

Language and Loneliness in *Earthly Powers*

by [Martin Phipps](#)

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers*, a novel that abounds in examples of significant coincidence, or what Carl Jung theoretically designated synchronicity. That it should fall on a year in which a pope on the fast-track to sainthood, John Paul II, and a world-famous novelist, Saul Bellow, die within days of each other and so have their earthly careers recapped everywhere in adjacent obituaries—newspapery versions of the novel's twinned lives, so to speak—is a coincidence which I trust the shade of the author is chortling over, between bouts of pointlessly pushing rocks up hills and whatnot, down—or is it up?—in Purgatory (Dante's cosmography is as headachy as an M.C. Escher lithograph). The existence of Purgatory is of course still maintained by the Church that Burgess defected from, which is perhaps not the case with the Rome rendered in *Earthly Powers*, with its “now much impaired eschatology” (*EP*, 20), an allusion to post-Vatican II liberalizing tendencies that threatened to mothball many a medieval, outmoded doctrine. Such tendencies John Paul II, immovably conservative, famously arrested or reversed in most cases. Karol was no Carlo—sad, one ventures to say, to say. But then Bellow was no Toomey, whose novels, referred to in elderly retrospect, sound as embarrassingly medieval and outmoded as any Thomistic treatise; his memoirs, thankfully, are thoroughly modern.

John Paul II was responsible for a less well-known difference between Burgess's fictional Rome and our own real one: he abolished the office of *advocatus diaboli*, or devil's advocate, which means that now no novelist will ever be invited, as Toomey was, to offer alternative truths about, or variant readings of, the life-history of a candidate for sanctity. And thank God for that,

one can almost hear the Vatican mandarins mumble. Because who ever expected a novelist to tell the truth about a person's life? "We lie for a living," Toomey himself points out to the archbishop who brings the invitation (12); stating the facts is the job of biographers (who, however, go by the name of hagiographers when they work for a Church and hacks when work for a Party). Most civilized secularists surely believe, though, that novelists do tell the truth about human lives—just not the approved truth, presented in convenient simplifications serving partisan or dogmatic ends (as when, perhaps, a saintly Polish pope is sung to sleep by uncritical televised encomiums in another instance of what Bellow has called "event glamour"). Novelists like Bellow balk at indoctrinating generalizations, and prefer stories with nuance and complexity—with *detail*
s, the
bane of dogmatists, because the devil is in them. Such writers make natural devil's advocates, because they record the minutiae of individuality, ambiguity, and accident that muddy the purity of official accounts, and their tools, or their weapons, are words. *Earthly Powers*, which recounts two twentieth-century wars, also dramatizes an eternal battle over language, pitting churchly custodians of sacred texts and symbols against writers who insist on unrestricted experiment in the artistic faith that language can reveal truths of its own, if it's allowed to. "We are forced by the very nature of language to generalize"(121),

Carlo argues once, and the platitudinous pontifications and glib aphorisms he offers in the role of Gregory XVII on television—his sound-bite theologizing, so to speak—certainly seem to confirm his point. While he is able to generalize and simplify his message for the benefit of "huge congregations in football stadia and baseball parks"(599), it's a different matter for literary practitioners of "the big subtle stuff crammed with ambiguities"(643), as exemplified by the subjects of the "Joyce Proust Mann course" (642) that an in-law of Toomey teaches, as well as by the works of Jakob Strehler, Burgess's fictional equivalent of these authors. Toomey's own fiction is much like Carlo's religion—a mass product packaged in "comfortingly flaccid language" (300), full of "melodrama, very simple and very crude"(643), the stuff most people need in order to "cope with life"(643), a literary equivalent of popular faith. And yet Toomey's volume of memoirs constitutes something more like the "great and difficult" (301) family saga of Strehler. It's a self-confessed second-rater's autobiography with regret at its core, but it has redemption as its aim—a novelized life written as compensation and amends for a career of lifeless novels, as well as a riposte to critics inner and outer delivered "posthumously, posthumously"(1). It supplies no pat answers to the questions it raises, and it is crammed with detail and hence with devilry—some of it literal, but most of it just hermeneutical—and it seems to live up to what Toomey's novels never could have done, namely the proviso that if language is a writer's sole earthly power, it had better be good.

Turning, now, to the devilish details of the narrative, with its uncanny concurrences and unsettling parallels, we can see a comparatively comic, unmomentous example of them early on, when the eighty-first birthday of Kenneth Toomey, world-renowned author, turns out to be the birthday also of an obscure poet named Scriberras, in the Malta where Toomey is then living. "We had to have him along," Toomey's embarrassed hostess explains, "and he took the wrong turning out of the loo and barged into the kitchen, and there he saw the damned cake.

