"Espionage is the secret theatre of our society. In the large back rooms we find out who we are — what we want, what are our ethical priorities, what freedoms we value, and what other freedoms we will give up to protect them".
– John Le Carré, cited by Charles Nicholl in *The Reckoning*

Anthony Burgess did not live long enough to see the rise of the world wide web, and the growth of the search engine as the source of all information. He might well have been amused by the way that careless internet searches mentioning his name will often suggest items relating to the Cambridge spies Burgess and McLean, the double agents who, with Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, and a fifth man, formed a spy ring to pass information to the Soviet Union during the cold war. Roger Lewis, in his scurrilous and ill-informed biography of Burgess suggested, on no particular evidence, that the novelist Burgess was a spy too, working for MI5, and acquiring enough money to decamp to Malta as a result. Having accused Burgess of concealing his espionage activities, Lewis makes allegations based on unattributable conversations with an unnamed Curzon Street contact, and offers a frankly ludicrous interpretation of the words on the banners of Alex's bedroom in *A Clockwork Orange*, suggesting they are a coded reference to a US secret military establishment. Certainly, it is true that spies interested Burgess – he attempted several James Bond screenplays, and produced several novels in the sixties – *Honey for the Bears*, *Tremor of Intent* – that dealt with the

contemporary condition of the spy. Indeed, the idea of the spy seems to be a recurring motif in much of Burgess's work. He frequently offers the reader a portrait of a man – and it is nearly always a man – whose life as an outsider figure is bound up with the need, or desire, to spy, either on a personal level or for the state. It is arguable that at no time in its history before the advent of the cold war was Britain (or at least England) so entrenched in a culture of espionage as during the Elizabethan period, so it is not surprising that to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Marlowe's death, Burgess produced a novel which dealt with the poet's life as a spy: *A Dead Man in Deptford*.

The most comprehensive account of Marlowe's life as a spy is in Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning*, which combines painstaking academic research with narrative verve. One of the epigraphs that Nicholl uses in that book is the John le Carré line that I have used for the title of this paper. It is clear that Burgess must have used Nicholl's book as preparation for his own. Indeed, the proof copy of the novel acknowledges the fact rather more openly than the final version. One can only speculate as to why Burgess originally named one of Kyd's torturers after Nicholl – perhaps he was dismayed at being beaten to publication.

Burgess wrote his undergraduate thesis on Marlowe, and he dramatises the occasion of its writing in his "Author's Note" to *A Dead Man in Deptford*, recalling the German bombardment of Manchester, whilst he, allowed to defer his call-up to the army in order to complete his degree, typed furiously against the backdrop of fires and explosions:

> The visions of hell in *Dr Faustus* seemed not too irrelevant. "I'll burn my books – ah, Mephistophilis." The *Luftwaffe* was to burn my books and even my thesis.[1]

The reader, especially one who had followed Burgess's career to this almost terminal point – *A Dead Man in Deptford* was the last book in the Burgess canon to be published in his lifetime – might reflect on his decision to revisit the compelling subject of his university days. Like Shakespeare in *Nothing Like the Sun*, Burgess uses an anniversary as the impetus for his work. Just as the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth in 1964 occasioned his fictional 'WS', so the quatercentenary of Marlowe's death in 1993 occasions his treatment of Shakespeare's contemporary. But Marlowe, as Burgess acknowledges, lives, in the literary sense, in Shakespeare's shadow; and this is a useful, if obvious metaphor for the shadowy dealings that Burgess addresses in the later novel. Marlowe, whose death in 1593 is even now disputed by the

---

[1] Anthony Burgess, *A Dead Man in Deptford* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p.271

fanatics of the Marlowe Society, remains a subject of speculation, possibly even more so than Shakespeare, whose authorship is perennially brought into question by both crackpots and serious scholars. Some members of the Marlowe Society even believe that Marlowe, mysteriously not dead and spirited out of the back room in Deptford to some place of safety abroad, then commenced to produce most of the works attributed to Shakespeare. They campaigned, successfully, to have a question-mark inserted after “1593” on his memorial window in Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey. It is a pleasant conceit, and one that fits well with the game of bluff and counterbluff that Burgess’s fictional Marlowe - and Charles Nicholl’s historical Marlowe – engage in.

