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MASTERPIECE

Lawrence Durrell's 'Justine': Missing Alexandria

The Alexandria of the novel was an exotic city of constant interactions between cultures and religions



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By LUCETTE LAGNADO

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Twenty years after he published "Justine," the first novel of his Alexandria Quartet, Lawrence Durrell returned to the city of his obsession. The signs of decay were everywhere, but he fixated on one small but telling change: The colorful movie posters he had loved, showcasing films in numerous languages, were now exclusively in Arabic. Where was the multilingual,

multicultural society he had chronicled so painstakingly and poetically?

It was 1977, a quarter-century after the revolution in Egypt that toppled a king. After years of military rule, Alexandria's cosmopolitan culture was almost completely gone. According to Durrell biographer Michael Haag in his book, "Alexandria: City of Memory," the novelist found the city "listless," declared that it had sunk "into oblivion" and was depressing "beyond endurance."

Were Durrell to return again now, he might despair even more. Two years after the Arab Spring precipitated another revolution, Egypt has seen a repressive Islamist government followed, again, by military rule. And just a few weeks ago, a young American Jew was murdered in Alexandria, which had once been a beacon for a mix of cultures, religions, outsiders and the young.

For Durrell's Alexandria was an exotic city where Jews and Europeans existed alongside Muslims, and where there were constant interactions between the cultures and religions. His characters, especially his lovely protagonist, she of the "somber brow-dark gaze," mirrored Alexandria in all its complexities—its elegance and searing poverty, its ancient Arab ways and modern European mores. Justine was the essence of Alexandria, its "true child…neither Greek, Syrian, nor Egyptian, but a hybrid."

The plot of "Justine" seems simple enough. An Anglo-Irish schoolteacher and aspiring writer becomes romantically involved with the eponymous Justine, a married Egyptian society woman in pre-World War II Alexandria. The increasingly passionate affair is unhinging to their partners—Nessim, Justine's sad, intensely decent husband, a wealthy Coptic Christian banker driven to madness by her adultery, and Melissa, the narrator's fragile girlfriend.

Justine—alluring, seductive, mournful, prone to dark, cryptic pronouncements—is the centrifugal force of the novel. She has a shadowy past, and there are hints of extreme poverty and sexual abuse in her youth. Men find her fascinating precisely because there is so much they don't know.

But there's nothing simple about the way Durrell tells this story, and the artfulness of the structure—unbound by time, linear narrative and other conventions—places it among the greatest 20th-century works of fiction. It unfolds through the voice of an unnamed (at least in this first volume) narrator. When the book opens he has just settled on a remote island seeking the "consolations" of art by telling the story of Justine and the other characters who still haunt

him: "I want them to live again to the point where pain becomes art." He tells his tale in an impressionistic way: "What I most need to do is to record experiences, not in the order in which they took place—for that is history—but in the order in which they first became significant for me."

Within the novel there are allusions to another, parallel novel called "Moeurs" ("Mores"), by Justine's former husband. The narrator reads it obsessively, searching for clues into Justine. He learns about her propensity for many lovers, complex sexuality and perpetual angst. There is also a diary kept by Justine that the narrator quotes at length.

The Alexandria that Durrell depicted was far from ideal. It was a world of lost souls trying to find their way amid a cacophony of languages, cultures and manners. While some of the main characters lead pleasurable, self-indulgent lives, there are intimations of "huddled slums" in the shadows of the villas and grand hotels that Justine and Nessim frequent. We glimpse "shuttered balconies swarming with rats," and Justine is from a deeply humble background. In one searing scene, she storms a house of child prostitutes—"a dozen fuzzy haired girls who could not have been more than ten"—and confronts a sailor, there to exploit them. That, too, was Alexandria.

Like Durrell's heroine, I am from Egypt, born into a Jewish family with roots in Syria. As I have pondered my own propensity for melancholy and melodrama—two of the traits that define Justine—I have often thought, "Justine, c'est moi." Unlike her, though, I am from Cairo. Each city had its distinctive personality. Yet once upon a time the two had much in common—a European culture and thriving night life, with hedonistic types who wandered through every nightclub and dined in the wee hours. Despite strict moral codes in the different cultures and religions, men and women found ways to come together, and somehow these liaisons seem far more enticing than the ready hookups of our "Sex and the City" culture.

Rereading the novel recently, I longed for the city of its dreamy pages. I thought of the perfume that so haunts the narrator: Justine's, called "Jamais de la Vie," a rather melodramatic French expression that means "Never in this life." It is a perfect metaphor for the heroine's darkness, her fatalism, and also for the larger arc of the story. This is a love affair guaranteed to fail, and its protagonists won't ever find the happiness they seek—*jamais de la vie.*

What keeps us riveted is the poetry of the prose as well as the author's feat of putting Alexandria front and center. In a note at the start of the novel, Durrell takes pains to say that the characters are "inventions" and "only the city is real." Alexandria, as some critics have noted, becomes a

full-fledged character, where "its women shall be the voluptuaries not of pleasure but of pain, doomed to hunt for what they least dare to find."

I have found myself wondering what Durrell would have said about Egypt today, where the tolerant, inclusive society he depicted has been almost utterly obliterated. In his time, beauties of every nationality—French, Greek, Italian, Armenian, Egyptian-Jewish and Egyptian-Muslim—would preen in their bathing suits along "the sand beaches of Sidi Bishr," as he calls one popular seafront enclave. These days, the foreigners and Jews are gone, and women who venture to the public beaches must go into the water covered from head to toe.

Could Durrell ever have envisioned such a dark destiny for his city—for all of Egypt? "Jamais de la vie," I can hear him reply.

—Ms. Lagnado, a Journal reporter, is the author of 'The Arrogant Years,' a memoir.

Write to Lucette Lagnado at lucette.lagnado@wsj.com

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