegone version of her old self . . . subject to long distracted silences” and “unusual fatigues” (*Cl* 235). The literary world ought to hear about the smack she gave the artist admitting defeat; the conference panel must be notified. Certainly, we all-too-knowing critics are



in greater need of a shaking than the as-yet unrealized and prematurely complacent writer, Darley, who was only filling the silence with a dull remark about the future!

...she was trying to drive me away: "I am no good for you, Darley. Since we have been together you haven't written a single line. You have no plans. You hardly read any more." /.../ In truth I knew, or thought I did, that I would never become a writer. The whole impulse to confide in the world in this way had foundered, had guttered out. The thought of the nagging little world of print and paper had become unbearably tedious to contemplate. Yet I was not unhappy to feel that the urge had abandoned me. On the contrary I was full of relief—a relief from the bondage of these forms which seemed so inadequate an instrument to convey the truth of feelings. "Clea, my dear" I said, still smiling ineffectually, and yet desiring in a way to confront this accusation and placate her. "I have been actually meditating on a book of criticism."

"Criticism!" she echoed sharply, as if the word were an insult. And she smacked me full across the mouth—a stinging blow which brought tears to my eyes and cut the inside of my lip against my teeth. (*CI* 236-7)

This attack causes Darley's blood to surround his teeth as if to mortify his grin—but we are told he is "furiously enraged" (237). His response to being attacked for suggesting he might write a book of criticism is not a grin, as was my reaction to this telltale moment. Yet the *Quartet* contains a number of embedded critics—Darley, Pursewarden, Clea, Balthazar—as if the only function left to criticism in late modernism is to partake in the creative process with one eye cast at the inspiring (or conspiring) literature. The more reasonable critic within me furrows but remains silent as if he is another of Darley's friends who should warn Darley not to get mixed up with Justine again, for "the truth is that nobody ever breathes a word, nobody interferes, nobody

whispers while the acrobat is on the tight-rope; they just sit and watch the spectacle, waiting only to be wise after the event (*Bl* 130). If the postmodern theme of writing the body as text rings true, it is compounded by the secondary writer's textualism, the result of which is an addiction to thrill-seeking, waving one's hand ever closer to the cauldron of solipsistic, fictive criticism.

The blurred vision I have recently directed to my fragments of the "Dolor" manuscript is the result of accepting as paradoxically real the artificiality of Justine. As Darley writes, "The distortions of reality were deeply interesting to someone who recognized that for the artist in herself some confusions of sensibility were valuable" (*Bl* 55). The distortion I encourage is a response to Durrell's complexity of love and philosophy of writing; the beautiful delusions of the *Alexandria Quartet* are too copious to grant any major theoretical camp its usual privilege as the lawmaker and metatextual connector, not even for the close textual readings I employed with Lowry. One has to do all that is possible to *live* the *Quartet*, even if one lives a regular family life not free to roam the "capital of memory," taking notes and recording quotes rather than exploring the city of Alexandria, living in comfortable monogamy not forming attachments and being wounded by them.

In "Dolor," which I set out upon a few months before reading *Justine*, I have been exploring the problem of the character talking back to the author in a way that proves she knows better than he does just how she will be represented. Reading Durrell in this pre-imitative context allowed me to fancy that I would anticipate the theories that could usefully be applied to the text. "To refuse such a criticism at this point," I wrote in a response paper on *Justine*, "would be the only blasphemy I can muster in this obscenely decentered world. If all the texts I will encounter in the avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will turn out like this, unsettlingly auto-self-reflective, then

the last thing I should do is to deny the course of a fatally idiosyncratic critique. Indeed, I am fortunate to have such friends already on my page.” For as Durrell writes:

What a marvelous capacity for unhappiness we writers have! I only know that this long and painful examination of Justine succeeded not only in making her less sure of herself, but also more consciously dishonest; worst of all, she began to look upon me as an enemy who watched for the least misconception, the least word or gesture which might give her away. (*Js* 82)

What Durrell has struck upon is the anxiety of prodding his subject for a response, the reversed gaze of oneself fictionalized. In holding the poem up to the critical light we must do the same: Justine is the text and the face. She is waiting for a response—the very words which actuate her seem to ask to be realized by the reader afresh, in the creative act of critiquing. Justine cannot only be a figment of the author’s or the narrator’s—or for that matter of Arnauti’s—imagination. (Arnauti, Justine’s ex-husband and psychoanalyst, pens the first full-length book in the effort of dissecting her personality). She quite clearly stems from the reader, who by this point in modern literature understands his role of reading the idealized woman into the text as quite a bundle of problems. This was the fact with Chaucer’s *Criseyde*, and we will continue along this narcissistic path until the death of sex or the ultimate moral order is imposed upon literature.

Again, *Justine* knows too much about this business of characterization. But the author of the legitimate story we are reading will not let this be proved beyond a doubt. Durrell has a text to construct, and we must have our book. He cannot ever be so naked as to disclose every act of self-creation and invite the total pulverization of his convictions. (Fish once demonstrated in a review of an attack on postmodernism that even when the emptiness of the center is acknowledged and celebrated, we still carry our convictions in an equipage we can never throw

off any bridge, since each bridge will link us to another idea or intimacy that cannot help but matter.)

Justine herself must survive the gaze of the author. Of course she will, and with alarming dexterity since she has been cut out of all of us (literary men) and made whole. And we are being pulled in by the notion that that's okay! This style of self-love has all the pessimism and passion that literature can ever acquire by its birth in a dark alchemical cellar. Reading *Justine* and relating to Justine becomes "a very ominous assignment—with overtones of extreme personal danger" (Thompson 6).

As I recently blogged:

I have thrown out everything and am trying to write to Durrell from the realm of...poetry. Simply the aesthetic attitude, extended to the creative mode—this word seems plain dirty now, the *aesthetic*. Ambivalence and ambiguity occupy different spaces; rather than reactionary, they are trusted old tropes. They are not a scourge on the discerning, differentiating mind as is *aesthetics*, which is so entirely removed from the general conversation that I cannot say where I am when I bring it up—suddenly back in my basement, mixing elements and staring off, writing! This is the space of poetry, even if I will produce only dismal prosaic lines about the nothingness I am escaping and the scholastic stuffiness I am evading by not claiming to know precisely what actuates Durrell's fiction...

I have gone through the Literature program learning how to take a text apart, resituate it, but rarely to comment upon its style. Yet instead of doing merely that, I have found a personally more fulfilling route in imitating an author's approach, rather as, or perhaps opposite to the way that Borges' Pierre Menard recreates *The Quixote*. I am not facetious

enough to rewrite the *Quartet* line for line, nor have I the memory that could call the entire opus forth in my handwriting. Yet this has been briefly my approach. Writing criticism in a shoddily poetic style confines one to a mimicry that risks getting the textual details wrong while it betrays one's own expectations of what the text should accomplish. Finally I have arrived at the question of why anyone should bother with this mode of critique, if no aesthetic categories or theories are to be established, if the qualities of an author's style are to be described primarily through apery. I have not escaped truth-minded claims about the texts, regardless of how loosely I have responded to them. In the first phase Lowry's references to alchemy created their own critical structure, though a modest one. And then an implication of my reading of Durrell is that although the style of an author might pass itself off to the student, no damage is done. The fictive flames can only imperil the student if he surrenders his imagination to an aesthetic experience that lingers well after the original text is set down so that he can never write his own. This remains to be seen with "Dolor."

As is well known to scholars, Lowry too struggled under the anxiety of influence. Sherrill Grace writes in the "About the Book" section following the text of Harper Perennial's 2007 edition of *Under the Volcano* that

some books become part of our lives. They insinuate themselves into our hearts and minds, take over our habits of speech, and provide us with a ready stock of phrases, locutions, and images. They teach us how to see the world; they warn, exhort, and delight. They haunt our imaginations and shape our appreciation of what great writing can, even should, be. (4)

The text enters the reader's consciousness innocuously enough at first—until, that is, the burden of originality begins to burn. Critics often point to Lowry's uneasiness with his various literary intimacies, as Grace continues:

Like so many writers before him, from Milton to T.S. Eliot, Lowry cannibalized what he read and made it his own. But unlike other writers, he was also horrified by this capacity for appropriation. He plagued himself with specters of plagiarism and chastised himself for succumbing to “hysterical identification” with other writers. (11)

During my study of Lowry and Durrell, I have located a source of appropriative discomfort that produces fine delusions of originality, in the form of critical transgressions and creative misuses of time-tested theories, usually without direct references. I have invited my readers to chastise my inaccuracy while nodding towards the sublime equilibrium of critical and creative writing. On the other hand, why cannot the two get along—is their antagonism wholly exaggerated?

Precisely why such a nihilistic, aesthetic attitude has beset my criticism is difficult to explain other than by admitting to my not taking time off from critical work to accommodate an artistic pregnancy, awaiting the birth of a peculiar madness that has always required an extensive reading list for validation. In reading the *Alexandria Quartet* I sent out several invitations to the demon of creation, warning at every step that a *criticism* was the object, that the beast must content itself with stylistic flourishes so long as they are true to the original text. (Most of the writings that resulted are too absurd to share). And once it arrived, the demon, fashioning itself not after a Mephistopheles but a conglomerate of female faces fashioned after various Justines, refused to leave my study for the sake of objectivity.

Until a second revision of this portion of the project, the shareable result was short-lived, like the creative act of a virgin. The readings leading up to this writing, divorced as much as

possible from the themes of theory, proved the greater force; the anticipation is rather more memorable than the moment of deflowering. The guilt which Nietzsche discusses as emanating from the debt one owes to ancestors, to repay the sacrifices they made long before one's birth to create the social order and culture that provides the empty individual with meaning, is apt here:

...the *aim* now is to turn back the concepts "guilt" and "duty"—back against whom?

There can be no doubt: against the "debtor" first of all, in whom from now on the bad conscience is firmly rooted, eating into him and spreading within him like a polyp, until at last the irredeemable debt gives rise to the conception of irredeemable penance, the idea that it cannot be discharged ("eternal punishment"). (*Genealogy* 91)

As the debtor with a bad conscience for all the ideas I have incorporated into my worldview and of which I would be gladly rid if I could fashion something entirely new, I have been morbidly eager to shirk this existential responsibility in favor of my own vapors and myths. Hence the retroactive wish from which I now suffer, that I had taken the parental if radical advice of theorists and scholars more seriously, connected ideas with more trust in their absolute value or recursive fascination, without this fatalism that turns a decent student into a travesty of higher learning. Yet without transgression, without crime, there can be no progress. As Durrell cites Sade just before opening *Clea*: "The Primary and most beautiful of Nature's qualities is motion, which agitates her at all times, but this motion is simply the perpetual consequence of crimes, it is conserved by means of crimes alone." Without crime we simply peter out and grow dull; it is no different in literary scholarship.

