

The Topography of Anthony Burgess

by Liana Burgess

I started with **The Doctor is Sick** (*Le docteur est malade*) because the book has just been published, translated into French for the first time, (ChercheMidi, 2001) and

Earthly Powers

because a new edition with a new introduction by Gilbert Adair has just been published by Penguin (London, 2001)

[Earthly powers](#)

[The Doctor is Sick](#)

[The Right to an Answer](#)

EARTHLY POWERS: Hutchinson 1980

MALTA

Lija (page 9) :

And he [Ali] opened the heavy door which led straight into the airy upper salon. At my age I could, can, take any fierce amount of light and heat, and both these properties of the South roared in, like a Rossini finale in stereophony, from the open and unshuttered casements. To the right were the housetops and gaudy washing of Lija, a passing bus, quarrelling children; to the left, beyond crystal and statuary and the upper terrace, the hiss and pump hum came up of the irrigation of my orange and lemon trees.

The Quirky Striking Of The Hours (page 42) :

The electric mosquito repellents whirred and clicked and puffed, and public clocks all over the island announced in imperfect unison the full hour or the part hour and, as an exordium to the part hour, the full hour that had already been completed.

Smells (page 71) :

The smells of that time, the smell of that time. I have always cherished the smells of places and eras. Singapore - hot dishrags and catpiss. Moscow - builder's size and the unflushed stools of the smokers of cheap cigars. Dublin - roasting coffee which turns out to be roasting barley.

PARIS

We used to stay there. (Laffont, the French publisher was in the same square mentioned hereunder)

(page 98) :

The crippled cabdriver found with difficulty the little Hotel Récamier, which hid in a corner near the huge porticoed church of Saint-Sulpice.

HOLLYWOOD (page 346) :

Carlo looked as at the world of fallen man on the endless suburbs that passed for a city, an eatery in the likeness of a Sphinx (enter between its forepaws), another, for jumbo malts so thick you can't suck 'em through a straw, in the form of an elephant crouched as at the bidding of its mahout, gimcrack temples of various faiths, attap roofs of nutbutger stands with Corinthian columns, loans loans loans, stores crammed with cutprice radios, a doughnuttery, homes like Swiss chalets, like Bavarian castles, miniature Blenheims, Strawberry Hills, Taj Mahals, a bank in the form of a tiny ocean liner, dusty trees on the boulevards (datepalm, orange, oleander), bars with neon bottles endlessly pouring, colleges for stuntmen, beauticians, morticians, degrees in drummajoretteship.

LIVERPOOL (page 463) :

" I thought of Liverpool, that's where it all began. Frazer who wrote *The Golden Bough* was professor there. But there's more work been going on in the States. Chicago, perhaps. "

NEW YORK (page 470) :

When we arrived at New York I went, straight after clearing customs, to the Algonquin Hotel. I would not claim as of right a room in my own flat, since Hortense must now regard it as hers. After a couple of whisky sours in the Blue Bar I walked up Fifth Avenue. The September heat was intense and the air was all woollen shirts aboil. The town was full of jumbo steaks and ice cream, the shops pleaded that we buy useless gadgets. This was not Europe. This was very far from being Europe. Victory in Europe and Asia confirmed the excellence of the American way of life. Strong appetite and inviolable health. The afternoon sun was higher here than in any town of Europe, forced upwards by the skyscrapers. The place was rife with life.

The Plaza, Manhattan (page 286) ;

In spring Manhattan I put up at the Plaza. Central Park a glorious froth of green, flowering cullens and bryants, thanatopsis.

ROME, Giordano Bruno (page 632) :

After dinner I stood in the Campo dei Fiori, looking up at the statue of Giordano Bruno, the Nolan as Jim Joyce had called him. He had been chased all over Europe for teaching the heresy that soul or spirit cannot exist apart from matter, that dissension and contradiction between the elements of the multifarious universe are to be welcomed and blessed since they justify the existence of God as the only reconciler and unifier.

□

THE DOCTOR IS SICK

(*Le Docteur est Malade* : Cherche Midi 2001)

LONDON (pages 19-20) :

Outside, the main doors behind him, he was hit full in the chest by autumn. The doggy wind leapt about him and nipped; leaves skirred along the pavement, the scrape of the ferrules of sticks; melancholy, that tetrasyllable, sat on a plinth in the middle of the square. English autumn, and the whistling tiny souls of the dead round the war memorial.

Sunday In London (page 20) :

He crossed a street of Sunday autumn strollers. turned a corner and came straight to the heartening facade of a tube station.

London Autumn (page 32) :

She danced up and down again; the leaves, like kittens, danced around her.

London Autumn II (page 79) :

The window opened gently and a still Autumn night entered cat-like. Edwin smelt freedom and London autumn – decay, smoke, cold, motor oil.

