

## A review of Will's Son and Jake's Peer: Anthony Burgess's Joycean Negotiations by A. I. Farkas

By [Andrew Biswell](#)

*Will's Son and Jake's Peer: Anthony Burgess's Joycean Negotiations* by A. I. Farkas  
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There are several reasons to be grateful to Dr Farkas for having written his pioneering book on the Joycean elements in Anthony Burgess's fiction and autobiographies. This is the first serious critical study of Burgess's writing to have been published since John J. Stinson's *Anthony Burgess Revisited* in 1991, and it will do much to satisfy anyone who is looking for a properly informed commentary. The book is a model of intelligent close reading which promises to bring us to a fuller understanding of each of the novels it touches on, and it aims to situate them within the wider literary-historical frame of Modernism. Farkas's interpretations display a pleasing familiarity with Burgess's journalism, especially the large body of ephemeral critical writing about James Joyce.

Although this book has its origins in a doctoral thesis on the textual affinities between Burgess and Joyce, submitted for examination at Eötvös University in Budapest, Farkas has considerably expanded the scope of his enquiry in the course of rewriting the thesis for publication. His range of reference is commendably broad -- partly because he acknowledges that there is no meaningful difference between Burgess as novelist and Burgess as unreliable narrator of his own life's story -- and many of the judgements that he arrives at are shrewdly

sceptical. The opening chapter demonstrates, through the deployment of relevant examples from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Little Wilson and Big God*, the full extent to which Burgess constructs an authorial persona that is consciously modelled on the aesthete Stephen Dedalus, as delineated in the final chapters of Joyce's novel. Burgess's purpose in reworking this material from

*A Portrait*

, it's argued by Farkas, is to present his adolescent self as a recognisably Joycean incipient artist.

Having identified the major debts to Joyce in the first volume of Burgess's autobiography, including a large number of previously uncatalogued coincidences and verbal echoes, Farkas writes:

Joyce's highly ambiguous relationship with Catholicism not only prefigured, but acted as a catalyst of Burgess's own highly ambivalent apostasy. The tradition of Catholic recusancy, complete with apocryphal references in the family annals to John Wilson the Elizabethan martyr, is a constant source of pride both for Burgess the writer and the autobiographer [...] The pride that even the apostate takes in the perceived superiority of the "logical absurdity" of Catholic theology over the lack of elegant logic in Protestant dogma is also appropriated by Burgess from Stephen Dedalus and, by implication, from Joyce in *Little Wilson* (p. 21).

The parallels between Burgess and Joyce extend beyond the boundaries of the purely literary into the area of biography. Farkas argues that 'Burgess's emigration [after 1968] could be seen as a Joycean, "Modernist", gesture of a larger anti-philistine revolt [...] It is a central feature of the whole Burgess phenomenon that he was an artist-expatriate and a tax-exile at one and the same time' (p. 24). 'Exile' was Burgess's preferred term for his voluntary expatriation, but Farkas is alert to the precise meaning of the word ('A person obliged by law or compelled by circumstances to live abroad' - *New Shorter OED*), and he recognises that Joyce's sudden departure from the Ireland which banned his books will scarcely bear comparison with Burgess's wish to avoid paying British death duties on his first wife's estate. The process by which Burgess subsequently turned himself into a fully-formed European writer is a different matter, of course, and it is a shame that Farkas does not illustrate it in greater detail when he goes on to discuss the extravagantly internationalist novels of the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Napoleon Symphony* and *Earthly Powers*.

Farkas's longest chapter diligently charts the evolution of Burgess's prolonged engagement with Joycean narrative techniques in *The Malayan Trilogy*, *The Doctor is Sick*, the Enderby novels, *Nothing Like the Sun*

and

*A Dead Man in Deptford*

, taking care at each stage to bring out the points of difference between the works under discussion. This approach is sensible, since the novels are more likely to yield to interpretation if they are considered on a case-by-case basis rather than in thematic groups. Burgess's protean self-reinventions as a stylist might in themselves be thought of as an important aspect of his Joycean inheritance, since neither Burgess nor Joyce deploys the same mode of narration in more than one novel. (

*Ulysses*

is acknowledged to be a special case, a book that seethes with potential literature, waiting to be exploited by other writers. As Martin Amis remarked in a recent radio interview, '

*Ulysses*

is novels'.)

