

## REFLECTIONS

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# Death Sentences

Erudite, witty, and prolific, Anthony Burgess is known to American readers as the author of *A Clockwork Orange* (1963), *Earthly Powers* (1980), and several dozen other works. But his long career as a professional writer had a beginning which, even by the dire standards of the literary world, must be considered inauspicious. He was 42, with a few novels and a desultory career as a college lecturer in Malaya and Borneo behind him, when doctors told him he had only a year to live: brain tumor. In this essay he renders with characteristic humor what might be called a portrait of the artist as a condemned man.

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*by Anthony Burgess*

**I**sighed and put paper into the typewriter. "I'd better start," I said. And I did. Meaning that, unemployable since I had less than a year to live, I had to turn myself into a professional writer.

It was January of 1960 and, according to the prognosis, I had a winter and a spring and a summer to live through and would die with the fall of the leaf. I felt too well. After the long enervation of the tropics, my wife Lynne and I were being stimulated by the winter gales of the Channel. Chill Hove sharpened the appetite, and we no longer had to feed ourselves on Singapore Cold Storage carrion and the surrealistic tubers of the Brunei market. The stay-at-home British did not realize how lucky they were. We ate stews of fresh beef, roasts of duck and chicken, sprouts and cauliflowers and Jersey potatoes. There were also daffodils from the Scilly Isles in the flower shops. England was really a demi-paradise. But the serpent of the British state had to flicker its forked tongue.

The departments of the British state

knew where I was. I was summoned to the local National Insurance office and asked what I proposed doing about sticking weekly stamps on a card. I replied that it hardly seemed worthwhile to enter the state scheme, and that the cost of my funeral would far exceed any contributions I could make to it. What was I living on? I was dying on cached Malayan dollars invested in British stock. I was writing vigorously to earn royalties for my prospective widow. When the Inland Revenue got onto me they found nothing, as yet, to tax. My coming death provoked no official sympathy. It was a statistical item yet to be realized. The coldness of the British was something that Lynne and I had become used to seeing as a property of colonial officials. We had forgotten that it was here at home as well.

Also mannerlessness. I worked out a little speech that I proposed delivering to the chinny woman who ran the news-agent-tobacconist's shop round the corner. "Madam, I have been coming here every morning for the last three (or six or nine)

months in order to buy the *Times* for myself, the *Daily Mirror* for my wife, and 80 Player's cigarettes for us both. I have meticulously said good morning on approaching your counter and on leaving it. I have also said 'please' and 'thank you' and made amiable comments on the weather. But not once has there been a reasonable phatic response from your unesteemed chinniness. It is as though bloody Trappists ran the shop." This was an intended valediction on leaving Hove, but it was never made. At the greengrocer's shop my good morning was met only by a head-jerk of inquiry as to what I wanted. Perhaps the unwillingness to say good morning had something apotropaic about it: Say the morning is good and it will turn out not to be. This must be true of American airline ticket agents, who are otherwise friendly enough.

"Good morning."

"Hi."

"Good morning."

"It sure is."

"Good morning."

"You'd better believe it."

We had been living in a region where the uneducated natives had been profuse with *tabek*, *tuan* and *selamat pagi*, *mem* and athletic with bows and hands on hearts. It was unnerving to be settling down in double cold, also to be surrounded by so much pinko-grey skin, as E. M. Forster called it. It was like being in a windy ward of the leprous. Like so many repatriates from the East, we found that the tropical past was becoming the only reality. We were in danger of turning into ex-colonial bores and eccentrics. In the winter cold I sometimes put on my suit over my pajamas: Lynne usually chose these occasions to drag me to a reach-me-down tailor's. We also drank as though we were still sweltering under a ceiling fan. For me, if I was really dying, it did not much matter. For Lynne, ingesting two bottles of white wine and a pint of gin daily, it would matter a great deal.

