

Modern Diplomacy and *Mountolive*

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The four novels in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* engage the modern diplomat's preoccupation with documents, the circulation of information, and the interpretation of that information. *Mountolive*, the third volume in the tetralogy, specifically represents the postwar "shrinking" of the British Empire as viewed from abroad. In many ways, *Mountolive's* failure as a diplomat parallels the demise of empire. Moreover, *Mountolive* performs the exigencies of diplomacy by implicating the reader in the act of decoding. Just as diplomats use networks to record, interpret, and spread information, characters encode or decode the information that mixes with false impressions and disinformation in the *Alexandria Quartet*. By re-casting the same characters in each volume of the *Quartet* and by revising information from the previous tome in subsequent volumes, Durrell's multi-volume novel asks the reader to share in the diplomat's perplexity and his postwar loss of agency.

Historians have noted that the practice of diplomacy has, from its inception, been associated with texts and documents. This textuality of the diplomat's work is embedded in the etymology of the word itself. In his study *Diplomacy*, Harold Nicolson explains that the term

is derived from the Greek verb 'diploun' meaning 'to fold.' In the days of the Roman Empire, all passports, passes along imperial roads and way-bills were stamped on double metal plates and folded and sewn together in a particular manner. These metal passes were called 'diplomas.' At a later date this word 'diploma' was extended to cover other and less metallic official documents conferring privileges or embodying arrangements with foreign communities and tribes. (Nicolson 11)

The diplomat's movement from one country or state to another is

sanctioned by a document that allows for passage and confers on the diplomat a special status and immunity. Unlike the warrior, the diplomat travels to promote peace and stability between nations. The “diploun” records and legitimates the diplomat’s movements between states. It is in the diplomat’s interest to have his movements recorded, since these set up a precedent for future diplomatic relationships. The records of the past are archived in order to create the conditions for future negotiation.

Therefore, a concern with keeping archives and preserving documents is conveyed in the etymology of “diplomacy.” A dealer in treaties and secret communiqués, the diplomat acts on behalf of his country. After recording information, he sends his papers to central archives, where, theoretically, they serve the interests of the state:

As these treaties accumulated, the imperial archives became encumbered with innumerable little documents folded and endorsed in a particular manner. It was found necessary to employ trained clerks to index, decipher, and preserve these documents. Hence the profession of archivist arose, and with it the science of palaeography—the science, that is, of deciphering and verifying and ancient documents. The occupations were, until late in the seventeenth century, called “*res diplomatica*” or “diplomatic business,” namely the business of dealing with archives and diplomas. (Nicolson 11)

Continuity is central to diplomacy. Past agreements and documents function as living memory; they establish precedents for future relations among states. By recording observations and recommending courses of action, the diplomat functions as an intermediary between countries. As the diplomat-arbitrator replaced the diplomat-ordinator in the seventeenth century, and as the original obligations of the diplomat to write and report were forgotten, the preoccupation with archiving nonetheless remained. Lawrence Durrell’s foregrounding of documents and archives in the *Alexandria Quartet* can be traced to this tradition in the profession of diplomacy.

From the beginnings of diplomacy in the Byzantine period, the diplomat was principally an informant charged with bringing news from far corners of an empire or lands with whom a state maintained a commercial relationship. Garrett Mattingly notes that “one of the chief functions of the resident ambassador came to be to keep a continuous stream of foreign political news flowing to his

home government” (Mattingly 58). But gauging how much detail was sufficient proved difficult. In Renaissance dispatches from Italian ambassadors, many seemingly useless details and reports of idle gossip were included, but there was good reason for this overabundance of information. “By making the mesh fine,” Mattingly explains, “fewer items were likely to escape because the man on the spot missed a significance clear enough to a minister who had the run of dispatches from all over Italy” (Mattingly 97). Such reports assumed a passive role for the ambassador: although he reported information, he offered neither commentary nor opinion on the subjects related. Nonetheless, the diplomat’s very choice of points of information is indicative of editorial selection.

As observers, recorders, negotiators, and travelers, ambassadors occupy a liminal subject-position *vis-à-vis* political events. In *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method*, Nicolson points out that in the sixteenth century, “theorists saw diplomats as angels who traveled the space between heaven and earth” (*Evolution* 27). Mobility, rather than political agency, confers upon diplomats their power. Ambassadors use language for peacemaking rather than for warfare; their work promotes continuity rather than catastrophe. Nicolson cites Demosthenes, who argues that “ambassadors...have no battleships at their disposal, or heavy infantry, or fortresses; their weapons are words and opportunities” (*Evolution* 13). Negotiation, one of the chief tasks of the ambassador, is a gradual, but continuous process. The ambassador’s neutrality is his strength. Because of his unaligned position, he arbitrates conflicts and preserves peace between nations. His efficacy derives from objectivity in exercising his powers of observation. In his essay, “A Trait of Certain Ambassadors,” Michel de Montaigne remarks that the ambassador should deliver a faithful account of events while retaining as much neutrality as possible: “It seems to me that the function of the servant is to represent things faithfully in their entirety just as they happened, leaving to his master the liberty to arrange, judge, and choose” (Frame 51). According to Montaigne, the ambassador has the right neither to omit nor to embellish, for to do so would constitute an abuse of power.