High Street (page 81) :

He walked down the side street to a wide thoroughfare of shop-windows and offices. This, he assumed, was one of the main arteries of London, a city he did not know very well. There were sodium street-lights, lights in windows. Occasional cars sped by. There was even an airline bus crammed with yawning passengers. Edwin saw himself reflected in a window full of tape-recorders.

Central London (pages 91-92) :

He was already tired by the time he got to Tottenham Court Road. The traffic confused him and made him sweat – as good as a pullover. Oxford Street, Bond Street, an anonymous right turn,

Berkely Square. Bandbox Mayfair was all about him.

The London office of the International Council for University Development was in Queen Street. Edwin hesitated outside, adjusting his cap, tightening the knot of his tie, smoothing his pyjama collar. The portals, a naked sculptural group above them emblematic of the Tutorial System, were designed to intimidate. The doors were all glass and hence appeared to be ever-open ; this again must be emblematic of something.

Early Evening (page 111) :

Closing-time and the prosaic street; a dull afternoon, broody with rain to come.

Soho (page 170) :

" The Soho Square end of Greek Street, " he told the driver. That seemed a reasonable sort of starting-point. Edwin, so much himself a sham, felt a sort of kinship with the sham pleasures of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street as they travelled painfully towards Soho. When Cross and Blackwell glowed on their left the driver said: " This do, guv? " The square was a mess of cars, parked and crawling. Edwin paid him but meagrely tipped him, then he walked into Greek Street.□

□

THE RIGHT TO AN ANSWER

□: The Norton Library 1978 original 1960

...a rather large smug Midland city. (p.4)

The Black Swan stood in a pocket of decaying village, the dirty speck round which the pearly suburb had woven itself. The village had shrunk to less than an acre. It was like a tiny reservation for aborigines. From the filthy windows imbeciles leered down at the weed-patches ; cocks crowed all day ; little girls in pinafores of an earlier age shnockled over stained half-eaten apples ; all the boys seemed to have cleft paletes. Still, it seemed to me far healthier than the surrounding suburb. Who shall describe their glory, those semi-detacheds with the pebble-dash all over the blind-end walls, the tiny gates which you could step over, the god-wottery in the toy gardens ? The wind cut through the spaces between, the wind of the old hill buried in macadam, striking like the edge of a wet towel. It stirred up a grey broth over the red roofs and, swirling in the soup, was the alphabet pasta of the television aerials –X,Y,H,T... (pages 7-8)

We went out silently, leaving ash on the carpet and a hot yellow cave in the fireplace, the barometer banging against the wall as the wet suburban air blew in....We turned into Clutterbuck Avenue, passing the letter-box that spoke of a bigger world, walked against the drizzle wheezing slightly, for it was a slight climb (it was queer to reflect that Clutterbuck Avenue was really a hill) , then turned sharp right to a cobbled path which led to the old village. The old village accosted us like prostitute as we turned the next corner. Then came the Black Swan or Mucky Duck, a Flayer's ace. (p.9)

§
Ted, I noted, was very busy -at the pumps, at the glasses behind, the bottles below, the merrily ringing till, like a percussion-player in some modern work who dashes with confidence from xylophone to glockenspiel to triangle to wind-machine to big drum to tambourine. (p.12)

§
The stretto of the Saturday night fugue was coming.

§

She was an appetising woman with a full-cheeked smile, about thirty, a Nordic blonde but not icy, though ice was suggested in its tamed winter-sport aspects : the flush after skating, log-fires and hot rum and butter, fine heavy thighs, that would warm your hand like a muff, under a skirt that had swirled in a rink waltz. Her beaver lamb coat was thrust back from a green suit : solid charms, thoroughly wholesome, were indicated. (p.9)

But it is recognised in England that home drinking is no real pleasure. We pray in a church and booze in a pub : profoundly sacerdotal at heart, we need a host in both places to preside over us. In Catholic churches as in continental bars the host is there all the time. But the Church of England kicked out the Real Presence and the licensing laws gave the landlord a terrible sacramental power. Ted was giving me grace of his own free will, holding back death – which is closing time – making a lordly grant of extra life. (p.18)

§

The voice like a slack bass string.

§

'Please, please,' said Veronica, in a breaking E-string voice. (p.20)

§

There was a distant cats' concert ; with a thrashing screw the half-moon sailed the turbulent sea-sky.

§

...The slack 'cello C-string boomed through the suburban night. (pages 28-29)

§

There was another light, and then another, making a full common chord of suburban light. (p.31)

He clomped back clumsily over the gate and up the crazy-paving to his front door. A woman's voice, a voice that sounded as if it were in curlers, said, ' What is it, Charlie ?'