Turning his attention briefly to writers other than Joyce, Farkas registers the presence of significant borrowings from T. S. Eliot's poems and plays in the Enderby novels. He quibbles with Vesta Bainbridge's misquotation of *Burnt Norton* in *Inside Mr Enderby* (Eliot's line 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality' is redeployed as 'Womankind cannot bear very much reality'), and dismisses the word 'womankind' on etymological grounds as 'an uncharacteristic oversight in the work of an almost always reliable writer-philologist', but in doing so he overlooks the other potential meanings -- 'womb-ankind' and 'womb-unkind', both relevant to Enderby's known fear of wives and stepmothers -- that are contained within Burgess's disrespectful allusion to Eliot.

Farkas is surely right to point to the intoxicating effect of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems on Burgess's creative imagination, particularly 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', which figures prominently throughout *The Clockwork Testament*, and 'The Windhover', fragments of which are embedded in chapter 12 of *The Doctor is Sick*. Perhaps

it will interest Farkas to learn that Burgess makes an extended comparison of Hopkins and Joyce in the second of his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, 'Rhythm, Sprung and Unsprung', broadcast on BBC Radio Three on 6 October 1980.

Elsewhere, the allusion-spotting proves to be a rather hit-and-miss affair. This reviewer's response to being told, on page 73, that 'salient references' to John Donne and Matthew Arnold may be found in the Enderby novels (echoes which are 'weak' and yet 'can distinctly be heard') was to ink a salient 'W.T.F.?' in the margin, and to turn the page with the shortest possible delay. How weak does an echo have to be, we might wonder, before it is rendered completely inaudible?

Farkas's account of *The Doctor is Sick* is impressively well argued, and he proposes an unexpected new interpretation of the novel's 'dubious ontological status' (p. 70), based on a detailed reappraisal of its narrative ambiguities. He suggests that the key to understanding what is going on in the book lies in the name of Aristotle Thanatos, the quasi-mythological figure whom Edwin Spindrift meets after he has escaped from hospital (his picaresque quest through the criminal underworld of Soho being a reworking of the 'Nighttown' chapter in Joyce's *Ulysses*

). 'Thanatos' signifies 'death', but Farkas is interested in the meanings of 'Aristotle'. To Leopold Bloom, according to Burgess in

*Joysprick*

, 'it means the monk who wrote a treatise on obstetrics' (see

*Joysprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce*

(London: André Deutsch, 1971), p. 163.) Obstetrics being the science of life and fertility, Farkas ends up with a sex/death or life/death opposition. The meeting with Thanatos, we are told, is likely to be a hallucination or a psychic projection on Edwin's part, and Farkas advances the contention that Edwin has probably died on the operating table.

This gets us quite a long way, but it does not seem to solve the Thanatos riddle definitively. 'Aristotle', as we learn in chapter 15 of *The Doctor is Sick*, carries another, less respectable, meaning in Cockney rhyming slang, since 'Aristotle' rhymes with 'bottle', and 'bottle and glass' rhymes with 'arse'. Hence 'Aristotle' signifies (among other things) 'arse', and the character's name could be taken to mean that 'death is crap' - a sentiment forcefully reiterated elsewhere in the Burgess canon by Ed Schaumwein, the fathomlessly vulgar Hollywood producer who appears in

*Beard's Roman Women*.

Does this alternative meaning of 'Aristotle' suggest that Edwin is actually being offered the possibility of life, if he can only stop inhabiting his crappy world of bilabial fricatives and folk-etymologies? The onomastic puzzle certainly contributes further uncertainties to what is already one of Burgess's most riddling and sophisticated texts, and we should be grateful to Farkas for having reopened the question for fresh debate.

Farkas's critical intelligence is shown most clearly in his discussion of the final page of *Napoleon Symphony*

, of which he proposes two interpretations. The passage in question is 'Rejoice. And again I say rejoice. And I say aga INRI ng bells bells bells bells and rejoice. Rejoice.' Farkas regards this first of all as an act of homage to Joyce, Burgess's 'great precursor', and he tells us that 'The reader will certainly join the writer of so many things re Joyce in his joy when he sees the word "Rejoice"' (p. 121). The other possible reference, and one that will be more immediately apparent to the musical reader, is to an anthem by Henry Purcell ('Rejoice in the Lord always / And again I say rejoice'). Which do you prefer?

There are a few minor errors, perfectly excusable in an author whose first language is not English, and I list them here in the hope that they will be corrected in a second edition. There is no character called 'Christopher Howard' in *The Worm and the Ring* (p. 25); the first volume of Burgess's autobiography was published in 1987, not 1990 (p. 29); Burgess did not write a novel called *A Dead Man at Deptford* (p. 106 and elsewhere); *The Exiles* is not the title of a play by James Joyce (p. 130); and the narrator of *Earthly Powers* is Kenneth Marchal Toomey, not 'Marchal Kenneth Toomey' (p. 138).

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