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Dissolution of the West**

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Death Without Tears: Anthony Burgess and the Dissolution of the West



The book that made Anthony Burgess' reputation in the United States is *A Clockwork Orange*, which is his own particular vision of horrors yet to come. It is probably not as good a book as *1984*, it is certainly not as chilling as *Brave New World* where the slaves do not even know they are slaves and the miserable have lost the power to recognize or name their misery, but it is quite good enough, and it serves well as an introduction to the Burgess canon. Set in England some time in the future, written only partly in English and partly in a language devised by Burgess for the occasion, it is the story of a young thief-rapist-murderer who is betrayed to the police by one of his comrades, jailed, treated by doctors and cured

The Hollins Critic

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at once of his criminal tendencies and of all his humanity. The effect of the book is made no less dour by the ending that restores Alex to his old, vicious, music-loving self. He is set loose to kill again, to mug old men for the fun of it, except now he will be sheltered by the government because the matter of his chemical brain washing has become a political *cause célèbre*. We leave him listening to Beethoven, speaking his own curious lingo, thinking his salacious thoughts.

At the other end of Burgess' range is his first written — though not first published — novel, and not one of his strongest, *A Vision of Battlements*. This is a mundane story of a soldier's life in the relatively safe precincts of Gibraltar. The book is, as one might expect, generally and in some way specifically autobiographical. The hero, Richard Ennis, is a composer — as is Burgess — and Burgess tells us in a preface to the American edition that he spent three years of his own army service on Gibraltar, and that the writing of *Battlements* was in part an effort to exorcise the pain and loneliness that he suffered there. The lines along which the narrative develops are of no consequence: there is a little sex, a little violence, a good deal of satirical writing about army life and army types. But the book does display in at least a rudimentary form Burgess' gloomy, tolerant and comic view of the human condition, his love of words and his gift for them, his extravagant sense of image and of plot. Thus, as different as the two books are, in their basic technical achievements and their primary philosophical thrusts, *Battlements* and *Clockwork Orange* fit the same mould.

The backgrounds for Burgess' sad conclusions, at least insofar as they are developed in his fiction, seem most fully apparent in the Malayan trilogy, *The Long Day Wanes*. Here the collision between East and West, the follies that inform both cultures—themes that Burgess has touched on in earlier novels such as *The Right to an Answer* and *Devil of a State*—are developed in some depth. The main character of the trilogy is Victor Crabbe, though whether Burgess knew this when he began the manuscript or whether, indeed, he knew he was working on a trilogy, the internal evidence of the novels does not show. It is easy to get the feeling, reading his fiction, that prolific as Burgess is, his creative life is a hand to mouth

affair. For him, there may really be a Muse, and one can imagine him sitting down to work in the morning having no notion of where he is going, sublimely content to follow in any direction that his mind might lead. Usually, his mind leads well, and even in moments of weak motivation and flawed structure, Burgess can rely on his wit and his extraordinary sense of language to see him through. Let the characters start talking and something will turn up, he seems to tell himself, and so sharp is his ear for the patterns of speaking, so keen is his perception of the way words operate, that sure enough, something does.

The Long Day begins with conversation, and in the opening paragraph one of the minor characters offers a statement of theme. "East? They wouldn't know the bloody East if they saw it. Not if you was to hand it to them on a plate would they know it was the East." This is Police-Lieutenant Flaherty speaking into the despairing depths of Nabby Adams' hangover, and Adams comes close to being the focal point of the trilogy's first book. But Burgess recovers in time to get rid of Adams by allowing him to win a lottery, and from then the action centers on the dissolution of the empire seen through the eyes and in the person of Crabbe. He is thinking of the money that he needs and the wife he would like to be free of when he asks himself, "Was it for this that the Crusades had been fought and Aquinas had tamed the Aristotelian beast into a *Summa*?" But the question makes its historical point all the same, and for serious readers of Burgess it survives to echo around the periphery of all his novels, a refrain that tempers the comic and deepens Burgess' sense of the absurd. Was it to produce a race of sterile bureaucrats that we achieved our past glories? Was it for the sake of Pop culture that our ancestors lived their lives and died their deaths? Or, closer to home, was it only to capitulate in ignominy that Victoria's emissaries carved out the empire so many years ago?

