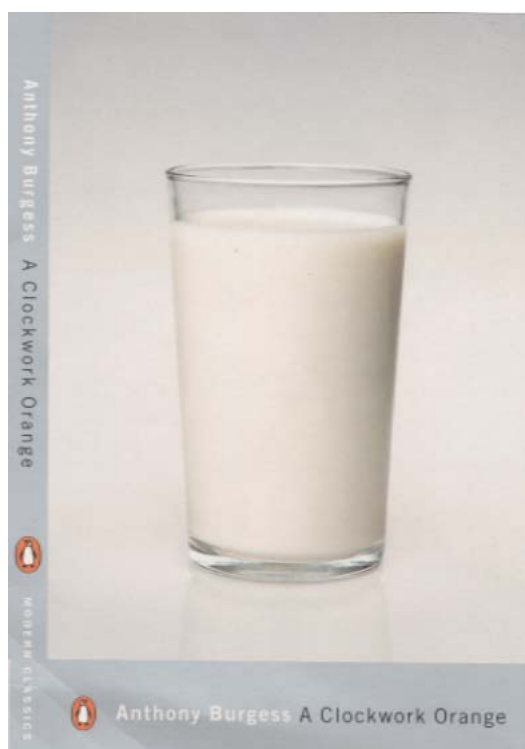


A Glass of Milk

By Liana Burgess



A Clockwork Orange's new cover for the series The Modern Classics published by Penguin displays on one of its two editions a glass of milk against a brilliant silver background.

(Photo Véronique Rolland. Avec l'aimable autorisation des éditions Penguin)

I was sent it last October, together with a number of other covers for the new classic series and I was immediately elated by the variety and the vision of these new presentations of old literary masterpieces: dazzling new images for one's own household titles is, admittedly, nowadays, an extremely rare pleasure. Some brilliant mind and eye was at work and one attributed the miraculous "new, antidumbing-down look" to a rare conjunction of the art, the sales and publicity departments, under the benevolent eye of one or more literary editors. My delusion was shared by the first-class play and comic writer Keith Waterhouse (*Geoffrey Bernard is Unwell*) who thus commented in the

Daily Mail

"Other treats in store are Dylan Thomas's

Under Milk Wood

, Anthony Burgess's

A Clockwork Orange

, Flann O' Brien's

At Swim-Two-Birds

, Colette's

Gigi And the Cat

, three Ronald Firbanks, half a dozen Evelyn Waugh... But who pronounces them classics? I

had imagined a learned panel of the great and the good of English literature. Not at all. The

titles seem to have been selected on a whim, possibly during a good lunch or two, on the basis

that you know a classic when it comes up and grabs your enthusiasm." This outburst follows an

interview released by one of the Publisher's editors to the Literary Editor of the

Independent

. However, be as it may, the image is brilliant and I hope it will be displayed around the

bookshops adequately, albeit this, as yet, does not seem to be the case, even if the film by

Stanley Kubrick, bearing the same title, will be shown in U.K. (which for cinematic purposes

includes, I suppose, Scotland, Wales and the two Irelands), for the first time in thirty years, let

me repeat: thirty years...

I have not been able, until very recently, to locate the person who thought of the milk image and am not even sure of what it stands for. For me, right away, there was no doubt, but when I asked Andrea or Andrew, our son, what was his first associations, his immediate response was: "Drugs". Now, that's the opposite of what I thought, although, literally speaking, Andrew is absolutely correct. I thought "Innocence," right away, and was left very perplexed by Andrew's reaction. I will try to explain why I have not changed my mind since last October.

Alex is fundamentally innocent, that is "politically" innocent, in a way that his drooghi are not, and to support my point I will mention that I remember how pleased Anthony was when Kubrick put a bottle of milk on the doorstep of the cat lady's house and Alex subsequently is blinded by it, when they all come out and his mates fling it in his face before fleeing, thus leaving him behind as the only culprit. If I remember correctly, Anthony, who was sitting next to me at the private show in U.K. before we left for the United States and New York (where he was to pick up his position as Distinguished Professor at NYUC, a position formerly held by Ralph Ellison and Joseph Heller - it must have been in 1971), gasped with admiration and approval, because he himself had not thought about it and Kubrick had gone one step ahead in the right direction. I seem to remember his exclaiming under his breath "My God, he got it right!" (Whereas the presence of the serpent is totally supererogatory and even contradictory since the snake is traditionally a symbol of wisdom or knowledge but in this instance the only point of being there seems to be that of shocking the audience in general for its probably Christian-generated herpetophobia and Malcolm Mc Dowell in particular, since he has horror of snakes).

Alex's innocence, then, is a political one. He is certainly a disaffected member of the polity, no matter how streetwise shrewd:

"And we are your enemies?" said the Minister, while all the gazetta vecks went scribble scribble scribble. "Tell us that, my boy".

"All who do me wrong," I said, "are my enemies."

"Well," said the Int Inf Min, sitting down by my bed. "I and the Government of which I am a member want you to regard us as friends. Yes, friends. We have put you right, yes?... We never wished you harm, but there are some who did and do... There are certain men who wanted to use you, yes, use you for political ends. They would have been glad, yes, glad for you to be dead, for they thought they could then blame it all on the Government... There is a man," said the Intinfmin, "called F. Alexander, a writer of subversive literature, who has been howling for

your blood." All through the film Alex remains not only innocent but indifferent to the political manipulations of the opposite political parties.

