

Burgess's Any Old Iron: An Apocalyptic Epic

By [Geoffrey Aggeler](#)

Any Old Iron could perhaps be characterized as a family saga, but the scope of the family history it chronicles is so broad and encompassing that the much-overused label 'epic' comes to mind. Not since *Earthly Powers* has Burgess covered so much history in a fictional narrative. What is remarkable is how he integrates such a wide range of material while maintaining focus on his characters. He accomplishes this by the use of 'cinematic' techniques as old as Homer, the sharply realized moment caught through the eyes of the participant, the richly suggestive but unobtrusive digression, and deftly inserted flashbacks.

The narrator identifies himself in the opening paragraph as "a retired terrorist and teacher of philosophy." He mentions this in passing as he discourses on the properties of steel and why it is improbable that the legendary sword Excalibur survived into the twentieth century. A sword alleged to be Arthur's may have belonged to Attila the Hun, who may have preserved it in oil, but the narrator is skeptical about the claim of a Welsh nationalist brotherhood calling themselves the Sons of Arthur that they possessed the true Excalibur, which they call "Caledvwilch."

What follows is a history of the Jones family, beginning with the parents of Reginald Morrow Jones, who had brought the sword alleged to be Excalibur back from Soviet Russia at great personal risk. The father, an undersized Welshman named David Jones, had sailed for America on the *Titanic*, survived the sinking, and wound up as a cook in a Brooklyn restaurant catering to East European exiles. The proprietor's statuesque daughter, Ludmila Petrovna Likhutin, then chooses him for a mate after he proves himself worthy in bed.

With the outbreak of the Great War, the Joneses leave Brooklyn for England, and David Jones joins a Welsh regiment in the British Army. As in other novels, notably *The Wanting Seed* and *Napoleon Symphony*, Burgess vividly presents the horrors and agony of modern warfare from the points of view of the suffering participants who are subject to the will of the generals. The initial focus of the narration on Excalibur and subsequent references to it inevitably evoke the myth of chivalry, one of the most potent in the western psyche, and provide an ironic backdrop to the images of mindless slaughter and suffering. Like Joseph Heller and Homer, Burgess captures the cruel

grotesque comedy of war, the terrible moments when suffering human beings are turned into grotesque objects for the amusement of the unfeeling gods. Thus Heller describes the death of Kid Sampson in

Catch-22

:

There was the briefest, softest *ssst!* filtering audibly through the shattering, overwhelming howl of the plane's engines, and then there were just Kid Sampson's two pale, skinny legs, still joined by strings somehow at the bloody truncated hips, standing stock-still on the raft for what seemed a full minute or two before they toppled over backward into the water finally with a faint, echoing splash and turned completely upside down so that only the grotesque toes and the plaster-white soles of Kid Sampson's feet remained in view.

Such moments have always been part of warfare, and thousands of years before Wilfrid Owen answered Horace with *Dulce et Decorum Est* Homer showed how unheroic and indecorous death in battle can be;

Patroklos coming close up to him stabbed with a spear-thrust at the right side of the jaw and drove it on through the teeth, then hooked and dragged him with the spear over the rail, as a fisherman who sits out on the jut of a rock with line and glittering bronze hook drags a fish, who is thus doomed, out of the water, So he hauled him, mouth open to the bright spear, out of the chariot, and shoved him over on his face, and as he fell the life left him.

(*Iliad* XVI, 404-410, Lattimore trans.)

In the same ghastly comic vein, Burgess's character David Jones recounts the miserable fate of a comrade: "Dan Tetlow, that wrote the letter. He lost his manhood just one day later, poor bugger. I'll not forget in a hurry. Cheerful as a lark, lost his manhood. Walking about in his blue, whistling. Clean as a whistle they were off." (*AOI*, 62). And later in the novel, during the next war, a son named for this comrade witnesses the bloody debacle at Anzio: "He could hear Jesus bugging fucking Christ and then landmines going off. The rockets had not got rid of all the landmines. Bert Redway, by way of being a kind of mate, a thin-necked lad with respirator spectacles, had a foot blown off, and Jack Unwin was totally shattered, showering lavish blood and guts over Bill Ross, who was in his turn blown to buggery, meaning he gave limbs to all points of the compass." (

AOI, 129)

When David Jones is reported killed in action, Ludmila leaves England to join relatives in Petrograd. She arrives in time to witness some of the violence of the Russian Revolution and is wounded in one buttock during an uprising of workers and mutinous soldiers. Like the old woman in Voltaire's *Candide*, she must manage with one buttock as she endures the misery of life in the chaos of Russia in transition. But then she is overjoyed to receive a letter from her husband, whose reported death had been a mistake. With help from the Anglo-Russian Bureau

in Petrograd, she is able to return to England.

