



## Anthony Burgess: *Nothing Like the Sun*

(1964)

- Rob Spence (Edge Hill University)

Genre: Novel. Country: England.

*Nothing Like the Sun* (1964) was occasioned by the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. It is not, however, as so many items produced at the time were, a matter of mere hagiography. Rather, it is an imaginative attempt at historical reconstruction, focusing on Shakespeare's relationship with the "Dark Lady" of the sonnets, and dwelling on the often unsavoury aspects of London life at the end of the sixteenth century. The narrative is presented as the rambling final lecture before departure of a drunken English academic in a Malaysian college, Mr Burgess. This device allows Burgess-the-author the freedom to invent plausible but unsubstantiated details, such as Shakespeare's contraction of syphilis as a result of his relationship with the dark lady, and his cuckolding by his brother.

Within this framework, the novel unfolds in a mixture of third-person narration interspersed with passages presented as interior monologue from Shakespeare's point of view, occasionally developing into a stream of consciousness style, particularly when "WS" (Burgess's character name for the Shakespeare persona) is facing death at the end of the novel. In a disarming preface to the novel, written on its republication in 1982, Burgess suggests that the progressively looser syntax reflects the increasing delirium of the lecturer, induced by his growing drunkenness. The reader is presented finally with the dying thoughts of WS, his mind afflicted by the ravages of his disease, as he ranges over a series of disjointed images of his life. Ultimately, in a passage reminiscent of the conclusion of *The Waste Land*, the resolution of religious faith conquers the confusion, with WS echoing the voice of George Herbert's "The Collar".

The structure of the novel is more complex than it appears on the surface. Although the narrative is apparently the creation of the drunken Burgess character, he appears very rarely, but when he does appear he reminds the reader of the shaky provenance of the information, and emphasises the fictionality of the piece. Burgess is also conscious of creating a literary portrait that conflicts with the anodyne figure of previous fictional representations of Shakespeare.

The chronology of the novel is relatively straightforward, with a short introductory section establishing Shakespeare as a romantic troubled by visions of a goddess-like muse, (to whom he writes a sonnet, invented for the purpose by Burgess) falling for the charms of Anne Hathaway and entering a forced marriage with her. When WS escapes her nymphomania, finding employment as a tutor near Bristol, he has his first encounter, in a whorehouse, with a black woman, whose image haunts him, replacing in his mind the image of his early dark-haired love in Stratford. The first section concludes with his return to Stratford and Anne; the second section shows a twenty-eight year old WS in the thick of the London theatre scene in the early 1690's, meeting Mr WH,

Florio, Burbage, Marlowe, Henslowe, Greene and other theatrical luminaries. The intervening years are silently passed over, by Burgess and by the Burgess character.

The central section of the novel focuses on the relationship between WS and Henry Wriothesley, third earl of Southampton, and dedicatee of *Venus and Adonis*. Burgess has Florio commission the sonnets to persuade the earl of the benefits of marriage, but when the commission is unmasked, the complex relationship between the two men is celebrated in Shakespeare's verse instead. This section also describes the growing infatuation of WS for a black woman, Fatimah, otherwise known as Lucy Negro, who embodies his enduring vision of a dark goddess. The novel switches to diary form at this point, as WS's infatuation leads to his possession of her, and her installation as his mistress, the prose taking on a more intimate tone as WS recounts a relationship doomed from the beginning, and ended by Southampton's rejection of boys in favour of her. Later, they are reconciled, after she has produced a child, probably his, which will be dispatched back to the east, and whose influence will resurface in the names of the students in Mr Burgess's Malaysian class. The section concludes with WS's realisation that he has contracted a venereal disease from her, a realisation that coincides with the completion of the new Globe.

The novel's coda again skips some years, taking the reader to WS's final moments in New Place. The initial passage recounts his time in London after partial recovery from the syphilis, and then gives a rapid summary of the years of his success as a playwright, culminating in his final monologue, in which the syntax finally breaks down altogether, and closing with the ambiguous "My Lord", which refers to Southampton as much as Christ.

Burgess interweaves accounts of historical events with the fictional detail of WS's life, showing how the playwright may have garnered material for the plays. There are similar passages in Burgess's biography of Shakespeare, published in 1970, where the novelist asks for indulgence: "The reader will recognise the fiction-writer at work and, I hope, will make due allowances." Later, after a section which speculates freely on the naming of Shakespeare's children, Burgess concludes disingenuously "The whole of this paragraph is very unsound" (p.11). Given the dearth of sound biographical material on Shakespeare, Burgess's invention in the later volume is understandable. In *Nothing Like the Sun*, it is essential. The central motif of the goddess-like figure who inspires the writer is reminiscent of the device Burgess uses to inspire Enderby, and the identification is comically complete when, in *Enderby's Dark Lady*, the modern poet is forced to impersonate Shakespeare in the ludicrous musical play which is at the centre of that novel's action.

