

The Dependent Mind: A Survey of the Novels of Anthony Burgess

By [Thomas Stumpf](#)

Anthony Burgess has paid a price for his catholic tastes, his wide-ranging intelligence and his sometimes gaudy brilliance. The author of some thirteen novels, not one of them sedate, he has the kind of prodigious fecundity that used to be attributed to Will Shakespeare, a natural genius with a mind, as the amazed Augustans used to say, "nobly wild and extravagant." [Note 1](#) The result is that we are delighted, dazzled, by one or another book and there make an end on it, almost guiltily pleased and quieting our critical faculties with words taken from the blurbs on the dust-jackets: "freewheeling, " "outrageous," "comic," and so on.

It is as if we were presented with a feast so great and so rich that our rather mean and meager appetites would be embarrassed to eat too much or too long. We are not, at least upon first acquaintance, tempted to make the kind of generalizations about Burgess's works that we almost inevitably fall into when reading his countryman, Anthony Powell, who, despite his admittedly wide scope, is somehow less pyrotechnic about it all and more comfortably aware of the unities. Each of Burgess's works seems rich enough to occupy our palates totally, and we obscurely feel that reading them all or thinking about them all together would be a kind of unjustifiable self-indulgence, culminating, as such self-indulgence is likely to do, in acute dyspepsia.

But sooner or later, curiosity begins to make connections, and we find connections forced upon

us by Burgess himself. In fact, the novels are united in some fairly obvious ways. The dark lady in *Nothing Like the Sun* turns out to be Malayan, an immigrant from *The Long Day Wanes*.

Richard Ennis, hero of

A Vision of Battlements

, is mentioned in

The Long Day Wanes

; and a poem recited by Ennis turns out to be one of Enderby's juvenilia. The Arden family, discussed at such length in

Nothing Like the Sun

, has a latter-day representative in Ted Arden, the confident publican in

Right to an Answer

. These rather mechanical connections are the first to be noticed; but then we remark certain character-types that tend to recur --the expatriate, the ex-Catholic, the bad husband-- as well as certain motifs. Every novel, for example, has at least one gloriously revealing drunken bash and several vivid and heartfelt descriptions of vomiting. Underlying all of this, however, is a more fundamental unity of theme, a sometimes compassionate, sometimes corrosive awareness of the insufficiency and dependence of the naked mind. It is Milton's Satan, we should remember, who boasts that "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (

Paradise Lost

, 1, 254-255). It is almost as if Burgess's novels undertake a full and bitter refutation of that boast, and of the romantic individualism that lurks behind it. For Burgess, the mind is dependent on its history deeply buried in its culture, and still more deeply embedded in a frequently hostile body; and the isolation which afflicts it is neither splendid nor Promethean, but simply the petulant loneliness of an invalid.

To begin with, Burgess almost never gives us a picture of an unacculturated man. There are few things that are universal in even his major characters, and the minor characters sometimes seem snatched from the wings of a minstrel show or from the dusty files of a dialect comedian. There is a Chinese cook named Ah Wang who eats live mice and black cats and whose "store of medicines" consists of "tiger's teeth in vinegar, a large lizard in brandy, compounds of lead, and horrible egg nogs." [Note 2](#) *Devil of a State* boasts a pair of stage Italians, amoral, emotional, lazy, randy, and utterly innocent. Elsewhere in the same novel "the Sino-Irishman or Hibernico-Chinese called Patrick Ong began to play the part of a drunken stage Mick, calling: 'Sure and I'll murder the spalpeens. Where are they till Oi get at them' " (p. 51). Finally there is a Chinese taxi-driver who "gave a monotoned commentary on the sights of the town... To pretend that his passengers were blind gave the youth some obscure Chinese satisfaction: 'Woman cross road now. Two black woman go in shop. Dog sit bite foot. In market fish smell...' (DOS, p. 11). When there is no better material for his abacus-like enumerations, he is content simply to read license plates. He is matched by a taxi-driver in

Honey for the Bears

who is a manic-depressive Slav, oscillating between a frightening ebullience and an equally frightening catatonia.

These are, of course, types, simplified for comic purposes; but they also give some idea of the frequency with which Burgess defines his characters in terms of racial, or more properly cultural, stereotypes. Less frequently, but often enough, characters are defined with the same simplicity by their professions. These professional caricatures include an outwardly reasonable psychiatrist given to temper tantrums, an American anthropologist who constantly mutters "But that's not my field; that's not my field," and a liberal vicar who demonstrates his strenuous Christianity by proclaiming after a round of golf "Christ, that was thirsty work."

[Note 3](#)

In the light of all this, Shakespeare's thoughts about Ben Jonson in

Nothing Like the Sun

are particularly ironic: "And yet Ben's destiny was far removed from my own, blessed as he has been to be able to take the world skin deep --humours and manners-- and to know that the world takes itself skin deep, though not with Ben's laws and systems" (p. 216). Burgess, too, is writing about manners, if not humors; and his stage is populated by stage types, and not just because they are funnier than more complicated characters could be.