Of course, disobeying (rather, trying to ignore) the most disruptive tradition in intellectual history—French theory—is no easy task. I have worn Darley's mackintosh for my walk out on the plank, assuming that since other students have made it back safely, so should I.

But they elected Derrida and Foucault for a lift, whereas the critic with artistic pretensions wanted no support. Still on deck is a pair of objective readers, ready to help with sentencing—my thesis advisor and secondary reader, who upon accepting this project cast himself as “a Gabby Hayes style sidekick to Paul,” whose nomadic lifestyle is reputed to support postmodernism by way of existing (and hiking) in the world so as to exhaust its theoretical possibilities. Of course, I am behaving on paper like Pursewarden, the only artist in the *Quartet* successful enough to live off his art. Writes Darley, “He had discovered for himself the uselessness of having opinions and in consequence made a habit of usually saying the opposite of what he thought in a joking way” (111). My quips, both on and off the stage, have been falling out haphazardly: “The act of creation now requires a doctor visit. As soon as your Faustian dread of too much learning kicks in, poof! A new reading is put on the table, ripe for discussion. Take the Lit-Crit potion and let the text be reborn in your hands!”



## Sade in Durrell

“How well I recognized her now as a child of the city, which decrees that its women shall be the voluptuaries not of pleasure but of pain, doomed to hunt for what they least dare to find!”

—Lawrence Durrell, *Justine* (47)

Unique among censorious statements of dictators, Napoleon Bonaparte’s hyperbolic blurb on the back cover of the collected works of the Marquis de Sade rings curiously true, that “*Justine* is the most abominable book ever engendered by the most depraved imagination.” Short of wanton murder, *Justine* explores the worst cruelty imaginable while seeking to demolish all half-hearted morality. Justine is ravaged on nearly every page—her violations must equal the Consul’s drinks. One of the more memorable scenes involves a large cylindrical device filled with boiling-hot water:

The monk threatens me with all his rage if I do not acquiesce; I have to obey. The perfidious machine penetrates to the two-thirds mark and the tearing it causes combined with its extreme heat are about to deprive me of the use of my sense; meanwhile, the superior, showering an uninterrupted stream of invectives upon the parts he is molesting, has himself excited by his follower; after fifteen minutes of rubbing which lacerates me, he releases the spring, a quart of nearly boiling water is fired into the last depths of my womb.... I fall into a faint. Severino was in an ecstasy...he was in a delirium at least the equal of my agony. (620)

To explore what this expansion signifies for the spirit is even more frightful, and Sade plunges into the philosophical implications with as callous a touch as his parade of torturers invade the anus. Still, Sade’s personality infuses every act with a certain silliness, a sense of humor born of the mayhem of the French revolution. From Sade’s *Justine* one gets the impression of the author

as a snarky aristocrat who acted much like his compatriots in the sack (in pursuit of divers pains) but who was locked up for writing these practices to their exaggerated climaxes. Ironically, Justine does not go in for sin straight from the convent (after her parents' death) as does her sister, Juliette, who directly "went to find a woman whose name she had once heard mentioned by a youthful friend; perverted was what she desired to be and this woman was to pervert her" (462-63). Juliette, who eventually focuses "her attentions to the culpable idea of abridging her husband's days" (465), fares infinitely better than her younger sister. She "attains, over a period of fifteen years, the position of a titled woman, with an income of thirty thousand pounds, very handsome jewels, two or three houses in the city, as many in the country and, at the present moment, the heart, the fortune and the confidence of Monsieur de Corville, Councilor to the State, an important man much esteemed and about to have a minister's post" (462). Justine, however, steadfast in her virtue, becomes more heroic yet also more foolish as her idealism is assaulted, defending her naiveté between torture sessions only to be run over by the violator's arguments.

Justine's pro-virtue stance is continuously knocked over by blunt antitheses with no hope for resolution. As Dubourg (whose role in the story is only important insofar as his methods supersede those of the previous villain) concludes his monstrous speech:

...the virtue whereof you make such a conspicuous display is worthless in this world; in vain will you genuflect before its altars, its ridiculous incense will nourish you not at all. The thing which least flatters men, that which makes the least favorable impression upon them, for which they have the most supreme contempt, is good behavior in your sex ... it is their wantonness which serves and amuses us; but their chastity could not interest us less. When, to be brief, persons of our sort give, it is never except to receive. (470)

When at last Justine finds a haven in which to regale her long-lost sister (whom she only recognizes at the end of her tale) of her obscene trials, she enjoys a period of torture-free bliss and is promptly ravaged by mother nature: “The lightning entered her right breast, found the heart, and after having consumed her chest and face, burst out through her belly” (742). While reading Sade’s *Justine*, the question is bound to come up: will pleasure ever be convincingly shared again, or is pain the only constant, the source of everything we love and hate?

From Sade to Durrell, pleasure morphs into an event for the psyche more than the body, for as Pursewarden tells Durrell’s Justine:

...sex is a psychic and not a physical act. The clumsy coupling of human beings is simply a biological paraphrase of this truth—a primitive method of introducing minds to each other, engaging them. But most people are stuck in the physical aspect, unaware of the poetic *rapport* which it so clumsily tries to teach. That is why all your dull repetitions of the same mistake are simply like a boring great multiplication table . . . . (*Bl* 124)

In short, love continuously sheds but is never rid of its agonistic layers; perhaps it would be dull without them? Yet the satisfaction, like any other energy, when dispersed across several affairs lasts throughout every disappointment, for at least one party of the relationship is always adrift in notions of another, especially during the act. Durrell’s response to Sade’s explicitness is primarily through betrayal: thinking of another, imitating another, requesting of one’s mate instructions for playacting.

Numerous instances of confessed betrayals can be culled from Durrell’s text. They are so common that Pursewarden, the only man whom Justine “could not punish by her infidelities—an intolerable but delightful novelty” (*Bl* 123), remarks to her that “We are all looking for something to be unfaithful to—did you think you were original?” (122). Darley, who is

enamored until the final novel (*Clea*) with Justine, tells us that his affections for the consumptive dancer Melissa are strong regardless of what fills his mind when he is with her, for he longs “to hold that slender cherished body in my arms, inhaling its sour flavours of alcohol and tobacco-smoke, thinking all the time of Justine” (210). Melissa, in turn, on her deathbed says to Clea in regard to Darley, “You have been my friend, Clea, and I want you to love him after I am gone. Do it with him, will you, and think of me? Never mind all this beastly love business. Cannot a friend make love on another’s behalf?” (135). After Purswarden, the quintessence of the guilt-tortured artist (namely for his all-consuming affair with Liza, his blind sister), has committed suicide via alcohol and cyanide, Darley contemplates the effects on his and Justine’s affair: “But such a demon is love that I would not be surprised if in a queer sort of way his death actually enriched our own love-making, filling it with the deceits on which the minds of women feed—the compost of secret pleasures and treacheries which are an inseparable part of every human relation” (210). Justine, upon discovering a prostitute lying in Purswarden’s bed while he stands in the bathroom brushing his teeth, pins the girl in a good-spirited attempt to procure a new perspective of her lover, asking how he was for her. And when she takes a lover to make her husband, Nessim, jealous, she instructs the man who is new adultery to “tell me how she [his wife] behaves and I will imitate her. In the dark we are all meat and treacherous however our hair kinks or skin smells” (*Js* 138). The cruelty of love extends, of course, to reading and responding to a text, Purswarden in the “Consequential Data” section after the narrative of *Balthazar* quipping that “I love the French edition with its uncut pages. I would not want a reader too lazy to use a knife on me” (246, *i*). For the moment, suffice it to agree with Darley—“how disgusting, how unfair, love is!” (231).

In the *Quartet*, love's infiltration of the intellect causes the metaphysical equivalent to the torture in Sade's *Justine*. The consequences of this approach are as sincere as they are amorphous and mystifying, for "Aphrodite permits every conjugation of the mind and sense in love" (*Bl* 166). The coupling of spirits leads to myriad infusions of identity. Justine, whom Purswarden calls "the tiresome old sexual turnstile through which presumably we all must pass—a somewhat vulpine Alexandrian Venus" (*Bl* 115) is the most alluring artifact of a city containing every false medicine for "the sick men, the solitaries, the prophets—I mean all who have been deeply wounded in their sex" (*Js* 14). Such is the Alexandrian advertisement of the overly-intellectual lover-writer, Darley.

Perhaps the most telling comment in the *Quartet* is made by Balthazar, that "all love-making to one less instructed than oneself has the added delicious thrill which comes from the consciousness of perverting, of pulling them down into the mud from which passions rise—together with poems and theories of God" (*Bl* 58). These novels contain so many self-reflections as to make traditional criticism—or even the most radical criticism!—redundant. All one can hope to accomplish is the connecting of various narrators' comments to their philosophical precedents; meanwhile the language deconstructs itself, the narrators toy with each other's theories, the slipperiness of reality is related to the better enjoyment of a mystified orifice, member, or essence. We arrive at the fact that Durrell is strangely subtle in matters sexual, relying on the asterisk to convey the worst, while Sade (at least in *Justine*) also avoids profanities—unlike *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, where he drops the religious euphemisms for obviously explicit acts, opting for "Jesus-fucking-shit" and the like. Why in *Justine* does Sade prefer to refer to the sacred altar of sex, not the cunt, and not so much to come as to incense, grants passage to the ramming rod, member, but not the cock? (I find it hard to justify dropping

these obscenities myself, but the point must be made explicitly). Nonetheless, though I am no expert on the topic, I doubt we have learned much about explicit and abusive sex since Sade's *Justine*, or the permutations of identity wrought by adulterous love in Durrell's *Justine*. It's all in there.

As for treating Durrell and Lowry traditionally—I fear that would only result in a stifling slew of Nietzsche and Sade references. Of course I have dipped my toes into that stream, which could have gone swimmingly if I did not share the self-destructive bent of half of Durrell's characters, if I did not wish to join Lowry in the search for poetic autobiography, if I were content to merely comment upon a work of such—forgive the cliché—stunning brilliance as this *Quartet*. The effect of these novels are strong, the experiences and intelligence they conjoin are intoxicating. Any scholar who wishes to tie either writer to a workhorse of epistemology—the machinery of criticism—has got other interests in mind, has got categories and terms polluting his or her aesthetic attitude. If there is an altar unto which I shall genuflect, it is that of art and the experiences which make it such a risky business to get into. For nothing can be counted upon; unless one has a fierce memory reinforced by the quickest imagination, these experiences are fleeting and must be caught. As Darley writes, “How did one come to forget the greatest of one's experiences? It was all lying there like a piano that one could play but which one had somehow forgotten to touch for years” (*Bl* 86).