That Burgess was intrigued by Marlowe is no surprise, given his predilection for focusing on central characters at odds with society: we think of Crabbe in the Malayan trilogy, Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, Enderby, Toomey in *Earthly Powers*, Spindrift in *The Doctor is Sick*, amongst many others. Burgess likes to put his characters in situations where they must perforce take on the role of outsider, other, stranger – and spy.

In addition, in the case of Marlowe, Burgess is able to introduce the theological debates that enliven so much of his work. Marlowe’s

mission to seek out recusant Catholics in France allows Burgess to introduce his oft-repeated motif of the enduring Catholic tradition of the English north-west, this time in the figure of Father Pryor, the "lined and croaking man from Lancashire, where the old faith had held out the longest."[2]

What strikes the reader of *A Dead Man in Deptford*, and of Nicholl's *The Reckoning*, is the similarity between the world of the Elizabethan spy and the Cold War world of the fifties and sixties, memorably evoked by Burgess in *Honey for the Bears* and *Tremor of Intent.* In both cases, clandestine operations are controlled by ruthless and committed men whose icy patriotism overcomes all moral scruples, particularly those raised by their agents. In each case, England is opposed by a force that holds political sway over much of Europe, and which seeks to overcome it; and both worlds are ones where nothing is as it seems, where deception is the norm, and the status quo can be reversed in an instant. As Burgess's narrator, the boy player Wilson, puts it at the end of *A Dead Man in Deptford*, "treason, like loyalty, is a wide word; at length the two concepts become one." [3] The duplicitous nature of belief, whether religious, as in *A Dead Man in Deptford* and *Earthly Powers*, or

---

[2] *Ibid.*, p.51
[3] *Ibid.*, p.269.

political, as in the novels of the cold war, is a central theme for Burgess, and the figure of the spy is a useful means with which to explore that theme.

Charles Nicholl was criticised in one review of *The Reckoning* for his use of what the reviewer describes as "1990s jargon". Nicholl, writes Elizabeth Lane Furdell,

> tries to reconstruct a time suspiciously like our own, when the intelligence world was 'self-perpetuating, self-referring,' when every plot seemed circular and conspiracies proliferated. [4]

On the contrary, this might equally be seen as one of the strengths of Nicholl's book, and it is noticeable that Burgess, who had sight of a proof copy of *The Reckoning*, describes Walsingham's spy ring in terms similar to Nicholl's. Indeed, the parallels with the secret apparatus of post-war communist Europe are compelling: the revelations, after the demise of the Soviet bloc of the extent to which services such as the East German Stasi, or the Romanian Securitate infiltrated the daily lives of citizens, confirm the truth of this notion. So Burgess's Marlowe operates in a milieu with strangely contemporary resonances for the reader in 1993.

How, then, are these spies located in their respective worlds? Given that Marlowe's brief as a spy is to investigate renegade Catholics,

---

[4] Elizabeth Jane Furdell, 'The Death of Christopher Marlowe', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27.2 (Summer, 1996) pp. 477-482 (p.479)

a task bound up in the notion of identity, it is intriguing that Burgess chooses to have a running gag about Marlowe's name throughout the novel. When, as he frequently is, he is asked his name, he always offers, apologetically, three or four alternatives: "Marlin, Merlin, Morley. Marlowe will do." (p.9) This comic play with the protagonist's confused identity is given a more sombre resonance when Marlowe, attempting to define what he believes in to Nashe and Lyly, wrestles with the ontological problem of his own being:

> - Listen to me, Kit said, and he knew, saying it, that the me to which he referred was one of a parcel of many within, and he felt a manner of despair or at least desperateness in not knowing well which was to speak. (p.161)

This fluidity of identity, though troubling to Marlowe at this point in the text, is essential to the success as a spy. His dislocated, floating presence allows him access to the secrets of others partially because he is an unknown quantity. Burgess works hard to show Marlowe as a man never certain of his place in the world, whether as a scholar at Cambridge, a play "botcher" in London, or in the service of Walsingham at Reims or Flushing. The shoemaker's son moves uneasily through a world composed of his social betters, and, like the spies of Burgess's cold war novels, is never at ease with himself.