One of the points that Burgess makes is that humanity is all of a piece. And if, as he sets forth, Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims have a claim to truth and virtue equal to that of the Christian, then they must also accept the same taint of evil. It is not only in the West that institutions and morality are failing. Among the Malays too there are murder and arson and rape and adulterous wives and disrespectful children. At the end of *The Long Day*, Crabbe dies in a way that makes sense only in terms of its studied insignificance. There is the usual Burgess contrivance, a kind of stacking of the deck that is fast becoming a hallmark of contemporary English fiction. Before the opening of the trilogy, Crabbe's first wife has died in an automobile accident with Crabbe behind the wheel. For a long time, Crabbe would not drive again, and he has carried through all the subsequent years a burden compounded of senses of guilt and loss. To a substantial degree, his love for his first wife corrupted his second marriage. Now, deep in the bush, where he has been sent to investigate the murder of another official, he meets, in the person of a newly arrived Englishman, his first wife's lover.

For the full duration of what he had thought to be a happy marriage, Crabbe had never suspected. With his old sense of guilt reborn, and carrying the new burden of his wife's infidelity, he limps toward the river—Burgess will not eschew comedy: Crabbe has been stung on the foot by a scorpion—and falls in. His body is never recovered. He is gone, and his adversary, the other man in his first marriage, stays: Costard remains, half drunk in his living room, cursing a fate that should

The Shoes

She realized, because she was buying shoes,
That she had feet.

Madam, the salesman said
With some embarrassment, where are your hose?
And the rest of your clothes?

For she was nude.
It's natural, she ventured. But to all that,
He was far more alert than she. Then seeing
The fact herself—no gloves, no dress, no hat—
She felt incredible.

What grounds had she for Being?

She thought about it all the afternoon
As she clocked the pavement in her new spike heels,
But not once noticed that the town was strewn
With cast-off clothing—old catalogues of styles

In the gutter, and in the street shoe after shoe
Walking along with nobody inside.

At his doorway, trapped in that worldwide déjà-vu,
The salesman knelt from habit and, babbling, died
As shoes climbed out of boxes, down from the shelves
And went off on expeditions by themselves.

—STEPHEN MOONEY

have brought Crabbe on the scene to revive wretched memories and spoil the start of this new tour of duty. But his voice is puny against the immensity of the jungle. Bereavement is not much different from death, and neither signifies. Man waxes and fades: acts, when they are performed at all, degenerate into meaninglessness. Nothing counts.

And the absurdity persists when the roles are reversed. Mr. Raj, in *The Right to an Answer*, perpetual scholar from Ceylon, comes to England with Denham, the expatriate business man home on leave, frequents Denham's haunts, moves in with Denham's father. If the mistake of Western man has been that he tried to impose his own customs on an unwilling Eastern society, Mr. Raj, at least, has something of his own to answer for. He displays a tenacious selfishness that knows no bounds, but which is masked by a veil of quaint and politely enunciated English. He lives only to gratify the sensual appetites, and in pursuit of this end, he brings his own kind of drinking and fighting into the pubs and his own kind of courtship to the women and his own kind of food and medicine and magic into the house of Denham's father. Here as in the East, the end of the story is death, for the elder Denham, for one of the women, for Raj himself, but death unmourned, death without significance.

In Burgess' work, there is almost never actual sorrow, and this is right, because an absurd world cannot be tragic. On the other hand, there is, in his novels, a sense of longing, a lingering wish to regain those things which seem forever lost. *Tremor of Intent* is a spy novel, squarely in the tradition, which is to say that it is full of lush sex and fine food and drink and other extravagant satieties. In their youths, Hillier and Roper were students at a Catholic boarding school, fellow sufferers under Father Byrne who lectured the boys on sex after lights were out in the dormitory. Now, many years and a World War later, Hillier is a secret agent about to retire; Roper is a scientist who has defected to the Communists. Hillier's last assignment: to snatch Roper from behind the Iron Curtain and return him to the West.

