

A Very Necessary Violence: Reading Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*

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Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* continues to be a noisy and combative text. Its forceful statement on the necessity of violence in a "free" Western society refuses to go quietly into the background of contemporary political discourse. Indeed, only this summer, as flash-riots swept across the streets of metropolitan England, did we see commentators reach again for their copy of Burgess's novel in order to try and better understand the conditions that make such events possible. One of those commentators, Gautam Malkani, notes:

following a week in which buildings and communities burnt the colour of *A Clockwork Orange*, this year's prize for late literary prophet clearly belongs to author Anthony Burgess. With its depiction of a lawless Britain, where the police command neither confidence nor deference and residents live in fear of feral youth empowered by their own vernacular, the parallels in Burgess's novel are instructive. (Malkani)

As Malkani states here, the parallels between the society of *A Clockwork Orange* and that of a free, liberal, Western democracy that gives birth to such outbursts of violence, is more than interesting—it is "instructive". It is instructive because the novel encourages us to think of the violence that underscored the riots as something other than that which should be immediately (and unthinkingly) condemned. Indeed, I want to argue here that *A Clockwork Orange* shows that violence is an essential element of any "free" society. More specifically, I want to argue that Burgess's novel shows that the capacity to commit violent acts is absolutely vital to the "health" of a society. As such, what was seen on the streets of England over a four-day period in the summer of 2011 was not the image of the metropolitan dystopia so convincingly expressed on the pages of a George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, or J.G. Ballard novel, but rather the confirmation of a healthy society that has the ability to keep its leaders in check.

We should from the outset, though, try and do away with the rather simple understanding of violence that sees it as a monolithic object. After all, it is this perception of violence that permits some to engage in a kind of unhelpful utopian dreaming—"of the enormous good that would be realized in human life if violence was entirely done away with" (Beehler 654). Unfortunately, violence, as Slavoj Žižek recognizes, is not such an easy beast to wrestle. In his recent book *Violence*, Žižek sketches the contours of at least three kinds of violence:

- the subjective
- the symbolic
- the systemic

Subjective violence is the one with which we are perhaps most familiar. It is the violence of “crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict” (Žižek 1). It is, in short, the violence we saw in the English riots—a very recognizable violence that is seen and talked about as “the perturbation of the ‘normal’, peaceful state of things” (Žižek 2). Now, although this is the kind of violence that garners most of our attention, for Žižek, it is merely the most obvious manifestation of a subterranean constellation of violence, which in itself is responsible for determining and maintaining the very idea of a “normal” state of things. This is the realm of symbolic and systemic violence. Symbolic violence is the often un-regarded violence embodied in language that accounts for ideological or political rigidity. It is symbolic violence then, that Žižek sees as responsible for the “imposition of a certain universe of meaning” (1). Systemic violence seems to work in a similarly underhand manner. It accounts for the forms of coercion that sustain relations of dominance and exploitation in the functioning of our political and economic systems.

What Žižek reveals, therefore, is that while it is important to recognize the multi-dimensional character of violence, it is absolutely critical to be aware of the fact that the smooth running of society—the maintenance of the economic and political systems that produce a sense of permanence and progression—is itself wholly dependent on certain forms of violence. Because of this dependence, it is certain that subjective violence can only erupt out of an always-already violent environment. In a very real sense, then, violence conditions “our house of being.” It is to Burgess’s credit that his novel not only renders visible this often unheralded aspect of violence, but also insists on the necessity of subjective violence as a means to keep in check the other more insidious forms of symbolic and systemic violence.