Alexandria is the “capital of memory” which we know thrives on imagination, and an aching duality is constantly up for resolution: “The sexual and the creative energy go hand in hand. They convert into one another—the solar sexual and the lunar spiritual holding an eternal dialogue” (*Cl* 141). It is now crass and vulgar to get caught up in limbs intertwining, says Pursewarden, yet one can drink from the body of the beloved from another, as Narouz, Nessim's

hair-lipped younger brother, drinks his beloved Clea (who barely knows of his existence) from the body of an old prostitute. Sade's villains, scores of them, are bent on inflicting pain to procure pleasure that is always one-sided, except for one scene involving a very fat man with a miniscule member instructing boys already predisposed to excite him where he can hardly interact with a woman. The only mutuality of Sade's pleasure in *Justine*, therefore, is male. Yet in Durrell's books, we can scarcely speak of feminism for it throws too much morality across a luminous literary landscape. We can say that Justine is now vying for control and the tables are successfully turned. Still, it is more meaningfully the case that the pain, sharpened by ambivalence and honesty alike, is emanating from everyone. Justine is written about, analyzed, or painted by at least four of the characters. These are no mere shifts of first-person narrators. Their theories baffle and deflect away from the thing they are explaining and we could not know Justine otherwise. One cannot hide from the subtle torture of discussing this character! Meanwhile every hint of guilt is used to rub off the ego. "We use each other," Justine says in the novel with her name on it, "like axes to cut down the ones we really love" (112). The problem, the cause of this torture is that love has spread to the intellect, and we get off by bad feelings and purposeful delusions. Sex is equated to guilt and the repositioning of selves during the act that allows metaphysics to reacquire its corporeality. We can feel that the body thrives during the writing process, regardless of the deconstructive activity playing out all around us.

## Chapter 3: Theory in Fiction

### Introduction

Whether my criticism has actually turned into fiction is an open question; presently it is not so obvious that I have a mind outside of Durrell's and Lowry's texts. Consider the following, then, the essay's "inconsequential data," yet its crux, climax, moment of disillusion.

What is most problematic in "Dolor" for this essay as a whole could be the revelation of themes associated less with modernism than with postmodernism. However, the triumphantly poetic life force of Lowry and Durrell's texts has rescued this story from utter abstraction and theoretical phrasemaking. They have helped me breathe life into an attitude and to at least occasionally humble my narrator before Dolores, the established playwright, recalling Darley's troubles in coping with the confident Pursewarden who represents one of the only true artists of the *Quartet*. The sole distinction between my narrator and the artist with whom he is supposedly in love is captured—to my own surprise—by the scene in *Clea* wherein Pursewarden observes Justine telling a story to a group of children in a brothel:

It was such a rich diet for the soul! It made me aware how thin the fare is which we moderns supply to our hungry readers. The epic contours, that is what her story had! I was envious. How rich these beggar children were. And I was envious too of her audience. Talk of suspended judgement! They sank into the imagery of her story like plummets. One saw, creeping out like mice, their true souls—creeping out upon those painted masks in little expressions of wonder, suspense and joy. . . . The poetry had stripped them to the bone and left only their natural selves to flower thus in expressions faithfully portraying their tiny stunted spirits! (149-50).



Again, the emphasis in literary studies on explicating or resituating the text in fresh interpretive systems belabors the aesthetic experience. This is so much the norm that the art of storytelling is taken for granted, as if the artist merely provides the raw, irrational data that the scholar must be obliged to arrange. Justine possesses the gift of captivating her audience, pulling them out of themselves until the show is over (and likely well afterward); such is the power Dolores is said to possess. The realization of her character might appear in the present draft woefully incomplete, but the effort has led me to a richer appreciation of my primary authors' accomplishments.

Much of the interest in provisionally comparing "Dolor" to the *Quartet* and *Under the Volcano* is not only the level of influence of the latter works upon the former but also of the coincidence of themes. Regardless of the vacuum an artist or critic seems to be working within, sheer originality turns out to be an illusion. As Borges writes, "The universe (which others call the Library)" contains all human utterance, so that "There is no combination of characters one can make—*dhcmlrchtjdj*, for example—that the divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance. There is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god" (112, 117). Considering the self-perpetuating and repeating nature of discourse, rather than become dismayed by a lack of originality, one ought to delight in contemplative language, taking sufficient risks in letting it reveal the most unsettling, embarrassing, or almost religious aspects of oneself.

Perhaps Pursewarden's individualistic view that "A good writer should be able to write anything. But a great writer is the servant of compulsions which are ordained by the very structure of the psyche and cannot be disregarded" (*CI* 136) is contradicted *ad infinitum* by the all-too-familiar position that is taken, for example, by political theorist Chantal Mouffe, which

“consistently rejects any kind of essentialism—either of the totality or of the elements—and affirms that neither the totality nor the fragments possess any kind of fixed identity, prior to the contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation” (7). Essential to this approach is a totally disillusioned view of the object of political theory, as theorists strive for—and without hope of actually realizing—the ideal pluralistic democracy (8).

Similarly, we can still consider one purpose of modern art to be the discovery of temporary resting spots of stability that we expect to dissolve and in which we must revel before they go. To extend a line of Nietzsche, students immersed in theory have lost the luxury of startling at a revelation of uncertainty—as the pre-moderns exclaimed, “To lose firm ground for once! To float! To err! To be mad! That was part of the paradise and the debauchery of bygone ages, while our bliss is like that of a man who has suffered shipwreck, climbed ashore, and now stands with both feet on the firm old earth—amazed that it does not waver” (*Science* 111). Artistic creation provides a delightfully wary—and aesthetically instructive—sense of stability, which is trickier to maintain than our emphasis on theory might have us assume.

Finally, the transformation of Keats from a journalist to an artist is telling of the balance between life, art, and criticism, as he transcends this slighting job description: “For it is always a Keats that is chosen to interpret, to drag his trail of slime over the pitiful muddled life out of which the artist, with such pain, recaptures these strange solitary jewels of self-enlightenment” (*Clea* 179). He suddenly becomes a *writer*, however, one who is certain of his transformation even without having yet written a more writerly word, when he discovers a range of activity in the war that affirms his existence more than the mere recording of it (181). The activity I have been celebrating is ever subordinate to lived experience. Meanwhile, the writer’s attempt to overcome that fate is paramount to nourishing the illusion of a stable self. As Darley reminds us:

“...as for human characters, whether real or invented, there are no such animals. Each psyche is really an ant-hill of opposing predispositions. Personality as something with fixed attributes is an illusion—but a necessary illusion *if we are to love!*” (Bl 15)...and to write.

## “Dolor”

In the following text we can trace Dolores’ progress into the sleepier categories of a hostile nature, learning the ropes of cooking and gardening while scraping artistically by on my efforts to conceal her. The remainder, what she knows is beyond capture, is the surplus that makes up her living personality. She is grateful I can never put all of her in here—so grateful she has raised the stakes by interrupting and harassing my text to tip the balance between responsible realism and Poststructuralism in the latter’s favor, threatening always to render me too intentional in my attempts to fix the mess she is making of her own story.

Her plays are marked by a freshness and curtness, a chill engulfed by laughter like the Steppenwolf’s redemptive punishment after his sober scour is raised out and above him like an ax. In this case the executor is charged by the jester to give her the textual presence she lacked as a playwright. What she thinks we will have here is a stuck philosopher going to shambles with the popular decree, the shared contempt for my efforts to portray the mistress of portrayals. In this she merely projects the furious drollery undergirding the dolorous show that she kicked off a decade ago by casting some nameless actor a role which I have yet to hide behind or live up to. Her success eventually terminated itself because she worried the world of drama with obvious hints to the back-story of her first play, on the verge of apologizing for the disingenuous manner in which she revealed me as if her use of my character was *a priori* immoral.

She was not herself convinced she’d committed an artist’s sin. Her hesitancy before the plunge of committing herself to the real me has been transmuted into my *responsibility*, as if because her career was mine all along I am the only one who can save it. Yet all this is imported by her more explicit attempts to get me to admit that I’ve always been a metaphysician tangentially interested in fantasy, a closeted fiction writer who works at a sawmill as a show of

earthbound masculinity. The truth is I've had to conduct my most laborious study in her favor. My living the rural dream outside the city of Alterity was arrested by the return of my childhood love/lore, and to repay the favor of characterization—she created me on the stage and asked me to construct her in prose—I have gone into critical theory, a tradition she either despises or decisively ignores.

A single episode hooked her on the idea that I was a sort of prophet, a rustic mystagogue: an afternoon in an abandoned house wherein I told a little tale of an alien to an empty kid's bedroom. So as not to keep the reader perpetually in the dark I have placed that story several chapters in the future, but at the time, who knows what I said. The rub was the point-blankness of my approach to this imaginary audience so that Dolores, who was then blinking in the dusty living-room, was vaporized into the film which I didn't quite see before me. I witnessed myself regaling but not the subject of that regaling; meanwhile she caught the idea that I could be put on as a father of philosophy and poetry. All I'd require for a repeat episode was a stage, the right lack of lighting and the subservience of surrounding characters who would evoke the same declarative stance: Listen, all you flattering empties, to the tale that I'll tell....

As it happens, the Violent Femmes were on the radio that day in August 1999. Alterity was progressively small-minded. The Femmes played in our town as if in a vacuum, but could a listener in a major city, we asked ourselves weaving through the hills beyond the homestead, encounter the band's live material on their local station? We forgot of course that by its nature a city cannot have a "local station" but a multiplicity of competing signals. The variety of our own station, from the day's worst country classics to death metal at night, prepared the Femmes' "Country Death Song" as a subliminally clever sandwich. The prospect Gorgon Gano suggests at

the end, “You wanna know how to take a short trip to hell—it’s guaranteed to get your own place in hell,” pushed its way into Dolores’ stoned, dialogue-churning mind and produced a one-man show starring a gregarious yours-truly and a nightmare of critical success, for both of us. In Gano’s tale a child is thrown into a well; in my seminal performance the children had long since disappeared. Finally, in Dolores’ rendering the audience took the blame for every emptiness!

As a writer then based at the University of Michigan—to which she had won herself a basketball scholarship, of all things—Dolores found a niche in the avant-garde of Ann Arbor and an added emptiness in the chamber that she hollowed out with a boombox manufacturing the murderous urban noise of the Brooklyn trio, *Unsane*. The result was a bent discomfiture: the play reached up and grappled with the implications of the audience’s guilt in perpetuating a world without meaning so that after a few performances at the Hill Auditorium, the critical scene of *Alterity* had begun to turn against her. Her fixation with Eliot’s phrase, “emptinesses ecclesiastically enshrined,” was being explained as Dolores’ conceit inverted against her *self* which pulled the audience into her inguinal canal, releasing them only after the playwright was sated with the pain of “hernial metaphoria.” Down-home puns like these found their way to her site in Michigan, infecting her with the resentment of those she had left behind when she became an artist elsewhere. After finishing her general education requirements she neglected to declare a major and register for other classes so that she is likely still a student after five years.

