

## THE SUICIDAL POST-CARTESIAN BODY

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It is quite strange how profound and talented artists who succeed in becoming legends manage to get themselves cornered, cannot fight long enough to escape their complicated situations and finish in suicide. Some of the well-known, fairly recent cases that might ring a bell in the real world, as opposed to the fictitious one created by L. Durrell, are those of Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Kurt Cobain (vocalist of Nirvana), Michael Hutchence (vocalist of INXS), Frida Kahlo, etc., all of whom suffered from the „disease” of the twentieth century – an overanalysis of their own life caused by the enslaving stress, which was sometimes mixed with the use of drugs that did nothing else but cloud their mind even more.

Following life and real-life-experienced facts, Durrell introduces the issue of suicide in *The Alexandria Quartet*, in an attempt to try and underline some of the dilemmas which people have to solve sometimes daily – which facts deserve our close attention and which do not, how deep we are supposed to plunge into existentialist philosophy and how much value we should credit our life with. For particular types of people, it is, thus, not always easy to decide whether life is dearer than love, sincerity and friendship.

One such instance is provided by Durrell's character Percy Pursewarden – a British writer working in Alexandria for the British Secret Service – and another by Durrell's Balthazar – a homosexual doctor and philosopher. They both flirt with suicide, but only the former manages to do it right.

Pursewarden takes matters exceedingly philosophically, looks upon life from the wrong perspective, which makes him want to finish it sooner than nature had planned it. His wish is dictated by the lack of an equitable solution to the apparently hopeless position in which he suddenly finds himself.

One night, after having made love to Melissa – the Greek cabaret dancer and Darley's lover – he learns from her that one of his friends, Nessim Hosnani, has been preparing a plot against the British and illegally bringing guns into the country. Thus, he is unexpectedly caught between duty and affection, between his bond with David Mountolive, the new British Ambassador to Alexandria, his friend and new boss, and that with Nessim, his personal friend, with whom he had pleasant and cheerful conversations and together with whom he had a great time. He cannot make a choice and take a decision, he likes them both and wants to be truthful to them both, which is why he writes a suicide letter to Mountolive, briefly describing the dead end he has reached, and a message to Nessim, letting him know that his watchers know all about his obscure operations and the channels through which he conducts them.

Pursewarden's weak feature seems to be the winding search for earnestness. He is looking for authenticity, naturalness and sensitivity in a world ruled by fakes, artificiality and coarseness. He prizes too much that good soul, which is supposed to go to heaven, without realising that, as D. H. Lawrence well understood it, our soul is no longer of any use to us once we have lost our bodies. [1: 487]

He, for example, cannot make love to Melissa until he feels that she is really there, her entire post-Cartesian body. He is not satisfied with a piece of flesh, he needs her affection and sympathy as well, though she is, after all, a simple prostitute doing her work.

In his idealistic world, he also does not realise that Nessim is trying to cement an interested friendship between them, with the aim of using it, when the time comes, in order to hide his illegal affairs from the British eyes. Nessim is thinking of emotional blackmail,

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which, however will not work in his favour and will ruin Pursewarden's balance completely, turning him into an overtly depressive person.

There are two types of depression that appear in the case of the suicidal men mentioned in the beginning: *masked* depression [4: 38], in Pursewarden's case, and *obvious* depression, in Balthazar's case. The former appears to be in a latent state and is brought forth by an unusually disturbing piece of news, while the latter appears all of a sudden due to a highly distressing event, subsequent to a rough period, which drains the post-Cartesian body of its energies. Thus, Durrell manages to present both types of depression without allowing his material to overlap.

Depression is not only a matter of thinking in a particularly harmful way, it is also a matter of misusing one's post-Cartesian body and of having a wrong attitude towards life. According to P. E. Huston, "a depressed patient looks sad. His eyes may be downcast and staring; the corners of his mouth sag. He smiles not at all or only rarely and weakly. He slumps, and his shoulders droop. [...] Patients may exhibit restlessness, irritability, tension, or even marked agitation." [1972: 693] He also adds that they have a reduced appetite, suffer from sleep disturbance and headaches.

Pursewarden shows some of these signs after he has received the terrible intelligence from Melissa and, consequently, proves himself to be rather unfit for our world, for the world Durrell lived in, at the time of his writing the novel. Metaphorically speaking, Pursewarden's committing suicide is synonymous to his being 'blind'. He sees only one dark way which excludes all the other perspectives that he might have considered. His confused feelings cloud his judgement and he is no longer able to 'see' around him.

