

I. Introduction: The Ethics of the Other

Ethics not based on metaphysics — that's what it is.¹

L'amoureux des langues est épris d'altérité.²

Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and the Ethics of Alterity is an attempt to bridge the gap between 'literature' and 'theory' without effacing it. It attempts neither an application of postmodernist theory to the work of Lawrence Durrell, nor does it take Durrell's writings as a reflection of or on postmodernist theory. Both, Durrell and postmodernist theory, are here set side by side, allowing differences and similarities to emerge with regard to a particular 'theme', namely: alterity. This parallel reading should lead to a critique of the concept of alterity in both Durrell and theory, which is to be understood, however, not as a rejection of a postmodernist 'ethics of alterity', but rather as a further 'radicalisation' of it.

A. *Lawrence Durrell, Postmodernism and Postmodernity*

'Postmodernist theory' is here used as a generic term for a number of textual approaches that analyse and submit to a more or less radical critique of previously established philosophical systems of thought grouped under another generic term, namely 'modern' or 'modernity'. These postmodernisms, usually classified into 'systems of thought', which, depending on the context, may sometimes appear rather violent or heterogeneous mixtures, nevertheless try to address a change perceived within contemporary society and culture (not to use the somewhat problematic term of 'lifeworld' [*Lebenswelt*], which, after all, already demands answers to at least two questions: whose life?, and which world?). The perceived social change may be called 'postmodernity', whereas the critical reflection of both, modernity and its development

¹Lawrence Durrell, *Tunc* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) 211. (Hereafter quoted in the text as *Tc.*)

² Claude Hagège, *L'Homme de paroles: contribution linguistique aux sciences humaines* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1985) 394.

The lover of languages is enamoured of alterity.

[All translations in this study, unless indicated otherwise, are mine]

towards postmodernity, may be called ‘postmodernism’, or ‘postmodernist theory’, ‘postmodernist literature’, etc. In this sense, Lawrence Durrell’s work and postmodernist theory are both reflections of modernity *and* postmodernity.

The proper name ‘Lawrence Durrell’, will subsequently stand, first of all, for the entire work of fiction, poetry, drama, humorist and travel writing signed by this name. But although focussing on Durrell’s novels, and in particular on *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-1985), the argument will often revert to overtly ‘biographical’ and non-fictional texts (interviews, letters, etc.) and will treat these in conjunction with and on the same level as the fiction. This is not to be misunderstood as biographical criticism or, in connection with the use of psychoanalytical theories, as an analysis of the author or the person(ality) of Lawrence Durrell. Instead the use of the entire textual material signed by Durrell permits an evaluation of precisely this (deliberate) confusion between ‘art’ and ‘life’ which is at the heart of Durrell’s work; this may, in fact, serve as a justification for seeing Durrell as a writer of postmodernity, and not, strictly speaking, a postmodernist writer. The entity of the Durrellian work thematises this aestheticisation of life into art, symbolised by the self-stylisation of the poet figure. The study thus refers to the sum of the narrating voices invented by the authorial ‘*persona*’ Lawrence Durrell in order to arrive at a critique of the political and ethical implications of the (predominantly ‘gnostic’ and ‘taoist’) ideology on which the Durrellian conjunction of life and art is based. This is of even greater importance since Durrell, who was, after all, a writer *and* a diplomat (i.e. an official figure in British colonial politics) failed to draw a clear line between his political and literary influence, and thus evaded or obscured this very question of the ideology of literature. Durrell’s fictional writings reflect, of course, the historical period of decolonisation, the end of Western colonialism and its aftermath. The study therefore also attempts to analyse this silencing of politics and its implications by using postmodernist theories that are sympathetic to what is usually referred to as ‘postcolonialism’.

Durrell’s writings are approached through his last group of novels, *The Avignon Quintet*, a strategy that revises the usual categorisation of Durrell as a (late) modernist. Instead, the similarities with postmodern tendencies and characteristics in his later writings are stressed, and can be seen as having been anticipated in his earlier work. Durrell’s novels are treated as ‘symptomatic’ of other contemporary fictional works that may fall into the category of postmodern literature. This is, however, not to

show the literary value or lack of value of Durrell's works (which have all sold and are continuing to sell reasonably well in many countries), but to engage with Durrell, postmodernism and postmodernity, on an ideological level. In this sense, this study uses Durrell's writings as a springboard into the pool of contemporary notions of alterity, in order to arrive at a different, and hopefully a more rigorous and 'radical', conception of postmodernism. A more restricted definition of postmodernism in connection with a critique of its notion of alterity is intended to outline the possibility and further the extent of a co-operation between postmodernism and postcolonialism.