The England, and indeed Europe, of Burgess's imagination in *A Dead Man in Deptford* is strikingly similar to the world of cold war

espionage evoked in the earlier novels. Kyd sets the tone in *A Dead Man in Deptford*: "See, there is one looking and one taking it down on his tablets. There are spies all over." (p.23) In *Honey for the Bears*, Paul Hussey, whose name and identity, like Marlowe's, is fluid – to the Russians he is Pavel Ivanovich Gussey – is similarly a man whose personal impulses are subjugated to those of an all-seeing and all-powerful state. As with Marlowe, Hussey, whose name suggests girlishness, finds that his supposed homosexuality is used as a means of exerting pressure on him. Hussey's banal objective – to sell a consignment of fashionable western dresses on the Soviet black market – is thwarted by his inadvertent involvement in a bigger game, controlled by the KGB. Certainly, Walsingham's world of covert observation, routine torture and double-cross is mirrored, though comically, in the Leningrad of *Honey for the Bears*, where even the most intimate transactions of the protagonists are subject to the state endorsed gaze of the security services.

These worlds of clandestine acts are figured in the novels through Burgess's frequent use of scenes of discovery. In *A Dead Man in Deptford*, the most significant example of this is when Marlowe's parents discover him in bed with Tom Walsingham. Similar *in flagrante* discoveries occur in *Nothing Like the Sun*, where Will is cuckolded by his brother, and in *Honey for the Bears*, where Paul and Belinda are

discovered naked in their cabin by a Soviet waiter. In *Tremor of Intent*, the agent Hillier, whose mission, like Marlowe's, is to hunt down a traitor, has an intimate and energetic encounter with an enemy agent, Miss Devi. Inevitably, this tryst is the subject of covert observation by Hillier's opponents. But it is in *A Dead Man in Deptford* that the trope of discovery is most notable, not surprisingly in a novel overtly about the art of espionage. Just as Kit frequently is present as an observer at acts of brutality and buggery in the service, so even his most joyous and private moments with Tom Walsingham are observed, if only by the cows in the field. In his chambers, in his lodgings, at Reims, in the smoke-filled room at Durham House, in his Canterbury home, and of course most significantly in the fatal encounter in the back room in Deptford, Marlowe is either the observer or the observed, set apart from the rest of his fellows, an adjunct to the games of treason and deception they play.

If espionage is 'the secret theatre of our society', as Le Carré suggests, then, like plays, it is made up of acts – of deception, of revenge, of treason, and, of course, acts of murder. So it is enlightening when the boy actor Jack Wilson describes Henslowe's Rose Theatre, scene of Marlowe's greatest dramatic triumphs, and in particular the stage, at the rear of which was

> the space we termed the study, wherein players might be disclosed at study, talk or murder, for it was curtained or uncurtained according to need […] Exit and entrance were by the left and right doorways. None could ask better for our swift traffic of the afternoon. (p.118)

This seems to describe perfectly the closed, claustrophobic, yet temporary, arena of the spy, as evoked both in this novel and in the cold war novels. This liminal space is infinitely adaptable, changed swiftly by that suggestive curtain. In that small space, the mood can change instantly from positive to negative, from welcoming to murderous, rather like the 'great reckoning in a little room' that ended Marlowe's life. Not insignificantly, too, this semi-secret stage area is not far from the trapdoor that could lead, as Jacke Wilson puts it, to "our Christian hell, or else a cooler pagan underworld." (p.118). It is perhaps, an analogue of the "large back rooms" where Le Carré says we "find out who we are."

The comment by Elizabeth Furdell, deploring Nicholl's use of late twentieth-century idioms to describe the Elizabethan environment of Marlowe fails to apprehend the ways in which the double-dealing, underhand, treacherous Marlowe of Nicholl's account chimes so precisely with the expendable, anti-heroic protagonists of John Le Carré*'s* novels, and those of Burgess. It seems entirely apposite that Nicholl should comment, regarding the nature of Marlowe's death, that it was in some ways

> familiar fare – another conspiratorial gathering in an age of conspiracy, another session among the informers of the Elizabethan police state. (p.326)

For Nicholl, Marlowe's death does not have to have a meaning, and his book scrupulously avoids romanticising its subject and thus investing it with a significance it could not support. Instead, he argues for "a more complex kind of meaninglessness than that of a tavern brawl." (p.327)

Burgess's Marlowe dies as a result of a conspiracy, deliberately provoked into starting a fight that can only end with his death. This paves the way for the smooth official editing of reality that is the hallmark of Walsingham's regime, and of the cold war spymasters in *Tremor of Intent* and *Honey for the Bears*. Marlowe dies an outsider, a role with which Burgess clearly felt some affinity. The dislocated protagonists of his cold war novels are also, in their alienation from the world in which they find themselves, aligned with his Marlowe.