The reason, it would seem, is that Burgess's subjects in most of his novels are not just human beings, but human beings as enmeshed in a culture which both defines and delimits them. It is significant that only one of the novels takes place entirely in contemporary England. Malaya, the mythical African state of Dunia, Rome, Tangier, Gibraltar, Tokyo, the Soviet Union, and that floating grand hotel, the SS *Polyolbion*: these are the settings, not because Burgess is trying to be fashionably exotic but because he is providing us with a series of

Kulturkämpfe

, pitting one culture and its representatives against others and noting the usually confused, frequently tragicomic outcomes. Even

A Clockwork Orange

and

Nothing Like the Sun

, though taking place in England, are considerably distanced in time, and

Nothing Like the Sun

provides the further complication of the Malayan "dark lady."

The Doctor is Sick

is the one exception, but it can boast a generous assortment of immigrants and a protagonist who has just returned from Malaya. In none of the novels are we very long in the company of familiar, comfortable Anglo-Saxons.

As an index of his concern for the apparently superficial trappings of a culture, it is interesting to note how often Burgess provides capsule cultural portraits, usually consisting of no more than a series of concrete nouns with adjectives which constitute what is occasionally called, ironically, "the exile's dream of home." Though they occur throughout the novels, these are especially frequent in *The Long Day Wanes*. Crabbe has a vaguely sentimental vision of home, consisting of "European architecture, and the art galleries, and London on a wet day, river fog, the country in autumn, pubs decorated for Christmas, book-shops, a live symphony orchestra." (p. 278) Even Rupert Hardman, much more cynical and married to a Moslem, retains a certain nostalgia for "the rain and the weekly papers, the clanking trains and the sooty trees and the girl students in jumpers and silk stockings." (p. 337) More pathetic is the dream of Rosemary Michael, Eurasian sexpot and wholehearted Anglophile. "She loved the snow, tea and crumpets by the cozy fire, fog and primroses." She is also fond of "European food with plenty of Lea & Perrin's" (p. 418). Lim Cheng Po, the Chinese Anglican, contributes "the church bells on Sunday, bitter and darts in the pub, civilization" (p. 445). Denham, the globetrotting protagonist of

The Right to an Answer

, is a bit more astringent: "Warm brown ale in the boat's bar...afternoon drinking in underground clubs the size of a Singapore lavatory...the married women dancing to the jukebox, ready for a lark till their taxis at six (hubby home to a casserole from a time-controlled electric cooker) and all the rest of it" (p. 8). Other cultures are described in the same capsule form. In

Vision of Battlements

, for example, the culture of the Mediterranean is reduced to "bread and garlic and bad drains, harsh red wine. And sin" (p. 15).

In constructing these miniatures, Burgess is in part being ironically simplistic. He *can* discuss cultural distinctions more abstractly and at greater length. In

A Vision of Battlements

, for example, he asserts that, in contrast to the East, the syllogism is at the heart of western culture and has produced, as inexorably as a seed produces fruit, that culture's most

characteristic products, the refrigerator and the hydrogen bomb. (Though even here his final definition of a culture is in terms of concrete objects) For the most part, however, he is not being ironic when he defines a culture simply in terms of the sensory experiences peculiar to it. For Burgess, what we see, what we smell, and what we eat defines the way we think. Enderby is as clearly defined by his fondness for "stepmother's tea," pickled onions, and slightly overripe stew as Mr. Raj (in

The Right to an Answer

) is by his baroque curries. And when Fenella Crabbe, unhappy in Malaya, says that civilization is impossible except in a cold climate, she is, if we substitute the phrase "English civilization" for "civilization," speaking no less than the truth. The mind is conditioned by its culture, which is, in turn, at the mercy of diet, climate, that host of incidentals that Burgess chronicles with such loving care.

That which most clearly distinguishes cultures, and the real symbol of our fragmentation is, of course, language, not for Burgess merely a medium in which thoughts are expressed but a preordained structure which, like climate and diet, determines our thoughts. Again, Burgess is not simply being comic on those occasions when he characterizes people by the way they talk. The following scene from *The Long Day Wanes* is illustrative. The Abang, a hereditary Malayan potentate purportedly descended from the feces of the white bull of Siva accosts Fenella Crabbe "in the hallowed language of film:"

'You're kind of pretty. Pretty as a picture. I guess they all tell you that.'

'Really...'

'I reckon you and me could get together. We could meet some place and talk. We could have a real long talk and get kind or better acquainted.'

'My husband...'

'I guess I haven't had the pleasure or making his acquaintance. I understand he's a very lovely person, though. They tell me he's making a real fine job of the College.'

'I mean, I don't want to seem rude or anything...'

'I guess he'll be understanding. He won't think you're rude or anything. How's about lunch tomorrow?' (p. 261)

Burgess is telling us here not only a good deal about the Abang, who is looking forward to eventual exile in the West, but also about that cultural ragout that is Malaya. While purely linguistic stereotypes are not as common in Burgess as cultural stereotypes, they are there in

large numbers. From Mr. Raj's courtly, inflated, Anglo-Indian formality to the neo-Slavic cant of Alex and his "droogs," we are made aware of linguistic structures that both reveal and condition the minds behind them.