The reader’s introduction to violence in Burgess’s novel is also the introduction to the idea of casual violence. Alex and his *droogs* (friends), it seems, simply engage in acts of violence for the sake of committing such acts. Because of this, it would appear as though there is no moral or ethical basis to the kind of violence that Alex and his group mete out to others. Indeed, such acts are presented as random acts carried out without any empathy or sympathy for the victims. The question that one must ask, though, is “why?” What conditions, either psychological or social, allow for, or more precisely, produce this kind of senseless activity? The answer, I think, is given early on in the novel. The narrator of the story, Alex, says, “I couldn’t help a bit of disappointment at things as they were those days. Nothing to fight against really. Everything as easy as kiss-my-sharries” (12). What Alex identifies here is a pervasive nihilism in the thoughts of the teenagers of the day. In short, there is nothing to fight for, and there is nothing to fight against. Looking to at least prove their existence in this horizon-less society, Alex and his *droogs* throw themselves into the world literally kicking and screaming. Even though they might not be able to understand the significance of their violent actions, such actions become a means of guaranteeing meaning. While intellectual pursuits seemingly lead nowhere in this atmosphere of absence, the only

meaning to be experienced comes at the visceral and personal level of the body. With strong echoes of Antonin Artaud's insistence that corporeal pain is the only means to insert sensation and therefore sense into existence (Finter), the moment of pain, the sensation of agony, and the flowing blood—even if experienced vicariously—are all sensations to be rejoiced. This is why each time Alex experiences the vitality of the body he is enraptured; it confirms that there is something valuable in this seeming empty world. Consider, for example, the way in which Alex narrates the first violent event in the novel:

The old veck [man] began to make sort of chumbling shrooms [sounds]—"wuf waf wof"—so Georgie let go of holding his goobers [gums] apart and just let him have one in the toothless rot [mouth] with his ringy fist, and that made the old veck start moaning a lot then, then out comes the blood, my brothers, real beautiful. (7)

Now, the use of the phrase "real beautiful" here, to describe the sight of blood, is worthy of further consideration. Certainly, the grammar of this passage dictates that Alex should have said "really beautiful", but the language of *Nadsat* thrives on contractions as much as it does productive associations. So, although the reader is quick to repair the damaged grammar in this passage, perhaps he or she is too quick. Another way of reading this passage is to be faithful to what is actually written—that is, that the blood is "beautiful" because it is, literally, "real". Read in this way, what this passage demonstrates is the vitality of the body that Alex and his *droogs* search for in the moment of violence. It is a vitality that guarantees the "realness" of reality—that there is something of value beneath the seemingly endless surface of things.

That said the torpor or languor brought about by the belief that there is nothing to be said or done in this society is not limited to the youth. Indeed, violence seems to have permeated every level of society. For example, we see the kind of consistent casual violence that we associate with Alex and his gang carried through into State institutions. As such, when Alex is arrested after the home invasion that results in the death of an old lady, we are told that he is "given the odd thump and malenky [small] tolchock [beating]" (50) by the police in the back of the car that is taking him to the police station. Of course, worse is to await him in the interrogation room, where he is to be beaten into confessing his crime. The reader is told that after:

They all had a turn, bouncing me from one to the other like some very weary bloody ball, O my brothers, and fisting me in the yarbles [testicles] and the rot [mouth] and the belly and dealing out kicks... at last I had to sick up on the floor. (52)

In contrast to Alex's acts of violence, at least one can detect some semblance of reason behind this violence—to obtain the confession of a criminal. But, even after the police have acquired Alex's statement they continue to rain blows down upon him. Alex claims, "I was kicked and punched and bullied off to the cells" (54). It is the same kind of unthinking, casual brutality that characterizes the guards of the prison to which Alex is eventual sent.

Again, the reader is told of the routine way in which Alex is “dragged down nice and gentle by brutal tolchocking chassos [hitting warders] to viddy [see] the Governor” (70). Such is the habit that when warders escort Alex to see the prison chaplain, he says,

I was marched out and off down the corridor towards the Wing Chapel, tolchocked [beaten] on the back and the gulliver [head] all the way by one of the chassos [warders], but in a very like yawny and bored manner. (71)

The rather simple observation to make is that violence is so endemic to the conduct of society that it has become habitual—an unthinking task that must be performed.