Reunited, the Joneses produce three children, whose histories take up much of the remainder of the novel. The first, a daughter, is named Beatrix, after the "creatix" of Peter Rabbit. Two sons are named for wounded comrades whom David Jones esteemed, Reginald Morrow and Daniel Tetlow. As the second long segment of the novel begins, the three children are grown, and we learn that the narrator, Harry Wolfson, is a Jew from Manchester. Delaying the revelation of a narrator's ethnicity is nothing new in Burgess's fiction. In *MF* we don't find out that the narrator is black until the very end. As Burgess explained to this writer in an interview:

"In my novel *MF* the hero does not have his race defined at the beginning because I consider the race to be irrelevant." And one of the "alembicated morals" he mockingly offers the reader is "that my race or your race must start thinking in terms of the human totality and cease weaving its own fancied achievements or miseries as a banner." His best known novel,

A Clockwork Orange

, also compels the reader to think in terms of the human totality. Having observed both the Russian

stilyagi

and the English teddy boys in action, Burgess was moved by a renewed sense of the oneness of humanity, and the murderous teenaged hooligans who are the main characters of

A Clockwork Orange

are composite creations who could be English or Russian or both.

In *Any Old Iron*, the Joneses fuse Welsh and Russian cultures, and through involvement with the narrator and his sister, Zipporah, Jewish culture as well. But while the cultures may fuse in these relationships the novel is taken up for the most part with conflicts between and within cultures. The main characters are either directly involved in or touched by World War I, the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, Arab-Jewish conflicts and a bit of terrorism by Welsh nationalists. We are left with an apocalyptic sense of twentieth century history, and there is much to suggest that this is part of Burgess's design. For one thing, he alludes directly to the *Book of Daniel* early in the novel when young David Jones is clouted by his father for "onanizing to a steel engraving of Belshazzar's Feast in the family Bible." Without actually seeing this engraving, one may gather from reading the fifth chapter of

Daniel

that there might be much to fire a young boy's libido in an artist's rendering of it. Belshazzar is in his cups when he orders the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem to be brought out and filled with wine to gratify the banqueters, among whom are wives, courtesans and concubines, presumably in various attitudes of Babylonian abandonment, uninhibited until the mysterious writing hand alarms Belshazzar. The words it inscribes are

"Mene mene tekel u-pharsin."

As Daniel explains to Belshazzar, the meaning is that God has numbered the days of his

kingdom, he himself has been weighed in the balance and found wanting, and his kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

The words themselves refer to coins, a *shekel* being a sixtieth of a *mene*, (Hebrew *mina*). *U* means "and";

pharsin

means two

pheres

, with one

pheres

being a half-shekel. The weights, or coins, are mentioned in descending value; this is in accord with the comparable descending values of the metals in chapter 2, verse 32 comprising the image with the head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. The four metals are believed to represent the Babylonian, Median, Persian, and Macedonian Greek kingdoms. The theme of a descending scale of metals representing ages of world history is also found in Hesiod's

Works and Days

, in ancient Hindu mythology, and elsewhere. (Notes to

Daniel

2:32 and 5:25 in

The Oxford Study Bible

).

As noted earlier, *Any Old Iron* begins with a discourse on the properties of steel. But steel is not the only metal that figures prominently in the saga of the Jones family. As he is dying, the father of David Jones bequeathes to him a thirty-eight pound chunk of gold, inherited from his grandfather, which remains in the family until Dan Tetlow Jones heaves it into a pond near the end of the novel. Then there is the title of the novel itself. In his

W

orks and Days

, Hesiod summarizes human history in terms of metals, beginning with a Golden Age of innocence corresponding to Eden in the Judaeo-Christian scheme. He sees his own time as the Age of Iron, a time when the old patriarchal and familial morality has dissolved and been replaced by a war of every man against his fellow: "The man who keeps his oath, the just, the good, will get no thanks; but rather evil doing and violence will be praised. Might will be right and shame will cease to be" (*Works and Days*, 182-93).