Language is, of course, an expression of culture; so that the thoroughgoing cultural converts like Nabby Adams, who dreams of India, and the Sinophile Pere Laforgue (both in *The Long Day* *Wanes*)

reveal themselves by forgetting their native language and finding comfort in thinking and speaking only the language of their adopted cultures. By the same token, the natives of Dunia, for whom language

is culture, are justified to some extent in their belief that " 'There is only one white man's language.' This was not meant figuratively; it was a straight philological assertion" (DOS, p. 157). What neither blacks nor whites sufficiently realize is that language is a tenuous medium of communication at best, capable of infinite and sometimes impenetrable variations, dialects, tones, connotations, etc. Variations even within the same language remind us of subcultures whose distinctions can be as rigid and forbidding as any. Thus Crabbe's dislike of his headmaster focuses upon "Boothby's Northumberland whine." Thus Ennis's contemptible superior officer becomes more contemptible because of the way he drops his h's. Thus Enderby, forced to listen to the almost unintelligible dialect poetry of a Rhodesian named Ricker Sugden, is driven to realize what Chaucer, Pope, and Wordsworth had realized long before --how much language, the poet's only medium, is subject to the depredations of space and time.

The problem is compounded when someone speaks in a language not his own. When Ennis, the hero of *A Vision of Battlements*, woos the lovely Concepcion in Spanish, she is forced to say "Don't. I know it's only a foreign language to you." (p. 46) And as Denham says to Mr. Raj, the Ceylonese who is fond of English abstractions: "You're different, that's all, but you pretend to be the same. When you use words like 'love' and 'equality' and 'brotherhood' you delude us into thinking that you mean by those words what we mean

by them." (RTA. p. 189) All the novels are full of characters trying to learn another language, from the Russian in

Honey for the Bears

who asks Paul whether one is hit "in the belly" or "on the belly" (both are painful, Paul replies) to the Tasca family,

padre e figlio

, both patiently trying to learn how to tell each other to go to hell in idiomatic English. All such efforts, however frantic, well-intentioned, and apparently successful, are, in fact, doomed.

Another language means another mode of thought, as we learn in

Devil of a State

when Paolo Tasca, raging against his biological father, is understood by the local nationalist Patu, who tends to take things symbolically, to be referring to the British colonialists. In the same novel, the same lesson is driven home even more uproariously at Mr. Tomlin's luncheon

party.

Mr. Tomlin is a long-suffering Englishman who serves as UN advisor to the emerging state of Dunia. He is long-suffering in part, perhaps, because of his belief that "the British are supposed to have a bad time. That is their destiny" (pps. 91-92). He is hosting a luncheon at which the guests include the nationalist leader, Patu, a hungry Czech artist named Smetana, and the gallant, amoral Nando Tasca. Mr. Tomlin is already at the end of his tether, and when circumstances prove too much for him he turns for relief to a comfortable, rather waterish abstraction:

" 'Reality. What do any of you know about reality?...Reality. What are we all doing? What do you all want?'...

'I feel,' said Patu, 'that it is perhaps the Government that knows nothing of reality. The movement towards the realization of self-government for this state cannot be halted'...

'What is this about reality?' asked M. Smetana, pricking up his ears at the rustle of an abstraction "*Wirklichkeit? Realität?* Is an Englishman asking about reality?"

Nando Tasca happily caught up the word in the twindling broth of his song. "*Realtá*" he sang to Mrs. Tomlin, and again, in a cadenza, "

Realtá

." (pps. 86-67)

This is comic opera, or linguistic farce, the complications provided not by disguises and intrigues but by the fragmentation of cultures and the linguistic Babel that reflects it. In this, as in many other cases, language, which ought to be the vehicle of thought, becomes its shroud. Patu cannot understand Paolo; Denham cannot understand Raj; the straight world cannot understand Alex.

Too much consciousness of language can be even worse than linguistic naivete. In both cases, language ceases to be a medium of expression and becomes itself the object of our thoughts. The words become an impenetrable and sometimes fascinating barrier --even, or rather most especially, the words of our own language. Enderby the poet is one such word-man, infinitely more comfortable with his consonants and vowels than with other people or, for that matter, things. Dr. Spindrift, the philologist-protagonist of *The Doctor is Sick*, is an even more obvious example. After a particularly sordid and unphilological brush with the vices of London's demi-monde, he reflects that "He'd treated words as things, things to be analysed and classified, and not as part of the warm current of life. Now certain lovely words like 'cerebral'

and 'encephalogram' were getting their violent own back. And in this foul flat flagellation had been real whips, not Roman

flagellum

, diminutive of

flagrum

; and look, gentlemen, how fascinating this interchange of 'l' and 'r'. And what pleasant alliteration, he thought, that was: foul flat flagellation" (p. 133). What we have here is a kind of autolinguisticism, language as a solitary delight. The sad thing, or course, is that, aside from bodily contact, language is the only instrument of communication we have, but depending upon it is like leaning on a reed.