The implication of this state of affairs is that the people who are charged with policing people like Alex are in fact acting in exactly the same way as the criminals. Perhaps they do not show Alex’s passion for ultra-violence; perhaps it can be reasoned, as the Chief policeman does, that “violence makes violence” (53); but nonetheless, they feel compelled to express themselves on the bodies of those who cross their path. Put another way, the policemen and prison warders are simply normal people who are responding to the empty condition of society by turning to the body as a mechanism to assert reality. The body hurts, the body bleeds, the body breaks, therefore it is real, and therefore it affirms reality in a way that other tests of reality cannot.

This, though, simplifies the role that the State has to play in the proliferation of such violence. Indeed, State violence always works in more than one dimension; it is always more than simply the exercise of physical violence over either its citizenry or the citizens of other States. Implicit to the operation of State violence is the State’s desire to maintain its ability to ensure, what Žižek calls, “the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (1), which is to say, to maintain its position of authority over its citizenry. In its attempts to do so, writers such Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, and Slavoj Žižek to name just a few, have shown that the State assumes a privileged position in its exercise of violence. Importantly, it claims to be the only legitimate user of violence. So, for example, when the police wrestle a man to the ground it is considered the exercise of a legitimate violence. Similarly, when a crime is committed that is considered to be so heinous that it results in the death penalty, such use of deadly force is considered the exercise of a legitimate violence. Also, when the interests of a State are seemingly inexcusably compromised by a foreign power, war is considered the exercise of a legitimate violence. It is, then, the State that decides on the legitimacy of violent actions. This is significant because this means that it is not the violent action itself but rather the position of the State in relation to the action carried out that renders the action legitimate or otherwise. However, what is vital to understand is that the State positions itself in relation to such actions according to whether or not the action protects the longevity of the State. That is to say, the State will always use “legitimate” forms of violence in order to maintain the stability of the existing *status quo*.

However, Alex over-hears a comment by a Government Official who is visiting his prison, Staja 84F (State Jail 84F), which indicates that the current political climate is anything but stable. The Official states:

The Government cannot be concerned any longer with outmoded penological theories. Cram criminals together and see what happens. You get concentrated criminality, crime in the midst of punishment. Soon we may be needing all our prison space for political offenders. (69)

He continues, “Common criminals like this unsavory crowd... can best be dealt with on a purely curative basis. Kill the criminal reflex, that’s all” (9). With its emphasis on the “criminal class” and the “criminal reflex,” the genealogy of the Government Official’s pronouncement can be traced back to the pen of people like Cesare Lombroso, whose pseudo-scientific theories of criminality underscored nineteenth-century narratives such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde*. Because of this, the Government Official’s remarks to the prison Governor reveal more than just the State’s stance on criminality; they also show the way in which the State thinks of criminality. Exposing the milieu of symbolic violence that Žižek detects in language, the Government Official’s words show the way in which an impoverished perception of criminality as a genetic feature of a “criminal class” has been institutionalized. It is no surprise, then, that the Government department that is tasked to destroy the “criminal reflex” is called the “State Institute for Reclamation of Criminal Types”. Importantly, as Stevenson expressed through his character Mr. Hyde, as soon as an idea of criminality is described in such terms it paves the way for the dehumanization of criminals. In this violated base state, suddenly any torturous method of “cure” becomes a viable possibility. It is the language of State, then, that allows for the genesis of the Ludovico Technique—a “cure-all” that seemingly appeals to both the liberal ethic of rehabilitation and also the punishment demanded by people like Staja 84F’s Governor, who wants prisoners to suffer the Old Testament penalty of “an eye for an eye” (70).

While critics have spent much time debating the ethical and moral implications of the Ludovico Technique (Beehler, Petix, Ray), the fact is that the State’s position in relation to its use renders it a legitimate form of violence. As such, it simply becomes another vector of violence apprehended by the State as a means of (re)establishing social order. After all, it certainly seems to be effective. Following his attempted escape from the Ludovico Unit, Alex is caught and beaten by the guards. Unable to defend himself from the assault because of his psychological re-engineering, Alex says:

I had to escape into sleep from then was the horrible and wrong feeling that it was better to get the hit than give it. If that veck [man] had stayed I might even have like presented the other cheek. (90)