Then he said how thoughtful and kind and the rest of it. Apparently it's his birthday today as well as yours, and he doesn't know it's yours"(21). The guests, among them a British Council official and the Poet Laureate, conspire to spare the poet the disappointment of finding it's not his anniversary that's being honored, but a drunk blurts the truth, and the poet, whose face was a "smiling moon of delight"(31) as Happy Birthday was sung, defends his right to be fêted: "You make a mistake. It is *my* birthday"(32). His childish reluctance to share the cake and candles is no less naïve and unsophisticated than his responses to the literary talk that previously passes between Toomey and his fellow author, Dawson Wignall, O.M. When Wignall cites the Cambridge School theory of 'stock response' to explain Toomey's teary-eyed reactions to terms like faith and duty, and Toomey's paid companion drunkenly guffaws, Scriberras cries, "It is not to be laughed at"(25); and, as the celebrants drink more and begin to argue over principles, he unabashedly cuts in with his own folksy philosophy, adding, with the firmness of the true believer, "it is also that we do not sneer at duty and at the faith we are taught at home"(30). Certain words, this mediocre versifier evidently comprehends, can be potent and precious, or perhaps sacred would be the term he, as a good Catholic, would apply. His own words, however, he's quite casual about, blurting out a *sonetto* off-handedly and expressing more wonder at the dream that inspired it than at the poem itself. By contrast, Wignall, a highly literate, nominal Anglican, invests all his emotion in his own work, and reacts with a pained howl when it's flippantly recited over dessert. No mere stock response, this, any more than is his sputtering impatience with a remark that the novelist Herman Hesse is "above language" and hence undiminished by translation: "No writer is above language. Each is his own language. ...[I]deas? Damn it, Shakespeare had no ideas worth talking about"(29). He's physically trembling as he says this, his eyes brimming with tears, as Toomey's had been earlier—and all for words, those harmless everyday things that modern literary theory and modern litterateurs like Toomey have supposedly "empt[ied]...of meaning"(459). Toomey himself does not really believe this, of course, and at one point he even uneasily asks Carlo if "language is of diabolic provenance" (121); Carlo answers that it is "one of our trials and sorrows" (121), and the diplomat hosting the birthday party would certainly concur. In vain does he, a professional builder of bridges between cultures and dinner guests by means of blandly tactful talk, try to restore good feeling, and the evening ends on a sour note. Toomey's placement of this episode at the start of his account of Carlo and his Gregorian reforms seems instructive: if a mere party can fall foul over linguistic and literary allegiances in this way, what will happen when the age-old, dug-in dogmas and dialects of the Catholic church get doctored with? What powers has Carlo, with his gambler's recklessness, unleashed?

Scriberras, a minor character in a book that has many of them, nonetheless plays a major role as the embodiment of what's later called "the unformed mentality of childhood" which, spiritually, everyone "want[s] to get back [to]. Faith and loyalty and duty. The church on the hill and the known names in the graveyard.... Faith cannot move forward to new loyalties and duties. We are loyal only to our mothers." Such, at any rate, is the view of an Anglican archbishop, commenting on the cross-cultural, inter-religious dialogue Carlo was in the midst of fostering, but "dear Carlo is wrong"(552), he concludes, and Toomey comes to share the clergyman's misgivings about changing the Church. To de-Latinize the liturgy and adapt the symbols of the Mass to suit local cultures is only to invite the kind of confusing language-lesson Toomey finds

himself forced to give his Muslim servant Ali, who's as jealously protective of his name for God as Scriberras is of his candles and concept of duty:

"Once, Ali, in Catholic churches all over the world, they used the Latin name *Deus*. But now they have what is called the vernacular, since very few ordinary people know Latin. In mosques all over the world they say

Allah

, but in Catholic churches all over the world they use the vernacular. In Serbo-Croat

Bog

, in Finnish

Jumala

, I think, and in Swahili, I know,

Mungu

. Now here in Malta their language is a kind of Arabic, though it uses the alphabet of the Romans. And in Arabic and Maltese the word for God is the same—

Allah

. Is that moderately clear?"