If the diplomat is the vehicle for the information that he transmits, then the living envoy is also a sensory apparatus for the nation he represents. The ambassador’s role rests in his ability to choose which fragments of information to transmit to his superiors. His opinion influences policy. As Montaigne observes, though they must be neutral and honest, “ambassadors have freer commission,

which in many areas depends in the last resort on their judgment; they do not simply carry out, but also by their counsel form and direct their master's will" (Frame 51). He cites several examples of ambassadors whose effectiveness was even compromised by a too close adherence to orders. The envoy's understanding of the circumstances and context surrounding the information that he has heard is indissociable from the information itself. That the diplomat's status confers neutrality does not mean that he is without his opinions. Nicolson echoes Montaigne in his insistence that "an ambassador in a foreign capital must always be the main source of information, above all the interpreter, regarding political conditions, trends and opinions in the country in which he resides" (*Evolution* 82). In his reports, the diplomat communicates information that will potentially be used in policy-making. The diplomat is thus both a collector and an interpreter of information. Diplomacy requires interpretive skills. In Ancient Greece, Hermes was thought to be the ruling deity of diplomats. In other guises, Hermes served as the patron of writers and governed commercial transactions, including the circulation of money and information. The word "hermeneutics," derived from Hermes' name, connects the faculty of interpretation with the circulation of information. Etymologically then, the diplomat can be thought of as a traveler engaged in the hermeneutic enterprise of interpreting and circulating information for future use. The diplomat collects, interprets and archives information knowing that the task of interpretation is never conclusive.

Therefore, Durrell's preoccupation with documents, diplomatic networks, and archives in the *Alexandria Quartet* is informed by his career with the Foreign Office and the British Council. From 1942 to 1945, he worked as Public Information Officer in Cairo, Alexandria, and Rhodes where he oversaw the publication of three newspapers whose goal was to ensure that the Greek population of those cities and islands remained loyal to the Allied forces. After the war, in 1947, Durrell was sent to Argentina by the British Council, where he taught at the *Asociation Argentina de Cultura Britannica*. From 1950-1956 he again served as Information Officer, this time in Belgrade and in Cyprus. His diplomatic career made him a member of an international network of information-gatherers that he represents in his postwar novels. These diplomatic networks maintained relations with former protectorates and created a global presence for British culture in the postwar period.

The British Foreign Office only recognized the importance of

cultural ambassadorship to its diplomatic relations between countries as Britain began to lose international power in the 1930s. The British Council, a body concerned with such cultural relations, was created by the Ministry of Information and the Foreign Office in 1934. Although precursors to the British Council had existed from the turn of the century in the form of British Institutes for the promotion of the English language, and had been well established throughout Europe and South America, the Council coordinated the activities of such Institutes through centralized planning committees. According to its charter, the British Council was charged with the “promotion of a wider knowledge of this country and of the English language abroad... [as well as] with the development of closer cultural relations between this and other countries” (NA: PRO BW1/43).¹

The Council’s creation coincided with the feeling that Britain needed to encourage the participation of cultural ambassadors in diplomatic missions concerned with building political and economic ties with Continental Europe. Early on, however, the Foreign office and the British Council disagreed about the focus of the Council’s activities. While the Foreign office hoped to increase cultural relations with countries of economic and commercial importance, the British Council preferred to increase British influence in countries they believed to be of political importance. As Frances Donaldson points out, Germany and France had recognized the benefits of cultural propaganda abroad and had been sending cultural attaches with diplomatic missions since the eighteenth century. During the 1920s evidence grew of the damage done to British interests by the increasingly hostile propaganda of other countries as well as of the size of the budget devoted elsewhere to cultural propaganda. Britain’s reluctance to set up cultural-diplomatic missions is attributable to a national aversion to all types of self-display: “If foreigners failed to appreciate, or even to notice, our gifts of invention or our splendid adaptability, then there was nothing that we could do to mitigate their obtuseness. The genius of England, unlike that of lesser countries, spoke for itself” (Donaldson 2). Rex Leeper, chairman of the British Council during the Second World War, explained that “The British would not... embark on any

¹ The following short forms will be used for brevity: The National Archives: TNA. Public Records Office PRO. Although the British Council planning documents are now housed at the National Archives, these are still included under the heading PRO.

programme of this sort until they were convinced that it was materially damaging to their interests not to do so" (Donaldson 12). Thus, paradoxically, the creation of the British Council coincides with the beginning of what Jed Esty has called the "shrinking" of British influence on world affairs. Even as Britain's political influence waned in the aftermath of the Second World War, cultural diplomacy as conducted by the British Council and the Foreign Office tried to maintain Britain's international cultural prestige.