Cultural accidents like climate, diet, and language need to be closely observed not because they are decorative but because they have a way of becoming cultural essentials; and it is, finally, the clash of cultures that is Burgess's most characteristic concern. Many of these cultural exchanges are simply the pure stuff of comedy. Ennis, for example, is putting on a show for the Spanish middle class on Gibraltar. For the second act, a "woman major of the Medical Corps, plumply shaking along with her castanets, performed Spanish dances, roguish eyes over an artificial flower in her powerful white teeth, a final Standard English 'Ole!' as she stamped the last step of her *zapateado*, a huge hip thrust provocatively at the stony watchers" (VB, p. 79).

Much the same thing happens in

Devil of a State, where Paolo,

having pawned his father's watch, "nearly cried. He had never had so much money before. He said 'Tante grazie.' The shopkeeper did not say 'Prego.' That was his Syrian ignorance" (p. 60). To be sure, the crazy salad of racial variants found in both *Malaya* and *Dunia* provides a perfect setting for cultural pratfalls; but Burgess can arrange the same effects in the Soviet Union, where the stolid citizens are put into a dither by Hussey's consignment of drip-dry dresses, or the north of England, agitated by the importation of Ceylonese curries, judo, and lust, in that order.

More often, however, these cultural collisions have at least an element of seriousness about them, revealing as they do the imperviousness of one culture to another and the hopelessness of any attempt at cultural communication. An incident from *The Long Day Wanes* might serve to illustrate this. Victor Crabbe, an Englishman and a teacher, takes a drunken leap into speculative philosophy and tries to introduce the eminently practical Pakistani policeman, Alladad Khan, to its delights. The conversation runs as follows:

'The question is whether a thing is really there if we are not there to see it.

'You could hear it, or smell it.'

'No, no, I mean... (I wish I could think of the right Malay word) I mean if we could not be aware of it with our...'

'Senses?'

'Yes, our senses. We could not be sure it existed.'

'So this jungle perhaps exists only in our heads?'

'Perhaps. And this car. And you only exist in my head, too.'

'And my wife only exists in my head? And the child?'

'It is possible.'

'It would be a big relief,' said Alladad Khan, sighing.(p. 138)

The East may indeed be "awake, building dams and canals, power houses and factories, forming committees, drawing up constitutions, having selected from the West the few tricks it could understand and use," (LDW, p. 522) but the task of communicating Western culture and the institutions of that culture remains a forlorn one, despite Crabbe's professional hopes. He says " 'I can teach them how to think. I can inculcate some idea of values.' 'You'll never teach them how to think,' " Hardman answers, 'And you know damned well they've got their own values, and they're not going to change those for any high-minded, pink-kneed colonial officer' " (p. 27). There is a tragic aspect to this, of course, revealed in the tragic climax of *Right to an Answer*. It is near the end of that book that Denhan, the travelling salesman, realizing that even languages specially acquired for the purpose cannot bridge the gap between disparate cultures, cries out in angry frustration:

"Such a bloody small planet, and one half can't understand the other half" (p. 188). The pretence of communication, not to mention love or friendship, between people of alien cultures is usually nothing more than pretence. What is real is multiplicity, a Babel of cross-purposes, a world of fragmented cultures, each with its own habits of mind, each with its own characteristic experiences.

There remains, according to Burgess, one possibility of cultural unity, that provided by popular myths, especially those associated with that most vulgar common denominator --American Coca-cola culture. Crabbe is speaking of Malaya when he says "There was a cold, purely legal unification provided by the state --a British importation-- and a sort of superficial culture represented by American films, jazz, chocolate bars, and refrigerators; for the rest, each race was content to keep alive fragments of culture imported from its country of origin" (pps. 434-435). Elsewhere Burgess speaks of the ways in which the "myths of cinema and the syndicated cartoon have served to unite the diverse races far more than the clump of the cricket ball" (LDW, p. 34). In *The Right to an Answer*, we encounter the film-goddess, Monique Hugo, and Denham asks: "Are we perhaps wrong to sneer at these whipped- like-cream, spun-like-sugar crackly, crunchy products of the shiny mythopoeic machines of our age? Every brown girl, far more beautiful than she, who gaped at this avatar at the airports where she was feted, showed in her teeth a hunger for unifying myth, while, in the council chambers inland, the

statesmen strove for disunity" (p. 164). Burgess's attitude toward these popular myths is, however, ambiguous. On the one hand, they do provide a substratum of unity; on the other hand, they are so vulgar and trashy that we wonder if the unity they provide is worth having at all, or whether it is no more than the unity provided, as some of the characters ironically suggest
,
by beer or money.

In *The Long Day Wanes*, young Robert Loo and Syed Hassan, inheritors of racial and cultural hatreds, find a common ground in adolescent revolt, Teddy-boy costumes, and bad popular music.