I got on with the task of turning myself into a brief professional writer. The term

professional is not meant to imply a high standard of commitment and attainment: It meant then, as it still does, the pursuit of a trade or calling to the end of paying the rent and buying liquor. I leave the myth of inspiration and agonized creative inaction to the amateurs. The practice of a profession entails discipline, which for me meant the production of 2,000 words of fair copy every day, weekends included. I discovered that, if I started early enough, I could complete the day's stint before the pubs opened. Or, if I could not, there was an elated period of the night after closing time, with neighbors banging on the walls to protest at the industrious clacking. Two thousand words a day meant a yearly total of 730,000. Step up the rate and, without undue effort, you can reach a million. This ought to mean 10 novels of 100,000 words each. This quantitative approach to writing is not, naturally, to be approved. And because of hangovers, marital quarrels, creative deadness induced by the weather, shopping trips, summonses to meet state officials, and sheer torpid gloom, I was not able to achieve more than five and a half novels of moderate size in that pseudo-terminal year. Still, it was very nearly E. M. Forster's whole long life's output.

Time also had to be expended on finding a house to live or die in. I did not propose meeting my maker in furnished rooms. And so, as spring approached, Lynne and I searched for a cottage in East or West Sussex. We also prepared to furnish it, wherever it was. This meant buying and storing Jacobean and deuterio-Caroline commodes and dressers at very reasonable prices. These, to me, were pledges of continued life. They were also the solidities of widowhood. When I died (but the when was being slowly modified to if), Lynne would be able to offer gin or white wine to possible suitors in a polished lonely home of her own. She was only in her late thirties and the beauty eroded by the tropics was returning. Meanwhile, in one of our two rented rooms, I worked at a novel called *The Doctor is Sick*.

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*Anthony Burgess is the author of more than 50 works of fiction and nonfiction. This essay is excerpted from his forthcoming You've Had Your Time. Reprinted with permission from Grove Weidenfeld, a division of Grove, Inc. Copyright © 1991 by Anthony Burgess.*

I clattered carefully at the dining table. To my right, dingy lace curtains occluded the view of an overgrown garden under a murky marine sky. To my left was a shabby sofa on which, before the shilling-in-the-slot gasfire, Lynne lay reading the *Daily Mirror* or a trashy novel. She had lost whatever literary taste she had ever had, except that she still adored Jane Austen, and one of my duties was to fetch her fictional garbage from the public library. If I brought Henry James or Anthony Trollope, the book would be viciously hurled at my head. It was her fault that I could not take Jane Austen seriously; it was a matter of association. If she could read trash and Jane Austen indifferently, Jane Austen had to be close to trash. But she used my ignorance of that scribbling spinster to trounce my own literary pretensions. In our cups I was catechized:

"How many daughters have Mr. and Mrs. Bennet?"

"Four, or is it five?"

"Who does Emma marry?"

"A man of decent education, appearance and income. I've forgotten his name."

"What is the play that is put on in *Mansfield Park*?"

"Something by Kotzebue, I think."

Lynne would never read any of my own books, but she would ask for selected passages from my first, *Time for a Tiger*, to be read to her when she was ill. She was not concerned with savoring literary quality; she merely wanted evocation of her own Malayan past.

I thought at first that her debased taste was a gesture of conformity to our landlady's furnishings. On the walls were pictures of monks fishing and then feasting on fish. All the friars had the same face, as if they really were brothers, which meant that artistic poverty was matched by real penury: The painter could afford only one model. There were odd knickknacks (strange that the Hebrew *naknik* should mean sausage)—ceramic buttonboxes, shell ashtrays from Brighton, all my stepmother's paraphernalia. The carpets, blankets, and sheets had holes in them. The radio with the sunburst fascia, relic of the 1930s, worked sporadically. Winds blew under the doors. Above us dwelt a young

couple living in vigorous sin: They slept heavily and let the bath overflow through our bedroom ceiling. They could not be awakened.