Archival sources suggest that one of the key debates to surface in the first meetings of the Planning Committee for Foreign Lectures was the question of reciprocity; that is, whether or not the British Council should engage in "facilitating the making known of other cultures in the U.K" (TNA: PRO BW 1/43). Lord Tyrell, the first chairman of the Council, wrote to his committee that "neither objective (cultural propaganda and political influence) can be properly attained, the Council feels, unless we show real interest, both here and abroad, in the culture, history and ways of life of the other peoples" (TNA: PRO BW 1/43). Durrell's work with the British Council in Argentina and as Press Officer in Egypt sensitized him to the need for establishing a dialogue between the British and the Egyptians, Cypriots, and Yugoslavs if peace was to be maintained. In Cyprus, Durrell's ability to create such a dialogue was tested.

Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* draw on his experience in Foreign Service, where he collected and interpreted information for the British Government. Informed by the aftermath of the Second World War and the Suez Crisis, and both published in 1957, *Justine* and *Bitter Lemons* offer a belated representation of the preoccupations of British diplomats. In both these texts, Durrell moves away from Nicolson's optimistic view of the diplomat: he presents himself and his characters as powerless to change the course of political events. Both texts are self-consciously fraught with documents, information, and communication. Whereas in *Mountolive* Durrell represents the political situation in the 1930s novelistically, in *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*, he addresses the contraction of British influence in a first-person report. In this travelogue of the three years he spent on the island (1953-1956), Durrell narrates his own first hand experience of the Enosis crisis from his dual position as an inhabitant of the island and as a representative of the British government. I will build on Richard Pine's and Petra Tournay's identification of *Bitter Lemons* as a "prime example of colonial discourse" (Tournay 159) to shed light on the ways in

which Durrell uses his diplomatic mobility to promote British culture to a Greek Cypriot audience in the *Cyprus Review*.

Together with *Prospero's Cell* (1945), Durrell's book about Corfu, and *Reflections on a Marine Venus* (1953), a book about Rhodes, *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* forms Durrell's "island trilogy." Generically similar to the previous two books, *Bitter Lemons* chronicles the Enosis crisis and examines failing attempts by the British to maintain their influence in the Mediterranean. Durrell's narrative authority rests on his first-hand experience of Cyprus and his status as an outsider. A liminal figure, he straddles linguistic and cultural boundaries. Durrell's power results in his mobility within and between different networks. Speaking "indifferent but comprehensible Greek" (*Bitter* 23) and living in a small village, he does not consider himself a member of the British expatriate community in Cyprus, but understands their way of life. He observes that the rituals and beliefs of the British abroad remain unchanged by their location. On Cyprus, Durrell recounts,

the British Colony lived what appeared to be a life of blameless monotony, rolling about in small cars, drinking at the yacht club, sailing a bit, going to church, and suffering apprehensions at the thought of not being invited to Government House on the Queen's Birthday. (*Bitter* 24)

In contrast, Durrell represents himself as a member of the local community. Living in a small house near Bellapaix Abbey, away from the British, he believes himself transformed by his proximity to local Cypriots of all classes, languages, and political convictions. "By electing to live in my own village rather than in the capital... I retained a link with the rural community" (*Bitter* 126). He counts among his friends the builders of his house, fellow teachers, and networks of Greek and Cypriot writers. He understands Cypriot culture from within, or so he intimates. Inhabiting this interstitial cultural space, Durrell believes, rewards him with impartiality, knowledge, and a hermeneutic advantage. In agreement with Durrell's assessment of himself, Nicolson, in his review of *Bitter Lemons*, also identifies Durrell's cultural mobility as the basis for his diplomatic authority:

Mr. Durrell possesses exceptional qualifications. He speaks Greek fluently; he has a wide knowledge of modern Greek history, politics and literature: he has lived in continental

Greece and has spent many years in the Greek islands... he was enabled to observe the Cyprus scene from... different angles. (Nicolson 10)

Durrell, at once serving the empire and constructing himself as belonging nowhere, observes and records the particularities of all the inhabitant of Cyprus. Durrell's correspondence, however, reveals that he thought of himself as helping the British Government. In a letter to Alan Thomas, he writes: "Trying to save Cyprus for the British as this late stage after so many years of total neglect is really a hard nut to crack..." (nd MSL, c.1954. LD Papers, British Library). Nevertheless, Durrell's perceived liminality confirms him as the British Colonial Government's main choice for negotiating a sharing of Cypriot territory among three cultures in the pages of the *Cyprus Review*.