What Hesiod is describing is the modern age, and his vision of it agrees with that of Burgess in *Any Old Iron*

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In an interview quoted by John J. Stinson, Burgess said that the book "is about trying to find some absolute value--what the sword of King Arthur was supposed to symbolize." Taking this as a key, Stinson notes that "the quest for absolutes, although an eternal human need, seems to result in war and carnage, causing the reader to think that the 'old iron' is an antiquated piece of junk that might best be discarded. 'Any Old Iron' is the cry of an itinerant junkman in Britain, this suggestion of the title being reinforced by the first epigraph "*Eisen, Lumpen, Papier!* [Iron, Rags, Paper]---Arab Street Cry in Tel Aviv." (*Anthony Burgess Revisited* 127-28).

In other words, the quest for absolutes in the modern world is ultimately doomed to failure, an exercise in futility, even as the quest for the Grail in Malory's *Morte Darthur* was doomed, given the corruption of the Round Table. It would seem that Burgess evokes an apocalyptic sense of history to impart an ironic perspective that is generally pessimistic but not entirely so, though Burgess has said, "I don't think there's any optimism in the book, except the scent of oranges and tangerines in the end." (Telephone interview with Amy Edith Johnson, quoted by Stinson, *Burgess Revisited* , 131)

In a note prefacing *The Devil's Mode*, a collection of his short fiction, Burgess says that "The novella *Hun* may, by readers of my novel *Any Old Iron*, be attributed to the fictitious author Reginald Morrow if they so desire." Reginald Morrow, for whom Reg is named, is introduced early in *Any Old Iron* as "the first man David Jones had met whom he sincerely admired." Badly wounded, Morrow plans a career in writing "to show up the infamy of the world." He tells David Jones,

'I'll have no children, but my children will be my books. You're married, Taff, and you'll have kids, and if you've any sense of duty to humanity you'll bring up those kids to spit in the eye of government and piss in the mouth of all authority. And not to be taken in by the big words. We don't want this lot [the Great War] to happen again.' (*AOI*, 43)

In his novella, Attila the Hun is presented as the brutal conqueror every schoolchild meets in history books, but he also reveals a surprising anxiety about how he will be remembered by posterity. The lessons Morrow would have David Jones impart to his children are learned by them through experience, chief among them being Reg's conclusion: "The big enemy's always government." (*AOI*, 267)

Most apocalyptic works are optimistic, and their optimism is grounded upon a faith in providence. *Daniel* gives encouragement to the Jews by promising God's ultimate vindication of the righteous.

Revelation portrays history as unfolding toward the ultimate fullness of God's triumph in a new heaven and new earth. Book I of Spenser's

The Faerie Queene

presents an apocalyptic vision of Protestant Christianity triumphing over Roman Catholicism as part of an ongoing cosmic conflict between the forces of light and darkness. Burgess doesn't rule out divine providence, but, as in his dystopian books,

A Clockwork Orange

and

The Wanting Seed

, he places his faith in man as a creature of growth and potential goodness. The message of the chapter originally omitted from the American edition of

A Clockwork Orange

is that, if there is hope for man, it is in the capacity of individuals to grow and learn by suffering and error. This appears to be the message of the final chapter of

Any Old Iron

as well.

Before discussing the final chapter, however, it may be useful to consider one of the mythic patterns Burgess evokes along with his apocalyptic design. As Stinson remarks, "Readers, compelled by Burgess to do more of the interpretive work themselves than in any of his other novels excepting *MF* and *Napoleon Symphony*, will gradually see patterns emerge." (*Anthony Burgess Revisited*

, 129) One of the patterns involves the character Dan, whose name is perhaps intended to evoke the Old Testament figure. Generally regarded as mentally deficient, he, like Daniel, exhibits surprising insights. His main defining quality, however, is an obsession with fish. He is, to use the narrator's phrase, "ichthyocentric and clearly not quite the round shilling." His passion for fish is alluded to repeatedly, indeed so often that a reader feels compelled to work out its possible thematic significance.