Postmodernism is obsessed with otherness. This derives mainly from its historically problematic relation with modernism, modernity and the modern in general. The modern (and modernity) cannot be 'overcome' due to a certain hermetic circularity inscribed in its progressivist and deterministic ideology. Postmodernism, understood as a reflection of the contemporary phase of 'late modernity' and a reflection on 'postmodernity', expresses at once an exasperation with the interminability of the (eternally) modern, an ongoing critique and the desire for the Other (than-the-modern). The postmodernist critique of modernity coincides with the 'de(con)struction of 'Western metaphysics' (the tradition of philosophical thinking that privileges an ontology of presence). Since the modern and the metaphysical both include the very principles of their own 'overcoming', a simple break or transcendence would be insufficient because this 'over-reaching' gesture would inevitably be re-appropriated as a continuation of modernity and Western metaphysics. Postmodernist theory therefore attempts to erode Western metaphysics from 'within', while inscribing itself in marginalised counter-traditions of heterology. It is the trust in the Other, or the radically heterological, which must remain ineffable in order to escape its appropriation by Western metaphysical thinking, which is supposed to lead to a destabilisation of Western colonialism and the violence of universalism.

Another attempt at describing the relation between modernity and postmodernism would be to use an analogy with psychoanalysis. Postmodernist theory, in this context, takes the place of the analyst, modernity that of the patient; by initiating a process of 'transference', postmodernist theory would catalyse a work of mourning, in which modernity would have to 'work through' the initial trauma(s) inscribed into its (by definition incomplete) project, and would thus be required to

“rewrite” itself.³

B. The Other

In a simplified model the relation between modernity and otherness could be described as a ‘neurotic’ process of differentiation and exclusion, while postmodernity – an age considering itself to be ‘beyond’ modernity — to follow Simon During’s line of argument, would be governed by a ‘psychotic’ process of negating and incorporating of otherness.⁴ Postmodernism, within this model, would be a critique of both these attitudes towards alterity, and the ‘obsession’ with the Other referred to above could be seen as a radicalisation in defence of otherness, a certain radical heterology as a form of care for the Other. It is this heterological element introduced by a postmodernist critique of both modern and postmodern relations to otherness, which makes postmodernist thought at once similar and radically different to certain gnostic ideas:

The dominating feeling of the mystic is one of unity, the determining

³Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 24-35. Lyotard is concerned with the postmodern (not postmodernism or postmodernity) as a ‘*tendance*’ that is always already inscribed into (and in this sense, even comes ‘before’) the modern. In order to retain our differentiation between postmodernism and postmodernity, one might say that the contemporary aspect of the postmodern as a critique of a certain modernity and postmodernity could be called ‘postmodernist’. This would allow for the substitution of “postmodernism” for “postmodernity” in the following passage from Lyotard (p. 34-5):

[Postmodernism] is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity, and first of all modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology... [T]hat rewriting has been at work, for a long time now, in modernity itself. [Thus one could understand postmodernism as a] rewriting [which] means resisting the writing of that supposed postmodernity.

⁴Simon During, “Postmodernism and Post-Colonialism Today” *Textual Practice* 1,1 (1987) 33:

We can, rather brutally, characterize postmodern[ist] thought (the phrase is useful rather than happy) as that thought which refuses to turn the Other into the Same. Thus it provides a theoretical space for what postmodernity denies: otherness. Postmodern[ist] thought also recognizes, however, that the Other can never speak for itself *as* Other.

experience of the gnostic is one of being a stranger to the world, the central insight of the philosopher is that of wholeness [*Ganzheit*]. Mystical and gnostic philosophy are knowledges of an entirely Other, through which the self experiences itself at once as an integrity and as estranged from the world. The world is, for the gnostic, decentred [*versetztes*] and fallen being, or being-in-erring [*In-der-Irre-Sein*]. At the same time, in gnosis, the entirely Other becomes perceivable beyond the fallen world.⁵

The radical difference of postmodernism lies precisely at the level of perception and experience. While the gnostic believes to be able to gain access to the Other (thus already appropriates), postmodernism refers to this Other as the un(re)presentable, or the im/possible but absolutely necessary.

