REVIEWS

The Truth of Beauty and the Goodness of Chaos: Jim Clarke's Nietzschean Burgess

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Clarke, Jim. *The Aesthetics of Anthony Burgess: Fire of Words*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xviii + 303 pages. ISBN 978-3-319-66410-1. Hb. £49.29.

In his autobiography, Anthony Burgess defends his own, sometimes audaciously successful, sometimes respectably failed, attempts at achieving the impossible claiming that "no art can progress unless failure is sometimes risked" (296). Whether literary criticism can be regarded as an art or not, the author of the first monographic treatment of Anthony Burgess's work as a novelist that has appeared in more than a decade and half does exactly that: he risks failure in order to generate progress. What Jim Clarke's book-length study endeavors to do is nothing less than to provide a consistent and comprehensive theoretical framework for the interpretative evaluation of the work produced by one of the most prolific and versatile twentieth-century English novelists of recognized literary quality.

The risks involved are clearly stated by Clarke in his "Introduction"—if not in fact suggested by the apparently old-fashioned title *The Aesthetics of Anthony Burgess*. The word "aesthetics" is seldom seen on the cover of any recently published scholarly book. What we have been conditioned in the past thirty years or so to expect are critical works calling themselves the *poetics* or, preferably, the *politics* of one thing or the other. It may in itself raise some eyebrows to imply, as the title does, that such value-laden concepts as the true, the good, or indeed the *beautiful* could carry any significance other than the historical. Surely, the author of a book with such a seemingly outmoded title must be swimming against the tide, heroically struggling against overwhelming theoretical currents still washing the shores of academia. The choice of a writer whose maverick cultural, political, and religious conservatism is described as "unfashionable" in the "Introduction" can reinforce the impression that what one is dealing with here is a deliberate act of academic defiance (1). But is it that, indeed?

The answer to such a question about Clarke's authorial intentions cannot be any more conclusive than his own response to queries formulated by himself or inherited from his scholarly predecessors. What may weaken the proposition that Clarke daringly challenges the value-skeptical consensus of

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his age is the reader's growing suspicion that Clarke's decision to call his exegetical system *aesthetics* may indicate motives other than the intention to defy the preferences of the still dominant critical idiom. As one reads on, it becomes clear that highlighting the aesthetics of a novelist's fiction is meant to act as a corrective to existing approaches specifically applied to Anthony Burgess. The critical literature surveyed by Clarke in his "Introduction" persistently relies on discourses that have more to do with popular theology and misunderstood ideology than what is really important about his subject's achievement, that is, Anthony Burgess's *art*. As it is implied in Clarke's choice of an approach indicated in the title, the system of thought best suited to the appreciation of artistic qualities happens to be aesthetics.

And yet, Jim Clarke's system-building thinking testified by the clearly articulated and methodically argued thesis concerning the aesthetics underlying Burgess's evolving artistic vision entails a scholarly credo analogous to, if not entirely identical with, Burgess's own *ars poetica*. "Fiction," affirms Burgess in an early essay of his, "can do little more than suggest that the world is bigger than it looks and that *it is in order to seek a pattern in it*" (qtd. in Clarke 23, italics added). Such a belief in the legitimacy of seeking a pattern in what tends to be regarded as a jumble of meaningless coincidence may be just as unfashionable in our skeptical climate of opinion as some of Burgess's controversial pronouncements about gender, class, or literary value. However, the seemingly anachronistic epistemological optimism of the quote appropriated by Clarke is perfectly in tune with his choice of a theoretical matrix—Camille Paglia's overarching conception of art history. Although neither possibly influencing nor demonstrably being influenced by Burgess, Paglia asserts a similar belief in the orderly nature of the universe, or at least that part of the universe which she claims to be sufficiently familiar with: Western culture. "I believe," Paglia proclaims in the belatedly published "Preface" to her now celebrated, now maligned *Sexual Personae*, "that history has shape, order, and meaning" (102).

