

Pynchon's V. and Durrell's Alexandria Quartet:  
A Seminar in the Modern Tradition<sup>1</sup>

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Lawrence Durrell's alter-ego, Pursewarden, in The Alexandria Quartet defines his work in a way that seems particularly applicable to Pynchon's V.:

Pursewarden on the "n-dimensional novel" trilogy:  
"The narrative momentum forward is counter-sprung by references backwards in time, giving the impression of a book which is not travelling from a to b but standing above time and turning slowly on its own axis to comprehend the whole pattern. Things do not all lead forward to other things: some lead backwards to things which have passed. A marriage of past and present with the flying multiplicity of the future racing towards one. Anyway, that was my idea" . . .<sup>2</sup>

This quotation seems even more pertinent after we read old Stencil's wry thoughts near the end of V.:

He had changed none of his ideas on The Situation. Had even written an article, pseudonymous, and sent it to Punch: "The Situation as an N-Dimensional Mishmash." It was rejected.<sup>3</sup>

This response--for so I take it to be--of Pynchon to Durrell instantaneously throws light on a possible approach to teaching Pynchon--one which a colleague of mine, Professor Stephen Matanle, and I decided to try in team-teaching a senior seminar on the modern tradition in fiction. We both wanted to use V. as our culminating work but came to it from very different backgrounds. Professor Matanle had just finished using it as one of a series of novels in a course in Contemporary Fiction and had been frankly frustrated by his students' lack of sympathy and difficulty with it. I had not taught V. but had several times centered on one work, studying it in depth and reading both historically and tangentially as we went along. Thus, in teaching V., one might, for example, look into the Fashoda Crisis and the Boer War, while also reading The Education of Henry Adams and Heart of Darkness. This latter approach, however, presupposed a significant interest in the work on the part of students or

else an appreciation that might rapidly develop during the course. Professor Matanle's experience spoke against this.

The third teaching possibility--and the one we chose--suggested setting two works in tandem (see the course syllabus below). We decided that the first would be The Alexandria Quartet, immediately glamorous and approachable, but with many levels and hidden depths, in some ways the quintessential modern novel; the second, V., seemingly the post-modern antithesis, working in fabulous, funny, icy contrast. Actually, however, both works epitomize modern man existing in the waste land of his city world, yet forever following a quest for the ideal and for self-realization. Also, intriguingly, each incorporates multiple mirrors and multiple points of view.<sup>4</sup> And each is self-reflexive and "'classical'--for our time," as Durrell puts it, in its assumption of entropy, multiplicity, and the Einsteinian universe.<sup>5</sup> Pynchon runs the gamut in V. all the way from the adopting of similar situations, such as intricate spy plots, similar exotic locales, and even pointedly exact and marvelous parodies of Durrell's style<sup>6</sup> to a deeply serious re-examination of theme and an extension into the post-modern of many of the methods of Durrell.

Indeed, in the juxtaposition of these two novels, a real way to approach Pynchon seemed to be evolving. Throughout, what Durrell's work takes seriously (or even expresses in joyous laughter), Pynchon parodies and attempts to undercut; but, in his very rephrasing of plot, character, symbol, and theme, Pynchon is able, through the comically grotesque, to reassert what he takes seriously.

Our venture into comparative teaching ended with the students giving papers that seemed to us examples of informed understanding. One of the best of them, "From Universe to Multiverse," summed it up:

Finally, the movement from unity to multiplicity, a movement which Henry Adams foresaw at the turn of the century, manifests itself in artistic decadence in Pynchon's Whole Sick Crew; on the other hand, a recognition of this movement provides Durrell's artist with the necessary nudge into the heraldic universe. Balthazar

betrays this knowledge when he admonishes Darley [the narrator], "At each moment of time all multiplicity waits at your elbow. Why, Darley, this should thrill you and give your writing the curves of a pregnant woman."<sup>7</sup>

Or, one might add, of a dynamic machine!<sup>8</sup> The approach we had chosen turned out to work amazingly well. The students loved and, more than loved, came to revel in V., with all its quirks, contradictions, tall tales, and skeptical versions of the quest. What Pynchon is parodying, what he is illuminating became more clear and comprehensible in the light of The Alexandria Quartet. Against the background of Durrell's shining white city of the imagination, it is not hard to contrast all of us--and Benny Profane too--running in a world gone dark "through the abruptly absolute night"<sup>9</sup> down the long receding V street "of the 20th Century."

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally presented at the meeting, "Teaching Pynchon to Undergraduates," at the Twelfth Annual College English Association Conference, April 3, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Durrell, Justine (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1957), 248.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Pynchon, V. (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), 443.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Durrell and Pynchon's use of mirror symbolism. Among many references:

I remember her sitting before the multiple mirrors at the dressmaker's, being fitted for a shark-skin costume, and saying: "Look! five different pictures of the same subject. Now if I wrote I would try for a multi-dimensional effect in character, a sort of prism-sightedness. Why should not people show more than one profile at a time?" Durrell, Justine, 27.