Gnostic cosmology and philosophy are the point of departure and foundation of Durrell's writings. They are informed by a desire for the Other not as 'Other', but a desire to transform the Other into the Same and One. It establishes the difference between the other and the same for the sake of ultimate obliteration of (their) difference. While postmodernist thinking is aware of its universalist *and* particularist tendencies, an experience of the Other-as-Other always remains impossible (ineffable) both in the singular and the plural. While gnostic thinking wants to overcome ontological metaphysics as such,⁶ it remains, nevertheless, metaphysical in its ultimate appropriation of its others; postmodernist theory, on the other hand, is to be understood in relation to an 'ethics of alterity' which is opposed to the reduction of the Other into the Same or its appropriation within categories of sameness and difference.

C. An Ethics of Alterity

Alterity, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), is "the state of being other or different; diversity, 'otherness';" in a postmodernist context, alterity contains the ethical imperative of respecting this otherness *as* radical difference. What this study understands as the postmodernist

⁵Peter Koslowski, "Philosophie, Mystik, Gnosis," *Gnosis und Mystik in der Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. Peter Koslowski (Zürich and Munich: Artemis, 1988) 9.

⁶In this sense, the 'end of metaphysics' invoked by Heidegger and even Habermas's notion of 'post-metaphysical' thinking are much closer to a gnostic 'trans-metaphysics' than the kind of postmodernist theory, as it is understood in this study, based on radical heterology.

‘ethics of alterity’ follows the “chiasmic” reading of Levinasian ethics and Derridean deconstruction undertaken by Simon Critchley, for whom the goal of deconstruction is “to locate an otherness within philosophical or logocentric conceptuality and then to deconstruct this conceptuality from that position of alterity”:

Derrida’s project may therefore be understood as the desire to keep open a dimension of alterity which can neither be reduced, comprehended nor, strictly speaking, even thought by philosophy.⁷

If Levinasian ethics is to be thought of as “the critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself”,⁸ it can be regarded — as opposed to traditional views on ethics as a branch of philosophy (namely: morality) — as a ‘first ethics’, or “*ultra-éthique*”,⁹ which precedes philosophy based on ontology.

Levinas’s project is to re-establish the rights of the Other against the imperialism of the Same. The Other can only ‘be’ other if its alterity is accepted as irreducibly, infinitely Other — a category incommensurable with, for always preceding, difference. In this respect, heterology is the *point commun* between Derridean deconstruction and Levinasian ethics, as the thinking ready to embrace “a confrontation with Otherness that would no longer be *its own*.”¹⁰ The Other understood in this radically heterological sense is neither an essence nor a phenomenon; it is “irretrievably plural and cannot be assimilated, digested, represented, or thought as such, and hence put to work by the system of metaphysics.”¹¹

The ethical demand this philosophy of radical heterology presupposes is the inevitable Necessity *and* Impossibility to do justice to the (pre-ontological) Other. This ‘ethics of alterity’ is the only form of ethical thinking available to postmodernism because it questions the ‘discreteness’ of the ego, the (pre-)existence of the modern (Cartesian) subject and the autonomous individual, which all rely on identification

⁷Simon Critchley, “The Chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida and the Ethical Demand for Deconstruction,” *Textual Practice* 3.1 (1989): 94-95.

⁸Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 5.

⁹Jacques Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarrière, *Altérités* (Paris: Osiris, 1986) 71.

¹⁰Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986) 101.

¹¹Gasché, *ibid.*, p. 103.

through the reduction of otherness to a paradigm of difference and sameness.

The concept of the free subject is based on the appropriation by representation of (its) others, as the external (reality), in relation to the idea of the (self-)same on which the ego's self-identity is grounded. Levinas's and Derrida's target are the ontological principles upon which Western metaphysics is built. A philosophy of being excludes any possibility of radical plurality, because it assimilates the other into the metaphysical category of supposedly self-present being and thus leaves no space for the encounter with the plural, or for the otherness of the Other. In its ontological 'immanence', Western philosophy succumbs to an "insurmountable allergy" to otherness.¹²

To experience the exteriority and heterology of the Other can only be achieved through the idea of the infinite which breaks through the totalitarian aspect of Western metaphysics by questioning the primacy of the subject, ego or self [*Moi*], on which it is founded. The idea of the infinite gives access to the Other [*Autrui*] as a primordial responsibility.¹³ The otherness of the Other must be located in a non-ontological philosophy, or in a 'being-otherwise' [*autrement qu'être*].¹⁴ The being-otherwise of the Other can only be maintained in its difference if the Other 'is' always already before the being of the self. In this sense, an ethics of alterity is an ethics that comes 'before' any ontology.