In Durrell's text, there are several types of blindness – *proper* or *metaphorical* – according to the points the writer wishes to make. As J. A. Weigel points out, we have "stark blindness" [5: 105] in Liza's – Pursewarden's sister – case and "partial blindness, half-vision, and distorted vision for others." [5: 105] Among the others, we can mention Nessim, who, in the end, becomes half-blinded, Justine whose eye droops after a stroke and Darley, who wears spectacles all the time, which is also a metaphorical indicator of his distorted perspective on the facts he renders.

Weigel believes that "Darley is also partially blind psychologically." [5: 105] He cannot rely on his feelings, instincts or intuition. His internal construction is faltering from this point of view, which is also suggestive of his insensitivity, superficiality and dilettantism. He seems to be wearing an internal eyeless mask, which paradoxically allows the people around him to perceive him as he really is, but does not allow him to understand what he sees.

During carnival time, all people can be considered blind, not because of impaired vision, but because everyone wears a mask and a domino, making it difficult, if not next to impossible, to discover the identity of the persons around.

Weigel stresses that "blindness bestows freedom of action on those the blind cannot see." [5: 106] During carnivals, however, this freedom is limited because both those who act and those who are acted upon are hidden by masks. Thus, we deal with 'blind' people facing one another.

The truly blind, however, can sometimes 'see' more clearly than those who can see, because they are not distracted by any thing and can really concentrate on whatever it is that they are thinking. This might be one reason for Pursewarden's unlimited and impossible-to-equal incestuous love for his sister. She is very rational and sensitive, natural and affectionate to him, as he would have liked a lover to be. He is, consequently, also driven to suicide by his impossibility to find someone to love as much as he did Liza, whom he had in the end decided to give up so that she might find an appropriate husband outside her family, as she was supposed to.

In *Mountolive*, he discusses love in a philosophical manner, which is so typical of him, giving a tinge of sadness and uselessness to the feeling and act in itself. He obviously has in mind the unusual love affair mentioned above when he states that:

"«At first» [...] «we seek to supplement the emptiness of our individuality through love, and for a brief moment enjoy the illusion of completeness. But it is only an illusion. For this strange creature, which we thought would join us to the body of the world, succeeds at last in separating us most thoroughly from it. Love joins and then divides [...].»" [2: 377]

Pursewarden's suicide has a threefold

motivation: his awkward position as a friend, his unique and forbidden love for his sister and his desire to leave a world too foul to bear for a writer in search for the crystal clear waters and pure flows of inspiration.

The reasons mentioned above thrust fierce roots into the fertile soil of his unstable personality prone to negative thinking. He is already somehow isolated psychologically speaking, which is why he often feels sad and lonely. As Balthazar notices, "his sense of humour had separated him from the world, into a privacy of his own." [2: 282] To which one can add his financial problems which made him "doubt his powers" [2: 282] as a good writer and his constant rumination on the nature of things. Too much philosophy, as he will see, harms one and kills the joy there is in life.

The paragraph that Pursewarden uses in one of his books to describe the role of the artist in life is also illustrative of the frustrating attitude towards those close to him:

*"«Aware of every discord, of every calamity in the nature of man himself, he can do nothing to warn his friends, to point, to cry out in time and to try to save them. It would be useless. For they are the deliberate factors of their own unhappiness. All the artist can say as an imperative is: 'Reflect and weep.'»" [2: 305]*

Pursewarden, thus, is the one who can always detect every trace of misery and tragedy in human existence, and this makes him "«sick [...] of all the 'mud thrown up by the wheels of life'" [2: 289], as he himself writes. He is in search of perfection, which, he is aware, cannot be found in the real world; that is why he writes literature and that is why he constantly checks his body in the mirror. He is looking for visible defects that can be improved and, at the same time, is trying to make sure that he is not like the others, that his personality has kept its bargain. This can also be seen by looking into his post-Cartesian body.

Pursewarden appears quite often in connection with *mirrors*: he looks at himself in the mirror to check his appearance, writes quotations on his mirror [Tolstoy: "I do not cease to reflect upon art and upon every form of temptation which obscures the spirit", 2: 293], leaves messages on the mirror for others to find them ["Nessim. Cohen Palestine etc. All discovered and reported", 2: 566], talks to and scolds his reflection in the mirror, etc.

As G. S. Fraser [3: 135] remarks, "Middleton deduced from *Justine* that Pursewarden killed himself for metaphysical reasons; he wanted to break through from the mirror-world of reflexive consciousness to the real world of absolute self-identity, from Sartre's *pour-soi* to his *en-soi*." This is though an inaccurate remark based on an unreliable story written by Darley. Later on in the novels, as Fraser also points out, we will find Pursewarden's ulterior motives for his deed.