Rachel was looking into the mirror at an angle of 45°, and so had a view of the face turned toward the room and the face on the other side, reflected in the mirror; here were

time and reverse-time, co-existing, cancelling one another exactly out. Were there many such reference points, scattered through the world, perhaps only at nodes like this room which housed a transient population of the imperfect, the dissatisfied; did real time plus virtual or mirror-time equal zero and thus serve some half-understood moral purpose? Pynchon, V., 36.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Durrell, Balthazar (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960), Note.

<sup>6</sup> Among a number of examples, note especially:

. . . where all the nostalgias of an Iberian littoral lost to them--the squid hung to dry, nets stretched across any skyglow morning or evening, singing or drunken cries of sailors and fishermen from behind only the next looming warehouse (find them, find them! voices whose misery is all the world's night)--came unreal, in a symbolic way, as a racketing over points, a chuff-chuff of inanimate breath, and had only pretended to gather among the pumpkins, purslane and cucumbers, lone date palm, roses and poinsettias of their garden. Pynchon, V., 68.

He had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment. Since these several minds tended to form a sum total or complex more mongrel than homogeneous, The Situation must necessarily appear to a single observer much like a diagram in four dimensions to an eye conditioned to seeing its world in only three. Pynchon, V., 174.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Richey, "From Universe to Multiverse," Paper submitted in Seminar in English, University of Baltimore, December, 1976, 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Both works project against the real/naturalistic world a romantic quest for the ideal woman (Justine, V., Aphrodite, Venus, or Virgin) that ends in each case in possible destruction, possible revival. In the fourth volume of the Quartet Durrell's mythical figure, Justine, becomes "a woman at last, lying there, soiled and tattered, like a dead bird in a gutter,"

her left eye drooping from a stroke, "her hands crumpled into claws." But on almost the last page she is reported seen, walking down the Rue Fuad, "radiant and beautifully turned out": "It was as if, like some powerful engine of destruction, she had suddenly switched on again." Lawrence Durrell, Clea (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960), 49, 62, 280.

In Pynchon, of course, V. (like Adams's Virgin and Dynamo) gradually becomes a machine, with her left eye artificial--indeed, a watch--and, as she seems to be dying in Valletta, revealing a star sapphire navel and artificial feet ("Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs be peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure of silver openwork.") Yet, in the end, in a flashback to 1919, on a beautiful cloudless day, old Stencil's boat is sucked down in the Mediterranean by a whirling waterspout--accident, sea nymph, or V. eternal? Pynchon, V., 219, 321-22, 463.

<sup>9</sup> Pynchon, V., 2, 303, 428.

### Syllabus

Seminar in English  
The Modern Tradition:  
Durrell and Modern Fiction

Profs. Peirce &  
Matanle

"[The] masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance. Here we begin to wonder if we cannot see literature, not only as complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some unseen center."

--Northrop Frye

I. Durrell and The Alexandria Quartet (4 weeks)

"A marriage of past and present . . ."

Justine  
Balthazar  
Mountolive  
Clea

II. The Past is Prologue (2 weeks)

"The narrative momentum forward is counter-sprung by references backward in time . . ."

Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra  
Cavafy, Selected Poems  
Proust, Swann's Way

- III. Pynchon and V. (3 weeks)  
 " . . . a book which is not travelling from  
 a to b but standing above time and turning  
 slowly on its own axis . . ."

V.

- IV. The Future is Present (1 week)  
 " . . . with the flying multiplicity of the  
 future racing towards one."  
 Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths"  
 "Funes the Memoriosus"  
 "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"  
 "Death and the Compass"  
 Robbe-Grillet, Jealousy  
 Barthelme, "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning"  
 "Views of my Father Weeping"  
 Coover, "The Babysitter"
- V. Reports on Seminar Papers (1 week)

Description, Purpose, and Requirements:

The course attempts a close examination of a major twentieth-century work in the light of modern literary traditions. It is hoped that, through group discussion, oral and written reports, and panels, the student will relate the work, as a touchstone, to other writings of past and present. In the latter part of the term students will pursue independent research, culminating in a critical study.

Texts:

Durrell. The Alexandria Quartet.  
 Shakespeare. Antony and Cleopatra.  
 Cavafy. Selected Poems.  
 Proust. Swann's Way.  
 Pynchon. V.  
 Robbe-Grillet. Jealousy.  
 Klinkowitz and Somer (eds.). Innovative Fiction.

Selected Background Material:

Bellamy, Joe David. The New Fiction.  
 Cirlot, J. E. A Dictionary of Symbols.  
 Ellmann and Feidelson. The Modern Tradition.  
 Forster, E. M. Alexandria.  
 Forster, E. M. Aspects of the Novel.

- Joyce, James. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.  
Moore, Harry T. (ed.). The World of Lawrence Durrell.  
Olderman, Raymond M. Beyond the Waste Land.  
Scholes, Robert. The Fabulators.  
Tanner, Tony. City of Words.  
Weston, Jessie. From Ritual to Romance.