Needing money for home restorations, Durrell first takes a post teaching English language and literature at the Pan Cyprian Gymnasium in Nicosia. As a teacher, he purveys English culture abroad. When he is offered the position of Director of Public Relations for the Colonial Office, it is precisely because of his knowledge of both Greek and British culture:

I met the Colonial Secretary of the island at Austen Harrison's lunch-table, where he proposed that I should apply for the post of Press Adviser, then about to fall vacant. There was much that needed doing in the field of public relations and it was felt that someone knowing Greek and having a stake in the island's affairs might do better than a routine official. (143)

This position, especially the editorship of the *Cyprus Review*, tested Durrell's friendships and his skills as a cultural negotiator. As Barbara Papastavrou-Koroniotaki points out, despite his philhellenism, Durrell "would now risk tarnishing his Hellenic image by working for the British colonial government at a critical post" (22). Founded in 1941, the magazine, published in English and Greek and circulated in Cyprus, throughout the Middle East, in Greece and in the UK, aimed to bridge British and Cypriot culture. Durrell's experience in cultural relations—as Information Officer in Cairo and Alexandria during the Second World War, as Information Officer in Rhodes in 1945, and as director of a British Council office in Argentina in 1947—prepared him to conduct diplomacy through cul-

tural means in the pages of the *Cyprus Review*. In the December 1954 issue, Durrell wrote in his editorial note:

Cyprus is something more than a vital communication center in the Eastern Levant; it is a point of confluence for three cultures, British, Greek, and Turkish, which gives it both a certain incongruity of styles in living and also a delightful variety. We want to represent the island's way of living and not only emphasize the pictorial side of its magnificent landscape and climate—the tourist aspect. But we would also like to build a journal which, apart from its notes on folklore, customs, and archaeology and art carries authoritative articles covering the contemporary Middle Eastern scene. Is this too ambitious a hope? Time, contributors, and a public are the factors upon which an answer to such a question depends. (*Cyprus* Dec. 1954)

Before Durrell's editorship began in October 1954, the *Review* focused on events of British politics and pageantry: visits of the Governor of Cyprus, British social events. The *Review* took for granted the universal appeal of British culture. Durrell's strategy was different. Informed by his work for the British Council, Durrell emphasized reciprocity and considered the perception of British Culture from a Cypriot perspective. To align British and Cypriot interests, Durrell featured articles about the visit of British Governors, Commissioners, and Excellencies alongside articles about felt-making, the festival of the Epiphany, as well as portraits of contemporary Greek Cypriot artists such as Eve Macrides, and of European artists who were living on Cyprus, such as Sigmund Pollitzer. Travelers' personal reminiscences of Istanbul or of Cyprus before the First World War, as well as portraits of historical figures who all lived for a time in Cyprus—such as Alexander the Great, Bécafico, and Rimbaud—constructed a *lingua franca* and a common past for all current Cypriots. Durrell's friendships with local Cypriots and British officials helped him to tailor the message of the *Cyprus Review* to the tastes of his readership and to the political ends of the British government, whereas his network of friends and fellow travelers such as Freya Stark, Rose Macaulay, and Patrick Leigh Fermor reported their perceptions of Cyprus from abroad. Through the medium of the magazine, Durrell was to forge a textual alliance, however disingenuous, of British and Cypriot culture. Although he had many Greek friends, Durrell was employed by

the British Government to keep Cyprus in the empire and used his information to this end. As Lewis Hyde points out, “Hermes is an amoral connecting deity... the moral tone of an exchange does not concern him.... When he’s the messenger of the gods he’s like the post office: he’ll carry love letters, hate letters, stupid letters, or smart letters” (Hyde 324).

Durrell does not only gather information; he also foregrounds it in his recounting of the three years he spent in Cyprus. Durrell’s experience of Cyprus is textually mediated: chapters in *Bitter Lemons* are introduced with epigraphs from Cypriot proverbs, Colonial reports, and excerpts from Hepworth-Dixon’s 1888 assessment of Cyprus when it was first a British suzerainty. Durrell imagines Rimbaud building the Governor’s summer lodge in the Troodos mountains at the end of the nineteenth century, and follows Mrs. Lewis’s travels as she recounts them in her 1893 *A Lady’s Impressions of Cyprus*. He recalls Samuel Brown’s prophetic description of violence on the island in the sixteenth century and the hanging and flaying of the soldier Bragadino and recalls that “in Cyprus I stumbled upon many more such echoes from forgotten moments of history with which to illuminate the present” (20). The diplomat’s authority rests in his knowledge of history of the documents that have described a location and a passage before his own. In *Bitter Lemons*, Durrell creates an archive of the passages of other travelers and empires: the text stitches together different types of documents: novels, travelogues, histories. *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus* is aware of its status as a postwar document. Implicit in Durrell’s account is the fact that all interpretations are only ever provisional: he creates an archive for which a conclusive interpretation is deferred.