This rapprochement is achieved, however, at the cost of Robert Loo's distinctively Malayan music which, produced in solitude, cannot survive sudden transfusions of camaraderie, love, or cultural synthesis. The isolated but brilliant composer has become a well-adjusted but mass-produced teenager, a process in which there is some gain, but, we suspect, more loss. Burgess once suggests in *Enderby* that poetry, by enabling people to understand each other, is one of the few things to provide some sort of unity; but that statement seems more hopeful than assertive, since

Enderby, more than any other novel, demonstrates the way in which even Apollo's demesnes are subdivided into petty, constantly squabbling, provinces. For the most part, therefore, Burgess sees no chance of unity except under the broad banner of American pop-culture, that dubious redeemer. It is questionable whether literature and music ought to transcend the cultures that give them birth. It is certain that they seldom do so; and that when they do, as the

Clockwork Orange

chillingly demonstrates, the results are meaningless.

Alex remains a thug, despite the fact that he shares the taste of his more civilized ancestors for Beethoven.

There are other, biological rather than mythical, kinds of cultural miscegenation, and these too Burgess sometimes seems to regard with a certain suspicion. One illustration, from *Devil of a State*, will have to suffice.

Near the door were men known to Lydgate, good-hearted young unstable men in whom the

mingling of blood had gone as far as it conceivably could. One was tiny and delicate, like a bird, but with a huge face scrawled with the lines of the agony of a Christ. He was Filipino, Chinese, Scottish, unsure of his allegiances, ready to weep over Old Glory or Union Jack as the drink took him; then, as the drink took him further, all for red blood and the crunch of bones. His name was Sebastian Hup. With him sat an Anglo-Burmese dashed with the blood of an Arab trader, a suspicion of Malayalam, a single drop of Portuguese. He looked handsome and English in his uniform of an Inspector of Vehicles, two pips on each shoulder, but his name was Dominic de Cruz, and his arms were covered with tattooings --hieroglyphs of Syrian secret societies for which he had worked as strong man, a sentimental back-view of a fat-bottomed toddler, a winsome pouting head labelled "Pixy Face". And standing, ready to go and supervise his Municipal Dog Catchers, was another tattooed man --Andu, Potok, Danish, Chadi, English-- called David Lloyd-Evans.

(pps. 13-14)

At least simple adherence to a single culture gives one a definite identity. If you are a Malay or a Chinese, you are something; but the cultural miscellanies described above are compact of ill-assorted, poorly understood, and mutually contradictory impulses and ideals. They are emphatically not what Burgees might have made of them --the men of a new world, harmonious syntheses of warring races and cultures, and thereby genuinely independent of the limitations of race and culture. They are instead pathetic things of patchwork, much more culturally restricted than those who have only one culture to worry about.

Into this cockpit of bickering cultures, Burgess places his protagonists, themselves usually clear representatives of one or another culture, and watches as they respond to cultural stimuli that are new, rich, and strange. One possible response to an alien culture is wholehearted conversion; and *The Long Day Wanes* is especially full of cultural converts: Rosemary Michael, a black beauty who has fallen in love with England and has beatific visions of potato chips and Lea & Perrins sauce, Lem Ching Po, racially Chinese, but whose "English voice and English gestures swallowed up these details as a pan of gravy soup might swallow up a shred of shark's fin" (p. 399), Pere Laforgue, the complete Sinophile, who has traded stuffed aubergines for bean curd and shoyu, Thomas Aquinas for Lao-Tse. All of these people become radically simplified by their cultural conversions. They lose what bits of recalcitrant individuality they might have had in their native cultures; they veer toward the comic and tend to see other people as well as little more than cultural ambassadors.

Two of the major characters in the trilogy, Hardman and Crabbe, are somewhat more difficult to assess. Hardman becomes a nominal Moslem, an event which reactivates his dormant love of a highly simplified England. Crabbe is a teacher, and thereby professionally committed to building bridges between cultures; but the seductive lure of cultural assimilation is especially strong since his life in England has been unsuccessful, his first marriage having ended in the tragedy of his wife's death --for which he blamed himself. As a result, "he had lost the desire for more complex and civilized patterns" (p. 268). What Crabbe hopes to find in Malayan culture is a kind of solvent in which he might take leave of his own highly unsatisfactory soul. Total cultural absorption then is a kind of death, spiritual and sometimes, as in Crabbe's case, physical as well. (One is reminded that, in *The Right to an Answer*, a catarrh-ridden, retired, North-country printer meets an untimely death by developing an improper fondness for exotic curries)

At the other extreme is Enderby, a confirmed xenophobe who regards garlic with a kind of exotic awe. An ex-Catholic, he sees Rome as a personal threat and all foreign customs as an affront. In Enderby's case, to be sure, cultural imperviousness is symptomatic of an almost incredible self-centeredness. He wants nothing more than to shut out the world, sit in his bathroom, and compose delicate verse. Things outside himself he regards with suspicion and unfamiliar things with downright dislike. Yet such small bits of wisdom as Enderby is vouchsafed at the end of the novel come only after he has lived cheek by jowl with some very disreputable Moors, has himself assumed the identity of a Moorish beggar, has been forced to endure rock and roll and modern American drug poetry, and has, in fine, been made to recognize that there is a world elsewhere. Enderby may be freer from cultural determinism than most of Burgess's characters, but he is so only by paying the price of a contracted heart.