It was clear, he said, but it seemed somehow bad. (19)

Not just badness but real evil—in one of the book's many examples of unintended consequences—results from similarly ill-advised clerical fiddling with cultural intangibles, as Toomey's linguist nephew becomes himself a trope in a gruesome misreading of the Mass. The Eucharist, thanks to the Vatican's new policies, gets interpreted with cannibalistic literalism by an African tribe (680 ff), and Carlo, Toomey feels, must ultimately answer for this death. In this and other instances the papal reforms disclose a dark side, which for Toomey is proof of the blindness of their author. To his mind, the money-making "shaman and showman" (501), whose thrusting ambition flies in the face of the adage from the *Theologica Germanica* that "nothing burns in hell but self will" (cf. Carlo's dogged comment that "will prevails...there is never any failure of [my] will"(382)), derives his relentlessly progressive, almost Panglossian, Pelagianism from his own lights, his own willfulness, and not from the Spirit he is supposed to be serving. His doctrinaire positivism, with its insistence on the goodness of humanity and on the devil as the sole instigator of evil, repeatedly fails to do philosophical justice to the unsavory realities that the novel recounts, and for Toomey, Hortense and other characters who don't share his vision, this misreading of modern history seems inexcusable. Misprision on such a scale—by no less than

the spiritual guide of a universal Church—must have grave repercussions in some form or other, it is implied, and an excerpt from Hobbes's

Leviathan

(whose "Sovereign Powers" is the source of the novel's title) darkly hints of punishable perverters of the truth. There are at work in the world, according to Hobbes, "*a Confederacy of Deceivers, that to obtain dominion over men in this present world, endeavour by dark and erroneous Doctrines to extinguish in them the Light, both by Nature, and of the Gospel; and so to dis-prepare them for the Kingdome of God to come*

"(459). No final conclusion is drawn about who might fit Hobbes's definition of a "Deceiver"—whether irreligious writers and composers whose fripperies corrupt public taste, or renegade churchmen who mislead millions with unfounded spiritual optimism—but Michelangelo's fresco of Christ the Judge dealing out doom appears and reappears throughout the narrative, and only the book's Hollywood hedonists and Hitlerite fanatics are unafraid that their actions might have eternal consequences. Carlo is gambling with his own soul, it is implied, as well as with the soul of his church, and his cardplayer's win-some-lose-some insouciance, given the drastic scale of the stakes, makes Toomey wonder in retrospect whose side his brother-in-law had really been on. In a telling episode, in which he attempts to de-condition a captured Nazi by means of torture (it is more a battle of wills than an exorcism of spirits, but Carlo is convinced of the rightness of his methods) he reaches a moment of breakthrough when the worn-out fascist finally sees through all his political indoctrination to a latent humanity and decency. At this point Carlo confidently dons the hat of a Freudian interpreter of dreams:

One morning Liebeneiner said that he had dreamed he was dead. "Ah. You are, or course, officially dead." "I saw my dead body. It was on a great battlefield. I looked down on my own body and thousands of others. I wept." "You wept for your own body or for all the bodies?" "I don't know. I wept. The bodies were of my comrades dead in battle." "You couldn't see that they were your comrades. They were just the bodies of dead men. And yet they were your comrades." "There were women too. Naked. Everybody was naked. I could not stop weeping. When I woke up my eyes were wet." (487)

At first glance the meaning of this epiphany appears to be as Carlo glosses it: a militant ideologue now sees, on a battlefield he once divided between friends and enemies, only the "comrades" of a common humanity, their lives needlessly wasted in divisiveness. But the dream has another interpretation in the context of the book as a whole. Carlo, a loyal soldier in "the long war" (295) between good and evil, completely certain of how the troops are aligned on the spiritual battlefield of the modern world, nevertheless repeatedly appears to serve the interests of the enemy, most notably when he miraculously heals a child in a hospital who grows up to be a messianic cult leader and mass-murderer. (This figure, Godfrey Manning, later assumes the fugitive alias of Carlton Goodlett, a name that could be taken as an implicit designation of his status as a sort of evil Carlo or anti-Pope—or, perhaps, as a spiritual son of Carlo, who after all has given him new life. In this role, he's as ironically, or diabolically, mismatched with his father as the petty criminal Heinz Strehler is with his father Jakob, the literary master and martyr and author of *Vatertag*.) Carlo himself, as well, admits that his pontificate seems to have been endorsed or even facilitated by a senior devil (588), who may have paved the way for his

preferred candidate by killing a competing cardinal, which raises the possibility that Carlo's pontificate is really a pawn of the wrong powers, and that his reforms are ruinous by infernal design. In the context of these kinds of cosmic-sized ironies, the dream of a battlefield strewn with combatants of unclear allegiance can stand as an emblem of Carlo himself, enigmatic footsoldier in God knows whose army.