The plays she wrote once the Midwest had gone sour attracted the attention of New York—and at such an apex, Dolores had no choice but to atrophy. She couldn’t help seeing herself as a local writer. She’d devoted her Ann Arbor plays to a desultory cast of friends from *Alterity*; taking the plunge into New York society and universalizing her material was, if not a

terrifying prospect, an unattractive one. She came back to Alterity, she claims, to settle the score with her first character, Victor Imbroglio.

With me in mind, Dolores has suffered throughout her career from the hand she dealt as the only member of the original audience, by which she had “captured the heavens so sweetly here I think I might brave another attempt.” She said this recently about an apple-filling mountain pie she baked over her gas stove, holding the iron over the flames just long enough for a golden brown exterior and an interior that would be kind to an eager tongue. Her accolade works just as well with how she treated the subject of her first and greatest play.

When Dolores returned to Alterity a few months ago she found me sitting at a picnic table, dallying with a yo-yo. I’d been demonstrating tricks for kids who had shortly scampered when an iPhone app was mentioned that spun the declensions of “diversion” into scintillating images of things the player could be doing instead of playing with an iPhone. I was executing the pendulum-in-a-triangle move (I’ve never been keen on jargon of any sort) when Dolores parked in the gravel her white Cadillac whose yellow smiley face stuck on the hood as a failed facsimile of her own face. I noticed the likeness immediately and flattered myself for having immortalized that dimple in her self-image years before picking up a pen. This was my first sighting of her new car—and the way I realized she was the driver bordered on the wordily peculiar. I saw a dolorous girl through the driver’s side window scrunching her face at an angle that hid her cheek’s bitter trademark while the sun assailed only the roof of the car, the trees throwing a shadow over the sticker that all but canceled its glow until the mood it was meant to evoke worked against the boredom which caused me to sit on a picnic bench spinning an antique in the first place. This circle of yellow paint with a dumb expression sent me instantly to distraction;

the charm struck its target before I had a chance to be rid of the toy. Dolores dug in her purse with great purpose as if she had only driven here to find a pen or eye-liner, if there were any difference in her case.

Eventually she stepped out and the idea occurred that I should get back to what I was doing. She took this as a note that I was still subservient—I am sure of it—but I have held my ground.

“You can tell them,” she says, “about my purse.” She means its long strap that has enjoyed the greatest security between her breasts. She has carried it thus since our days in the woods.

“A narrowing sky, and you looking under it,” I said in that moment, not this. She lay back across the table, under a pavilion with a view of cobwebs and birds’ nests that allowed her eyes to flash in the old manner of a listless girl making shapes out of clouds and memories of the moment. “Yes,” I went on. “You delivered me from an unworthy distraction here.” She seemed to recoil. “Are you wandering amid stale impressions?” I asked, as in, “The cobwebs? Have they caught you here before? What remains of the sultry stupidity you enjoined me to adopt when cancer was on your tongue and the world was blistering hot?”

“You noticed.” Sealing a gemmy pair of eyes whose lids were yellow like a lizard’s. Birds were turning in for the day and I wondered if we’d be shat upon. “The cancer was made up,” she began, “so I’d appear noble in my decision to pierce the oral—” I heard her not say “muscle” so she would end less awkwardly; she uttered what was left with a more liquid inflection than was necessary. “Makes it pass away too quickly admitting that,” she said. Yet I was letting her pass into the pedestrian territory of false signs, the baseless beautifying of the hostile nature I mentioned here earlier. I wondered if she couldn’t help me fill out the void. “You



drove here all the way from Michigan, today?” I asked. “You must needs rest.” I looked at her and shot a glance at the one active bird’s nest, tossing it back down upon Dolores so her round chin quivered as if swimming in light drizzle studded with hail. “Control yourself,” she intoned, sensing my non sequitur.

She doesn’t often realize when the afternoon has reached its peak. I was once in her garden a few weeks after she purchased the house in which we used to carouse—I was sipping cold mead, in fact, when she came round and asked if the vitamins had been put inside for the cats as if they would access the bags and unscrew the lids (and mix the contents with their canned lunch) themselves. I glanced at the dimple in her, in which resided an entire quarter of her personality, but it was already past noon. Since the hour of genius was soon to be upon her, we wouldn’t climb the stairs and pack away our belongings in each other’s bodies. Every morning she assembled an original space and reflected upon trivialities she had picked up from literary magazines and notes I’d left her as fragments of high school. And so, catching her unawares just before the climax of psychical sluggishness, I occurred in the same vicinity as if wandering into a fly trap. (Of course Dolores has a handsome little community of these typical metaphors along the side of her unrepaired abode). I was in sync with her, and so was she; the only connection shared with *me* is this empty breakfast nook where I sit and speak on tenterhooks.

Once inside, the indolence she had exhibited to lead up to the coupling expanded her movements above me: she hovered and slithered in the air. I could fancy I felt nothing and that the spectacle was half the interest, as my exchange value—“No, not this crude Marxist eroticism.”

Although Dolores was seldom in the room with me, she was ever carrying my dead enraptured body down the stairs and up onto the roof, stifling the evidence of her efforts so that the dimple opened a black hole via the pressure she exerted to suppress it. Still it did not take me in, rather it ejected me when I found myself off somehow. I had thought it was the eternity of a face and the immediate past leading up from confounding curves that collected data in her average length of neck that was thinner than one expected. Her cashmere turtlenecks when removed left her curiously ignorant of what she was entrusting even as she wound me up and unraveled me like an annotated bibliography.

And as for the dim, complacent postcoital Look she gave me—what did it matter? I had canceled my subscription to her paper weeks before. *The Lookout* was published biweekly. It was a slim affair, the reading of which threatened to spoil my illusions of Dolores as an artist and a lover. Knowing it was still stacked in those lonely black cages in the doorways of the high school, library, and party stores returned me to Proustian reflection but not to writing, where I would've eructated impressions with a poet's acid reflex. In addition to the muse I was trying not to know too thoroughly in the context of her journalistic functions I noticed a smattering of local events with a quotidian seal. Dolores was now a staff writer whose prominence overtook the paper's character; she had *The Lookout* working for her. Even its reportedly autocratic editor made pronouncements in his chatty "View" section that labored the dolorous tone. Take for instance his response to the writing center conference hosted by Alterity Community College:

Surely it wouldn't hurt students to visit the center and subject themselves to the victors of English 107. Those who fail the remedy the first time know something of the danger of writing to one's slippery expectations. There is no end to a process invented to cure the mind of stasis; movement is the charge we are brought up on, and move the pen we do.

Only it earns us not a passing grade until we deliver our scribbled cogitations to the center. Now the lashings of a disinterested party behind a long table can begin. We know of no other reliable fix: finally we meet the termination of the self-destructive attitude, which we had assumed was running the show. What can possibly follow?

The conference's aim had been to unite the minds of tutors across the state as if to effect a takeover of the English department, whose instructors continued to send their students to the center with their thoughts caught on paper like burglars who hadn't bothered to learn the pattern of the shadows of the houses they were to break into. The motivation of writing rather than the science of it: this was the only responsibility of English teachers these days, so the *Lookout* editor deigned to opine. The tutors were the mostly ungraduated victors of squashy composition courses—they were formulated as math students who had moved the pen enough to get out of Dodge only to become its purveyors. They were the true heroes, the accountants of grammar, the grunt-workers of words. But the truth was, Ray the editor had fallen into some corner of his own past when Dolores joined the *Lookout* staff. What was once an unambiguous tribute to the town's favorite make-out spot became a trite titular warning: Dolores hated everything, and was charming and pithy enough to distract attention from her pretty face so those reformulating her words were convinced they spoke (in) their own minds. More likely they had formed a crush in a literal sense: a pejorative vice, a contemptuous pressure on their sympathies.

And so the local paper on all things intellectual gained a solipsistic charm while the playwright spent her talent. Yet this was also the period when my visits to her garden state were most frequent. An incorrigible night owl, early mornings had never claimed me so easily as when I inched closer to a childhood fantasy, creating a text out of our belated consummation. In her turn, my old muse sees me working and assumes that rolling around is just as productive as

giving the local actors their lines—and then on alternate days she is back in the staff room, inflicting her views. One might say she has been productive, and not from her resolve against contraception.

Meanwhile the small theater revamped in her honor has not hosted a single new play. The director had it in her mind that Dolores would write for Alterity's stage since her interviews suggested one of those troubled homecomings which inspire so many artists with greater longing for a place that can never accept them back wholeheartedly and thus evokes a few ounces of useful melancholy. The only words spilled since Dolores' return are my own; in Alterity Dolores' reputation sustains her.

I was once a hopeless writer of love letters, where I couldn't have been more honest if inflated with what I ironically regarded as my "feelings." The movie *The Crow* helped shape the gloom I'd associated with love according to the parental disceptations I'd overheard since adolescence—an inimical intensity in quarreling, almost mythological at this point in half my siblings' minds. If the fights were scary they were also salutary for a burgeoning subjectivity. I later explored this theme in letters to adopted cousins during my last summer in the Valley, before the divorce that coincided with my graduation, while every day watching *The Crow*, lamenting to Dolores via telephone the rape and murder of Shelly Webster. She glows palely in saccharine Gothic luster in the candlelit Los Angeles loft she shares with her soon-to-be undead avenger, Eric Draven. On the other end of the kitchen phone whose cord was a bedraggled strand of white plastic spoke my doomed female, one impossible to know, whose occasionally coarse Pennsylvania pub-speak warned me even then of the let-down of my final plunge.

Of course I took the leap that was opened up by a fling with someone else—who I was to learn esteemed me terribly. Selena had to experience the full force of a mythological love that secretly knew its own falsity—its sources were mixed up, it hadn't investigated itself properly, it began with Dolores, was interpreted foolishly by me, and fell at last at the feet of Sell, importuning her to step aside so it could fecundate the entire scene with misery—ecstasy—assuring Selena she would get off on this too. Until that point, our affair had merely been cute. And then returning to Selena after a week of non-starters and awkward hand-holding with Dolores (when this mytheme was a bit more experienced than that!) sowed the seeds of what has been traditionally regarded as Love—a year and a half wrapped severely through the squirrely Sell's short, tapered fingers, extensions of an angelic mess of emotions and lingering rage from the dolorous show. Meanwhile, in my heart I knew it was better to keep Dolores in the dark until a better version came out.