In this respect the book complementary to *A Clockwork Orange* is *The Wanting Seed* and I wish that one day it will appear in one volume, as it has been done instead, wrongly I think, with 1985

The pointing out of a writer as a subversive element in the society is a strong evidence that we *are*

in the presence of a totalitarian government, never a great lover of art unless safely hitched to the political chariot of the moment. The subversive writer labels the opposing Government "evil and wicked" and in chapter 5, part 3, we learn that we are in the interregnum that precedes the general elections ("you can be a very potent weapon, you see, in ensuring that this present evil and wicked Government is not returned in the forthcoming election. The Government's big boast, you see, is the way it has dealt with crime these last months" says the humanistic liberal writer. "...Recruiting brutal young roughs for the police. Proposing debilitating and will-sapping techniques of conditioning... Before we know where we are we shall have the full apparatus of totalitarianism.") I personally suspect that the outcry about the violence of both book and film has something more to do with political clarity of vision than violence. The book was written in the

annus mirabilis

'59-60, but could not find a publisher before 1962. "Pornography of violence" was the editorial verdict. In that language?

Nadsat

! Not of immediate access! As to the film, how can we forget that the years that saw its coming out (1971-1972) saw also Sam Peckinpah's

Stray Dogs

, Ken Russell's

The Devils

that filled the screen with the most sumptuous images of a black-and-white nun (Vanessa Redgrave) masturbating with a crucifix, and pierced our eardrums with the screams of the tortured of Loudun? If Huxley had not been safely dead, the film drawn from his book with the aim of fostering religious tolerance would certainly had given him a heart attack.

In *The Wanting Seed*, (splendidly translated into French with the title *La Folle semence*) we live in a future where, because of a shortage of foodstuff, the right to have children is strongly limited to one or a couple and the heroes of the period or the personalities most likely to ascend the political echelon are the homosexuals. (In a futuristic greater London posters are displayed everywhere IT IS SAPIENS TO BE HOMO.)

Tristram Foxe, the hero or antihero of the novel, is a history teacher married to a dangerously fertile and healthy-looking Beatrice-Joanna, now pregnant again after the death of the last legitimate, rationed, as it were, child. Tristram's brother, Derek, high in the hierarchy of power, is a blatant homosexual (in effect no homosexual at all since the twins that Beatrice-Joanna carries are, in effect, his).

Tristram's history lessons are the interesting point: they illustrate a theory of the alternation of governments, from permissive-liberal (Pelagian) to authoritarian-repressive (Augustinian), based on a theological notion of the nature of man. It provides, in effect, the backdrop to *A Clockwork Orange* story.

Pelagius was the British monk who believed in the essentially good and redeemable nature of man. Whenever this perspective prevails the government which rules the society for the time being is permissive, but, as permissiveness in the long or short run creates disorders and disaffection a sterner socio-political view prevails and we have a repressive government supported by a strong police body which detains citizens without compunction. At the beginning of ACO the national jails are overcrowded and the Minister of Interior or Inferior is coming up with a solution suggested by technocrats (in themselves "uncovenanted"), which may help his party win the coming elections. The Augustinian phase, which is the present one of the book, incidentally, comes from St Augustine's view of man as irremediably tainted by the original sin. The milk without vellocet (served *with* vellocet in the Korova milk bar) stands for the milk of human kindness and innocence which flows inside the ruffian Alex.

Another reflection: I think that Anthony Burgess likes to snowball multiple and at the same time contradictory pointers into a single, polyvalent, entity, thus the Ludovico technique would stand not only as a nudge toward "Ludwig Van" (Beethoven) as Blake Morrison says in his introduction to the book, but (because, where does the Italian language all of a sudden come from?) towards Nicolò Macchiavelli as well. The Old Nick, the devil, the man who knew everything about - and taught Europe - the nature of political power and how to gain it and the natural wickedness of man ("Gli uomini sdimenticano prima la morte del padre che la perdita del loro patrimonio.") Calling it Nicolò technique would have been too obvious. But, Ludovico is also Ludovico Ariosto, author of *Orlando Furioso*, his long poem of knights in arms and also a tragedy by Robert Green performed in February 1592 at the Rose. Ariosto, Ludovico, was well known to the Elizabethans (and Anthony's heart is with the Elizabethans) because Elizabeth the 1st had condemned Sir John Harington (inventor of the water-closet) to translate the whole of the poem as a punishment for having circulated among her "Glories" a series of ribald octaves extrapolated from it and dealing with a very

indiscreet (and most delicious) erotic adventure.

Liana Burgess, February 2000.



* Malcolm Mc Dowell told us when lunching at Claridge's while waiting for Kubrick to get a loan of a tie from that establishment before entering the dining hall that as soon as he was back from the hospital for either the threat of a detached retina (owing to the Ludovico treatment) or a bout of initial pneumonia after having been immersed in the cold water trough too long by the two millicents and former droogs who recognise him, that he was welcome back with open arms by the director who announced "I have found you a very nice snake, my boy!"

[Return to article](#)