This kind of book has a built-in safety factor: when it is done properly, it satirizes itself. Surprises made surprising enough, contrivances made sufficiently outrageous become a part of the comic treatment, and Burgess is never reluctant to turn his imagination loose. Under the guise of adding spice to the performance—"Now pain," she said—an Indian beauty injects Hillier with truth serum while they are making love. The toothless steward on the ship, his appearance enhanced by expertly wrought dentures, turns out to be the killer hired to make Hillier's retirement permanently silent. And after the traditional preexecution talk, Roper and Hillier are saved by a boy who is playing spy. Such is the surface of *Intent*, but on a deeper level it produces something more.

At the end of the book, Hillier has indeed retired—or rather changed professions: he has moved to Ireland and become a priest. But his dogma is not orthodox and his call to his vocation has not, apparently, been totally clear. He yearns for a view of life, generally held, that does not stop at the borders of the physical; even more he seeks a society of committed people, a culture where neutralists no longer reign. "If we're going to save the world," he says, "we shall have to use unorthodox doctrines as well as unorthodox methods. Don't you think we'd all rather see devil-worship than bland neutrality?" This is Manicheanism as Burgess and his characters recognize, but the point he is making is not theological in a narrow sense. We have lost our impulse to purposeful struggle, because we have allowed our vision to diminish. Those who are not disinterested are likely to be merely partisans: at best we see our struggles as between palpable good and evil: Burgess is seeking a metaphysical motive for action, a commitment based on a transcendent view.

In *Enderby*, he continues the search, but not at once. A first version of the novel, published in England in 1963, was called *Inside Mr. Enderby*, and though it was funny—as Burgess is always funny—it seemed at the outset to be little more than a brilliantly extended joke. Enderby is a poet whose habit is to compose in the bathroom, his cogitations accompanied by the ruder exhortations of his lower tract. Lured out of his water closet, he makes a bad marriage, has the plot of his *magnum opus* stolen, escapes from his wife but loses his money, and tries finally to take enough aspirin to kill himself.

Again, Burgess demonstrates that if he pursues the humorous long enough, something serious will develop. Here, he has worked back to the situation of *A Clockwork Orange*, but his treatment of it in *Enderby* is at once mellower and more frightening. Enderby is given no injections to change his chemistry and reconstruct his psyche; no agonizing sickness sets in when he confronts beauty or

- TIME FOR A TIGER
London: Heinemann, 1956. 13/6.
- THE ENEMY IN THE BLANKET
London: Heinemann, 1958. 15/.
- BEDS IN THE EAST
London: Heinemann, 1959. 15/.
- THE RIGHT TO AN ANSWER
London: Heinemann, 1960. 16/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1962. \$4.50.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60. (pa.)
- THE DOCTOR IS SICK
London: Heinemann, 1960. 16/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1966. \$4.50.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60. (pa.)
- DEVIL OF A STATE
London: Heinemann, 1961. 16/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1962. \$4.50.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60 (pa.)
- THE WORM AND THE RING
London: Heinemann, 1961. 16/.
- A CLOCKWORK ORANGE
London: Heinemann, 1962. 16/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1963. \$1.25. (pa.)
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60 (pa.)
London: Pan Books, 1964. 3/6. (pa.)
- THE WANTING SEED
London: Heinemann, 1962. 18/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1963. \$4.95.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60. (pa.)

