



Anthony Burgess: *Earthly Powers*

(1980)

- Rob Spence (Edge Hill University)

Genre: Novel. Country: England.

Earthly Powers was published in 1980, and marked a new stage in Burgess's work. His major novels of the 1970s had been characterised by experimentation: from *MF* to *Napoleon Symphony* to *Abba Abba*, the impulse throughout the decade had been towards relatively brief novels with complex structures, often based on external sources: in *MF*, the work of Lévi-Strauss on Native American myth; in *Napoleon Symphony* on Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony; and on an imagined meeting between Keats and Belli in *Abba Abba*. These novels were the most obviously experimental of this phase of Burgess's career, and they contrast sharply with the relatively conventional *Earthly Powers*, which ranks second only to *A Clockwork Orange* in the amount of attention it has received. This novel too, uses external sources, but they are major public events – the first and second world wars, the holocaust, the Jonestown massacre. Burgess interweaves his fictional characters' lives with those of the literary and artistic elite of the twentieth century and uses the historical framework as a backdrop both for the first person account of the life of his central character, Kenneth Toomey, and also as a way of grounding Toomey's discursive ruminations on the nature of good and evil in a tangible reality.

The novel is arranged in eighty-two chapters, echoing the eighty-second year of the narrator's life, which begins in the novel's celebrated opening sentence. The structure of the novel is straightforward, and mostly comprises chronological narration. The early chapters constitute a *mise-en-scène* in which Burgess establishes Toomey's fastidious nature, his connection to powerful people, and his status as an outsider, both as a homosexual and as an expatriate. The main bulk of the novel, from chapter 11 to the final, elegiac chapter, is in essence a flashback, beginning with Toomey's first affair as a precocious writer becoming well-known in the London literary world just before the first war, and concluding with his retirement back in the England he had long since left. The sequence is almost entirely chronological, with one significant exception – the account, in chapter thirteen, of Toomey's first homosexual experience, seduced at the age of thirteen in a Dublin hotel. It is Toomey's homosexuality which governs his attitude to other people and to events, and which guarantees his status as a neutral observer, since he is accepted neither by the church he is forced to reject in the first chapter of the long flashback sequence, nor by society in general. This in turn enables Burgess to present Toomey as a kind of Tiresias figure, always observing, but never completely involved.

Apparently simple as this structural arrangement is, a bare outline of the narrative sequence cannot convey the range and scope of this novel. Burgess confronts some of the most significant developments in twentieth century history from a standpoint which in some respects is intensely personal to Toomey, and in others has universal application. Central to the concerns of the novel is an examination of the workings of evil in a century notable for its excesses in this regard. Burgess once again returns to the debate between Augustinianism and Pelagianism

which informs so many of his works. *Earthly Powers* is perhaps the novel which, even more than *A Clockwork Orange*, most clearly acknowledges that debate as of central importance. Indeed, the novel can be seen to some extent as a deliberate attempt to re-establish the consideration of such matters in the discourse of English fiction. The breadth and scope of the narrative allow Burgess to range over a series of significant twentieth century events, placing them within the context of a meditation on the nature of evil.

Toomey's first person narration in the novel is a vehicle for Burgess's social and historical commentary on many of the major events of the century, beginning with the first world war, and taking in the rise of the Mafia in America, the emergence of fascism, the Holocaust, the second world war, the end of African colonialism and the growth of quasi-religious cults in the 1960s and 70s. The novel thus operates both as a saga of one man's extremely varied and interesting life, and as an informal account of the major events of the century in Western civilisation.