Durrell’s historical understanding also makes him aware that the British will not hold onto the island forever. His interest in historical accounts about Cyprus and his sense of the continuity between past and present make him cognizant of the impermanence of political power and the violence the island has witnessed. He recounts that “walking about at dusk in the iron parallelogram of Famagusta, these thoughts became absurdly mixed with evocations of past history, no less cruel and turbulent than the times in which we lived” (162). Even as he defends the empire through his work as Press Officer, Durrell’s sense of history is palimpsestic: he recalls that the Ottoman empire and the Venetians ruled over Cyprus long before the British, and that the island has seen other rulers “like Haroud Al Rashid, Alexander, Coeur de Lion: women like Catherine Coronaro and Helena Palaeologus” (20). He sees the ruins of past cen-

turies and wonders, in conversation with his friend Rose Macaulay, how to interpret the ruins of a fortress. He asks, quoting Macaulay,

how it is that the utilitarian objects of one period become objects of aesthetic value to succeeding ones? This thing was constructed purely to keep armies at bay, to shatter men and horses, to guard a pass. How do we find it more beautiful than the Maginot line? Does time itself confer something on relics and ruins which isn't inherent in the design of the builder? Will we ever visit the Maginot line with such awe at its natural beauty? (*Bitter* 94)

Interpreting monuments as aesthetic objects, Durrell suggests, defies history. In an television interview for the BBC's "Midday Dialogue" with Marius Goring, Durrell echoed this sentiment: "the past shouldn't be a funk hole or an escape, but that it should be... just as informative as it is seducing." Looking at the ruins of a town built by Caesar's legions in Provence, Durrell explains that history is a compilation of information:

The remains of those monuments are not simply remains. They contain... information that is not just archaeological—or what Byron called "Antiquarian Twaddle"... They contain a great deal of contemporary information.... In fact you become more contemporary the more you look at these old stones. (Durrell Scripts 10-11, BBC Written Archives, Caversham)

A postwar text, *Bitter Lemons* asks how the late modernist writer should reconfigure the fragments of the past. In particular, Durrell, by reinvesting ruins with meaning, moves away from the high modernist transformation of the fragment into an aestheticized object.

In his postwar serial novels, Durrell also draws on his experience in the Foreign Service and re-imagines his novels in light of the discourse of diplomacy. As such, *Mountolive* performs the praxis of diplomacy by implicating the reader in the act of decoding and in the creation of meaning from information. Like diplomats, characters in the *Quartet* record and interpret information. Unlike its "siblings" in the *Quartet*, *Mountolive* employs the discourse of a diplomatic report. It reads like a file on David Mountolive that interpolates the reader into self-conscious attention to the nature of

communication itself. A seemingly realist and objective novel, *Mountolive* it is deceitful, and defers full disclosure of the situation. The reader, like the diplomat, is forced to withhold judgment until more information is brought to light. But *Clea*, the fourth volume of the *Quartet*, adds to but also does not complete the archive of David Mountolive.

While Durrell's Preface to *Balthazar*, the second volume of the *Quartet*, announces that the novels are "an investigation of modern love," the series frustrates all attempts at uncomplicated human communication: Justine, whom Darley believes to be in love with him, is revealed to be merely using their affair to divert the attention of the British away from Nessim's plot, and also to find information about another of his lovers, Melissa Artemis. Similarly, in *Mountolive*, Leila Hosnani's husband suggests that she take Mountolive as a lover in order to blind him to Nessim's machinations. The narrative gradually reveals that characters use their lovers to satisfy their desires for information, spying, gossip, betrayal, and *realpolitik*. Mountolive is duped by Leila; Darley by Justine. Justine's affairs do not fulfill her personal desires; they mask her political allegiances. In the end, the narrative rewards those characters who can decode relationships in terms of ulterior motives.

Documents frustrate and outlive their users and producers. Justine's diary, found after her disappearance, is intercepted, read, and interpreted by Jacob Arnauti, who publishes a *roman-à-clef* based on it. Documents also frustrate those who seek information from them; they mystify more than they clarify. Darley searches through the pages of the diary for clues to the identity and motives of his lover, only to be further mystified. In *Clea*, Justine confesses to Darley that she and Nessim's favorite postwar after-dinner pastime at their estate in Karm Abu Girg is to read aloud Mountolive's love letters to Leila. Yet documents also function as problematic inheritances for those who find them. After his suicide, Pursewarden's last letter to Mountolive forces the latter to act on the information that the letter reveals about Nessim. In other instances, written documents are revealed to be unreliable. *Balthazar*, the second volume of the *Quartet*, revises and corrects *Justine*. In what Darley calls Balthazar's Interlinear, his friend supplies a revision of Darley's erroneous beliefs about his Alexandrian friends. In turn, the second novel in the series. *Balthazar*, is Darley's narration of Balthazar's Interlinear and his own revision of *Justine*. What seemed like an archive on Justine Hosnani in the first volume is therefore revealed to be disinformation, and the series expands as it revises previous

volumes. Durrell's Alexandrian archive is incomplete and inconclusive.