In this novel, Burgess is able to suggest sources for Shakespeare's work by "planting" references in the text. These occur frequently, and emphasise the playful fictionality of the enterprise, a fictionality so frankly admitted to in the *Shakespeare* volume. The young WS, for example, is called upon to deliver gloves to a gentleman, and is plunged into a scene of riotous drunken revelry, complete with the singing of bawdy catches, reminiscent of the scene in *Twelfth Night* where Belch, Aguecheek and Feste engage in singing catches loudly enough to wake the house. A sly passing allusion to the pub sign of the two fools, the We Three, adds to the identification. Later, when dismissed from the post as tutor which this encounter has led him to, WS joins forces with a rogue, whose trickery recalls that of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*. More darkly, the sexual relationship between Anne and Will borders on the sado-masochistic, and the descriptions of their love-making suggest the mixture of loathing and ecstasy hinted at in references to sex in, for example, *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*. Later, after a particularly spectacular bout of violent lovemaking with Fatimah, he descends to a level of post-coital self-loathing first hinted at in the early scenes with Anne Hathaway: "And after, in a cold and rainy May evening, I sit in mine own lodging, feeling truly in a wretched dim hell of mine own making, spent, used, shameless, shameful" (p.155).

The connection with Sonnet CXXIX "An expense of spirit in a waste of shame" is readily apparent. This is one example among many where Burgess adduces biographical detail from the literary record.

Burgess's WS, then, exists in a fabricated approximation of Elizabethan England. He and his colleagues speak dialogue which has the virtue of being understandable, as well as conveying the flavour of the time. In the Burgess canon, this novel was preceded two years earlier by *A Clockwork Orange*, and it is arguable that a similar process goes on there, with the inventive use of particular idiolects adding to the novelist's ability to create a believable narrative world. Burgess never allows the reader to forget, however, that the text is an invention – indeed, the invention of an invention, the “Mr Burgess” character. The ludic nature of the enterprise, announced in the novel's subtitle, and in Burgess's foreword, is reinforced by the periodic interventions of the Burgess character, usually associated with the consumption of a little more *samsu* the fermented Chinese rice drink with which he becomes progressively intoxicated as the novel proceeds. The conceit of the drunken Burgess character also allows the novelist to move from a relatively straightforward prose style, to the freer, stream-of-consciousness style used at the end of the novel where a pox-ridden dying Shakespeare produces a rambling monologue, which reviews his life. That life is described in the central section, with Burgess demonstrating his linguistic knowledge in an exuberant prose style which makes playful use of images and tags from the plays. The framing of the narrative by the meta-narrative of the drunken lecturer adds to the sense of playfulness: this is an end-of-term lecture, carrying with it associations of release from the serious business of scholarship.

The final section recalls the concluding passage in *The Waste Land*, a work which had proved fruitful for Burgess since *The Malayan Trilogy*, as broken image follows broken image in an increasingly syntax-free and apparently meaningless kaleidoscopic first person account, prompted by questions from an unknown voice:

*Subject matter?*

Oaklings, footsticks, cinques, moxibustion, the Maccabees, the Lydian mode (soft, effeminate) the snow-goose or whitebrant, rose-windows, government, the conflagration of citadel and senate-house, Bucephalus, the Antilegomena, Simnel Sunday, the torrid zone, Wapping, my lord's top-boots, the shoeflower, prostitute boys, dittany, face-ague, cosmic cinefaction, the Antipodes, the Gate of Bab, Fidessa, Rattlin the Reefer, Taliesin, the dead head in alchemy, the bar, dungeons, skylarks, the wind, Thaumast, the dark eyes of London, the fellowship of the frog, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, Myrddhin, faithful dealing, A Girl worth Gold, viticulture, the Queen that's dead (bee, meadow, chess, Bench, regnant) imposts of arches, pollards, sea-fox and sea-hog and sea-heath, the sigmoid curve, cardinals, touchability.

*What would you have now?*

No more. No no no more. Never again.