Poor troubled Toomey, whose apostasy is pained and problematic throughout the book, and whose mediocre art reflects a mediocre character ill-equipped to confront these outsized teleological imponderables, hopes or prays at the end of the book for a sleep which, alluding to Hamlet's "sleep of death" and probably Egmont's "Süßer Schlaf," seems to be a metaphor for mercy—for compassionate deliverance from the anguish of not knowing the outcome of the clash of the powers that "fierce" Carlo cheerfully engages with, and what side, for good or ill, Toomey himself took in the fight. Did his instinctive shove of Heinrich Himmler out of the path of a bullet, for instance, constitute an unpardonable sin? Did a lifetime frittered away on travel and triviality merit damnation? "Will he let us sleep?" he asks Hortense at the end of the book, and she tries to reassure him by saying that the "one article of faith" (705) remaining to her is that "if we suffer enough [in this life], we'll kindly be allowed to sleep. Christ wrung at least that much out of the father"(519). Toomey, despite his rationalist credentials as a twentieth-century *littérateur*, seems at the end almost a conventional believer, having been forced into his lifelong religious disenfranchisement by a biological mischance, not out of any Faustian bravado. Home and family are what he finally longs for; whatever eternal perdition might await him, there is hell enough in this life, and he tires of it at last: "it's hell being lonely. I've been lonely all my life. When Carlo opted for loneliness I knew what I'd always suspected. That he wasn't, isn't human. It's like opting for hell"(634). Leaving, in old age, "the real fight, the struggle with form and expression, unwon" (4), and leaving also the bigger battle that Carlo fought in to look after itself, he returns to the peace, so to speak, of Battle, his hometown in Sussex, and there he finds family again, in a reunion of sorts with his sister, his brother (long dead, but whose voice on LP is repeatedly said to reproduce the "real presence" of Tom—a way of saying their brotherly bond is a sort of sacrament), and his mother, at least in spirit (it's really Tom portraying her in a comic skit). "Leave well alone, do you hear, Hortense, Kenneth," he mimics in a motherly voice (705), and the advice is not as generically parental as it might at first seem: it had been issued earlier by Wignall the poet, bland Anglican or agnostic (Toomey sees the two terms as virtual synonyms), and comes in the course of a conversation about Catholicism as a religion that unwisely invites confrontation with mysteries that are best left alone. Anglicanism, he says, is a strategic compromise with the supernatural or paranormal, an arms-length acknowledgement of the "damned hairraising" (682) stuff that Carlo embraces—the God ("or something") that "rides upon the storm," as Toomey worriedly quotes (705), and that appears at one point to comically topple a seagoing Anglican bishop (238), as if to chide a heretic. Toomey does not seem unwilling to take the maternal advice and, as an answer to his loneliness if not to his intellectual misgivings, to take some comfort in a nostalgic return to the old, Pre-Carlo rites of Mother Church, as administered by "a young French priest"—a priest speaking, in other words, the language of his mother: "we can even confess in French, I suppose, in the foredawn candles"(703). His approving mention of these objects reminds one of Scriberras the poetaster, a simple soul nourished by simple symbols, and as such not so unlike Toomey in his needy old

age.

When the Anglican archbishop had spoken previously of ultimate loyalty to one's mother, and of how he believed faith could not move forward to loyalties and duties beyond that, he added that "if Carlo can do it, he is exceptional in his loneliness"(552). It seems, on the face of it, a fair judgment, because when motherless Carlo "elect[s] loneliness" (593) and dramatically disowns his friends and family ("I don't want any of you"), he certainly seems to be leaving the world of normal emotional allegiances for some sort of sanctity, or else superhuman folly, but he is not alone in being so alone. Another figure in the book is a match for him in terms of isolation, as well as in the commanding strength of his personality and his militant devotion to principle. This is Jakob Strehler, the great Austrian author who refuses to leave Nazi-occupied Europe and works on in imperturbable solitude, shotgun at the ready (like the line from Eliot, "the trowel in hand, and the gun rather loose in the holster"). He, like Carlo, wars with devils—purely political ones in his case, although there are theological overtones to his battle too. He is translating, after all, a medieval prophecy of the Third Reich, a narrative poem in Latin about an army of rats with swastikas on their ensigns that overruns Austria, lead by a "king rat...called Adolphus" (448). Toomey replies with an appalled "good God" to this, an appropriately theistic exclamation, whether or not he is specifically recalling Carlo in a low moment "see[ing] the devil in the corner of the living room...assum[ing] the guise of a large rat, whose sleek fur and bright teeth [he] admired extravagantly in various languages" (382)—a vision, or visitation, this, which occurred on the night that Carlo learned of his own bastardy, in a foretaste of his final, total loneliness. Strehler, no less isolated a figure as he is lead off to certain death in a concentration camp, sings serenely, despite the SS men surrounding him, in Latin—the same language Carlo uses when in the company of devils. "Strehler's heart was light," Toomey observes, because "he had produced great work which would outlast the Nazis"(453); he was "alive, like Heine and Mendelssohn, and the Nazis are merely the stuff of television movies"(454). He has won, in other words, his war. There is something celebratory, in a eucharistic sense, in the descriptions of his rural sequestration ("the water from my well is like wine"; "I have learned to make bread, more satisfying than the making of novels"(448-9)), and the way in which he and Toomey pass a week, "relaxed and stimulated," in the quiet woods, while vast historical events circle around them, is reminiscent of another long intricate novel whose plot is shaped, like that of *Earthly Powers* , by