David Mountolive, like a diligent "student of manners" documents and records his observations (*Mountolive* 30). His acceptance among the Hosnanis is made possible by a letter of introduction—another document—which he carries with him upon his arrival: "He blessed the chanced letter of introduction which brought him to the Hosnani lands, to the rambling old-fashioned house built upon a network of lakes and embankments near Alexandria" (11). A "junior of exceptional promise" (11), Mountolive goes to Egypt to perfect his Arabic and thus to advance his career. The Hosnanis respond to his interest in them, since "never had a stranger shown any desire to study and assess them, their language, religion, and habits" (24). A newcomer in a foreign culture, Mountolive at first finds that "it was hateful to be young, to be maladroit, to feel carried out of one's depths" (19). As he becomes immersed in the life of the Hosnanis, however, Mountolive loses his sense of Englishness gladly.

Mountolive learns what he knows of Egypt by reading the foreign service primer on Egypt, Edward William Lane's *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. But Mountolive is not satisfied with Lane's antiquated and armchair view of Egypt. Not even Edward Lane's book can be a substitute for keen attention and swift judgment. Lane can provide him with basic knowledge of the country, the geography, and customs. But for the rest, he must have sources of information on the ground. To this end, the Hosnanis teach Mountolive how to read and decode the Egyptian landscape and the culture. Like an anthropologist, he also immerses himself in "the field" that constitutes his object of study. He keeps a notebook in which he records his impressions of the country and valuable lessons in reading and decoding:

Sunday. Riding through a poor fly-blown village my companion points to marks like cuneiform scratched on the walls of houses and asks if I can read them. Like a fool I say no, but perhaps they are Amharic? Laughter. Explanation is that a venerable pedlar who travels through here every six months carries a special henna from Medina...People are mostly too poor to pay, so he extends his credit, but lest they forget, marks his tally on the clay wall. (29)

The marks on the wall form a public archive, which provide the

recollection and record a transaction. Although the signs of culture and commerce are legible, Mountolive cannot read them. In effect, the narrative satirizes his hubristic and illusory belief that he can read and understand the Hosnani and Egypt.

His affair with Leila Hosnani is also conducted through documents. Mountolive uses correspondence to keep alive his relationship with Leila, who uses him as her own emissary:

“You say you will be in Zagreb next month. Please visit and describe to me...” she would write, or “How lucky you will be in passing through Amsterdam; there is a retrospective Klee which has received tremendous notices in the French press. *Please* pay a visit and describe your impressions honestly to me, even if unfavourable. I have never seen an original myself.” This was Leila’s parody of love... (47)

Private letters, like diplomatic reports and novels, require decoding. Just like diplomatic discourse, the letters perform their genre—the love letter—by following protocol. Letters do not demand correspondents’ sincerity. The letters liberate lovers from the pain of separation and simultaneously mask each lover from the other. Nonetheless, the correspondence delivers the message Leila intends, since by maintaining an intimacy with Mountolive she distracts him from paying attention to Nessim’s plans, and Mountolive does not decode her message.

Mountolive’s father, also a decoder, is an example of the kind of envoy who becomes, according to diplomatic theory, overly implicated in foreign cultures. Mountolive’s father is a skilled decoder who has abandoned the family to live his remaining years in a monastery in India where he translates and interprets Buddhist texts: “At first he had been simply a judge in the service, but within a few years he had become pre-eminent in Indian scholarship, and editor and interpreter of rare and neglected texts” (87). Mountolive senior forgets his allegiance to England. Similarly, David shows signs of having inherited his father’s tendency for decenteredness. Even the Mountolive’s family’s residence speaks of their absence, a “pleasant house... furnished with trophies, books, and pictures...had something of the air of a museum... because it had been deserted by its real author” (87). Durrell imagines Postwar English houses as like archives that have lost their significance and bespeak a national fatigue.

Moreover, the behaviour of networks of British diplomats

abroad provides the subject of Durrell's satirical pieces collected in *Esprit de Corps* (1957), *Stiff Upper Lip*, and *Sauve Qui Peut* (1966). The illustrated "Sketches from Diplomatic Life" illuminate the gaffes, machinations, and banalities of the daily lives of diplomats. An unnamed first-person narrator, a young writer with some experience in the Foreign Office records conversations had over lunch with a certain "Antrobus," a senior diplomat and an *habitué* of diplomatic life. The narrator collects these anecdotes in an "Antrobus file," as he calls it, and re-circulates the stories in new contexts. These texts provide a key to the seemingly opaque world of diplomatic life. The "Antrobus" stories construct an idea of Britishness while unveiling its mode of operation. The anecdotes masquerade as light satire—they are revealed in casual conversation—but in Antrobus's stories of small problems at official functions, more is revealed about the British than their cookery methods. Antrobus teaches his interlocutor that "in Diplomacy, quite small things can be one's undoing" and that "foreigners are apt to be preternaturally touchy about small things" (*Antrobus* 35). The accounts given of the foreign emissaries focus on the gaffes and eccentricities of a certain ambassador Polk-Mowbray. In "Where the Bee Sucks," he develops odd interests:

One week for example it would be Sailors' Knots. It was all right so long as he only sat at his desk playing with string but this was not all. He grew reckless, ambitious, carried away by all this new knowledge. He took to demonstrating his powers at children's parties, charity bazaars, cocktails—everywhere...One day I walked into his office and found him clad for the most part in a bee-keeper's veil... "Antrobus," he said, "I have the answer to the monotony of this post. The murmur of innumerable bees, dear boy. A *pastoral* hobby, suitable for diplomats." (*Antrobus* 47)

Tedium, a necessary strategy in diplomacy, wears down the diplomat as it wears down foreign resistance during negotiations. The diplomat understands that the information he finds is not conclusive. Durrell pokes fun at the ineffectiveness of the diplomats, who were often stationed far away from any supervision. The "Antrobus" stories also call attention to their own status as stories: It is significant that the reader receives this archive of anecdotes third-hand, in full awareness that they have been heard and edited from

the narrator's notes. Interpretations of the Antrobus stories proliferate and defy conclusiveness.

Hence, diplomatic transactions, encoded in protocol, can seem to the untrained onlooker as shallow spectacle. Durrell's *Quartet*, like his satires about diplomats, demonstrate that the reader—like the junior diplomat in the Antrobus stories—must pay close attention to details in order to distinguish between those euphemisms used to make a serious matter more palatable and those used simply as surface lightness. Durrell's attitude to the English in the "Antrobus" stories is ambivalent. He both mocks the diplomats who try to preserve their Englishness abroad and celebrates those eccentricities that demarcate the English diplomat from his foreign environment. The performance of "rituals of Englishness" among diplomats in Durrell's stories has still another purpose: by over-acting, the diplomats can pretend that England still possesses its strength and presence on the international scene. At the same time, Durrell casts himself as a decoder who provides a "key" to the codes of Englishness.

"Codes of manners" are likewise the central trope of *Mountolive* much as the codes of the novel are central to the telling of the *Quartet*. Mountolive's friendship with Nessim Hosnani is founded on his recognition of Nessim as one "whose life was a code" (*Mountolive* 24). Their understanding of their mutual hypocrisies continues until Nessim's betrayal of Mountolive. For those who live by codes, committing a gaffe is an inexcusable error; to commit a gaffe is to lose control of one's exterior or possibly to disclose secret information. In his early visit to the Hosnanis, Mountolive provokes an argument by forgetting that the Hosnanis are Copts: he "unwittingly provided an opening by committing one of those gaffes which diplomats, more than any other tribe, fear and dread; the memory of which can keep them awake at nights for years" (36). Mountolive's mistake makes clear that he has little concern for the role that the British have played in the worsening of the relationship between Copts and Muslims in Egypt. Although Mountolive and Nessim are outwardly good friends, Nessim nonetheless lies to him openly. This break in truthfulness foretells the beginning of Mountolive's crisis in Egypt. Visiting a cabaret on a visit to Berlin, Mountolive unexpectedly sees Nessim "seated at a table among a group of elderly men in evening-dress" and sends over a card. Nessim tells Mountolive that he is there "trying to market tungsten." Mountolive thinks nothing of it. His host, however, is more observant:

“Is your friend in armaments?” asked the Chargé d’Affaires as they were leaving. Mountolive shook his head. “He’s a banker. Unless tungsten plays a role in armaments—I really don’t know.” “It isn’t important. Just idle curiosity. You see, the people at his table are from Krupps, and so I wondered. That was all.” (75)

Mountolive misses clear signs that Nessim is planning a coup that will require armaments. Even when his Charge d’Affaires see this, and reports it to him, still he refuses to draw the connections. In *Mountolive*, Durrell satirizes the diplomat’s inability to read signs, while also showing sympathy for the monotony of diplomatic life. David Mountolive is not a skilled decoder and reader of signs. He fails to see Leila’s purpose in writing him love-letters; he does not read the significance of Nessim’s meeting with people from Krupps, the German steelworks and armement factory. He manages to rise through the ranks of the Foreign Office through a scrupulous adherence to protocol rather than because he is an effective listener and negotiator.

In this third volume of the series, which Durrell called the *clou*² of the *Alexandria Quartet*, David Mountolive makes an error in his response to learning of the Hosnani’s plot to overthrow the British in Egypt. Rather than maintain his allegiance to his government, of which he is the envoy, he protects his friendship with the Hosnani by hiding the memo he receives from Brigadier Maskelyne about the Hosnani’s plot. Mountolive is the kind of diplomat Nicolson warns against. He is neither neutral nor distant, nor is he even truthful in reporting information to the Foreign Office. Mountolive succeeds, however, in hiding his error by making Narouz, Nessim’s brother, into a scapegoat and having him killed to dissipate mounting concern. *Mountolive* charts David Mountolive’s failure to act as a public figure. His knowledge of Arabic does not help him to decode the political situation and the Hosnani’s motives.