Books by Anthony Burgess

- HONEY FOR THE BEARS
London: Heinemann, 1963. 2/.
London: Pan Books, 3/6. (pa.)
New York: W. W. Norton, 1964. \$3.95.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60. (pa.)
- THE NOVEL TODAY
London: Longmans, Green, 1963.
- NOVEL NOW
New York: W. W. Norton, 1967. \$5.00.
- INSIDE MR. ENDERBY (pseud. Joseph Kell)
London: Heinemann, 1963. 11/.
Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 4/. (pa.)
- LANGUAGE MADE PLAIN
London: English University Press, 1964. 21/.
New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. \$3.95.
- NOTHING LIKE THE SUN
London: Heinemann, 1964. 2/.
Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 4/6. (pa.)
New York: W. W. Norton, 1964. \$4.50.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60. (pa.)
- MALAYAN TRILOGY
London: Pan Books, 1964. 7/6. (pa.)
- ONE HAND CLAPPING
London: Peter Davies, 1964. 18/.
- EVE OF ST. VENUS
London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1964. 15/.
- HERE COMES EVERYBODY (As introduction to Joyce)
London: Faber & Faber, 1965. 30/.
- RE JOYCE
New York: W. W. Norton, 1968. \$1.95. (pa.)
New York: Ballantine Books, 1968. \$95. (pa.)
- A VISION OF BATTLEMENTS
London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1965. 25/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1966. \$4.50.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$60. (pa.)
- TREMOR OF INTENT
London: Heinemann, 1966. 21/.
New York: W. W. Norton, 1966. \$4.95.
New York: W. W. Norton, \$1.65. (pa.)
New York: Ballantine Books, 1967. \$75. (pa.)
- THE LONG DAY WANES
New York: W. W. Norton, 1966. \$4.95.
New York: Ballantine Books, \$95. (pa.)
- ENDERBY
New York: W. W. Norton, 1968. \$5.95.
- A CLOCKWORK ORANGE & HONEY FOR THE BEARS
New York: Modern Library Books, 1968. \$2.45.
Edited by Anthony Burgess
- A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR, (ed.)
Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966. \$95. (pa.)
Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966. 5/. (pa.)
- A SHORTER *FINNEGANS WAKE*, (ed.)
London: Falber & Faber, 1966. 15/.

—C. D. E.

remembers his old ways. But Alex suffered in the maybe-land of the future, and Enderby lives and endures his agonies in a present that is all too real. An erring soul may escape from the wife who wants to reform him, but he is helpless in the hands of Leviathan. Having failed at suicide, Enderby is admonished by the totally non-brutal police and given a new identity by the state psychiatrists. He is no longer Enderby, the poet, but a bar tender named Piggy Hogg. So ends the first volume and so stood the book for five years.

But now we have the second volume and in it the inevitable journey to the East. Restored once more to his Muse, accused falsely of murder, Enderby escapes to North Africa with actual murder in his heart. But when he finds Rawcliffe, he discovers that his old enemy is sick and on the verge of natural death. There is nothing much funny about a dying man, particularly one who is spitting blood and cursing in pain and having trouble with his bowels. The tone of the book changes

from extravagance to understatement. Rawcliffe's death agony is muffled somehow as if it were masked by the opium and brandy that he takes. Enderby's acts of kindness are performed at a distance: we fail to see the red of the blood or to smell the foulness. A pair of homosexuals—Rawcliffe's loveless wives—stand around and wait. The doctor comes, demanding his fee. Death is in the house, but there is no feel of death in the novel.

I have said already that dying in Burgess' work—which has heretofore been mostly by violent means—is never sad, but *Enderby* moves me to go one step further. The truth is, death does not really exist. Those are not corpses that litter his books: they are actors who have not yet recovered themselves from their comic pratfalls. They tumble from cliffs with surprised looks on their faces, they groan in their caskets, they bleed sometimes, but nobody looks back at them and nobody cares. One reason is that death restores us all to a kind of dignity, and dignity is

the one thing Burgess' essentially humorous characters are not allowed to have.