In the later days of writing her, while she flourished in Ann Arbor I thought I had found a method of getting her willfully wrong while my pen was interrupted constantly by ancient claims of love. In setting her down, who cared anymore the direction I took, what was this literary reality? Furthermore I was a sham despite my exterior of erudition by which I had furnished an attitudinal edge at the sawmill, employing my wit during breaks as if I had no greater stage than the timber bench outside the southern wall. I smoldered while talking to this mesmeric troglodyte in another state, squinting after charging my laptop at the café so I could return home and encourage honesty with a euphonious strand of sentences. The computer had stopped because the electricity had failed in a recent storm. With it working momentarily as the only light in my apartment because I hadn't thought to pick up candles, who could say whether it mattered that a single reader might take my writing seriously—the project was selfish, whether for me or for her,

but so was the world outside—and I thought I could control all three within this suffocating place of darkness and ennui. Daily losing a sense of perfection was tragic; the merit was in behaving as if any sort of completion was possible. I sometimes took a pen and notepad to the creek where a universe of rhythms and rattles echoed in the cyclical droning of cicadas. The Valley could have advertised an insect's orchestra and made a killing. For me it was the site of an adult's deliberate insanity, remembering a childish reverie of the purest variety, and now: despair set out to dry, perchance to be drenched by language.

On my blog's dashboard I recorded inklings that might have struck a more animated tone were they set in pen on Dolores' fridge. Instead I announced to my family, who mentioned a bloggy moment here and there during Thursday night pasta dinners so that I knew I could still be counted on for an interesting existence in the valley of our curiously intellectual Podunk—I asked them, what was this Alterity, and how did we come to be named after a theory, or a facet of one! Of course they did not care to contextualize the locality that owned all our years without delivering us to the feeling of enclosure, that presented my own menial wrist-breaking job sorting the lumber that spewed down an exposed shoot as an existential, one-way river-crossing, as if with each slab I identified as more useful than scrap I managed to swallow a portion of what I'd been chewing over a 10-hour shift. Realizing it was thoughts like these that nourished my affection for Dolores was discouraging, and so at one point I discussed how it slowed me down, attributing these thoughts to another. I knew where I stood, but as for the *other*! I couldn't bring myself together enough to make any assertion about her no matter how vague. The stopper of lovelornity had been pulled by a gifted scout of the crass: Control yourself, it warned. It wore a bandanna and a hat, its eyes swirled with sooty coffee, my God it looked like a capital henchwoman smuggling every desire to the interstices of our souls' contagion! Dolores was the

essence of pain, thus she must feel it herself—and every sickness, I thought, has its moment of positive reflection. The clarity one adopts for the sake of the sickly surcease captivated me—ever on the brink of an Associates in Philosophy—since I abandoned my claims to creativity. With that claim went the hope of ever owning the artist; becoming one was out of the question until she ordered her representation.

Victor, however, the version of myself that was emerging from this effort mixed with how I had appeared in Dolores' play, wore a hooded sweatshirt and spoke in cheap parables until a certain cleverness stepped in to force out an original voice. Like nothing I hadn't seen before, save the gauze wrapped interlinearly across his projected selves. Spots of blood on the arms had entertained friends and family for weeks. At times he'd say he was a cutter, yet he appeared to the practiced eye only a leper. Perhaps he could be called Jenkins because the detective spirit was against him, eating away *etcetera*, instructing those around him to consider the consequences of "an inflamed self-pity," first as a quote from Lawrence Durrell and then as it related to this petrifying if not decaying malingerer—finally as it indicated the detritus of nothingness, fragments of the void, pieces of a place that has naught. Only his sickness was not feigned! Indeed, he denied it. I for one cannot help but laugh at the petty problems we attribute to this student: the tragedy is timeless and staid...he is in love, somewhere.

A guess? He walks around at night, sleeping in various corners, disturbing his wounds by careful and logical thought. As if he is his own voodoo doll, only the injuries are not achieved through spite—they are veritable successes of good intentions so that while his friends are sore from strategic contact sports he languishes inside calculative castles in the air, avoiding for originality's sake the deconstructive *House of Leaves*. We like to fill him with candy and pummel his shell to see if it's redoubted. This is how cancer mocks itself on the flesh of a

thinker, to let us know that futility is in the eye of the controller who witnesses ideas growing with no evidence of their fleshiness, compiling frameworks that serve different spheres, life-infested swamp water encircling a dry theoretical space. If he picks up the sandpaper and goes to work, the result will be a surface from which there is too much to choose. Argal: the bloody face in the delayed act of surfacing. It drips, tickling sawdust. Yet life might still teach the palpable routes to redemption!

She tells me her pet name is Guru—of all things subliminal—and that several of her pets go by names starting with letters that recall the ocean twinkling as if provoked into a sort of calm by the flowers and blades of her garden, rippling as through a ventilation system installed by Mercury. At last, passing by at dusk are the motley leftovers of her spent imagination, nameless furry entities dismissed as blandly erotic. Dramatic impulses have sprouted in her Sent folder after a few days returning emails from admirers mostly in Michigan. Meanwhile I, the control, flail about the midnight ether as the test awaits obliteration by oxygen. He stalks through the paths he mowed about the red house years before she moved in. Unconcerned, she writes her fan base like she's honeymooning with her hands after they've been tattooed by God, the artist's *raison d'être* swelling her ego as if with the issuance of my Sadean incense. "The brain in my chest—I fear it will pop if I so much as cough! So I relax watching the lusterless butterflies, these pale, haphazard moths. Call them my little women."

Dolores is accepted by all the major institutions of thought channeling through my pen. She glowers while raising the anticipations of the gadfly of textual politics who ensures that his associates tear up occasionally, not sparing Dolores yet not achieving her either. "It makes a difference," Ray says between speeches in the room with gray walls, gray tables and chairs, without windows, "it makes a différence." She has been called upon to write briefings for the



public, a very small public containing a majority of avid readers; how could it be otherwise? This is why she has taken up smoking—as if again—because the critical macrocosm has realistic standards the disappointment of which leads to a compacted, cloistered artist punctured all over, constituting some evidence of academic prodding, the tyranny of the majority on a small body. The villain is the blistering sun of praxis.

## Spinning Darks

My childhood: Shot through by images of broken-up and rotting houses—soggy stairs, holey couches, overgrowing brambles, tottering tree ladders of kick-snapped boards—an intestate string of events represented in purple paint on my bedroom wall, lingering for decades before some oppressive intentionality settles in to ward off the pests who will devour their desires when I retire without setting the locks. Predictable, my invocation of a starry night, but not the scent of an older house with new life scraping inside it; refreshing after my emphasis on a house blotched on top with brittle, speckled brown and green shingles instead of trim slices of pine since the wood that escaped burning in '89 still failed the family's expectations of a timelessness it was too modest to entertain, so it rotted as siding. Our roof was as sturdy as it wasn't even, the faulty stitching of a boy with a nail gun crisscrossing the angles and slopes, woolgathering near the chimney—the subject a pair of warm hands despite an old Sunday chill. Defeat is avoided by the notion that he's working alone and should be reprimanded if *not* alone. So he can stay and disrepair the entire surface by this long, deliberate mistake only now considered: patchwork is the new stability, the scattered look suits a house well if scowls and fumes are to fill the space below.

“It looks like you made it yourself,” she says resetting the washing machine, a forgetful dinosaur that finds itself stuck indefinitely at each stage of the process, “but how are you working towards a room of your own in this white-carpeted land of invasive rabbits and nourishing worms?”

Having reached no decision on the matter, I attempt a distraction. “I’ll find another scenario while you conduct yourself in the kitchen. Is that where you are—in regards to the chirping?” From another room now, rustling a bag and sifting papers, she cancels the thing

making the noise and says, “Since this one’s supposed to be outside—on the porch is fine—I *step on all its kind.*” With a consortium of bangs wafting her into the room as if on a pendulum—hair like pendulating fangs—Dolores repairs to the nook. The M.C. handles the insectile wreckage as if folding a satin handkerchief, the essence of thrilled consternation gleaming down at a page of something—I ask her what it is.

“Instead, listen to this: ‘I want you to steep four hours in an apple core and then return my call. Sensibly yours, Trewly.’ This is a hideous title for a victim!” Yet the smashed bug translates itself to me as a scapegoat painted by a Pre-Raphaelite and described by Ruskin, whom Dolores has mentioned before as the original owner of the Grove a few miles down the road, a place for wandering poets to park and swim where a beaver thwaps its tail on the surface of the creek at dusk.

Dolores bursts in again—she was out for a time—and she’s heard of the painting mentioned above. “The theme of the Wandering Jew, almost. This is not, however, literally the case—its soggy back cannot result from the people heaping their anguish upon it, but from my own act of stepping deliberately to effect the death of a pest.”

“Have we been sticking to the terms of our literary affair?” I ask.

“If I paused to reflect before answering I would only elaborate on the point that after all, we need better coverage of basic things.”

Thus the snapping turtle in her broken bathtub upstairs asks himself whether he appreciates the drainage cage or if he is only interested in naming its element. “Gold? Iodine? Red?” These are categories which only a stowaway reptile with a shell could link together. This munching, hissing, pointy-faced bastard has got it all wrong, but as Dolores’ first and ugliest pet, he enjoys the impression he makes, that he’s been de-jawed, rendered useless to the outside

world because he cannot escape into and act against it. Instead, his defense has been pierced and adorned by a pair of rings so that he sounds like a little boot with spurs. All his water hails from the creek down the hill from the house: I sneak it to him with an Oops bottle (“Cheeky little white”) that I first drained while Dolores was writing emails. He self-protects by launching campaigns of swirly swimming, worrying precisely no one, a quarterly pegged dark brown oval lollygagging in what he can only know as an oval white basin. (Through shame of his jewelry he has forced his head back into his shell, but we could employ a stick to pluck him by the rings). When in the morning I see him from the vantage of the toilet I look down and ask the tops of my feet, when will she turn that turtle into a character? She might finally use Alterity Hall and advertise with an abstract in the *Outlook: A reptilian replica inside a realist text, cohabiting the lavatory amid specters of goldfish who occupy the snatching-bowl, the hole constituting a watery vector through which fins occasionally twitter.*

Dolores agrees. “This is actual, as one would say; this is expected.” She mixes the cricket’s remains into a deposit of soil. I ask where she’ll put that and she scrunches, hesitating. “Well, when are we done here? Our pains coalesce by 4:30.”

I’ve been dizzying for half an hour and only now realize this vertigo is salutary, I sense a strong will attached to it, a length of fly tape tacked to a merry-go-round in notional space. “Someone’s working in the garden,” I say, “I think I’d better start a confrontation.” She trails me a moment before swooping back under the blanket—I haven’t got a shot of her standing vulnerable—I’ve almost forgotten her nudity since it’s been tucked away ere I stood up to go and confirm that we are now in the bedroom while someone else is in the region we occupy only in the morning. For thither the evening was now turning.