Bored “diplomatic types” abound in *Mountolive*. While Errol and Maskelyne battle one another for power in Egypt, and Kenilworth thinks of his advancement, Sir Louis, Mountolive’s mentor,

² In a letter to Patricia Rodda, Durrell writes: “In a way Mountolive is the clou to the whole set” (u.d MsL, LD Collection, HRC). To Alan Thomas, Durrell echoes: “I am curious to see how Mountolive takes—it is the fulcrum of the Quartet, the clou” (29 September 1958, LD Papers, ADD MS 73114, British Library).

anxiously awaits his retirement. Pombal and Pursewarden look forward to their daily shave and gossip at Mnemijian's barber and their after-work arak at Café al-Aktar. Sir Louis has, after a lifetime of service,

formed the habit of uttering a low continuous humming noise at receptions which had earned him a rather questionable notoriety... he was in the habit of humming, over and over again, in *basso profundo*, a passage from the Dead March in Saul. It summed up, appropriately enough, a lifetime of acute boredom spent in the company of friendless officials and empty dignitaries. (*Mountolive* 71)

Sir Louis' humming indicates not only fatigue at the diplomat's work of communicating, but a deliberate thwarting of language. He does not repeat a word, but simply makes a sound, as though he had renounced language altogether. Sir Louis also gives Mountolive advice to temper his excitement at finally being posted to Egypt: "I bet your first reaction to the news was: now I'm free to act, eh?" The final delusion." (69) For the seasoned, fatigued ambassador, the diplomat, as a mere envoy, has no political power: "In diplomacy one can only propose, never dispose" (*Mountolive* 79). Durrell also disliked the lack of freedom imposed upon him by the duty to follow protocol. Protocol annihilates personality. As Frank Kersznowski points out, "Mountolive must achieve [the F.O's] acceptance of protocol, of inertia, if he is to continue to be of use to diplomacy" (Kersznowski 59). Unlike Sir Louis and Mountolive, Gaston Pombal, "a minor consular official," is realistic about the diplomat's obligations, since "[f]or him the tiresome treadmill of protocol and entertainment—so like a surrealist nightmare—is full of exotic charm... He indulges himself with it but never allows it to engulf what remains of his intellect" (*Mountolive* 23). Pombal maintains a distance relative to his work and dreams of returning home to Normandy.

As a result of his disappointment with the Hosnanis, Mountolive sees that he has been following codes for most of his career: "In time his annoyance gave place to resignation. His profession which valued only judgment, coolness, and reserve, taught him... never to utter the pejorative thought aloud" (50). For the sake of neutrality, the diplomat sacrifices his personality to his profession. As Nicolson remarks, the diplomat "often becomes denationalised, internationalised, and therefore dehydrated, an elegant empty husk"

(*Evolution* 79). As David Mountolive rises through the ranks of the diplomatic service, he loses access to his private opinions. His ability to follow protocol, which made him successful in the foreign service, finally impedes his ability to act in a time of crisis. In the debacle following the revelation of Nessim's plot to transport armament to Palestine, Mountolive perfects his diplomatic persona. He experiences

a disenchanting sense of his own professional inadequacy, his powerlessness to act now save as an instrument... he thought back bitterly and often to the casually spoken words of Sir Louis as he was combing his hair in the mirror. "The illusion that you are free to act!" (242).

As Mountolive's lover, Grishkin, tells him, "you are only a diplomat. You have no politics and no religion!" (49). In Durrell's mind, writing, like diplomacy, creates a double loneliness because it "involve[s] a flight not only from one's culture, but also from the self: 'je suis un réfugié de moi-même'... the extraterritorial writer is one for whom both 'home' and 'language' are difficult" (Pine 8).

In Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, communication and interpretation are complicated by the vestiges of colonial rule. Against this background, Durrell's diplomat figures develop an expertise in hermeneutic decoding and in revising the significance of the information which they gather. Diplomats and their networks of informants belong to a class onto themselves: they are an international society of emissary-arbitrators with special privileges who belong nowhere and whose public personas can erode their private convictions. They are observers because they are outsiders. This gives them greater mobility of the implicit indifference of information; its origins and its ends exist irrespective of its content. David Mountolive's failure, inertia, and inability to act are emblematic of the fatigue of the postwar period and of the end of British imperial dominance. Durrell's novel looks back to a period of transition in the late 1930s when Egypt was granted increasing independence from Britain and relations between the two countries required a different diplomatic approach. *Mountolive*, a postwar and post-Suez novel, rewrites the 1930s as the beginning of Britain's loss of power in Egypt and in the Middle East.

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