It is possible, of course, to encounter alien cultures with sympathy but with restraint, holding something back, avoiding, like the death it might well lead to, the siren song of complete assimilation. It is possible, but in Burgess's novels it is seldom successfully done. Fenella Crabbe does it in a comic and not altogether attractive way when she is introduced to the barbarous aborigines of the Malayan interior. She both domesticates and distances them by placing them in an anthropology textbook separated from her by the cool barrier of professional prose: "She automatically saw in her mind the exordium of a stock monograph: 'The aborigines of the Upper Lanchap present, ethnologically and culturally, a very different picture from the inhabitants of the coastal areas...' " (p. 124) Lydgate, the hero of *Devil of a State*, happy with his aborigine mistress yet quite incapable of regarding her (or any woman, for that matter) as a

human being, represents another unsatisfactory compromise. Denham, in

The Right to an Answer

, comes as close as anyone to striking a genuine compromise. He is an exile who gets little pleasure from England, though he visits it out of filial piety. He lives in the East, but with no hope of ever really identifying himself with it: "Contact, eh? I had always known that there was no real contact, except briefly in bed, over a shared bottle, across counter or desk among white stucco colonial houses." (pps. 192-193) Even Denham's wisdom, however, is a by-product of that aloofness and self-containment which leads him to respect marriage as an institution but to prefer prostitutes for home consumption. What keeps him free of culture is what effectively isolates him from love.

Culture is not the only limitation on the human mind; another is provided by the body itself. Culture itself, as we have noted, depends in part upon certain recurring patterns of sensation; but beyond this Burgess sees, as Montaigne saw hundreds of years before him, a thousand other limitations and humiliations imposed upon the mind by the body. Like language, the body is ideally the soul's book, the means of its expression; but also like language, the body is a recalcitrant medium, a difficult servant and an impossible master. Some connection between the two is illustrated in a passage from *The Right to an Answer*. Mr. Raj, the courtly Ceylonese who has been blamed by Denham for the death of his father, arrives in Denham's apartment drunk, armed, and almost hysterical. Normally he was acutely conscious of his English usage, but under the emotional strain "he crashed into a sort of shouting rhythmic rhapsody of which the elements were English words, language reduced to what my father's body was swiftly being reduced to: simple senseless elements laid side by side, unbound into a totality of meaning" (p. 191). It is this entropic tendency in both language and the body that must be resisted, and that in turn resists the organizing capacity of the mind. In language, if

The Doctor is Sick

may be offered as evidence, this is manifested in the almost psychotic fascination of analytic philology; in the body, of course, the breakdown of an organic whole into its constituent elements assumes another form --corruption.

Throughout Burgess's novels, there is a very strong, almost Swiftian sense of the uncleanness of the flesh and of the laughable disparity between the reality of the body and the pretensions of the spirit. Sgt. Ennis in *A Vision of Battlements*, objects to calling soldiers "bods". He sees it as "the final indignity: the stripping off of soul and instincts, the reduction by apocope to puppet status" (p. 74). Yet Burgess, with frightening regularity, does exactly this. Every book has at least one very vivid scene of retching (some have four or five) serving frequently to deflate pretensions of one sort or another, to remind the animal that he

is

an animal.

If, in Pope's words, "the fresh vomit runs forever green" throughout Burgess's works, special attention must still be paid to *Enderby* and *Nothing Like the Sun*, two novels in which the grossness and uncleanness of the flesh are almost disproportionately emphasized, perhaps as a direct result of the fact that both novels deal with the exalted calling of the poet, the artist. Both novels contain circumstantial descriptions of particularly nasty deaths. In

Enderby

the death of the poet Rawcliffe, in

Nothing Like The Sun

the death of the poet Robert Greene, are described in painful detail and witnessed by the protagonists. In both cases, the physical corruption leads to a kind of spiritual regeneration, though in

Nothing Like The Sun

an almost spiritual ecstasy can also lead to physical corruption when Shakespeare, having exhausted "both the Indias of spice and mine" with his dark lady, comes down with a dreadful dose of the clap. Both Enderby and Shakespeare wallow in a fleshly morass, Shakespeare in sexual escapades of one sort or another, Enderby in the more solitary pleasures of flatulence and defecation. Shakespeare is shudderingly aware of the dirtiness of it all and would like to be quit of it, or at least be able to transform it.

Was there not somewhere a clean world? Theocritan shepherds piped --Damon, Lycidas, Syphilus (that was the name; that was from Fracastor)-- but I saw them too eaten, their sheep with foot-rot, the southern torrents crunching their mean shelters like apples. I turned to the tales of Greek and Trojan and expected to find again what I had known as a boy --war all smiling postures of the dance, a game of buffeting with reed spears. But, of course, they were like ourselves. They were braggarts, cowards, traducers, whores...

Here, then, was the end of all sweetness. But I wept to see the end of the honey days, winced to turn Cressida into a whore of the court. Dust hath closed Helen's eye. But disease had closed it long before --a swollen ring of corruption. Die in dust but live in filth. Well, if we are to live with it we must somehow ennoble it. (pps 217-218)

Enderby, on the other hand, perfectly comfortable in his sinful earth, is baffled and annoyed by the requirements of love, miserably discontented as a honeymooning tourist in Rome, but perfectly happy when he sees his wife Vesta coming up with her lunch.