Some familiarity with Paglia's contribution to cultural criticism is required for the understanding of Burgess's aesthetics as conceived by Clarke. Setting up his system, Clarke makes a clean break with the interpretative paradigms of Burgess's vaunted Manicheism predicated on the fundamental opposition of good versus evil and his also self-explanatory dichotomy pitting (pseudo-)Augustinian grace against (supposedly) Pelagian free will. It is such a binary system of critical assessment that successive generations of Burgess-scholars happily took it over from the subject of their exegesis, who, in the manner of his own avowed predecessor James Joyce, knew only too well how to pre-program posterity's response to his work. And yet, innovative as it may

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be, the conceptual framework with which Clarke proposes to replace these misleading, Burgess-bequeathed dichotomies is no less of an essential binary than the two-pronged critical discourse that he dispenses with. What is introduced as a new explanatory tool by Clarke is the ultimately mythological opposition of the instinct-driven, community-oriented, chaotically creative, dark demiurge here and the rational, egotistically individual, tidy and sunlight-drenched divinity there. In other words, Clarke works with a variant of Friedrich Nietzsche's opposed principles of the Dionysian versus the Apollonian, propounded by the German philosopher in *The Birth of Tragedy*. An important modification to Nietzsche's oppositional pair was made by Clarke's immediate theoretical inspiration, Camille Paglia. What thus underlies Clarke's exegetical system is the (idiosyncratically) feminist thinker's re-gendering, in her *Sexual Personae*, of Dionysus as a historically masculinized avatar of the originally female, chthonic, that is, earthly or subterranean, ur-goddess who, in her various guises, provides the creative impulse to a long line of Western cultural icons from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson.

In Clarke's analysis, it is the opposition between the Muse-inspired, Dionysian, artist—or *artiste manqué*—and the self-deified, Apollonian, creator of the Nietzschean-Paglian typology, whose shape-shifting appearances drive the evolution of Burgess's fictional "duoverse." This trajectory is described by Clarke to have taken Burgess from one Paglian pole to another, followed, at the end of the novelist's career, by an attempted synthesis of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Such an aesthetically demarcated itinerary of mythological antitheses took Burgess from his first-written novel, *A Vision of Battlements*, through his major work represented by *A Clockwork Orange*, *Napoleon Symphony*, and *Earthly Powers*, among others, to his posthumously published verse-novel, *Byrne*. Neither the precise direction that this journey took, nor the specific destination it finally reached, should be revealed in a review which is meant to arouse, rather than satisfy, curiosity. It would also be a spoiler of sorts to divulge how such external factors as Burgess's exposure to the methods and principles of anthropological structuralism or his involvement with Hollywood filmmaking contributed, in Clarke's understanding, to the unfolding of the novelist's Dionysian-Apollonian aesthetics.

More in tune with the expectations pertinent to book-reviewing is the obligation to cover, without fully uncovering, any really significant contributions to its chosen field made by the work introduced, however distant some of these may seem from the book's thematic core. One far from marginal but less immediately topic-relevant contribution is Clarke's tentative answer to the question, asked by a number of earlier critics—including the writer of this review—but most poignantly formulated by David Lodge, about

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Burgess's place in literary history. The query proposed by Lodge runs like this: "was Burgess among the last of the literary modernists, or among the first postmodernists, in English fiction?" (qtd. in Clarke 262). Again, it would be telling to cite Clarke's answer to Lodge's question in full, but it may be in place to suggest how he arrives at it. It was, in Clarke's reading, Burgess's life-long interest in the psychological mechanics and aesthetic principles of artistic creation, enhanced by his engagement with poststructuralist theories of authorship that prompted him to engage in frequent metaleptic play in his later novels. The specific nature of Burgess's signature metafictionality is considered by Clarke to be the major point of orientation where it comes to assigning a position to Burgess's fictional work on the modern-postmodern continuum.

Those wishing to find Anthony Burgess's place in the recent history of English fiction, while discovering how the novelist's Dionysian-Apollonian aesthetics finally worked out, had better consult Clarke's refreshingly original, truly comprehensive, and highly readable contribution to literary scholarship in general and Burgess-criticism in particular. *The Aesthetics of Anthony Burgess* provides shining proof of the often forgotten fact that scholarly, as well as creative, writing can make the attentive reader sense the fire of words.

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