Considering the Arthurian elements and the futility of the quest for absolute value in the modern world of the novel, one is tempted to see Dan as a Fisher King corresponding to the figure as it appears in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. According to Jessie L. Weston in her book on the Grail legend,

From Ritual to Romance, which influenced Eliot so strongly, "the Fish is a Life symbol of immemorial antiquity, and the title of Fisher has, from the earliest ages, been associated with the Deities who were held to be specially connected with the origin and preservation of Life." To fish is to seek eternity and salvation, but in the context of the modern Waste Land, as Eliot makes clear, this activity becomes dirty and degraded. Dan's constant involvement with fish leaves him with an unbearable stench that no one but his brother Reg, who has lost his sense of smell, can tolerate. And his lack of libido, in spite of his fondness for fish, evokes the impotence of the Fisher King.

Dan is captured by the Germans at Anzio, sent to a prisoner of war camp in Poland, and survives a long march home after his captors are vanquished. He is reunited with his brother Reg, who has served in the British Army as a Russian interpreter and has witnessed firsthand the bloody consequences of Churchill's acquiescence to the demands of Stalin at Yalta in the matter of the forcible repatriation of Russian citizens. In the concluding chapter, the brothers undertake what appears to be a journey into the underworld, where they dispose of both the sword and the chunk of gold.

The underworld is part of the modern British landscape, but the reader is made constantly aware of its infernal aspects. Like Dante and Virgil beginning their descent into hell, they set out on Good Friday and continue through Holy Saturday. Passing through an outdoor urinal, they notice a chalked inscription above the sink: "ALL SOAP ABANDON." A boat in the Stanley Canal loaded with human manure is piloted by a Charonlike figure. At one point they are stopped by a Cerberuslike dog, whose owner refers to the day as "Bad Friday." Even the rain above them has an infernal aspect, "filthy slanting water arrow[ing] out of a boiling sky now moonless." They come to a house abandoned but repossessed by hippies, one of whom thrums a guitar and intones a ditty reminiscent of the inscription upon the lintel of hell in the *Inferno*. The singer then quotes Mephistophilis in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*
: "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it."

The brothers finally arrive at a pond, and Reg quotes Malory's description in the *Morte Darthur* of Sir Bedivere going to the water's side with Excalibur. Like Bedivere, he hesitates, even though Excalibur is now just a "poor dull rusty bastard," but Dan prompts him to carry out his mission by heaving the chunk of gold that has become a family curse into the water. This gives Reg the courage to heave Excalibur, a.k.a. Caledvwich, after it. No hand rises to grasp the sword, and while Dan imagines that it screams, Reg assures him that it did not: "Merlin's long gone under, and there's no magic any more." (*AOI*, 385)

Reg recounts the story of the sword's disposal to Harry Wolfson while the two are walking after breakfast among the Roman ruins surrounding a kibbutz near Caesarea and he is again emphatic about the absence of any sort of magic, 'no arm clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.' They are surrounded by the pleasant aromas of oranges and tangerines mingling with the sweetness of pipe smoke, none of which Reg can appreciate. As Reg tries to articulate what he has learned and how he has come to fit himself for the modern age by grasping a chunk of the romantic past and finding it rusty, Wolfson reflects that the citrus fruits whose

fragrance they are enjoying would outlive the law of Moses, even as they outlived the Roman ruins that witnessed to "injustice that could never be avenged." For Burgess, these fruits provided a scent of optimism.

Any Old Iron was completed in 1987, when Burgess was seventy. While not one of his best novels, not on a level with *Earthly Powers*, say, or *Nothing Like the Sun*, it exhibits his powers still at their height. If one is looking for flaws, one might argue that the narrative moves in too many directions, and parts of it seem not to be clearly integrated. But reading it, one is not tempted to gloss over any part. Each segment, whether it be Dan's odyssey across Eastern Europe, or Reg's affair with the doomed Russian medical officer, Marya Ivanovna Sokolova, or Beatrix's miserable marriage to a failed American novelist, is wholly absorbing. Burgess's comic touch and logophilia are irresistible. Like Kit Marlowe, the hero of his last novel, he was always moving in new directions. We do not see the familiar Pelagian-Augustinian or Manichaeian patterns that govern history in his earlier novels. What we have instead is a more mysterious, apocalyptic or perhaps anti-apocalyptic sense of history, ironic and pessimistic but tempered by an affirmation of faith in humanity.

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