But the paradox is even deeper. Beneath all the action that fills Burgess' novels, the sex and the violence, the thefts and intrigues, the travels by all kinds of conveyance, the drunkenness and the cannibalism and the sodomy, and the smoking of innumerable cigarettes: beneath this surface of continual motion, the recurring theme is man's inability to act at all. Enderby's existence is significant mainly as that of the surrogate, the role filler, the substitute in life, and here Burgess names the illness he has been searching for in his fables of East and West. Enderby is Burgess' very specialized Everyman, who even as poet exists in a kind of limbo. Some of his work is polished and published, but more of it is left unfinished to gather dust in the seldom used bathtub: or it is plagiarized to be rewritten for a science fiction movie: or it is stolen to be inexpertly mouthed by a pop singer who claims it for his own.

At the very end of the book, Enderby almost manages an involvement of the affections, but not quite. His capacity for devotion remains stunted. "You can't be blamed," the girl tells him, "if you've opted to live without love." But in fact, no choice has been exercised: Enderby is incapable even of sex. He has been made a eunuch by his fidelity to his poetry, indifferent as it is. His marriage was never consummated, and later, when he had finally got himself into bed with a woman and was properly engaged in the act, he jumped up to write a poem before the deed was finished. As was the case when he served as nurse to Rawcliffe, some coldness prevents ultimate fulfilment. Enderby is lured away by the call of his imperfect art.

This is, of course, familiar material, and it is subject to a more conventional interpretation. Burgess is a careful student of Joyce, and he is as familiar as anybody else with the rejections Stephen Dedalus made for the sake of his writing. Well and good, but one of the keys to any novel is that of character, and Enderby is simply not the man to bring serious rejections off. He is an outsider, all right, but one who has merely drifted there. No wild angel has appeared to him demanding that he throw open the gates of all the ways of ecstasy and glory. His soul has never declared its intention to recreate life out of life. His exile has been spent in the bathroom, and he has come reluctantly out of it, a chap with a little decency left and a little talent who resumes his tepid progress through the world. As Rawcliffe's heir, he inherits Rawcliffe's vast collection of pornography, and sensible citizen of our age that he is, he keeps what seems to him suitable, but sells what is perverted or tinged with impiety. His poems, and many of them are given in the book, are drab, and his mind is filled not with deep thoughts or aesthetic theory or even with considerations of technique. Rather, there are only his desire to write and his peripheral agitations that issue into comedy.

In the interval between the first and second halves of *Enderby*, Burgess wrote a novel about Shakespeare. *Nothing Like the Sun* is, as most of its reviewers described it, a *tour de force*. It is difficult to write convincingly about the distant past, and little is known of that vast creative mystery that was WS. Most of us believe that he existed, but at this separation from him and under our reduced spiritual circumstances, we cannot know what fires burned in his head and heart. Nor can Burgess, and so the book, in many of its aspects, has a quality of artificiality that is foreign to his other work. But a sense does come through of the wholeness of the character

Anthony Burgess

Born on February 25, 1917, in Manchester, England, John Anthony Burgess Wilson received his B.A. degree with honors from Manchester University. Mr. Burgess was a full time lecturer for the Central Advisory Council for Adult Education in the Forces, lectured in phonetics for the Ministry of Education, and served as education officer in the Colonial Service. Both a performer and composer of music, Mr. Burgess did not turn to novel writing until he was almost forty. One of his numerous books, *Devil of a State* (1961), written under the pseudonym Joseph Kell, was designated a Book Society Choice. Mr. Burgess has contributed to journals and newspapers in England, America, and Japan. He is married and has no children.

—LEILA M. DAVIS

Let It Ring

On fifty feet of tense extension cord
You and a phone vanish behind a stair,
As under a shower, while his fondness poured
Liquids I couldn't hear. Talced, fresh and fair

You reappear—the drained receiver lolls
On its curved spine, his near extinguished moan
Thrashes to life under your tongue, then fails
And is obliterated by the dial tone.

"I'm going, he's running one of his suicidals."
I shrug my way across to your bookshelf.
You say softly from your caressing towels,
"Nobody loves anybody ever, enough."