I apologize for the irrelevance of that *naknik*. I am evoking a time when I was composing a novel about a man drunk on words, any words, and shoving him against his will into a world of things. Elias Canetti has a novel, *Auto da Fé*, in which an aging philologist, expert in Chinese, is thrust among criminals. *The Doctor is Sick*, more Britishly and perhaps less ponderously, exploited the same situation. The hero is Edwin Spindrift, a Ph.D. whose speciality is a philology which, in the 1960s, was already out of date, and he is sent home from a college in Burma where he has been teaching phonetics. He has, as I myself had, a suspected tumor on the brain. He also has a dark-haired unfaithful wife named Sheila. In the same neurological clinic as the one where I had been probed, his tests prove positive and an operation is proposed. But he escapes from the hospital and goes looking for his wife, who he suspects is fornicating vigorously all over London. He has had his head shaven in preparation for the scalpel; he wears a woolly cap. He has no money. He gets mixed up with the same lowlife characters I had encountered in a Bloomsbury unknown to Virginia Woolf—the big man who worked in Covent Garden (mornings in the market, evenings sceneshifting in the Opera House) and kept a Tangerine mistress, the vendors of stolen watches known as the Kettle Mob (among them a masochist who paid to be flagellated), the Jewish twins who ran an illegal drinking club.

These Jewish twins, Ralph and Leo, paid a surprise visit to Hove just as I was ready to transfer them to fiction. They wanted to start a small clothing enterprise and needed 200 pounds to hire sewing machines and pay first week's wages to a young seamstress who was also, they frankly admitted, a shared doxy. We paid the money, though we foreknew the business would fail. All their businesses had failed. Their only stock in trade was their identical twinhood, useful in alibis. As for libeling them in a novel, they, or one of

them, said: "You can't say nuffink worse of us van we done already." We took them to a pub which a handlebar-moustached ex-squadron leader entered with great laughter. "Musta sold two cars today," Ralph or Leo said. When the superior barmaid served our gin, Leo or Ralph said: "Chip a couple of cubes off yer aris, iceberg." Aris was short for Aristotle, itself rhyming slang for bottle, meaning bottle and glass, meaning arse. They went back to London with a check for 200 nicker, having ensured that there were at least five Hove pubs we could no longer visit. But they were a pledge that life was going on somewhere, if not in Hove. I went back to the novel with appetite.

Spindrift is forced (by the twins) to enter a competition for handsome bald heads. He wins first prize but disapproves of the vulgarity of the contest. He shouts a filthy monosyllable on television and, anticipating Kenneth Tynan, makes history. In 1960 it was not possible to spell the word out on the page. I had to describe it as an unvoiced ladiodental followed by an unrounded back vowel in the region of Cardinal Number 7, followed by an unvoiced velar plosive. Finally Dr. Spindrift meets an old Greek acquaintance, a vendor of wine named Mr. Thanatos. Thanatos means death, but we are not sure whether Spindrift dies or recovers from his operation. Nor are we sure whether his picaresque adventures are dreams or reality. He has lived in a world of words but has ignored their referents. The referents get up to bite him, perhaps kill him. Or conceivably they only pretend to.

Spindrift is a very improbable name. I do not think it is to be found in any telephone directory. Spin is a distortion of spoon, and spindrift is seaspray. It is meant to connote the frivolous insubstantial thrown off by the reality of life's heavy water. Dr. Spindrift gained his doctorate by writing a thesis on the Yiddish prefix *shm*, as used derisively in New York Jewish English or Yidglish. I doubt if such a thesis would be possible. I doubt if Spindrift ever went, as he alleges, to Pasadena to take his doctoral degree. He is insubstantial to his creator. He is useless to his wife, as his libido has failed him, and it is in order for her to seek sexual sustenance in a London

of layabouts and failed artists only too ready to give it. He offers words instead of love. Even the small criminals he is thrown among are vigorously transacting in a world of realities. The whisky sold in the illegal drinking club may be watered, and the kettles sold on building sites by the mobsters may cease to tick after a day or so, but they are more substantial than words. Spindrift is only spindrift, a feeder of philological pobs, and he deserves to die. He has a neural disease, but this is only a confirmation of a psychical disease—the morbidity of a useless specialization. Giving a pair of improvident Jewish twins a check for 200 nicker was a recognition, on Spindrift's creator's part, that life was more than words, that Spindrift could not have been fabricated except by somebody dangerously like him. To fail at treading cloth was better than succeeding with words.