Then, having set my course by the moon, I went home in a fine forked-lightening pattern. (p.32)

Only when, for a late breakfast, I shuffled out some Frostflakes on to a soup-plate, the wind whipping under the kitchen door like a snake, did the name Winter come. (p.33)

Stamping around, waiting, I cursed England aloud, hands dug deep into pockets, dancing to the wind that knocked in vain at the Sunday shops. Cigarette-packets, football fixtures, bus-tickets sailed by in dust-ghosts of Saturday. A woman with a puce face and a blancmange-coloured prayer-book was waiting also for The Priest and Pig, and she looked puce disapproval at me. Twenty minutes late, the bus yawned in from town, near-empty, and it swallowed us in a gape of Sunday ennui. So we sundayed along, rattling and creaking in Sunday hollowness, I upstairs, tearing my elevenpenny ticket while I read the prospectus of Winter Commercial Classes stuck on the window.

I watched the grey villages limp by, the wind tearing at torn posters of long-done events. What I needed, of course, was a drink.

...when I went out I tried to push the door instead of pulling it. " Pull it, mate, " said someone, and I had to obey. I nearly tripped over a footscraper and, the door closed, had the impression of loud laughter. The vile blunt-razor-blade wind blew hard from my sister's house. I felt ashamed and furious. In the East there was politeness, doors opened the right way, there were no footscrapers. (pages 34-35)

There was a smell of old dog in the hall, an earthy rebuke at least to the blurry misty pictures of dream-dogs on the walls. (p.36)

§

He was fifty-odd, five hanks of hair like an empty bar of music pasted across his baldness, with army spectacles over very pale eyes, eyes that suggested somehow Georgian lyrics.

My father sat deep in the fireside armchair, deep with frowning eyes in the sports page, while his free fingers dabbled absently in the hair of the stinking old dog, as in the water of a canal.

§

His voice suggested damped piano notes - una corda, I think the direction is. (p.37)

The dog looked up through its hairy yashmak and farted. (p.38)

Sunday's nightmare lay far behind – the village lying in a torpor of beef and pudding in the bird-deserted afternoon which was also the grease on plates, the unmade beds ; the evensong bell, the light switched on to shock, with a sort of Monday earnestness, squalor out of what in the tea-tray dusk looked like holiday abandon. (pages 44-45)

The rain eased off, but the streets were greasily wet, rainbowed with oil. I went to the bank for more five-pound notes, stood like a pauper in the public library reading the Christian Science Monitor, then went for the first drinks of the day to a dive-bar popular with merchants. Hungarian refugees waited on at the tables and a West Indian negro collected dirty glasses – we were all exiles together.

I had a sudden longing, like a pain, for the hot smelly East, and remembered that Everett had said something about an Indian restaurant. I asked the barman, a hot-haired Irishman, and he asked one of the business-men (who, I saw now, was a Pakistani) and then was able to tell me that the Calicut Restaurant was on Egg Street, by the Poultry Market. I went there and ate insipid dahl, tough chicken, greasy pappadams, and rice that had congealed to a pudding. The décor was depressing – brown oily wallpaper, a calendar with a Bengali pin-up (buff, deliriously plump, about thirty-eight) – and it was evident that the few Indian students were eating the special curry prepared for the staff. The manager was from Pondicherry : he caled me 'monsieur' and was not impressed by my complaints. At least one of the waiters was from Jamaica. I went out angry and, at a pub where the landlady sniffed in curlers, drank brandy till closing-time. (pages 46-47)

§

Above the street-lamps the great dying northern winter sky boomed like an organ.

§

Obviously my mind had been preparing itself for the entry of Everett, as the orchestra prepares for the entry of the second subject.

(pages 48-49)

'We might as well have a cup of tea,' he said, and we noisily marched over the hollow boards of the glass-covered bridge, down the stairs to Platform Four. We entered the filthy Gothic tea-room and Everett ordered. The serving-woman served us with tired distain ; she treated her customers like a dull and endless film that could only, with order and money , make a very rare stereoscopic contact with her real though duller world. Everett took me to a table and began to talk sadly but eagerly.

He seemed to lose interest in the subject of his daughter, glooming at a yellow card of ancient railway regulations on the wall. But when the harbingers of the coming train were audible – porters trundling, a scrambled gabble from the station announcer, frantic blowing on hot tea – he became eager again and was out swiftly on to the platform. I followed him. The train slid in. I saw the driver look down disdainful from his cosy hell, sharing – like soldier and auxiliary – a mystique with the tea-room woman. Passengers, disillusioned with arrival, got out greyly amid grey steam ; passengers, hungry for the illusion of getting somewhere, jostled their way on.