The ethical affirmation of the Other turns Levinas's thinking, according to Derrida, into an "immense treatise on hospitality".¹⁵ Receiving the Other as an ethical possibility manifests itself in an unconditional responsibility for the Other that derives from the precedence of the Other to the ego. In the sense of this 'radical' concept of inevitable hospitality one might call an 'ethics of reception', even hostility towards others still falls within the paradigm of hospitality. Even a refusal to

¹²Emmanuel Lévinas, "La trace de l'autre," *En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1982) 188.

¹³Cf. Lévinas, "La trace de l'autre" 196.

¹⁴Cf. Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990).

¹⁵Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu — à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997) 49ff. See my review "Désormais... à demeure, or 'radical hospitality'," *Textual Practice* 13,3 (1997), 591-95. Derrida has since expanded on the theme of hospitality in "Demeure: fiction et témoignage," Michel Lisse, ed., *Passions de la littérature: avec Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 1996) 13-73, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* (Paris: Galilée, 1997) and *L'Hospitalité* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1997).

receive is a reception that always presupposes an acceptance of ‘receivability’ (see Chapter II). One may say that “reason itself is a receiving [*un recevoir*]” thus understood.¹⁶

D. Durrell and Alterity

The proximity *and* the radical difference between the gnostic notion of mystical alterity in Durrell’s writings and the ethical notion of irreducible alterity in postmodernist theory form the main object of this study. While rejecting the gnostic notion of (limited) alterity, and emphasising the necessity of (radical) alterity as the principle of a postmodernist ‘first ethics’, the study suggests a pluralisation of the concept of alterity. This pluralisation is believed to open up the possibility of an exchange not with the Other as opposed to the (Self-) Same, but a communication between alterities and their differences, for example between an alterity located ‘within’ Western metaphysical notions of History, Subject, Culture and Language (a concept of restricted alterity hereafter referred to as the ‘other-than-the-same’), and an alterity located ‘without’ (what may be called the ‘other-than-the-other’), a being-otherwise of the non-Western history, subject, culture and language encountered in their untranslatability.¹⁷ The possibility of an exchange or a ‘co-operation’ between the deconstruction of the (neo)colonialist and (neo)imperialist tendencies in (Western) postmodernist universalism from ‘within’ and the deconstructive forces working from ‘without’, for example through so-called ‘postcolonial’ cultures and literatures, and the alterities they address, are used in this study as a contrastive critique of Durrell’s project of joining East and West in his most ambitious literary undertaking, *The Avignon Quintet*.

¹⁶Derrida, *Adieu*, 56.

¹⁷The experience of this resisting otherness, or this “crisis in alterity”, encountered in the “untranslatability of cultures” is referred to as “secondary otherness” by Sanford Budick, “Crises of Alterity: Cultural Untranslatability and the Experience of Secondary Otherness”, in Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 1-22.

E. Reception and the Survival of Literary Reputation

Concerns have been voiced about the “survival” of Durrell’s reputation as a major twentieth-century novelist. While this study does not share the concern, it nevertheless takes the anxiety as a symptom of a “literary politics”, which, inevitably, will also provide the context for what is to follow.

Durrell’s precarious position within the modern canon creates great difficulty in “receiving” *The Avignon Quintet*. In 1994, four years after Durrell’s death, Keith Brown asked the question of Durrell’s literary “survival”.¹⁸ The concern over the survival of literary reputation implies at least two things: first, that Durrell’s work has either not yet been, is not being, or has stopped being received; and, second, that there is a certain necessity to encourage, extend or revive a reading or re-reading of Durrell’s texts (and that this critical reading may contribute either to a greater appreciation of Durrell, and/or a better understanding of a particular literary and socio-historical context to be defined).