The novel's opening is probably the most well known in Burgess's *oeuvre*, with the exception of that of *A Clockwork Orange*. The sentence, "It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me" (p. 7), is artfully attention-grabbing, and introduces in its brief span several of the threads that are to become important later. It is also knowingly an intriguing opening, as Toomey acknowledges a few sentences later, and this alerts the reader immediately to the ludic quality of this text. The sentence slyly introduces some of the major themes of the novel and every word comes loaded with suggestion: the protagonist is in bed in the afternoon, is old, is homosexual (and "catamite" has connotations of pederasty), has a servant, and is familiar with figures of power in the church. In the first of a long series of self-reflexive references to his own art, Toomey suggests that he has "lost none of my old cunning" in contriving "an arresting opening".

It becomes increasingly apparent as the reader progresses that the fictive nature of the text is to be emphasised, at the same time as, and in parallel with, the novel's insistence on grounding events in historical reality. Toomey's earliest homosexual encounter is a prime case in point. The eighty-one year old Toomey recalls his seduction at the age of thirteen by the author George Moore at a Dublin hotel on what was later to be known as Bloomsday, June 16th, 1904, itself of course a fictional construct. The anecdote is told by Toomey, again undeniably fictional (though reminiscent of several real authors, including Burgess himself), in the context of a work of fiction which uses real settings and people in real historical situations. The effect serves to foreground the fiction writer's art in the novel, and set up a tension between the fictionality of the story and the apparent historical authenticity of the settings in which the narrative takes place.

Thus, although the narrative style is less obviously experimental than that of Burgess's other novels of this period (though still as resourceful in its linguistic playfulness), his use of a professional story teller as a first-person narrator allows him to call into the question the nature of authority in fictional texts. It is crucial to the overall effect of the novel that Toomey is seen in dual rôles: as an omniscient author on the one hand, confidently recalling trivial details from a distance of nearly seventy years, and as an unreliable narrator on the other, conflating events for structural convenience, and making demonstrable mistakes. The authority of the narrative, and its status as believable pseudo-autobiography, is thus constantly undercut by the muddying of the waters which Toomey's uncertain recall of events creates, especially as his persona as a professional novelist allows him to write with apparent total recall.

Following the opening chapters, which establish that the eighty-one year old Toomey is being sought as a key witness to an event which may lead to the canonisation of Carlo Campanati, the recently dead Pope, the narrative becomes a retrospective account of a life spent as an outsider. Within that account, Burgess locates Toomey at some key moments of twentieth century history in order, it seems, to comment on those issues which consistently surface in all of Burgess's fiction, particularly the nature of evil and its presence in the physical world. Burgess's original (and preferred) title for the novel, *The Prince of the Powers of the Air*, echoing

Hobbes's description of Satan in *Leviathan*, indicates the centrality of the theme. If Salman Rushdie's near-contemporary novel *Midnight's Children* is an attempt to understand a country through the medium of prose fiction, then *Earthly Powers* might be said to be an attempt to understand Western civilisation through the same medium. Such a grand objective needs some justification, but Burgess's choice of a peripheral but nonetheless important figure as a witness seems deliberately designed to give his protagonist the access, the freedom and the authority to comment, indeed almost to *commentate*, on some of the most significant moments in the progress of mankind during the twentieth century, especially those where inhuman excesses have been committed. To some extent classifiable as a *Bildungsroman*, this novel stretches that form, and ultimately transcends it, as Toomey's life unfolds amidst a series of striking tableaux all of which are connected ultimately to his chance meeting with Carlo Campanati at the end of the First World War.