Along the way to the bedroom door I am briefly followed, and this proves she is no longer in control. I stand peering in at her from the threshold. Simply: Her hair is chopped blond under sparse betrayals of original color flushed out by a part down the middle keeping everything in line, no matter the disrepair wrought by her rapid standing and lying again after our limbs' latest entanglement. That is to say, the rupture of context exacts no revenge upon her aesthetics.

The visitor spoke into his cell when I looked out upon the foliage through the kitchen window.

"This is a game that provides its own tokens for favors in the arcade. Let's assume it's essentially a spectacle and agree on a quarter to make it run without parameters, with the whole controlled by the batting of the spectator's eyes." He was speaking, of course, of the dolorous show. "The bottle will contain this eyeless personality with deniable presence. It's set vertically so the character can look straight at the audience, readying for the cupboard after each round. She's an embattled light poised to stand in the dark." Mutterings on the other end while the leaves of general shrubbery interspersed with carelessly blooming flowers quivered. "She is somewhat lanky," concluded Ray.

"We wish that the situation involved you, only it doesn't," I told the editor. He stood as a man standing in the past. "What is that crawling behind you?" I asked concerning a fluffy gray rabbit with blood on its cheeks. "You brought a guest! Then let her treat us with your silence while you tell us what brings you here."

"It involves the price adjustments of our tickets."

"What are they as they now stand? Which play are they rehashing?"

“Doesn’t matter, the one about you.” After a moment he was visibly in a state of acceptance. “It’s a Marxist text, yet.” He paused again, the moon shed its last slice of influence, and then he began. “In short, a fly in the intermission soup and the effect it had on the reviews. ‘Need a Head Shave?’ ran one in particular, in my paper. ‘You’d like to make sense of her lines—but they’re coiled inside this (in)effectual *Hairdressed Studio*. Says one actor, ‘We didn’t know when to begin the Weird. Before, her work was really clever with cues for awkward behavior. They weren’t exactly part of the script, or even contained in the plot. Just the arc, the curve—not exactly the mood, because that...comes and goes.’ But *we* must ask, does this actor know Dolores’ earlier work like we do? Was he ever cast a special role, one made just for him? Of course not. The only real person ever to appear in her work was you. Genius—because now I find you here! Forget that I’m the one in the garden at five in the morning. Property rights grant me access. I’d never been discovered and all I’d ever sought through her window was my fate on the perimeters of what I’d thought was her most absorbing hobby—as if gardening had replaced her writing.

“And so the structure—the reviews were saying—was there in the *Studio*, but—and I quote—‘not its translator.’ What could that mean? Were you her translator? Why should something written in everyman’s language need translating?”

“I know all about this but thanks, thanks for the new perspective,” I said.

He went on, “The wave of activity of misguided actors, quoting the devil who would take their sentences backstage . . . . As for me,” he expectorated, “I’ve been living in the fog, waiting. Leaving my lights on but not necessarily sleeping, obeying a dozen masters and their friends’ voices all at once. ‘Find the strength to publish these reviews and avoid mentioning them in your

editorial, tell your opinion on other matters, and think not of how she works the stubby green pen made of wood and silver that shades and glares the glossy photos she signs!”

“Alarming!” Dolores interjected from the window at 11 o’clock, a point I had forgotten overlooked the garden from the far corner of her room. I was in a control group, the one not assigned the dubious substance yet convinced it has been—and this is how the concept of a placebo worked its way into my mind, after a definition prepared me for it. I wasn’t narrating, I was barely thinking in words, and then out came the phrase “romantic individualism.” I was sure I had concluded my role in this suddenly fanatical love triangle. Strange, the editor of the local (intellectual) paper committing himself to the illusions his star writer stirred in him....

Dolores repeated my phrase verbatim, as if it were a soliloquy rather than a puncturing quip in the morning murk. As she enunciated each syllable it fell to the grass and sprouted intimations, very colorful in the accumulating sun. But then as if she had said nothing, she pushed her smart little head further out the window and asked what this was all about. The silence she was assuming to have been only now interrupted was supposed to be mended by one of her suitors dutifully explaining himself. This fallacy struck Ray instantly; he seemed prepared to fall into the pit he was claiming as the source of evil in Dolores’ garden. He began to recite this foolish bit, only to be told by the playwright herself why his peculiar role in the writing process was certainly not to be neglected but never to be overstated. “We have an editor in the garden,” she said, “a decision maker. Now, to excise is...not all that this fellow does, just most of it. But he won’t revive his paper by trying on new hats in front of old friends.”

As dolorous loyalists, we pushed forward and justified her witticism, making our own meaning, leading ourselves into it all over again.

For me, it was all an exercise in the hidden logic of Dolores' distant urge to write a play about a matriculating housewife once she realized she wanted to become one. She rested her chin upon the sill like a pie in need of cooling. "Ray, please return later, then go away."

Nothing sure obstructed his retreat back along the tricky path that led behind her house onto the Valley road; still, he was caught. Talking was his salvation. Regardless of what he said we're obliged to respond—and so he had it out. "Tonight I have called upon the sight, the active burning opening, the source of all poetry, to finally discover what it's not. I wouldn't have anticipated thoughtful treatment from those intruded upon! For I am, at bottom, a caricature. I'm here to substantiate myself, to excite the enterprise of managing a paper, but it turns out I have contributed to an [sic] situation between writers. Meanwhile I am—as you say—*excised*."

I wondered whether Ray had had to sit very long for his caricature or if he'd visited an artist of the Carnivelesque even less dedicated than Dolores. He had no idea what he was about; she was complacent on the matter; I was faithfully disinterested, so much so that I was the only actor willing to put a name to the travesty, the rhetorical monstrosity, of his presentation—yet my intention was to wait until the scene had ended.

He extracted a thought from his pocket to insist she was a character from her play where a tractor anthropomorphizes to storm the logging roads and save the mountainous coves scheduled to be cleared by the sawmill. "Did they sell you to an auto shop to be lent to strangers who generally went for muddin', who now left nasty trails over the hills that were not even fun? What did the parents think, that you were too deliberate a machine for the playful forest folk, three- and four-wheelers being much better suited to the task you hadn't chosen?"

Uncomfortable, I interrupt: "What...in which direction lies the office of Dr. Benway?"



“A phenomenal artist,” answers Ray, “open heart surgery with a toilet plunger. No one’s left to say what anything’s good for.”

Dolores shifts ground while remaining fixed at her perch. “Start talking like me—you’re nothing to reach around with. My own voice imitates enough.”

“The indications of the show,” I say...

Ray: “I’ve come, I think, to fill it in.”

## Crockery in the Bedroom

It is approximately 8pm; I have offered to cook Dolores' dinner since I'm a grateful old character of hers. Not everyone thinks of her the way I do, and of me she says: "In fact you're your own goddamn burden." She accuses me endlessly of circuitous chicanery, but what can she expect from a kid who balanced philosophy with ridiculous fights between camera angles and the wily absurdity of downy cartoons, that is, Van Damme and *Animaniacs*? This is the conversation occurring while I wait to prepare her repast, envisioning the jam she will make if she performs the task herself. When you see quotes, she speaks as if—or actually—to another. I'm just the other.

It was outside a house which was of course abandoned that I first allowed a handful of voices to inform me of what was within, including images from a grimy mirror in the midst of an overgrown interior. The house had sat unoccupied for longer than the forest could stop itself from moving in. We sat vis-à-vis on a platitude of a porch exchanging a glass pipe, cupping expressions and holding aloft the *context*, a lifted reflection of naturalistic events.

Dolores has been stipulating none too subtly the issues she will confront in this business of situating her. The problem stems from our situation a few years earlier, before she was the playwright and I the phone-jabbering lead in her minimalist debut, *Bled in Detroit: The Broken-up Luster of a Dream Preferred*. We eventually stood on the platitudinal porch, after I'd begun responding to the voices accepting the invitation I'd sparked with her, my portrayer of futurity.

"I could have stopped you," she says of the event, "but I had never heard anyone say so much while talking to an emptiness. Besides, as the embodiment of your desire, with my bloneness muddling I could not have performed in your stead." Every time I draw too near she appears as the accursed center which cannot be fixed or considered in any way reliable or

brought into conversation without emitting endless deceptions and threatening the literary enterprise with an arsenal of singular excrescences. The self, the I, the All, the subject, the thing—this is supposed to be she: heinous in aspect, cherubic and gemmy up in the oculars, stirring a brew of psychical experience predicated on impossible beauty. Uxorious philosopher-kings would know! There's a demon of a distance between us, a single point of origin or at least a soulful-seeming affinity—invading a space nowhere, a place where words find themselves smashing into each other like atoms.

“Oh no, not slightly,” she says.

I choose to regard such outbursts as indicative of a host of flavors and colors too distinct to merit much reattribution back to my own image feminized. I'd rather fly from beauty of this sort lest I celebrate it wrongly—and even if this has been warned against by my earlier efforts as a philosopher, still one can incorporate certain terms into one's private structure only to thrust them out sentence-wise. I insist, however, there is a real person in our midst. She has most of us convinced she has never been innocent, as if her creativity lies in the better sort of lack of sympathy: she flings us characters into the worst situations with impunity. I cannot say I agree. Her fondness of the moniker “Dolor” betrays something close to warm and fuzzy if one tosses it at the right moment, namely, when she is attempting to cook—though one must take care not to be pricked by a riposte of such depth and accuracy . . . . But all the sweeter, then, is her periodic success in the kitchen. Only then will an affectionate *Dolor* prove ripe.

She had me strung up in a telephone cord, pacing—now at the window, at the coffee table, sitting on a lazy chair, that cushy eyesore I could not have tolerated off stage—and there the similarities ended. As in: What was set up for my opening sequence was familiar but I, *I*, had been recreated. I'd—

“I’d sooner you be revised, but again, all quotes are mine unless otherwise specified.”

That’s the element, the elemental question. You and I created what, precisely—vagaries in the sky? We arranged with our fingers the stars like marbles? The ozone sparkles like nothing odd can be overstated, and we laugh and lick each other. “Now elaborate on an instance of verbiage.”

She keeps a digital camera in the knife drawer to her left containing evidence that I once stood up an assault of criticism from the locals, those practitioners of “philosophy with quotes.” Unfortunately I picked up some of the habits typical of an Alterite while defending her.

Otherwise specified. “I sat on the picnic table looking down at you and thought: ‘So you think you’ll originate a new memory.’”

“Ah, did you think I had left the kitchen? I wouldn’t leave you here, not when you’re offering to cook for me.” Exhaling into the vent on the white-spackled wall.