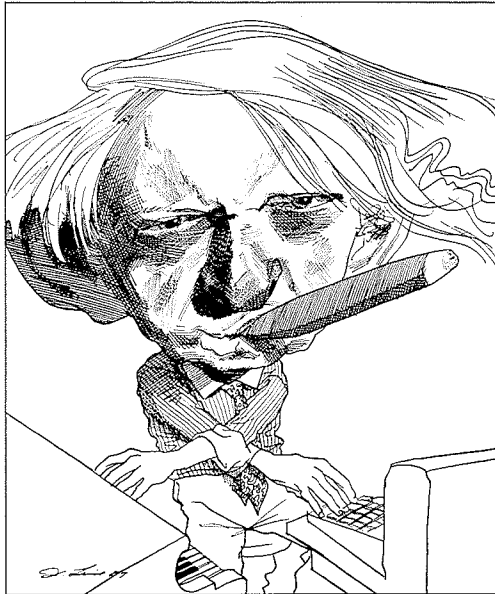
On the other hand, a work of fiction is a solidity that can be handled, weighed, sold, and its task is to present or distort the real world through words. Words are real things, but only if they evoke real things. But things become real only when they are named. And we can only know reality through our minds, which function through structural oppositions, typically realized in phonemes and morphemes. But there is only one knowable mind, and that is mine or yours. The solipsism suggested in *The Doctor is Sick*—the external world can be confirmed only by one perceiving mind, even if it is deranged, but what do we mean by derangement?—is a tenable metaphysical position, but I was, am, trying to be a kind of comic novelist playing with a few ideas. Perhaps it was inevitable that the Germans should make more of this particular novel than the British. There have been two translations—*Der Doktor ist Üebergeschnappt* and *Der Doctor ist Defekt*—and a number of scholarly dissertations from the universities of the free Republik. The British have taken it as mere, rather demented and certainly tasteless, entertainment.

Dr. Spindrift is not altogether myself, but some of his experiences are based on my own, not least the failure of the libido. A Pakistani doctor at the Hospital for

Tropical Diseases had lilted the term with relish and regret when questioning me about my sexual life. Whether it was part of a neuropathological syndrome was never made clear. The fact was that sexual relations between my wife and myself had practically ceased in 1959, and I did not need a clinical report to tell me why. If, at night, I was too drunk to perform the act and, in the morning, too crapulous, it was probable that I soaked myself in gin in order to evade it. I wanted to evade it because of my wife's vaunted infidelity, intermitted in valetudinarian Hove but, I suspected, ready to erupt again when, if, we settled in a randier ambience. I was prepared to accept the discipline of love but not the abandon of sex—neither in marriage nor, for the moment, elsewhere. Sex, but not too much of it, could be reserved to my novels.

No husband can object to his wife's infidelities if she does not blab too much about them. But to hear about the prowess of a Punjabi on Bukit Chandan or a Eurasian on Batu Road is the best of detumescents. Marital sex develops a routine, but the routines of a stranger are a novelty. Infidelities are a search for novelty, and *dongiannismo* is more properly a woman's disease than a man's. Don Juan's tragedy is that he finds all women the same in the dark and that they, finding novelty in his routine, are innocent enough to believe that the physical revelation is love. His tragic flaw is to choose the innocent, who pursue him to death. Women thrive on novelty and are easy meat for the commerce of fashion. Men prefer old pipes and torn jackets. Women love gifts (finding novel presents for Lynne on her birthday and at Christmas was strenuous work), and, given the chance,

they love amorous variety. The dissatisfaction of wives unable to find it has become, since Flaubert, one of the stock themes of fiction. The flesh of my wife was honeycolored and sumptuous, but I could not be attracted. She told me how often it had been handled by others, and how well some of them had handled it. I was perhaps better than A and B but not so good as X or Y. I could not subdue my pride, which was a grievous fault, and I preferred to put myself out of the running. This was marital cruelty, though not according to the Catholic church, which blessed chaste unions. I was always ready to call on my abandoned faith when I lacked the courage to make my own moral decisions.