Nevertheless, by killing his character, Durrell, according to Fraser, meant to round him off, as he does not understand death "as a limit, the edge over which everything falls into nothingness [...]." [3: 149] He means to have his character completely finished, to have him furnished with what he lacked while living, which is why he decides to put him to a long sleep.

In the letter he leaves for Mountolive, Pursewarden writes that he decided to commit suicide because there are enough people on this planet who can write or do write literature, so there is no longer any need for him. He also calls his work "divinely unimportant" [2: 305], which either points to a streak of false modesty or to a paradoxical character covertly depressive and lyrical at the same time. This is, however, only a secondary reason for suicide, which is not powerful enough to make him take this step. What disturbs the balance of his mind, to use Mountolive's own words, is that, as Pursewarden says: "[...] I simply am not equal to facing the simpler moral implications raised by this discovery [Nessim's plot]. I know what has to be done with it. But the man happens to be my friend." [2: 540]

Darley, in *Justine*, sees Pursewarden through the prism of his envy at and spite towards the writer's success. Still, he partially manages to catch a glimpse of the real person, even though, towards the end of his analysis, he reaches false conclusions:

*"«Here is someone who in farming his talent has neglected his sensibility, not by accident, but deliberately, for its self-expression might have brought him into conflict with the world, or his loneliness threatened his reason. He could not bear to be refused admittance, while he lived, to the hall of fame and recognition. Underneath it all he has been steadily putting up with an almost insupportable*

*consciousness of his own mental poltroonery.»* [2: 96]

It is not a question of mental cowardness that we need to answer in Pursewarden's case, it is rather an issue of his perceiving and focusing only on the bad side of things. He is convinced that the evil in the human heart and the filth of the world will gain the upper hand in whichever situation. His manner of fighting with all this is his irony, his drinking and his writing in which, as he says, we "recover a lost innocence." [2: 475] Still, all this cannot help him get rid of the difficult state of things that he has discovered by accident and he has no other weapons to use for the protection of his post-Cartesian body.

Melissa discovers his nature when trying to make love to him for the unusually great sum of money he promised her. She notices that he is all closed in and that *his life is dead*, closed up, as opposed to Darley's who is very open and affectionate. [2: 531] It is again she who foresees his death while trying to tell his fortune by reading his palm and pities his situation before anyone else does.

Liza, his sister, also pities him and mentions to Mountolive, her lover-to-be that her brother's only "job is to learn how to submit to despair." [2: 440] Thus everyone around him realises his awkward situation but him.

Balthazar also reaches a problematic situation. He falls in love with a Greek actor, Panagiotis, who has quite a despicable character, who humiliates, supplies him with drugs and ultimately leaves him. This pushes the doctor into a terrible crisis against the background of his nearing old age, made obvious by the necessity of having his teeth changed and of acquiring some false ones. He falls into heavy drinking and, under the influence of alcohol and drugs, having in mind a remark made by Darley in *Justine* about his ungainly hands, he decides that his ugly hands, which were the reason for his final dispute with his former lover, need some trimming. So he starts cutting his wrists clumsily and is caught in the process by doctor Amaril who also saves

him from the terrible post-Cartesian bodily

state, which he was in.

Balthazar is luckier than Pursewarden, he has his friends around him in time to prevent a pending disaster, caused, as in Pursewarden's case, by a piece of terrible news which his weak post-Cartesian body cannot stand. In the absence of his friends, his body would have been destroyed. It is difficult for him to fight evil influences by himself, which is why he should have pondered on each unpleasant situation with care and tried to minimise its effect on his post-Cartesian body. This is what Balthazar discovers after his terrible experience and this makes him wiser, a better companion and a friend to look for in case of intricate situations whose solving needs a clear mind.

The issue of attempted suicide has been much debated in connection with its consequences on the post-Cartesian human body. What is most important for us is to detect an overall weakened post-Cartesian corporeal state, which might leave a free way for the devastating manner of ending our lives prematurely; this may be prevented by taking better care of our bodies.

Durrell's undermined post-Cartesian bodies are even harder to redeem than Orwell's oppressed ones, with the exception of Flory's in *Burmese Days*, and can be compared to Beckett's which are clearly on their way to full destruction, i.e. death. As opposed to Beckett's deceptive bodies, some of Durrell's bodies still have the chance of attaining an overall healthy status.

Nevertheless, Durrell manages to create an entire series of undermined post-Cartesian bodies which all revolve around a set of false values. It is this very falsity that sometimes causes their destruction or at least has a great negative influence upon the bodily degradation. Paradoxically, the attempt to destroy or avoid falsity, in some cases, has a tragic outcome. In the end, Durrell's characters are nothing else but a series of masks wrongly put on their faces so that sometimes one might glimpse a piece of their real character or a small part of their real face.

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