However, this is not the only project of pacification that the State sets loose on its

people. The reader is shown a range of ways—no less violent because they too work on the symbolic and archetypal apparatus of the mind rather than the body—in which the State assaults its citizenry in order to keep them quiet and under control. Consider, for example, the public art that adorns the walls of “Municipal Flatblock 18A”, which quietly works away at the unthinking mind:

Vecks [men] and ptitsas [women] very well developed, stern in the dignity of labour, at workbench and machine with not one stitch of platties [clothes] on their well-developed plots [bodies]. (25)

The message is perfectly clear—the healthy person is the person who goes to work. Of course, the immediate benefit to the State is seen in economic growth. But, there is also a wider social significance of making art readily available to “the masses.” As is discussed later on in the novel, it is believed by some that such art has the potential to also “quieten Modern Youth down and make Modern Youth more civilized” (32). That is to say, that the high cultural products of civilization have the capacity to somehow civilize those that come across them. Whether true or not—and it is perhaps worth noting that such ideas owe more to an enduring Romantic appreciation of the literary and visual arts than anything else—the point remains the same: the exhibition of public art is a way in which the State can quietly work its ideas on productivity and social passivity into the collective subconscious.

Now, when one becomes sensitive to such conduits of State will, that will begins to appear everywhere throughout the novel. Indeed, it seems that nearly every communicative site holds the potential to trickle State thinking into the unwary mind. This, then, is the significance of the “worldcasts” that keep the bourgeois (the property-owning classes) indoors and off the street (33). Indeed, Alex discusses the TV in terms not unlike an anesthetic, which quietens and therefore pacifies the potentially rebellious thinking mind. Similarly, newspapers are represented as little more than political pamphlets. It is again Alex who notes that:

This gazetta I had seemed to be like a Government gazetta, for the only news that was on the front page was about the need for every veck [man] to make sure he put the Government back in again on the next General Election. (98)

But to public art, TV, and newspapers one might also add pop music and fashion. Both of these, not unrelated, sites provide a particularly acute way for the State to target often rebellious youth movements. For example, pop music is shown to busy the brain so that wider, and perhaps more fundamental issues, are relegated from the thinking process. This is certainly the impression one gets from the clinical attendant who is singing a pop song to himself while strapping Alex into the chair for what amounts to his first torture session (75-76). In this specific case, pop music is shown to occupy the mind of a person who should, perhaps, be thinking about the wider moral and ethical implications of his actions.

It is, though, these seemingly benign means of maintaining social order that pave the

way for the violent psychological reconditioning that Alex experiences. With the Ludovico Technique, the State announces that for those who refuse its gentle coercive messages in the shape of public art, television, newspapers, music, fashion, and so on, it will assert itself by violently over-coding the processes of independent thought. Put another way, the Ludovico Technique, as the prison chaplain understands, is the means by which the State seeks to impose the “State’s Peace” (71). Simply, the Ludovico Technique stands as the State’s attempt to totalize the cognitive landscape of its people. The resonance with George Orwell’s cautionary tale of totalitarian thinking, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, could not be clearer. In such an environment where nothing can stand outside of the State in order to challenge it, the State necessarily conditions all morality and ethical sense. Indeed, it is the imposition of this totalized State thought in the shape of a State-conditioned morality that so frightens the chaplain. About Alex’s undertaking of the Ludovico reconditioning experiment, he says:

Very hard ethical questions are involved... It may not be nice to be good, little 6655321. It may be horrible to be good... What does God want? Does God want woodness or the choice of goodness? Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed on him? (71)

It is this question—whether it is better to be made mechanically “good” or have the option to commit “bad” deeds—that drives much of the intrigue of the narrative. However, it is clearly the totalitarian thinking of the Government that clears the space for such discussion.