There was never any argument about the deeper value of our marriage, which could be viewed as a miniature civilization or micropolis. Or, put it another way, it was complex semiotics. There was a fund of common memories to draw on, a series of codes, a potent shorthand. It was the ultimate intimacy, except that it was no longer physical. I had reacted to infidelity by

condoning it; if, as there was, there was to be more of it, that would not affect the intimacy. But the resentment would be all on her side, and it would take forms unrelated to sex. One form would be unwillingness to read my work and to take malicious pleasure in bad reviews of it. Another, not really anomalous, would be to spread the rumor that she herself had produced it, myself not being quite clever enough. "Anthony Burgess" was, after all, a pseudonym, and it need not be mine. George Eliot and the Bell brothers were women. If she fought for the work, which she did, if insulting agents, publishers, and reviewers could be termed fighting, she would be fighting for

herself. She cried out for notice while doing nothing to earn it. What she had achieved, which she seemed to me to overvalue, all lay in the past—head girl of her school, hockey and tennis player for her county, swimmer for the principality, pet of Professor Namier, minor star of the Board of Trade and the Ministry of War Transport. She identified with her father, successful headmaster of a minor Welsh grammar school, the more so as she could not quell guilt over the death of her mother. Our marriage was bristling with tensions, but it was still a marriage. It was sustained by love, which I do not have to define.

I wrote *The Doctor is Sick* in six weeks. As Lynne never read it, it was otiose to wonder whether she would have seen anything of herself in the character of Sheila Spindrift, erring wife. Sheila was dark, anyway, and Lynne was blonde, and, to a woman, the dichotomy is temperamental. All women, with the exception of Ann Gregory, might accept that blondness is a reality that cosmetics cannot efface. Lynne saw herself in the heroine of my Malayan books, what she knew of them, and accepted the blonde, chaste, patrician lady as an adequate portrait. The patrician aspect was important in itself, besides relating her to a writer more important than I. A family tree, engrossed by her primary-schoolteacher sister, was imported, and the name of Lady Charlotte Isherwood of Marple Hall was writ large in gold. The aristocratic heresy is convenient to those too lazy to develop talent or bitterly aware that they have none. Blue blood is a fine substitute for genius: To Evelyn Waugh his own genius was little more than a calling card for the houses of the great. Class is the great British reality, and the more books I wrote the more Lynne termed me an unregenerable guttersnipe. Many critics agreed with her. As for all my fictional women after Fenella Crabbe, these were to Lynne mere interchangeable mannequins for whom she kindly devised wardrobes. But she was not interested in how these women, dressed by her, looked, nor in what they did. I had, with *The Doctor is Sick*, completed a book that she hoped was saleable. Now stop reading Richard

Ellmann's life of Joyce, just published, and get on with the next.

It had been suggested to me by James Michie of Heinemann that I take a literary agent. He recommended one, Peter Janson-Smith, and I took the train to Charing Cross to see him, the typescript of the new novel under my arm. I would prove small beer to Janson-Smith, who was to handle the work of Ian Fleming, Professor C. Northcote Parkinson, and Gavin Maxwell, but of his goodness he took me on. He began by selling *The Doctor is Sick* to Heinemann, which had already contracted for it, but with a slightly enhanced advance that covered the agent's commission. Janson-Smith was, I suppose, a good agent, but I am not sure what a good agent is. The best agent, it seemed to me at the time, was the one who would try to place a first novel, but I do not think there were many such agents around. When I had published *Time for a Tiger* in the 1950s, received many encouraging reviews, and seen the work go into a second impression, I began to receive letters from agents: I had cranked up the car in freezing weather, and now they would drive from the back seat. What I wanted from my agent was publishers' commissions, foreign sales, film options. They were slow to come. I was, it must be remembered, trying to make a living from literature.