The question is therefore “*what* is to survive”? *Super-vivere* is always a statement *about* living; about and beyond living. In these moments, writing takes the place of living and becomes writing “about” living. Literally, writing always asks the question of life and death. It always involves the question of *écrire-sur-vivre*, or of writing-surviving and writing-about-living.¹⁹ To survive is the peculiar state between life and death, opened up by writing, as understood as “living-on”: a borderline case. These derridean notions, inspired by Blanchot, are certainly not alien to Durrell’s writings, which are very well aware of the murderous nature of writing in their constant interrogation of life, death, writing and otherness.²⁰ These interrogations always manifest themselves as attempts to write the inexpressible, to write “around” an un(re)presentable “thing”, invoking it and waiting for its arrival. The

¹⁸ Keith Brown, “Letter from Norway: Durrell and the Survival of Literary Reputations,” *Deus Loci* New Series 3 (1994): 162-165.

¹⁹Jacques Derrida, “Survivre,” *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986) 117 ff.; translated by James Hulbert as “Living On — Border Lines,” *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. H. Bloom, et al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 75-176.

²⁰See for example Durrell’s statements in his interview with Marc Alyn, “The Novel Versus Suicide,” *The Big Supposer*, trans. Francine Barker (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1973; hereafter quoted in the text as *BS*) 95-103; see especially p. 97: “What I can say for certain though is that either I start a novel or I commit suicide.”

Quintet especially, seen in a postmodernist context, seems to be relevant with regard to such a literature of the “event” (connected to the Heideggerian notion of the *Ereignis*), a notion which has also come to play an important part in postmodernist theory (see chapter IV).

The question of survival has thus to be put differently: which Durrell is to “survive”? In the following, we are not so much concerned with the survival of literary reputations, than with the analysis of what literary reputations consist of and which ideological purposes they may serve. Literary reputations are not only subject to change and to cultural difference, but they are also the ideological concern of the critic, whose traditional task it may have been to determine and to preserve. Of course, the present argument cannot entirely escape this logic. It is based on the assumption that reading Durrell’s work is useful, maybe even “necessary”, today. At the same time, however, this “general economy” is restricted by the critical apparatus this study employs to “guide” others in their reception of Durrell. The aim in presenting the “other” Durrell must therefore run the risk of creating “other” Durrells, but this is to be seen, at once, as the chance, danger and further possibility of reading (Durrell) in general. This is also why the notion of alterity forms the critical point of departure not only for a possible re-reading of Durrell, but also for a related investigation into the nature of postmodernism through a reading of Durrell.

In view of a postmodernist “ethics of alterity”, as outlined above, becoming part of a canon is the worst thing that can happen to a text, as far as its (further) receivability is concerned. And it is certainly because a certain Durrell has been canonised in various forms that his writings have become first of all “readable”. It is partly because Durrell had already gained a certain reputation in his lifetime — due to the success of the *Quartet* and its categorisation as “modernist” — that it has become so difficult to receive the *Quintet*. Receiving the *Quintet*, however, for the purpose outlined, represents a much more urgent piece of work and is of much greater necessity. Any restrictive reading which aims only at the survival and canonisation of Durrell’s work, would have a negative influence on the receivability of Durrell’s writings in general.

The modern idea of the canon and its constant revaluation is based on the assumption that a continual renewal and extension of literary experience occurs through a process of canonical “sedimentation”. Reception aesthetics, for example, explains the process of canonisation according to a dialectic of expectation and appropriation. It is the

“aesthetic distance” in relation to the receiver’s “horizon of expectation” [*Erwartungshorizont*] which, in turn, leads to a negation of and a break with the existing (canonised) literary experience.²¹ This “change of horizon” [*Horizontwandel*] is due to a belated understanding of the new which is gradually appropriated and transferred into the classical or canonised literary experience. The historical dimension of a literary work and thus the task for the literary historian lies in the constant process of measuring the horizon of expectation against the change of expectation in time. The diachronic development within the *Erwartungshorizont* leads to a synchronic situating of a work in relation to the canon.

The problem with reception aesthetics, one could say, is that it logically denies the possibility for any reception to take place. It is impossible to determine a horizon of expectation a “new” literary work could encounter or change, since this horizon is by definition always receding. How a break with an existing horizon can actually occur must therefore remain inexplicable, because it can only be observed *après coup*. The canon thus can never be questioned in its organic continuity. The difference or distance the “new” literary work promises serves only in so far as it affirms a tradition. Its difference is there to be reduced, and its otherness to be appropriated.

