

Of Times and Places

by Liana Burgess

The suggestion of putting together a [collection of places](#) taken from Anthony Burgess's novels I seem to remember came from me towards the end of the 80's (I had just rented a place on the second floor of Rue Grimaldi which was to be our joint office) but Anthony's positive answer was so prompt that it was almost as if he had conveyed to me subliminally the idea of trying the experiment; at the same time I sensed a shadow of reticence, as if he knew that, possible intimation of death apart, making the collection was not going to be as straightforward as that.

A surprise awaited me: the novels I thought would hold a rich harvest, such as **Earthly Powers**, which spans over eighty years and covers Milan, Gorgonzola and Rome in Italy, Chicago, California and New York, Northern and Southern France, London, Malta and Vienna offer instead a very meagre reward in term of images.

Earthly Powers

is packed with characters and action, but there are no more descriptive passages that you would find in one of Shakespeare's historical plays.

As a matter of fact a place was not a simple and unequivocal notion like a postcard: a place proved that it could also be a smell, the smell of a place, or a number of smells, a voice, many voices, an intonation, the phonetic transcription of a character's dialect, like Arry's in **Enderby's** quartet, musical similes, like the ones that crowd

A Vision of Battlements

. Smells, intonation, speech, the slant of a light, all of these things, are places,-- and times as well. If somebody says to me 'Loove' I feel in the vicinity of Manchester and Shakespeare, a town, region, and a century.

Animals can signify places: a house, un foyer, or a country, Malaysia. Sirikit, the Siamese cat of **The Worm and the Ring**

is Lynne's [Anthony's first wife] cat, who adored her and despised Anthony, as Sirikit despises Christopher Howarth and fawns upon Veronica, his wife.

He, it, she, rather since the cat in question is a 'lady' (but always referred to as 'it' by Howarth) is also Bloom's cat and by accurately describing the movements of a cat Anthony eternises, as it were, his own transient reality while paying homage to Jim Joyce, as he pays homage whenever he can with stylistic grace and probability, to Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde. So we see that in **Man from Nazareth** there is a wild man—John the Baptist, yes, but also Oscar and in **Honey for the Bears** when Paul Hussey recovers from his frightening debauch he finds 'by Anna's side of the bed' a scant bunch of sweet williams in a jam-jar.

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The Malacca [cane] with the ivory bulldog's head on which the major-general rests both hands (**Enderby**

, 23) belonged to Anthony's – and very fond of it I was.

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So a place can be an object and vice versa. Or a period, as in Joyce. Because what is, really, Stephen Dedalus' ashplant? A sort of a crozier or crosier (Middle Ages), a historical period, and also a stick whose English name reminds one of repentance, as in Ash Wednesday. (The echo is lost in the Italian Frassino or, even worse, its equivalent, ornello or orniello or "albero della manna, manna tree, Fraxinus ornus" from the medicinal substance drawn from its bark, since it would imply a blessing instead of a penance and 'un rimorso', agenbite of inwit). Otherwise, why should Stephen be the only one who needs a walking stick for going around? Because, I think, he has to atone for the everlasting wound he has inflicted to his dying mother when he refused to kneel down by her bedside, and he has to be reminded, or remind himself, of the agenbite of inwit.

The Doctor is Sick, a slender volume of 261 well-spaced pages (Norton paperback 1971) compared to the 649 of **Earthly Powers**'s crowded ones offers more topographical illustrations. The book was written in Hove, Sussex, in 1959, and the action, taking place in a London where the 'hero' Edwin Spindrift has to move with his wife in order for

the specialists in tropical diseases to diagnose and possibly cure the unknown sickness which ails him, contains, not unnaturally, descriptions of the big town. It's Edwin's London, mainly, but also his wife Sheila's London, when, for instance, we read 'She danced up and down again, the leaves, like kittens, danced around her'. (It's Sirikit reappearing, multiplied. The cat who dotes upon ladies and does not like males all that much, as in Anthony's personal experience, with the Siamese bearing the Catullian name of Lalage.

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As Geoffrey Aggeler writes: 'Spindrift's pursuit of Sheila becomes. . . a search for love, or more precisely the meaning of love, and this is one of the many respects in which it parallels the quest of Leopold Bloom through Dublin. . . **The Doctor is Sick** can be seen as Burgess's own treatment of the major themes of

Ulysses

, for example the extent to which Spindrift's descent from disembodied philology into the world of tangible reality is like the progress of Stephen Dedalus from a world of words, in which he is an acknowledged master, to the world of Leopold Bloom'

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(p.123-24)

NOTES

1 'The Northern dialects,' says AB in his autobiography **Little Wilson and Big God** (p.12 Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1986) 'have a sound – represented phonetically by an inverted m – which serves for both the u in "push" and the "o" in "mother". They are historically right (Shakespeare pronounced "love" like a Lancastrian). . .

2 **Honey for the Bears** , The Norton Library, 1978, p.156. 'Shakespeare,' called Paul. 'Sweet William.' There was a jam-jar with a scant bunch of the flower in it, sitting on the cloth-topped soap-box by Anna's side of the bed.' "For that the furtive ties pronounce auriculous," recited Paul, "and in fat andirons cross and cowslip lay—then foreshore tits wax loud in holdall brew;" There was applause. Feodor started a sort of frog-dance. They were all old Russia after all, God bless them."

3 '**The Complete Enderby**' , Penguin, 1995, (p.2)

4 To his [Howarth's] very small surprise he saw that the cat Sirikit was on the Hearth-rug (he had thought it still to be wolfing in the kitchen) with the look of a cat that had been there for hours. It gave him a straight hostile glare, then extended a leg like a furry drumstick and began to wash it. (pp.19-20)

(From **The Worm and the Ring**)

. . .The cat, aware of tidbits, lifted up a questing paw, tapping Veronica's shin with its brown pad. 'My nylons! Stop that. Here.' The cat sniffed the crumbs in her palm and began to lick. (p.96)

Howarth sat, that night, in the empty house. . .he was left with the clock and the cat for company. . .

The clock kept on marching round the room, stiff and expressionless. The Siamese cat Sirikit yawned, curling its long thin tongue, then stretched up from its hot bed in the hearth. It contemplated the stewpan on the electric cooker, looked contemptuously at the husband of its mistress, then leapt on to the edge of the sink. Pausing there to give its brown face a quick wash, it then thudded on to the top of the cold stove. Placing its right paw in the handle of the stewpan lid, it lifted this off with ease, holding it like a cymbal, then it fished with its left paw in the greasy piscine of the pan, after a tidbit. Howard watched, fascinated. 'Down from there!' he yelled With a cymbal-clatter the cat streaked down, its eyes wide with momentary fear. It crouched under a chair, watching him, questioning his right. It would get him later. (pp.65-66)

5 Geoffrey Aggeler, **Anthony Burgess, The Artist as Novelist**, (The University of Alabama Press, 1979) pp.119-131, *passi*
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Monaco, 31 August 2001