I was to do better when I ceased to have an agent. I now gravely doubt the value of a literary middleman. The publisher himself, when you come to think of it, is not much more than that. In the 18th century Mr. Dilly, a bookseller, could commission a dictionary from Samuel Johnson and not have to be persuaded to display the book in his window. The essential trinity is the author, the printer-binder, and the vendor with a cash register. In the United States this trinity has become a unity. A young writer, despairing of a publisher's acceptance of his work, will type and copy his book and then sell it on the street. There was, I remember, a young Californian who wrote an interesting but, in publisher's terms, uncommercial trilogy in which the characters of the Popeye cartoons became figures in a theological allegory. He printed his work on an IBM machine and hawked his copies. He sold only

about 400 of each volume but registered an 80 percent profit. He managed to live. Later he took drugs and died, but this does not invalidate his practice. With both agents and publishers hungry for bestsellers, literature will have to end up as a cottage industry.

When bestsellers are boosted, the number of languages into which they are translated is proclaimed with pride. But multiple translation is no index of anything. It is the agent's task to find foreign publishers but not to choose the translator, and many translations are very bad. They cannot be all that bad with what I have termed Class 1 novelists—those in whom language is a discardable quality—but with Class 2 writers, those who are given to poetic effects, wordplay, and linguistic ambiguity, the translator himself must be a committed writer. I have achieved a reading knowledge of a fair number of the Indo-European languages, and I insist on seeing translations before they are published. This is the kind of time-consuming work which few agents would be willing or qualified to take on, but it is essential if howlers or total misrepresentations are to be avoided. A lot of translations have to be rejected as inept. In a novel of mine, *Earthly Powers*, the injunction "Go to Malaya and write about planters going down with DT's" was rendered into Italian to the effect of writing about planters committing fellatio with doctors of theology. A self-respecting author will never boast about the number of foreign countries that know his work: He will consult accuracy and elegance of translation and pride himself, often in old age, on having assembled a limited but reliable stable. Agents will sell to anyone, if the money seems right. They are quantitative people.

They are buffers between authors and publishers, but, to the author, they often

seem closer to the publisher than to himself. They will quarrel with an author and even reject him as a nuisance, but they dare not make an enemy of a publisher. They will push saleability more than literary merit, which can sometimes creep into a publisher's list because of a package deal: I will let you have this undoubted bestseller if you will accept this unprofitable pastiche of Henry James. Done. Agents dare not be overconcerned with literary merit, as opposed to adequate literacy, when they have many typescripts to sell. They usually disclaim the higher critical competence. Janson-Smith cautiously made a literary judgment of *The Doctor is Sick* and suggested a change. I snarled, and he withdrew. He knew he was exceeding his brief.

The trip to London to meet Janson-Smith, in an office of which I can remember only a large can of lighter fuel, should also have been crowned by a visit to the Neurological Institute for a spinal tap. I did not go. I feared that there would be such an increase in the protein volume of the cerebrospinal fluid that the year to live might be curtailed and discourage a new novel. My failure to turn up seems to have been translated into a negative report from the laboratory, for I received a letter from Sir Alexander Abercrombie informing me that the protein content of my spinal liquor had gone down dramatically and I was now kindly allowed to live. This did not provoke elation but rather new caution: I had to be more careful when crossing the street. If, as I wished, I were to start a very long novel about a minor poet living in a lavatory, the gods might contrive pernicious anemia or galloping consumption to thwart me. Now that death from a cerebral tumor was crossed off the list, there was still a limitless list of ailments to draw on, all lethal. Life itself is lethal but, we hope, not yet.