A text resisting this idea of horizon, or a completely “unexpected” text, would have to remain unreadable and unreceivable. But it is precisely this unreadable text which represents the hope of bringing about a *Horizontwandel*. It is the resistance to an aesthetics of reception which makes an unreadable text the most urgent text to be “received”. But it can only be received outside the (horizon of the) canon and thus according to an ethics of alterity, which would be an ethics based on a radical idea of the reception of the unclassifiable. It is in following this form of logic that Roland Barthes called the unclassifiable text “receivable” (as opposed to the “readerly” or “writerly” text).²²

If, however, the problem of reception lies entirely within the responsibility of the reader/critic, it is also the true that one can never find the completely unexpected. Strictly speaking, one never really *receives* a text, because one always only *re-ceives* it, one “captures it back/again”

²¹See Hans Robert Jauß, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) 177 ff.

²²Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan) 118, quoted as epigraph to the next chapter. For a critique of the terms “readerly” and “writerly” see below.

(Latin *re-capere*), thus presupposing an object (text), a subject (reader) and a first “capture”. One only receives in the narcissistic sense of “sending one/self something, for example a letter, or a text, to one/self”.²³ The entirely Other does never “arrive” (as Other); it can never be received as such, which would mean: to receive before any ontology of the subject (an intransitive process which may be called to **ceive*). But the possibility of this absolute form of arrival, or absolute “receiving” (or rather **ceival*), is always given, always precedes (pre-exists), and is thus what makes the arriving and receiving possible. To receive the (un)receivable text (in any text), instead, is to receive it as an impossible gift. This is valid for any kind of reading or process of receiving, but in particular it is true for a context that desires itself to be “postmodern(ist)”, that is a discourse that questions the very newness of the new or modern. And thus one might argue: to be able to receive postmodernist literature (which is far from being new) and to realise what might be radically other in it — post-modern (as belonging to a “postmodernity” to come, in the strict sense) — a different form of reading is needed, a radically open, which does not mean uncritical, reading, but which is always conscious of its belatedness. This would be a reading outside of any canon, and even before canonisation.

To receive the radically Other is of greatest necessity for postmodernism, while being absolutely impossible. The new is always presupposed but never (re)ceived; it can only be realised *post datum* (“this was new”), promised (“this will be new”), or invoked (“this will have been new”). This might be called the condition of “late modernity”, or postmodernism in general. The modern is by definition insurmountable, it cannot be overcome, because overcoming is the very principle of the modern ideology. It always presupposes and incorporates the new. It is impossible to break with the modern. One is either always already post-modern or forever modern. This does not necessarily mean that there is nothing beyond modernity. But it is a question of arrival, an opening for the future, for what is to come [*à-venir*]:

La condition que l’*à-venir* reste à venir, c’est que non seulement il ne soit pas

²³Compare OED *Receive* 16b. “To get (a letter, etc.) brought to oneself or delivered into one’s hands.” This involves the entire dialectic of sending and receiving, and the problem of the “post” in general, or of “Postal metaphysics”, as described by Derrida in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

connu mais qu'il ne soit pas *connaissable comme tel*.²⁴

The new may be there in its “truth” or “reality”, but these aspects “ex-sist” in a movement of *Ent-fernung*: the ambiguity of an impossible reduction of [ent-] distancing [*fernen*], always receivable as promise but never received *per se*. But it must be received, it is absolutely necessary to receive the unreceivable, to “call it forth”, to (re)ceive it unreservedly like a gift. This ethical imperative before ontology is based on a responsibility for the other as always “before” (being) oneself; it presupposes an idea of justice that comes before any law, and is located in the irreducible alterity of the other (text):

[A]n infinite “idea of justice”, infinite because it is irreducible, irreducible because owed to the other, owed to the other, before any contract, because it has come, the other’s coming as the singularity that is always other. This “idea of justice” seems to be irreducible in its affirmative character, in its demand of gift without exchange, without circulation, without recognition or gratitude, without economic circularity, without calculation and without rules, without reason and without rationality. (...) Justice as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history.²⁵

In the epigraph to *Quinx*, Durrell quotes Wordsworth by saying: “...must itself create the taste by which it is to be judged...” This choice of epigraph makes the *Quintet* at once receivable and unreceivable. It stresses continuity (with the Romantic) and professes its own radical difference to the (horizon of) “taste” or expectation [*Erwartungshorizont*]. It is therefore nothing new, but rather plays with the very condition of the new, promising the (re)ceivability of the new and announcing: “this will have been new”.