metaphysical coincidences and ironies, namely

Doctor Zhivago

by Boris Pasternak. No less than Strehler, Pasternak was a master-novelist who worked on in defiance of totalitarian powers arrayed against him and who now "lives" on through Zhivago in the canon of world literature, while the Soviet Union fades into history. Impending canonization in Carlo's case, on the other hand, is no conclusive proof that he has successfully defeated any evil empire, as he himself seemed to point out to Toomey on the night of the infamous confrontation with the Malayan warlock. "It's a long war," he says, and urges Toomey to content himself, despite the loss of his beloved companion Philip, with life's "small victor[ies]"(295). Indeed, of the two great men in the book, Carlo comes away looking by far the more problematical candidate for sainthood. Strehler, whose work celebrates "the greater glory of life"(301) and has proven salvific power ("the great life-enhancer reconciled me to the world

again,” Toomey says after finishing

Vatertag

), looks like a hero or a martyr of art, and even though when Toomey finds him he is estranged from his wife and uninterested in seeing his son again, he could never be accused of inhumanity in the way that Toomey accuses Carlo after he rejects his family and friends. After all, Strehler’s freely elected loneliness has been in order to create “a great but difficult comic masterpiece as mad and as sane as Rabelais”(301) which, significantly, is about a family—flawed and fallible, but warmly rendered, “loud, quarrelsome, always *sympatisch*

”(301). Strehler’s loneliness has drawn him closer to the meaning of family, the primal human bond, and his Bürgers, like Joyce’s Blooms of Dublin, are proof of it. His book “denies the possibility of progress”(301), depicting a world which is “undemocratic and infested with police spies but is also charming, comic and creative”(300); it magnanimously accepts and upholds, in other words, human nature as it is, on its own terms, rather than seeking to alter or “improve” it, to force it to conform to some imposed model—an impulse which, troublingly, puts well-intentioned Carlo in the same company as the Nazis and Godfrey Manning. There is something humourless and inhumanly earnest about passionate reformers, and a sense of humour may be the chief indicator in the book of the only sort of sanctity that Toomey is prepared to endorse. His brother Tommy, who produces comedy that is of a lesser order than Strehler’s but no less worthy, is repeatedly presented as a possible saint, albeit in Toomey’s qualified, humanistic sense of the term (he’s a “decent man who countered the world’s horrors with an easy humour”(471), “a man who did no harm to anyone, who brought a good deal of harmless pleasure into people’s lives”(421)).

But if by the end of the book Carlo looks considerably diminished after Toomey has stripped away the robes of holiness that the canonizers had been preparing to dress him in (as Hortense had stripped the clothes from St. Ambrose, in her basso-relievo) he is still a sympathetic figure, with his Falstaffian appetites and his very human compassion, on occasion, for his friends. When he rushes to help Toomey in Malaya he seems even noble, and after his failure to save Philip, he still tries to console his distraught brother-in-law, as mentioned, with talk of life’s “small victor[ies].” Toomey, who lacks both Carlo’s faith and Strehler’s imaginative genius, bristles at this appeal to a philosophical largeness of soul, as would most of us, one suspects, given our instinctive preference for certainties and symbols that simplify rather than intensify the mystery of existence: “I made noises of rage, hatred, frustration, loss. ‘Stop that,’ he cried. ‘Rejoice. For God’s sake try to rejoice’”(295).

If some poor, Toomey-like mortal were ever tempted to pick, after the seven hundred pages of Strehlerian complexity or Bellovian abundance that is *Earthly Powers*, a single phrase with which to simplify the meaning or message of its author, that last admonition of Carlo’s might well be it.

Work cited.

Burgess, Anthony. *Earthly Powers*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.