*One last word. One last last last word.*

My Lord. (p.234)

The novel ends, then, with an affirmation of faith that is also a declaration of love. The images evoked in this bravura finale are difficult to reconcile with what has gone before. Tantalising glimpses of the plays, dimly suggested, are present: “soft, effeminate” might refer to Cordelia in *King Lear*; “bee, meadow” may suggest Ariel's song in *The Tempest* and that play may also be evoked in the references to chess and to the sea which follow, Burgess's character, like Shakespeare's, breaking his staff at the end of the play. Equally, the associations might be random, balancing the logical ones at the beginning of the narrative where the boy WS creates patterns out of unrelated images. The technique is similar to that employed at the end of *Napoleon Symphony*, and there is more than a suggestion that, as in the later novel, Burgess may have had recourse to a dictionary or encyclopaedia to create the collage effect.

In sum, the novel works well as a historical recreation. The boldness of using Shakespeare as the central character, and also of using the plays as quarries to mine for incidents in the life, is matched by the verbal invention. Finding an idiom which avoids the trap of rendering Elizabethan English in the “Olde Englishe” locutions of Hollywood films on the subject, but which also conveyed the intensity of experience which Burgess felt communicated through the plays and poems, was the major obstacle. Burgess's solution juxtaposes third-

person narration in a relatively modern voice with dialogue and inner monologue which revels in the particularity of Elizabethan phraseology. We move from the relative simplicity of a passage such as this, where WS witnesses an execution:

There was the tree. Crouched on the platform the hangman's assistant was securing a plank with busy hammer. The hangman himself, masked, with brawny arms folded, strutted like Alleyn, an Alleyn that needed no glory of words. The eternal kites wheeled about in the pure and blue and crystalline air, as yet unpolluted by men. From afar came a roar. The hurdles were approaching, dragged over dry ground, raising a coughing dust. One of the draggers, with a toothless idiot's face, greeted friends from a black and panting mouth. There were jeers, men spat on the still figures roped to the hurdles, a young woman in front of WS began to jump, partly to see better, partly in a kind of transport of expectancy. (p.128)

to the altogether more impressionistic style of WS's interior monologue as he considers becoming a sharer in Burbage's company:

Far from the river now. North of the divers fair and large builded homes for merchants and suchlike. North even of the City Wall and the fair summer houses north of the wall. Good air in Shoreditch. The theatre a finer playhouse than the Rose. Burbage as good a man of business any day as Henslowe and an old player too, though, from what I see, of no great skill. But his son now, his son promises, this Richard. He may yet go further than Alleyn. Is that Giles Alleyn from whom old Burbage got the land of Ned's kin? It may be so. In '76 it was. A lease of twenty-one years. A mere patch with rank grass and dog-turds, even a man's bones they say. A skull grinning up at surveyors. (p.136)

Whereas in the first passage only the use of "afar" might be considered archaic, the second passage works hard to convey the flavour of Elizabethan usage without excessive recourse to what would be obscure to modern ears. The use of "divers" and "builded" subtly place the reader in the Elizabethan mode, and the colloquial nature of "this Richard" and "Ned's kin" suggest an individual train of thought rather than an external rendition of it. Burgess is also at pains to include an appreciation of property in Shakespeare's acquisitive appraisal of his surroundings, and also to plant the seed of the grave digging scene in *Hamlet*.

The realism of the third person narrative interacts with the stream of consciousness sections to produce a believable portrait both of Shakespeare and the age in which he lived. Perhaps Burgess's greatest achievement in this novel is to bury once and for all the cosy picture, developed by nineteenth century hagiographers, and continued by Shakespeare apologists in the present century, of "the bard", a man of inspirational genius with few unsavoury characteristics. Burgess expresses his distaste for these sanitised versions of Shakespeare in his 1970 biography. He quotes F. J. Furnivall's idealised portrait of "our chestnut-haired, fair, brown, rosy-cheekt boy...as full of life as an egg is full of meat, impulsive, inquiring, sympathetic; up to any fun and daring..." (p. 27) and suggests that such speculation is a pointless indulgence. The facts being absent, the biographer must perforce be silent, or speculate with intelligence. The Burgess biography of Shakespeare is largely speculation, but solidly grounded. *Nothing Like the Sun*, though purely fictional, concentrates on presenting a believable portrait, rather than one to fit the accepted norm.

### Works Cited:

- Burgess, A. (1964) *Nothing Like the Sun*. London: Heinemann.  
--- (1984) *Enderby's Dark Lady*. London: Hutchinson.  
--- (1974) *Napoleon Symphony*. London: Cape.  
--- (1970) *Shakespeare* London: Cape.

- Rob Spence (Edge Hill University)

First published 01 November 2007, last revised 0000-00-00

**Citation:** Spence, Rob. "Nothing Like the Sun". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 1 November 2007.  
[<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=3182>, accessed 15 May 2016.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](#).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X