(pages 50-51-52)

" After all, what bit of money I've made has been made among mosquitoes and sand-flies, snakes in the bedroom, long monotonous damp heat, boredom, exasperation with native clerks. Who are these sweet stay-at-homes, sweet well-contented, to try and suck it out of me and feel aggrieved if they can't have it ? "

(p.59)

Much of this story is a record of what I found happening when I got back – from abroad to England, back from London to my father's suburb – so you won't be greatly interested in what I did on my few days in London. I was staying in a small hotel just off Russell Square, a place

kept by an Italian widow who was normally waiting up for me when I got back at night, ready for a chat over two glasses of cognac, copies of *Il Giorno* spread over the main table of the lounge-breakfast-room. She was very nearly the only woman I spoke to in London during these few days.

The greater part of the time I spent, when I talked at all, talking to men. I liked to take luncheon in some pub or other, sitting on a high stool at the snack-counter, barons of beef, hams, salads and dishes of pickle spread before me, the server in his tall white cap carving with skill. Other male eaters would be wedged against me, champing over newspapers, and there were a peculiar animal content in being among warm silent men, raising glasses in smacking silent toasts to themselves, the automatic 'ah' after the draught, the forkful of red beef and mustard pickle. Sitting with my gin or whisky afterwards I would often manage to get into conversation with some lonely man or other – usually an exile like myself – and the talk would be about the world, air-routes and shipping-lines, drinking-places thousands of miles away. Then I felt happy, felt I had come home, because home to people like me is not a place but all places, all places except the one we happen to be in at the moment.

In the afternoon I would drink in one or other of the two clubs of which I was a member (one was primarily for chess-players, the other for decayed and most loquacious theatricals) or go to see a film. In the evening I would dine – slowly and sumptuously – at Rule's in Maiden Lane. (pages 63-64)

§

The gas-fire sank, sang urgently its hoarse swansong, exploded out.

But we got to erotic Piccadilly after a journey like a sleep, with Imogen and Winterbottom suspiciously checking the stops with the map that was set, like sweet geometrical reason, among the advertisements at strap-hanger's eye-level.

I took them to a large new drinking palace which was no pub, a place with its own grim perpetual daylight. We had to climb to a hall of hushed carpet, full of pink and scientific comfortless chairs. (pages 94-95-96)

The train was ready to move north, nether steam bunching up like effects in a Faust-play, the pistons working up quickly to the vinegar strokes. (p. 106)

§

My father had aged more than my month's absence. He gave, before and on opening the front door, a symphonic cough of welcome, pathetic as the report of ill-usage one's cat will make when one returns to it after a holiday. And, like the cat one has trusted the neighbours to feed, he was thinner.

'They'll be in all our houses,' I said, 'blackies of all colours, before the century's over. The new world belongs to Asia. (p. 113)

Mr Raj had been purely Orientally and fancifully complimentary ('so great a man, his lingam as long and as thick as a tree, the father of whole villages') but this, I must tell him, would not do in a Midland suburb. (p.115)

§

He pressed and pressed Alice Winterbottom's hand in the rhythm of a cat dilating its claws. (p. 119)

§

Then he and I began to walk, arm in arm, towards my father's house, under cold nothern stars that milled like fire-ants, in a night so coldly tense that one felt one could almost pluck it like a violin string. (p.130)

Great splashes of plum and apple adorned the dying sky. (p.135)

Mr Raj saw through the window bare branches, coil after coil of dirty clouds, washing on neighbour lines, forlorn pecking birds, a distant brace of gasometers. (p.141)

I boarded the Koekoek and found it full of Dutchness, a kind of jolly nightmare parody of England. I entered via C DEK and, by the Hofmeester's sodium-lighted office, was met by fair plump men in blue who spoke English so well that, when they returned to Dutch among themselves, one grew afraid as in the presence of Ray Bradbury Martians, clever at quick human disguises. For Dutch, though it looks like a reasonable language, never really sounds like one ; it is, as Gulliver implied, the right tongue for talking horses. (p.153)

'They say the church spire interferes with their bloody television reception,' he said. (p.205)

Passages chosen by Liana Burgess

Notes by Liana Burgess

§ denotes musical similitudes.

The Midland dialect spoken is not so far removed from Shakespearean speech. The barman's name, Ted Arden is a reminder of the family name of Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden.

In Anthony's Shakespeare's lecture in 1973 to his American students in New York he says:

" I knew a man who kept a pub in England, in Oxfordshire, not too far from Warwickshire, called Ted Arden, and he had, this was rather horrifying, he had the Shakespeare face, he had broken teeth and an astonishingly bad accent and he was full of dirty jokes; but he had the Shakespeare face, the kind of fiddle-shaped brows and he swore that the Shakespeare face was the Arden face. The way he said it to me was ' The Shakespeare blood was as poor as piss,' he said, 'but the Arden blood was strong.' This may have been so because we do know that the Shakespeare family has died out where as the Arden is still going strong."