

Speech for the Anthony Burgess Symposium in Angers

By Liana Burgess

Dear friends of Anthony Burgess

First of all my deeply felt thanks to all the people, teachers, professors, musicians, who have made this our first meeting possible.

I hope that this personal note of mine may add to the interest of the public in general and also of the narrower circle of specialists and biographers.

In 1962 *A Clockwork Orange* was the first book I read by our author, almost at the same time as I read the first book, *Inside Mr Enderby*, by a writer called Joseph Kell. I was beside myself with joy when I read both these works because my task was to write for the Bompiani Literary Almanack a panorama of the literary output covering a year in English language. I remember that the average number of titles appearing yearly was 32,000, out of which I had to choose and discuss a handful. I had discovered two, so I thought, masters, comparatively unknown, although ACO was shortly to become an underground cult book and the nadsat was going to be spoken by the aficionados the world over.

In the first case I was "carried away" as the saying goes, by the beauty of the language and did not stop to analyze the meaning, rather as one doesn't when one reads the mighty lines by Marlowe: "In Naples did I learn to poison flowers" or "And ride in triumph through Persepolis."

In Trieste, in 1987, Prof. Carla Sassi, put this feeling this way:

"In *A Clockwork Orange*, la musicalità della prosa, l'elemento del suono e del rumore hanno spesso la prevalenza sul momento descrittivo, e poiché si tratta di racconto auto-diegetico, oltre a conferire una qualità lirica al testo, tali elementi contribuiscono a caratterizzare in maniera incisiva la figura del narratore-protagonista. Alex viene infatti principalmente definito attraverso il suo uso "musicale" della lingua e il suo rapporto con il mondo della musica, rapporto che di volta in volta ne sottolinea, o addirittura ne provoca, pensieri ed azioni, e ne segue l'evoluzione nel corso del racconto."

In *A Clockwork Orange* the musicality of the prose, the elements of sound and noise are often more prominent than the descriptive passages and since here we are dealing with an autodiegetic tale, apart from giving to the text a lyrical quality, they contribute to define very clearly the character of the story-teller-protagonist. Alex indeed is defined mainly through his 'musical' usage of the language and his relation with the world of music. This relationship from time to time emphasizes, or even provokes, his thoughts and actions and follows his development throughout the spinning of the tale.

I didn't particularly want to see anything. I did not read with my eyes: I was happy to hear and puzzle out those remarkably shaped words which, unknown but vaguely familiar at first, began to yield a sense and/or convey a feeling, as one went on.

"There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is Pete, Georgie, and Dim, Dim being really dim, and we sat in the Korova Milkbar making up our rassodocks what to do with the evening, a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry."

The six adjectives/nouns in apposition to 'evening' convey a sweeping sense of the totality of the scene outside, a beckettian bareness.

"The Korova Milkbar was a milk-plus mesto".

We may wonder what a mesto is but whoever has even a passing association with a Latin language links the word with melancholic. An absolute barren hardness outside, a melancholic feeling inside.

"Well, what they sold there was milk plus something else. They had no licence for selling liquor, but there was no law yet against prodding some of the new veshches which they used to put into the old moloko, so you could peet it with vellocet or synthemesc or drenchrom...which would give you a nice quiet horrorshow fifteen minutes admiring Bog And All His Holy Angels and Saints in your left shoe with lights burning all over your mozg."

Veshch we don't know but it sound something very strong, moloko is milk mentioned two lines above, and Bog surrounded by Angels and Saints must be God. But the beauty of it is that Bog is God in Russian, Bogu Bogova, "give to God what belongs to God", but it's also "a spongy ground of decomposing vegetation" that peat that for Seamus Heaney ("Bogland") is the symbol

of Ireland.

The scene is set for action and horrors to come but we do not see the horrors: "We filled round what was called the backtown for a bit, scaring old vecks and cheenas that were crossing the roads and zigzagging after cats and that. Then we took the road west. There wasn't much traffic about, so I kept pushing the old noga through the floorboards near, and the Durango 95 ate up the road like spaghetti. Soon it was winter trees and dark, my brothers, with a country dark, and at one place I ran over something big with a snarling toothy rot in the headlamps, then it screamed and squelched under..." Yes, something big has been run over. We don't see it; our attention is being held by the mechanical but the "screaming and squelching" belongs definitely to the animal world, and jolts us.

The linguistic duplicity takes away from the photographic horror.

Anthony himself says that one of the uses of the nadsat was to act as a screen between the reader and the event. But once you have images it is very difficult to remove them and go back to the purely aural.

One type of innocence is lost.

Then, in the book, the story unfolds to the end and Alex coming out of his violent life, relinquishing it, appears to be the 'recapitulation' in the musical sense, of what has preceded it, that is 'the repeating of earlier themes when forming the final section of a movement in sonata form'. When the music critic of The Kansas City Star (the newspaper for which in his youth Ernest Hemingway was a reporter) analysed the book as if it were a musical composition Anthony felt understood. I leave to the scholars here the task of retracing the article.

In this case, the case of the book as a whole, the problem of the extra chapter, the famous 21, does not exist because the "I was cured all right" and the brilliant re-start of lustful hybris makes sense visually only.

We go back to the beginning, as if nothing had changed inside Alex...

Inside Mr Enderby was completely different, describing a completely different character, full of concern for the "beady-eyed greedy creatures", the seagulls whom Enderby the poet feeds every day, and full of solicitude for the old cronies, men and women, who spend their leftover

lives in one pub or different pubs, comparing, complaining, exhibiting wounds and diseases. Being stubborn, sometimes arrogant, distrustful, like the major-general who calls Enderby a liar, misinterpreting Enderby's enunciation of his rank. (' "I shall look up the Army List this afternoon." He never did. A motorist, irritable and jumpy with a seasonal hangover, knocked him down as he was crossing Nollekens Avenue. Long before spring, the major-general was promoted to glory .') (p.25) But all these people whom many would call irritatingly useless are followed in their peregrinations and observed with charity and empathy. And then, as a lighter element, we have the eroticism of 'Arry the cook who tries to convey his amorous message to Thelma under shape of especially prepared dishes to be accompanied by Enderby lyrics, such as 'The Music of the Spheres'.

When Anthony saw the film, he found that Malcolm Mc Dowell was his Alex, a mancunian like himself, and the cast of actors was admirable, Steven Berkoff great and so was the examining policeman. The snake was unnecessary and Anthony wondered at what he was doing there. The use of the milk as a way of temporarily blinding Alex he found a stroke of genius because Alex is, fundamentally, politically innocent and this he told me more than once.

He was also relieved, and so was I, at the stylization of the multiple-love-making, ballet-like scene. Having seen Ken Russell's film drawn from Huxley's book, titled, I believe, *The Devils of Loudun*, we were, in comparison, reassured by the lack of gratuitous violence.

Then the film appeared in Venice and we didn't see it, although we were invited to the Festival, if I remember correctly, because we were on our way to New York sailing from Naples. In the end I would say that Anthony has been more supportive than supported. Even across the Atlantic the amount of charges and abuses conveyed by telephone at all hours of night and day was very tedious. Kubrick was equally persecuted in England, so he stopped the film and he still could go on 'crying all the way to the bank'. Thirty years of nagging from journalists can be wearisome. So Anthony wrote a play and composed the music that I was hoping to hear here. And turned the book into a cabaret show.

Liana Burgess, 2001