Toomey recounts his early life in chapters 11 to 25, which are mainly concerned with his emergence as a writer of somewhat racy romantic novels, peopled with bold heterosexual heroes whose exploits are recounted in appropriately breathless prose. During the war, from which he is excluded because of a heart condition, he turns his hand to light musical comedy. This fictional universe is juxtaposed with the somewhat squalid life the emerging artist leads, and his unsatisfactory homosexual relationship with the boy poet Val Wrigley. In these early chapters, Burgess establishes Toomey's characteristically cool, detached tone. His Catholicism undermined by his homosexuality, Toomey quickly becomes bereft of spiritual comfort, and finds little in the way of physical comfort once the ambitious Wrigley has left him, and his clandestine affair with a well-known music-hall artist ends with a farcical scene, when Toomey is discovered in bed with his sick lover by his lover's wife. The element of farce is, however, overshadowed by the previous evocation of the genuine tenderness between the two men. The pathos is heightened by the reader's knowledge of Toomey's attempt to find emotional stability in the relationship. Toomey's reaction to his exposure is to flee the country for France, a decision that confirms his exile status and provides the opportunity for a first meeting with Campanati and his brother, who will later marry Toomey's sister Hortense. That meeting colours the rest of Toomey's life and Burgess's narrative, setting in train the events which culminate in Campanati's candidacy for sainthood.

Following the chance meeting between Toomey and the Campanati brothers, much of the central section of the novel is concerned with how the developing relationships of these three men interact and how, because of Carlo Campanati's rise through the church hierarchy, they engage with big moral issues. All three are, in one sense, less than entire as males: Campanati's vow of celibacy and Toomey's homosexuality remove reproduction from their lives, whilst Domenico, though sexually voracious, is infertile. The meeting of the three men, on the day after the signing of the armistice, leads to a discussion of war, and introduces the central dispute between the future pope and the writer of middlebrow fiction concerning the presence of evil in the material world.

Just as in *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed*, *Earthly Powers* has at its centre the debate about free will and predestination which in the church led to the adoption of Augustine's view of a sovereign divine grace, original sin and the doctrine of fallen man. What marks *Earthly Powers* off from the other two novels is its setting in the real world, frequently peopled by historical figures, and set in recognisable historical events. Both *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed* dramatise the debate within a schematic framework, with characters who operate as much as embodiments of the different philosophies as realistic figures. *Earthly Powers*, on the other hand, is set in a very carefully constructed version of the contemporary and recently historical world, using realistic characters whose attributes are such that the dialectic is played out within their interwoven lives.

After Toomey's connection with the Campanati family is made formal by Hortense's marriage to the philandering Domenico, the dyadic interplay of the positions represented by the two men becomes the staple narrative structure of the novel. Thus, when Toomey, having travelled to Malaya to soak up local colour for a novel and there having met an expatriate doctor, Philip Shawcross, to whom he becomes devoted, is involved in a confrontation with a local practitioner of black magic, it is Campanati who intervenes, demonstrating the power to cast out demons which suggested his elevation to sainthood at the beginning. Campanati is, despite his

ability to overcome the Hindu curse which afflicts Shawcross, unable to save his life. In the face of Toomey's devastation, he reiterates the Pelagian principle of the innate goodness of man, demanding that Toomey rejoice in the death of his friend. This is one of a number of set piece scenes where Campanati, advancing towards the popedom, is made to demonstrate his robust version of the faith against Toomey's scepticism.

Shortly after the episode with Shawcross, Toomey witnesses Campanati's power as an exorcist again, in the incident which leads to his possible canonisation. His account accepts that the deed was supernatural, but describes it as a banal, almost everyday act. Carlo, turning from his dying brother in his hospital bed, attends to the cry of an orphan child in another bed. The child, Toomey recognises, is dying of tuberculous meningitis. In a Christ-like act of blessing, the priest soothes the child's pain, and leaves as the child drifts into sleep. The following day, the brother Raffaele Campanati dies, but the child has effected a complete recovery.

This episode is placed significantly at the mid point of the novel. Forty chapters have led to this affirmation of earthly power, which will have terrible consequences, and will be Toomey's, or Burgess's, means of suggesting the fallibility of Campanati's belief in the essential goodness or perfectibility of man. The irony of Campanati's actions becomes apparent only much later in the narrative when it is revealed that the boy saved by the priest becomes a monstrous manipulator of young people, including Toomey's great niece, urging them into a mass suicide. This incident, which follows close on the heels of the death of Hortense's son and wife at the hands of African Christians celebrating a perverted version of the mass, which had been encouraged by Campanati, darkens the tone at the novel's end, and seems to confirm the failure of his doctrine. He dies on the same day that the cult leader, significantly named God Manning, is arrested trying to escape the mass suicide site.