“When at summer camp I realized I needed to write for therapy I started using my own scissors instead of my cabin-mates’. Upon returning to a legion of a family comprised of non-relatives living in two houses I started doing basketball on the blacktop between them. My folks weren’t surprised when I was admitted as an athlete to the ‘Public Ivy’ of Michigan. Some *still* accuse me of stealing ice cream every day of camp; fifteen years later I’m chopping my hair and *dyeing that shit* blonde, conversing with Mr. Imbroglio while cutting up texts, wearing crusty penny loafers to stay an icon beyond Alterity.” This narcissism is as pervasive as it is isn’t interesting; Dolores is the most tiresome egoist with whom many of us haven’t had the pleasure of speaking in years.

“I realize people are speaking out against me by turns favorably and disastrously—for their own love of art,” she acknowledges. “I take as much help from an injury as can be expected

of one so averse to theory. I was there! I penned it, I was engaged with a cigarette while my stiletto assumed itself on the toilet, when *you* sir came a-knocking, claiming to know about my black, ‘classically cute,’ roundly overshadowing hat that I’d been wearing around the city. ‘Your father’s homeopathic after all,’ is what he stood his head up to say. I sat him at the table; replaced of his platform he turned to mush. ‘Remember,’ he said, ‘you created me’—but listen to him assess the playwright in public! His reviews chew like Langoliers. Of course he’ll make ‘the unknown knowable.’ Won’t ever know it.”

Yes

I forget the point at which our romance dissociated us from ourselves. I was the mind/body dichotomy asking what connected our experiences of each other to what I was presently engaged in—sleeping her—so that our previous cognitive overloads being recalled during really quite well-timed pelvic thrusts brought to mind Helen Cixous’ self-made waves and explosions, meanings and interpretations like combusting impressions—wet flowing bombastic—barbaric and revolting sort of—even accusative and deceptive (“for you see I *was* on top”). I’m the type of character with such sophisticated equipment as allows me to woo a girl by hallucinating at her—sketching on the outer wall of a paper-thin, dry old house tilted upwards of a slanted slope—because I showed her my various institutions she responded in kind: effluence, coalescence, *reprisal*.

And I’m trying to establish she’s got a list of prerequisite flattery.

I brought her back to Alterity and have kept her here, I am her author, she is not mine.

“Not exactly. Let’s say I’m a solitary blight to the schizophrenia of Alterity’s discourse—the incest of ideas, as it were. Let me remind you: bullies every one of them. Cripples of

narrative, lantern-carrying exhibitionists—explorers of rotten egoism conjured for the embarrassment of mankind. Their critiques are vague shapes snaking snickering sulking—ultimately, though, obeying. My defense, their defense, is words raked together.”

This is your Dolores: Censorious and cruel, imperious to a fault, rude by turns and always...is she so subtle?

“Nay! Complementors, beware—consciencers, guilty little pinchers, vegetarians lurking in scuttle-fish clouds—asserting, as you’d say, but only because you affect to visit the All and thence deliver your own abuses, from obscurity—as suggestions and reminders. All your ideas fit onto green heart-shaped posted notes, pesky little objections, caviling termitic fleas.”

We put away the playwright—all five feet and some inches of her—as she rattles in the kitchen sifting through her past campfire scenes, sweating over an apple mountain pie at the stove. Always one examines her hacked and glittering, green- and blue-flecked hair atop this curved eager line of a neck. She seems to have no face, mere eyebrows and pale shirts, thin yet not clinging because of a respectable lack of underlying substance. She does not ask much—hence her direct method of telling. Always looking down into something, a fixed expression pointed in various directions. Her critics spread out around her, becoming their own set of messages, but as she stands over the stove they know she’s bent on their specialized destruction. Their response is that it’s cathartic to be hunted by a creature worthy of the spectacle.

“No I am not a succubus, lying in wait!” Squeaks her heels back-and-forth, back-and-forth on the linoleum because she cannot rename her foes. “I’m invidious and sneaky? The cad—alack!—is a sticky-palmed mutant pushing for equality of body parts under the floorboards.” Living as she does, *against*, she allows the ire to pass over Victor, until he gives up trying to speak out for her. When accused of possessing an untoward negative attitude, she admits to

having it developed out of a dark house that was broken by a series of violations against her person (so that whether she was molested or offended remains uncertain) and that what she would've required for the development of said negativity is time—which, rather than let it be inverted at her expense, she has traditionally used up writing plays. As for now, “This is my domestic *renaissance*.”

Just what could be for dinner? It's all we're waiting for. She said she'd get it for us—since I brought a readerly friend, she said we'd be well fed—and as she started on the dishes the words fell out: “Sweet potato fries are by default bigger, longer—such heft!—yet they're inevitably rather mushy....” She trails off when she's noncommittal so I'm expecting next to nothing from her. She'll be smoking over the burner and blowing it through the vent, although she can puff away in the nook if she wants to wait in our presence. She can say it's baking while she pursues other polemical bits—she speaks to us as if we are her characters while we're only her servants—or employees—or patrons, guests, observers. Certainly, to observe is key. Yet in the view of those friends from whom she has strained off a marketable panoply of shortcomings, she performs to slight: an icy wave or flutter of this or that extremity. More than anything, she attacks—we are here to explain.

Isn't there a better way to do this than blocking us? I am your guest who came to entertain *you*, other.

Now you might wish to admire the author authoring you. This is only a fog; I am forever her guest who arrived, after all, to relate her—

“Like me: There are reversals out here you've never dreamed of.”

This is what happens. A child with a disabused Will grows a tenuous self at best. While looking outward she spots games to play, some violent others witty. She turns cynical about the

relationship between society and herself, develops a strategy of accusations and elisions. So much practice on black pavement between two homes occupies her teens to help her to athleticize her artistry. After realizing her success she maneuvers through society in a way that leaves the home empty but gets her to realize her social *telos*, a purpose unlike most that could be most usefully revealed under a Lacanian light—

Somewhere in Alterity, a theory is born.

Let us hope there is also a stiffed-lipped prig sipping claret under perfect circular specs letting its gaze slip down off a piercing little nose! This is still not what we are about. Like Adorno, we seek an aesthetics that goes *inside* the text. Like Dolores, we discover we'd rather write *our own* text. So what we get is a disparate hermeneutic circle where no one knows the point. The playwright derides the critics for their...well you know most of the critics in our neck of the woods haven't written fiction, let alone drama—they wouldn't risk their necks in the creative milieu.

We progressed into a rheum still furnished with a television stand next to the door in an area vast enough to grant the audience some kicking space. On the wall I began a diagram of the activities to which I was posing as the first witness—now she was instantly excited and sat opposite me in the corner to smoke thyme before the show. I traversed the bare splintery floor and stood in an undersized bedchamber, saying I was vacating to someplace new. To this essayistic oath she almost clapped in a very...one struggles not to say “girly” way since there's something predisposed in that to backfire. She's the blonde-headed cantankerous artist dwelling among the sticks, reminding us structural fetishists that the distance we must travel from Alterity to push her to the limits of the Valley and rob her fancy blind is far indeed! I can see—I can tell—she's gauging the atmosphere of the kitchen as I wait for her to chime in, for a bratty child



am I. She put me on stage, of course, with my permission. I'd known her work had a stage in A<sup>2</sup>; I'd heard she was hailed as the revivalist of what they were terming here *paraliterary drama*. The relativism had gotten so bad that the *more* literary was prefaced with a *para*! She won't charm in—oh, stir will you! She'll let me go on without her, so long as it's about her. What if I skipped dinner? She's only preparing ten feet away at her absolute whim....

This split—agonizingly halved—moment is stretched so one can write a truly appreciative piece on one's dramatist so that she, who tends to bed this “one,” can be spared the pain of dissolution and know that her secrets involving driveway sports and awards will not be appropriated cheaply by TV execs too early in her career. Perhaps I can forestall the biographers so long as they're only creditable enough to write for television. Imagine biography rolling straight into a sitcom—imagine it's your life, you'll see the problem. Hers is comical and tasteless enough to be made into something combatively catchy and, as they say, shallow.

“But you know this better than to slight it, *Drago*. You know where I sat in the room beyond the one in which you performed: it wasn't the corner. The former tenants watched TV from that angle—they might have called their living room with the television the *den*, for all we know, but certainly they viewed their flickering pop distraction askance. It won't matter how I'll show up in the plasma.”

She smells the irony spicing the air and wants to be assured it's only her cooking.

“I have claimed the heavens—what the Dickens—so sweetly that I will brave another...attempt? Let's make an attempt together then, Stan—now you don't like that I know you don't like that oh heavens, you don't.”

And so it could go on this way if I didn't know she's virtually—and quite virtuously!—chained in that kitchen as if for the first and last time. It might actually be. She has only recently

acquired the house with the porch where I was the first guest besides Ray—whose name I don't agree with—who had only been received when I heard him rustling. None of this prevents me from walking out on my own character. "That's the economy of writerly love!" She's got the issues surrounding us for a reason—she's the artist who went to college on a scholarship that seemed to allow for Gen Ed classes alone; she avoided the trends in literature and theory, made a career out of what everyone gets. But it was *I* who said to her in the living room which is just next door to this nook:

"Pick a shadow, any shadow, and *melt* into it"

before visiting what turned out to be a poignant scene: a library of children's lit, scuffled over by every creature that likes to build with paper.

"Stop, before you burn a hole in your desk. Since you're having difficulties (I think you're avoiding the issue) I'll tell you, for your sake alone, what you said next door independent of the show I spun out of it. Don't object. In its original form it is not a story but a scene. A single scene you cannot reach."

The thing is, that's just the point, all of it. I need only explain (as a fictive critic should) that my life was boiled down into that one performance—and now a thousand people know they've got me. If I were jealous, I would argue with her every three pages about the Other appearing before me, for how could she have gutted enough out of *him*, since her best and simplest rejoinder is that I (or whoever accuses her) know what she's up to and they (or I) can always call her—at any hour (meaning, late) and object—strongly, now!—to being characterized that way? Yet then she'll throw in, "Make your bloody case cogently and forcibly or I won't give a damn, I'll use what I've got, maybe adjust what I've planned to advance your adversity—but if you recognize yourself too well and know [for instance] how some of this will end, then I too

will know and I'll remove you from these early drafts. Still they will never see who you are—  
*I've got you in my play.*”

She and I both love cheap and winsome talk at the break of dawn for which we are still too young. It's hard to say exactly how this and everything before it came to pass, but we were sitting in the dining room when I got up to go to the bedroom and, peeking in, said, “So it's all we need to do—finish the birdhouse, hang it, wait a few years and restore it?” To which she replied: “Now and forever, that's what needs done. So go now, off with you. Fly free.” It is here that Dolores interjected her last trenchancy.