Crane Brinton's *History of Western Morals*
Begs like a phone book to be torn in half.

—ROBERT BAGG

and of his time, of Shakespeare's lusty appetites and his limitless gifts that allowed him to live fully and to turn his agonies and his affections into fuel for his sonnets and his plays. As I read the Burgess canon, WS is the proper foil for Enderby. He represents the lost country, but neither Enderby nor most of Burgess' other characters dare look back.

The exception is Hillier in *Tremor*, and his induction into the priesthood generates a romanticism scarcely softened by his heresy and one that Burgess usually avoids. Yet, as an apostate Catholic, Burgess remembers the comforts of his faith. "It is with no indifferent eye," he wrote recently, "that I view the flood of worshippers pouring into the Catholic church at the corner of my street. I want to be one of them, but wanting is not enough. The position of standing on the periphery is one that I share with many men of good will; the state of being a lapsed Catholic is so painful that it sometimes seems to generate a positive charge, as though it had in itself a certain religious validity. Perhaps some of the prayers that go for the souls in purgatory might occasionally be used for us. Those souls at least know where they are. We don't. I don't."

An extrapolation of this position is the key to Burgess' novels. What matters is not that we are threatened with extinction—caught as we are between the bomb and Malthusian disaster. Burgess is not finally interested in the flesh, and this is why he can write such a novel as *The Wanting Seed*, an outrageous bit of fantasy in which the world finds itself on the brink of starvation and governments fight back by encouraging homosexuality and outlawing conception and promoting wars to reduce the population. Burgess may be the only man alive who can make wholesale cannibalism not only inoffensive, but downright funny, and a part of the reason that he can do this is that he does not take a very serious view of the simple mortality of man. Indeed, physical danger, carnal sin are treated sometimes as if they had no reality at all.

In *The Doctor is Sick*, a philologist escapes from his hospital bed where he is awaiting brain surgery and makes his way through the London underworld by luck and by wit. He falls into the hands of thieves and murderers and deviates; he resorts to stealing and acts of duplicity; his courage grows to meet increasing dangers; he goes on television, runs from policemen, throws away a dedicated masochist's set of whips. Or does he? It is all probably just an illusion, a sick man's vision, but no one minds. To revert once more to the paradox I mentioned earlier, the physical world is everything and it is nothing. It is what we have left and we use it violently. We gorge ourselves on the sensuous pleasures, we pursue danger, we laugh at death. But always Burgess is telling us, it does not matter. What is important is the vestigial sense of decency, the recollection of that country we yearn for but cannot return to, the modicum of virtue which in one way or another all of Burgess' heroes share.

The beauty is in being alive, regardless of the limitations. Even when his fortunes are lowest, Enderby is an appealing and comic character, an activist against his will, but one who is willing to make the best of it. Disguised as an Arab, his face darkened with shoe polish, he begs his bread and avoids arrest and searches for the man he means to kill. Later, when he disposes of Rawcliffe's body there is a moment of piquant beauty. According to the dead man's wish, Enderby wraps the

Madman In The Sestet

"He eased into my coffeesulk at Bicks
As though I were a warm piranha river—
Not like a suicide, more like a lover
Courts brutal fingernails to get his kicks.
Scenes from your sex life ripped him to the bone,
Your each new lay procured a glowing torpor
Swirling through his finger ends. Pouring sugar,
He drowned his coffee in one crumbling dune."

"With bare feet once he smashed my door, this tight
Clenched face my palms unscrunchd. He left less hope-
Less, but then climbed my roof, pried the skylight
Up, over my tub, (me all slimed with soap)
Chinning himself down in, till the water sprawled,
Reaching to flush the john fast as it filled."

—ROBERT BACC

corpse in a flag and drops it from a plane down through the glittering sunlight, into the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. Life and even death are worth the candle, Burgess tells us, even in the midst of dissolution. What we do is worth doing, no matter how reduced our modern state.

—WALTER SULLIVAN



SECOND CLASS
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