The most important similarity in both books is the way Burgess associates literary elegance or

spiritual profundity with the physically disgusting. In a moment of desperation, Enderby asks himself: "Was anything he could now do as a poet of any value to the world or God the ultimate *noumenon*?

Graarp, answered his stomach, like some new mode of communication" (p. 358). And of course Enderby's habits of composition deserve mention as well. He writes only while seated on the bathroom throne, where the music of the spheres is inevitably counterpointed by bowel music. In the same manner, Shakespeare's elegant letter to Southhampton (NLTS, pps. 97-98) is counterpointed by the sights, sounds, and smells of London, some of them exhilarating, some disgusting. In an earlier scene, in fact, young Will both vomits and composes verse at the same time. In both of these novels Burgess is telling us that all the ladders start not in "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" but in the equally foul and much less poetic guts and glands of the poet. Burgess is unequivocal; the mind, culture's slave, is also seen as the body's poor pensioner. Its productions, however rarified, are by-products of glandular agitation. Burgess writes near the end of

Nothing Like the Sun

: "There is the flesh and the flesh makes all. Literature is an epiphenomenon of the flesh" (p. 222).

There is, according to Burgess, at least one more factor that limits the already sadly dependent mind, and that is the past. History is to culture as time is to space. Both provide the conditions in which the mind can work and both, therefore, help to define and limit it. When Burgess speaks of the past, he only occasionally deals with history in our larger sense of the word. Ennis, for example, an ex-Catholic like so many of Burgess's heroes, finds that because of his past he could never really love his Anglican wife Laurel or his Anglican girl friend Lavinia. "He did not love Laurel; he did not love Lavinia. They were out of his world, an older world than that of the braying Oxford vicars, the cold embraces, the cold climate" (VB p. 149). More often, however, the past is a distinctly personal one, one that conditions the present and makes certain actions inevitable and others impossible. Enderby hates Rome, hates the history of his own culture, just as he has hated and sought to escape his own personal history, dominated by a vile and hideous stepmother. In fact, he calls Rome the Stepmother of the West. Enderby's life, even Enderby's poetry, is a conditioned reflex, an attempt to escape that loathsome stepmother. "He nodded several times, standing there naked in rainy Italy, thinking that it was a mother he had always wanted, not a stepmother, and he had made that mother himself in his bedroom, made her out of the past, history, myth, the craft of verse" (p. 159). It is the past, more than culture and as much as his gross body, that conditions Enderby; just as it is the past, more than his body and as much as his culture, that conditions the agonized Crabbe, dreaming constantly of his first wife and her death. At one point Crabbe makes a connection, at least a metaphorical one, between the impositions of the body and those of the past. " 'History,' said Crabbe, battering his pain with words at random. 'The best thing to do is put all that in books and forget about it. A book is a kind of lavatory. We've got to throw up the past, otherwise we can't live in the present. The past has got to be killed.' But in saying that, off his guard with the pain in his foot, he reverted to his own past, and pronounced the words in the Northern style, the style of his childhood" (p. 517).

Despite its irony, the passage is a cry for simplicity and freedom, analogous to Shakespeare's wish that he might somewhere find a "clean world" --a bare stage and wraith-like actors, appearing *ex nihilo* and vanishing without a trace. And it is only natural that, having constructed a world so full of cultural impedimenta, the burdens of the flesh, and constricting memories, Burgess should wonder sometimes about what remains of individual personality or, even more important, of the possibility of free choice. For Burgess as for Milton, the possibility of free choice means the possibility of sin. This, of course, is the central problem of

A Clockwork Orange

and accounts for the savage hatred of psychiatrists present both there and in

Enderby

. The psychiatrist, who sees evil as a delusion to be antiseptically eliminated, adds the final disability, the last manacle to a mind already burdened with its body, its culture, and its past. One reason that Burgess is less than enthusiastic about the unifying possibilities of American culture is that he sees it --and the Soviet Union for that matter --as societies devoted to the elimination of even the possibility of sin. As Paul Hussey tells an incredulous Soviet secret policeman: "Indifferent ways our societies move towards the same goal --the creation of a new kind of man who shall be sinless" (HFB, p. 154). In

A Vision of Battlements

Mendoza, the soon-to-be-expatriate American officer, links both America and Russia with Pelagianism. " 'You heard of Pelagius?...He's been called the great British heretic. He didn't hold with Original Sin.' 'I've heard of him vaguely'. 'He was the father of the two big modern heresies --material progress as a sacred goal; the State as God Almighty...One has produced Americanism, which is only a mental climate....And then there's Russia" (p. 122). Mendoza, like the hero, Richard Ennis, (whose first initial and last name, read backwards, spell "sinner," and about whom his mistress says, only half ironically, "You always knew about sin," p. 39) is indeed looking for sin, because in some measure to find it is to find freedom.