Richard Pine, referring to *The Avignon Quintet* as the “Unreadable Book”, feels uncomfortable about its “unreadability”:

[I]t is not that the dream of a ‘Tibetan novel’ was inherently unappealing to a

²⁴Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) 114.

The condition that the future (the to-come) remains to come is that it is not only not known, but *unknowable as such*.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (New York: Routledge, 1992) 25-27.

western audience but that its stasis and circularity oblige the reader to concentrate not on any sequence or series of events but on the idea of thought itself. *The Avignon Quintet* becomes unreadable in the sense that a symphony by Brahms becomes ‘unhearable’ or even unplayable, because, by placing too great a burden on the nature of a language which we have been taught to take for granted, it abandons us without signposts while we are still expecting to be conducted from start to finish by sequential narrative.²⁶

It is the element of unreadability which makes the *Quintet* a receivable text, that is a text “to be received” (because yet to be read). Just like the paradoxical logic of translation — it is precisely the untranslatable that demands to be translated most urgently — the hope for the survival of a text lies in its resistance to and its demand for being translated/received.²⁷ The circularity Pine mentions resembles very much the performative aspect of receivability: while waiting for the impossible event (*ceival), writing goes on and produces postmodernist fiction like the *Quintet*, which writes about the (im)possibility of writing the event, as the end of *Quinx* indicates:

The lovers gave a shiver of premonition and Blanford thought that if ever he wrote the scene he would say: “It was at this precise moment that reality prime rushed to the aid of fiction and the totally unpredictable began to take place!”²⁸

Performative or (re)ceivable fiction calls for readers who are prepared to “translate” the untranslatable, and for criticism that is not afraid to (re)ceive and that is willing to face the challenge contained in “apocalyptic” thinking, which poses

a challenge to the established receivability [*recevabilité*] of messages and to the policing of destination, in short to the postal police or the monopoly of posts... we could even say that every discord or every tonal disorder, everything that denotes and becomes unreceivable [*irrecevable*] in general collocation, everything that is no longer identifiable starting from established codes, from both sides of a front, will necessarily pass for mystagogic,

²⁶ Richard Pine, *Lawrence Durrell: The Mindscape* 325-326, chapter 13 “The Unreadable Book”.

²⁷See Jacques Derrida, “Living On — Border Lines” 102-103.

²⁸Lawrence Durrell, *Quinx or The Ripper’s Tale, The Avignon Quintet: Monsieur, Livia, Constance, Sebastian, Quinx* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) 1367 (the one-volume edition is used throughout; further references are given in the text as *Ms*, *Lv*, *Cn*, *Sb* and *Qx* following the one-volume pagination).

obscurantistic, and apocalyptic. It will be made to pass for such... all language on apocalypse is also apocalyptic and cannot be excluded from its object.²⁹

A reading which accepts this “apocalypse *without* apocalypse” as an end *without* end gains time — the time of (provisional) survival — for the performative (re)ceival of the untranslatable.

F. The Structure of this Study

Chapters IV to VII of this study will take up the list of metaphysical concepts underlined in the introduction — History, Subject, Culture and Language — in their respective ‘alterations’ in postmodernism and Durrell’s writings: The Time of the Other (History), The ‘Other-than-Me’ (Subject), The Place of the Other (Culture) and The Language of the Other. Chapter II undertakes a justification for the proposed re-reading of Durrell’s writings. It attempts to re-interpret the established reception of Durrell’s work (The Other Durrell), following the ‘receptive’ ethics of reading outlined above. Chapter III describes the different forms of heterology underlying the gnostic cosmology of Durrell’s work and postmodernist theory (The Knowledge of the Other). The ambiguity that exists in the “of” constructions — *genitivus subjectivus* and *objectivus* (the other as initiating agent and/or passive object) — was deliberately chosen to reflect the interface between a “postmodern(ist)” ethics of alterity and a “modern” metaphysics of presence.

²⁹Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., altered *Oxford Literary Review* 6.2 (1984): 30.