“Now, now. You broke this for me, but downing barriers will no longer impress. They were dissolved and puffed away long before you sat up in Word.” It's the rant ensuing “from a mouth that had never been used so much before and hasn't since” depleting Dolores of her naturally incalculable wit, snapping her eyelids back after so many semesters of trying not to see what was around her. After slivering them, she has her eyes blaring open and then closed shut again. That's why she's taken me

*Fin.*

## Afterword

Harassed by the certainty that my characters will always be extensions of myself, I have written to exorcise that demon of solipsism, allowing Dolores the freedom to issue obscure threats, that is, not against my outward person, but the one that floundered and paced during the creative act, avoiding accurate descriptions of the imagined surroundings, avoiding even the imagining of these surroundings, not trusting them to ring true once captured. The other characters would not bear resemblance to living people lest I be found out and my imagination put on trial. And so I allowed the verbal attacks to begin, rarely with a clear idea of where they would take me, confident only that I kept an arsenal well stocked to wage war as I proceeded under the influence of a name. I experienced a milder version of the singularity the French novelist Jean Genet describes:

The fact that his name was Divers conferred on him an earthly and nocturnal dream quality sufficient to enchant me. For one isn't called Georges Divers, or Jules or Joseph Divers, and that nominal singleness set him on a throne, as if glory had recognized him when he was still in the children's hell. The name was almost a nickname, royal, brief, haughty, a convention. And so he galloped in and took possession of the world, that is, of me. And he dwelt within me. Henceforth, I enjoyed him as if I were pregnant with him.

(cited by Derrida, *Glas* 8)

The choice of a name that could be turned into an adjective and then into a basic noun meaning "pain" in Spanish worked wonders for the outward thrust of my pen. Once this battle had run out of steam, professor Paul Bruss introduced me to Durrell's *Justine*, which sealed my fate of writing against the scholarly grain. Of the essence was choosing a style that would churn out the most piquant and soul-stripping metaphors and images. The words took priority, describing what

they would while I was left to repeat the results obliquely, connecting a description to its correlative or opposite later in the text, testing whether at bottom I knew my own subject.

Durrell performs this feat remarkably well throughout the *Quartet*. His own suggestion (*Bl* “Note”) that his “continuum of words” tells the Alexandrian history in no predetermined, chronological order is more than a (post)modernist conceit. The storyteller’s skill is evinced particularly in his describing the marriage between Nessim and Justine as an indissoluble unit which is not to be threatened by Justine’s affairs with Darley and Pursewarden. Much of the Justine intelligence is supplied by Nessim himself very early in the *Justine* narrative (16). The structure, despite the associative style Durrell adopts, is not to be mistrusted, for the scenes to which he returns appear as real to him as they must be to their creator. As Darley writes early on:

These are the moments which possess the writer, not the lover, and which live on perpetually. One can return to them time and again in memory, or use them as a fund upon which to build the part of one’s life which is writing. One can debauch them with words, but one cannot spoil them. (25)

This is at once a sort of warning of the decadent poetic language the various narrators will employ and a reassurance that the entire project is controlled by a sober instinct reinforced by memory. Despite their fictiveness, these memories establish the primacy of reality, the authority which art is ever trying to evade.

The relationship between art and theory is similarly at odds and yet mutually dependent. Adorno describes the philosophical study of aesthetics as “compelled to drag its concepts helplessly behind a situation of art in which art, indifferent to what becomes of it, seeks to undermine those concepts without which it can hardly be conceived” (339). In *Under the Volcano*, the Consul attempts to escape reality by rendering its essential qualities in his writing,

to use wholly symbolic language that appears to reach out from a mystical region of absolutes yet is ever dependent upon daily life. One suspects Durrell of following language as if from this putatively separate realm, displacing reality to the detriment of a unified plot; yet he works strictly according to the rule of aesthetic form, a logic that cannot be disrupted even by an associative writer so possessed by the object of his art. This is also expressed in Lowry's understanding of his work (according to Knickerbocken) as "'a sort of mighty if preposterous moral deed of some sort,' testifying to an underlying toughness of fibre or staying power" (cited by Spender, xxiii). The dependable life-force of Lowry's art testifies also to the notion that regardless of the splintered and decentered nature of the modern subject, still remaining is a will to structure the effusions of poetry.

Writing "Dolor" was a test of this hypothesis in the postmodern context. During at least half of the writing I kept in mind Durrell's post-*Quartet* endeavor, the *Avignon Quintet*'s scenario of spinning a multiplicity of characters out of the protagonist, Aubrey Blanford. One figure alone is to be imagined as possessing real presence while the others are to be mere extensions, regardless of their complexity and contradicting origins and impulses. Part of the excitement of writing in the postmodern context is to see whether one's subjectivity is as broken as it should be, or if this notion has become a platitude shorn of radical force. More crucially, committing some adulterous creativity while writing a critical thesis was a way of following Pope's advice in his "Essay on Criticism":

But you who seek to give and merit fame,  
And justly bear a critic's noble name,  
Be sure yourself and your own reach to know,  
How far your genius, taste, and learning go;

Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,

And mark that point where sense and dullness meet. (I.46-51)

Yet in seeking the merit of an experienced critic through artistic exploration, I consistently defied Montaigne, who cites Quintilian and Seneca, respectively, disparaging authors who “do not fit words to things but look for irrelevant things to fit their words!” and “are led by the beauty of some attractive word to write what they never intended” (192). Furthermore, this relatively blind approach proved quite the antidote to theoretical criticism, the tone and style of which is often ripe for parody and can certainly fill a student of literature with the dread of abstruse secondarity, of writing only to be read by one’s colleagues. As Cusset writes in his critical history of French theory in America:

next to the rare names that become known outside the university, how many intellectual stars and campus divas have found that the American university’s microcosmic function, sequestered from civil society, has limited their recognition—however reverential it might be—to their peers alone? Stanley Fish, himself a formidable heavyweight at Duke University, has often mused over this: “Whatever the answer to the question ‘How does one get to be a public intellectual?’, we know that it *won’t* be ‘by joining the academy.’”(37)

It is not merely the level of difficulty that makes such a fate seem horrible, but the unscrupulous reading in our system of academic overproduction whereby professors must secure tenure by publishing more articles than anyone can keep up with, even within a single genre of literature. Lacan is perhaps the theorist most notorious for stretching the truth with a dense and jargon-laden style, mystifying his audience who typically understands little of the mathematical concepts he erroneously evokes. As biologist Richard Dawkins writes in a review of Sokal and

Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectual's Abuse of Science*, "Although Lacan uses quite a few key words from the mathematical theory of compactness, he mixes them up arbitrarily and without the slightest regard for their meaning. His 'definition' of compactness is not just false: it is gibberish" (49). The scandal that Sokal sparked by publishing in the journal *Social Text* what Dawkins fondly describes as "a carefully crafted parody of postmodern metatwaddle" (51) is more than a decade old, but of course our scholarship is still imbued with Lacanian terms and tones. My primary complaint, my reason for loving to hate theory, is the style it often adopts, denounced most shrewdly (in the specific case of Guattari) by zoologist Peter Medawar:

Style has become an object of first importance, and what a style it is! For me it has a prancing, high-stepping quality, full of self-importance, elevated indeed, but in the balletic manner, and stopping from time to time in studied attitudes, as if awaiting an outburst of applause. It has had a deplorable influence on the quality of modern thought.... (cited by Dawkins, 48)

In "Dolor" I have tried to exploit the rhetoric of theory, knowing that much has already been accomplished toward this end by theorists themselves: Baudrillard in *America*, Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, Umberto Eco in *Foucault's Pendulum*, David Lodge in *Nice Work*, and Derrida in *Glas*.

The last work, primarily an effort of deconstructive, semiotic theory and philosophic analysis, is a parallel assemblage of extended essays on Genet and Hegel containing enough wordplay and exegesis for an entire semester's worth of meticulous head-scratching and nihilistic giggling. It is obnoxiously clever in its arrangement of text, as the marginal commentary (which is not always concise) mingles with the front lines. Meaning is undercut,



crossed over, dispersed and yet encapsulated by single sentences so that reading only the first 25 pages of each essay (which amounts to 50 pages simultaneously) is required for anyone who doubts the capacity of theory to open up new possibilities of language and literature. Yet Derrida is also aware of the perniciousness of his approach, as he pauses in the Genet essay to wax rhetorically on the displacement he has instigated with one of Genet's central motifs, the flower:

Departed are those who thought the flower signified, symbolized, metaphorized, metonymized, that one was devising repertoires of signifiers and anthic figures, classifying flowers of rhetoric, combining them, ordering them, binding them up in a sheaf or a bouquet around the phallic arch . . . (which trap you fall into doesn't matter).

Departed then are, save certain exceptions, duly so considered, the archeologists, philosophers, hermeneuts, semioticians, semanticians, psychoanalysts, rhetoricians, poeticians, even perhaps all those readers who still believe, in literature or anything else.

(40-41)

Derrida's dictum that nothing exists outside the text holds true. But not only is everything contained by discourse—making good on this prophecy may require a poetic capacity and a playful nihilism, a faithful mistrust of language that takes as a given the notion, expressed by Pureswarden in *Clea*, that “Words being what they are, people being what they are, perhaps it would be better always to say the opposite of what one means?” (134). The only requirement could be that the combination of words evoke contemplative or artistic delight: Poetry rules the day. Still, as Adorno writes, art requires some semblance of truth to forestall meaninglessness, to fortify its reflective necessity. “Art does not stand in need of an aesthetics that will prescribe norms where it finds itself in difficulty, but rather of an aesthetics that will provide the capacity for reflection, which art on its own is hardly able to achieve” (341). Such is, or should be, the

function of criticism: To enhance a work of art by discussing the philosophy that is as consistently logical as it is internal to the work, avoiding the aggressive textualism which, as Sontag decries, “excavates, and as it excavates, destroys . . . digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (6).

Among the more difficult moves every fiction writer must make is the separation, as cited by Spender in regard to Lowry (*xxiii*), of oneself from one’s characters. My position is essentially that every (graduate) student of literature must try his or her hand at creative writing even at the risk of exposing an unkindness, obsession, selfishness, bigotry, or lack of general acceptability in the cultural and critical climate. Otherwise, the practical, historical, and scientific reflexes can become too automatic for the treatment of a medium that cannot be trusted for its literal representations of reality or its avocations of morality. The creative writer might also, however, simply betray a good nature. Pursewarden notes this twofold flaw in Darley’s novels: “A curious and rather forbidding streak of cruelty—a lack of humanity . . . [which] is simply the way a sentimentalist would disguise his weakness. Cruelty here is the obverse of sentimentality. He wounds because he is afraid of going all squashy” (*Bl* 111). Traces of a similar queasiness in the face of sentimentality were most likely detected in the story above, as well as the contrivance of an antagonism that may have been nothing more than a projection of the most alluring language I could grasp during the creative act.

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