The deaths of the Pope and of the people in the camp and in the jungle are inextricably linked, as indeed is everything in this tightly plotted novel. Manning has been able to build his empire because of Campanati's intervention, divine or otherwise; Hortense's son, John, and his wife Laura die at the hands of a primitive people allowed access to the church through Campanati's ecumenism. The man who sets himself to be an agent of good is responsible for great evil.

What Burgess establishes through the episodes where Don Carlo uses supernatural powers, is the presence of evil in the midst of good. The implication of the structural connections between Don Carlo's actions and the release of evil suggest the fallacy of the Pelagian view, and perhaps confirm Toomey's gloomy Augustinianism. It is in regard to the central act of human evil in the century, the Nazi regime, that Toomey and Don Carlo's views are most clearly opposed: the encounters that they both have emphasise the institutional brutality of the Nazis, but whereas Don Carlo sees corrupted souls who can be won back to goodness through a powerful act of will, Toomey sees only the innate evil of fallen man.

Campanati's encounter centres on his holding a German soldier prisoner, whilst working for the Italian resistance. The prisoner is an unrepentant Nazi, but Don Carlo works on him, and in effect, exorcises his belief from him. The prisoner, Liebeneiner (a suggestive name, as many are in *Earthly Powers*) succumbs to Don Carlo's persuasion, but is still not wholly repentant on his release: his condemnation of Hitler stems more from a sense of betrayal than of contrition. Thus, the story of Carlo's reclamation of the German for Christianity is compromised, as are many of his other demonstrations of faith. Liebeneiner is left, in Toomey's thoughts, dreaming of a revival of German power, and it is clear that he has not repented at all of his position before capture by Campanati.

Toomey's counterbalancing encounter with Nazism occurs in the chapter following the account of Campanati's attempt to salvage the soul of Liebeneiner. Toomey is ordered to visit the newly liberated concentration camps as a kind of penance for his misguided wartime broadcasts. He surveys the evidence of man's inhumanity to man, and considers its origin:

I looked at the sky, rainwashed, pure, and saw an elongated pink cloud like a Picasso angel with trumpet. The prince of the power of the air. No. This was no Luciferan work. The intellectual revel against God could not stoop to it. This was pure man, pure me. (...) Man had not been tainted from without by the prince of the power of the air. The evil was all within him and he was beyond hope of redemption. (p. 457)

The two protagonists' approach to the Nazi regime defines their moral position, and confirms the central place of the Pelagian - Augustinian dichotomy at the heart of the novel.

Earthly Powers attempts to address issues of belief, and the rôle of religion in late twentieth century culture, using a broad cast of characters, fictional and real; it is not, however, a roman à clef. The reviewers and critics who identified Toomey with Somerset Maugham fail to recognise that Toomey is a portmanteau of many characters. He contains hints of Maugham, certainly, though his frequent references to Maugham as part of the cast of "real" characters would seem to preclude a straightforward identification. In fact, there are suggestions of, to name a few, Alec Waugh in the precocious young novelist; of P. G. Wodehouse in the broadcaster from Berlin; of W. H. Auden in the rescuer of a Nobel laureate's offspring; and of Burgess himself, the author of a real *Blooms of Dublin*. Similarly, the assumption that Carlo Campanati is a thinly disguised portrait of Pope John XXIII diminishes the impact of the narrative. Burgess certainly seems to ascribe a number of the real pope's characteristics to his own creation, but throughout the novel, the emphasis is on the debate about the nature of evil rather than on the accuracy or otherwise of the references to twentieth century figures. The novel examines at length the nature of belief, the way in which people cope with an imperfect world, and the operation of evil and suffering.

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