The basic problem posed by most of Burgess's novels remains, and it remains unsolved. What is left of a man after what has been provided by his culture, shaped by his body, and conditioned by his past has been subtracted. The question itself implies a possibly invalid kind of romantic individualism, the feeling that there ought to be something which is private, ours alone, something which owes nothing to the importuning world. It is so easy to be submerged in a culture, buried in a body, a thrall to the past, and many of Burgess's characters struggle almost frantically to avoid this kind of absorption. Paul Hussey, in *Honey for the Bears*, tells an illustrative fable of a man born on the border of two states, two cultures. Both urge him to choose one side or another; and he resists the blandishments of both, knowing that each simply wants to gobble him up (pps. 169-171). Lydgate, in

Devil of a State

responds with desperate anger to a dream in which he is told that "taking involveth giving, that we are all members of one another, that the perfect round of man and woman in hardly contrived harmony is a shadow or figure of that heavenly round or harmony in which we are destined ultimately to merge our shrieking selfhood, becoming one with the one with the one

with the..." Lydgate's own shrieking selfhood can only respond "Shut up shut up shut up" (p. 175). Enderby also, resisting women, resisting foreign cultures, hugs his loneliness to himself, but again the results are pathetic:

"I can get a job," said Enderby, growing angry. "I'm not reliant on anybody. I can be independent." Then he felt tears of self-pity coming. "The poet," he said, whimpering, "is best left to live on his own." Through his tears he had confused images of Dantesque eagles flitting round lightning-shot peaks. He left the edge of the bed and went to stand in a corner. "The poet," he said, blubbering like that seven-year-old Elizabethan bridegroom who had cried to go home with his father (p. 167).

To the degree that characters like Enderby and Lydgate manage to preserve their aloofness, they pay, like Milton's Satan, a terrible price. Some of Burgess's characters are sexually impotent; most are failed husbands or chilly bachelors. There is not a happy love affair in the lot. The reason, perhaps, is not far to seek. Absorption is death; and what a man has carefully, desperately kept back from his culture, his history, or his body, he is not likely to sacrifice to anyone else.

The novels are full of instances in which the characters decide to retrench, to withdraw from the contagion off the world's slow stain into an attitude of Promethean aloofness and perhaps even defiance. Enderby, with his romantic image (really more Byronic than Dantesque) of eagles flitting about lightning-scarred peaks, ends up blubbering, the most dependent of them all. Shakespeare, sickened by the wretched excesses of his lust, takes a survey of corruption and resolves to leave it: "the Fleet's stink, a boil on my thigh, the wretched mound of rotting shit that lies to fester in the sun, the diseases that heave and bubble in pustular quietness all over the city and the world. It is time to rise all above the body and live in a making soul" (p. 152). Yet he does not do so and soon finds himself corrupted by syphilis. Crabbe, disturbed by the imperviousness of the East, thinks of three lines from Hopkins: " 'Or what is else? There is your world within./ There rid the dragons, root out there the sin./ Your will is law in that small commonweal.' ... The time has come to start thinking about his private life" (p. 522). Yet Crabbe is literally and culturally drowned, loses his identity in the solvent of Malaya. The hope that each of these characters has of rescuing a part of himself, of cultivating, to use a mean cliché, his own private garden, proves illusory.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan claims that he "brings/ A mind not to be changed by place or time" (1, 252-253). It is a vain boast for Satan; it is an impossible dream in the world of Burgess's novels. The voice we hear there is not the voice of Milton's Satan or of Prometheus but a more

compassionate version of Montaigne, with much of that author's breadth of reference and bittersweet wisdom. Both, though Burgess with more pity, might have asked the same question: "Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous, as this miserable and wretched creature, which is not so much as master of himself, exposed and subject to offences of all things, and yet dareth call himself Master and Emperour of this universe."

[Note 4](#)

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Chapel Hill, 1969



1. Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, 160. [Return to article](#) .

2. Anthony Burgess, *Devil of a State*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968. p. 282. All subsequent single citations will be included in the body of the text. All quotations from Burgess are taken from the Ballantine paperback editions of the following novels:

- *Nothing Like the Sun*, 1965 (NLTS)
- *A Clockwork Orange*, 1965 (C0)
- *Honey for the Bears*, 1965 (HFB)
- *The Right to an Answer*, 1966 (RTA)
- *The Long Day Wanes*, 1966 (LDW)
- *A Vision of Battlements*, 1966 (VB)
- *Tremor of Intent*, 1966 (TI)

- *The Doctor is Sick*, 1967 (DS)
- *Devil of a State*, 1968 (DOS)
- *Enderby*, 1969 (E)

The dates given are those of the Ballantine editions. When the context does not make the source of the quotations sufficiently clear, the above abbreviations will be used in the citations.

[Return to article](#)

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3. In *Enderby*, *The Long Day Wanes*, and *The Right to an Answer* respectively. [Return to article](#)

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4. Michel de Montaigne, "An Apology of Raymond Sebond" in *Essays*, trans. by John Florio. New York: Modern Library, n.d., p. 396.

[Return to article](#)

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