It is perhaps George Orwell who has written most vividly about totalitarian thinking. In one of his minor essays published just before the end of WWII, Orwell writes that “totalitarianism in one form or another is visibly on the up-grade in every part of the world” (“Conversation with a Pacifist”). Importantly, the “every part of the world” that Orwell is most concerned with here is that of England and America—those nations traditionally seen as the beacons of democracy. Since these countries were not perpetrating internal atrocities the like of which were experienced by the ethnic minority populations of both Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany, it is important to realize that when Orwell discusses the rise of totalitarianism in the world he is not writing of the explicitly aggressive form of a political totalitarianism that commits atrocities, but rather the more insidious quality of a totalitarian way of thinking. After all, acts of violence are always just that, acts of violence. But, for Orwell, totalitarian *thinking* has the potential to turn such acts into something else for an initiated population. Totalitarian thinking allows a population to be conditioned into thinking one way or another about something that one would normally consider morally absolute—black or white. As an example, Orwell shows in his essay “As I Please” that some abhorrent actions can be considered “good” under certain ideologically driven conditions. Talking of some pictures that he saw in an English newspaper, he reports on the way in which the images are published with some sort of glee by the English press because they

depict the humiliation of collaborators following the liberation of France by Allied forces. Orwell finds the celebration of the humiliation of these people disturbing, and because of that interesting. He recognizes that a certain circularity of impression is taking place. Orwell asks himself:

“Where have I seen something like this before?” Then I remembered. Just about ten years ago, when the Nazi regime was beginning to get into its stride, very similar pictures of humiliated Jews being led through the streets of German cities... but with the difference, that on that occasion we were not expected to approve. (“As I Please”)

Orwell argues that the only way this celebration of the humiliation of collaborators can be explained is if the same kind of thinking is in place for both the liberated French citizen and the Nazi German soldier. Humiliated Jews on one side of the equation, and humiliated collaborators on the other—the ever-present term being “humiliation.” Importantly, humiliation can only be wrought if you have an absolute (if misguided) sense of who is morally “right” and who is morally “wrong” in any given situation. For the Germans, being Jewish was a terrible theological sin and so they deserved to be punished; whereas for the liberated French, being a collaborator was an unforgivable crime of siding with an invading force. In each case, there is no question to be asked of the motives of the people that are being persecuted. Such a picture of humiliation is for Orwell, then, an example of the kind of absolutist thinking that is both part of totalitarianism and, clearly in this example, invading the ideological sensibilities of the British population.

Significantly, the State in Burgess’s novel is engaged in just this kind of totalitarian, absolutist thinking. Caught in this ideological trap, the State cannot perhaps see that it is simply repeating the violence that it wishes to stamp out of society in the very process of “reclaiming” the “good person” from the criminal class. So it is that the State literally tortures Alex into becoming “good” through a process that, one suspects, uses films of real violent incidents in order to condition his response to such images—in the style of Burrhus Frederic Skinner. Indeed, Alex himself comments on the fidelity of the action on screen to real life:

Then there was the close-up gulliver of this beaten-up starry veck [old man], and the krovvy [blood] flowed beautiful red. It’s funny how the colours of the like real world only seem really real when you viddy [see] them on the screen. (77)

Again, then, the State ultimately repeats the violence that it is seeking to annul in its citizens because it has strayed into the absolutist terrain of totalitarian thought. It thinks that all criminals are the same; that all criminals can be “cured”; and, importantly, that all those who think or behave in a way that is contrary to the *status quo* are destabilizing forces that need to be neutralized – either physically or psychologically.

It is against this form of totalitarianism, this totalitarian thinking, that the writer F.

Alexander (another Alex, we should note) and his friends organize themselves. Recognizing the signs of totalitarianism, he says to Alex:

The Government's big boast, you see, is the way it has dealt with crime these last months... Recruiting brutal young roughs for the police. Proposing debilitating and will-sapping techniques of conditioning... We've seen it all before... in other countries. The thin end of the wedge. Before we know where we are we shall have the full apparatus of totalitarianism. (118)

It is an observation that not only recognizes the methods that the Government is taking in order to cement its own powers, but also the passivity of the people in allowing the proliferation of such measures. "Some of us have to fight," he continues:

There are great traditions of liberty to defend... Where I see infamy I seek to erase it... The tradition of liberty means all. The common people will let it go, oh yes. They will sell liberty for a quieter life. That is why they must be prodded, *prodded*—(119)

The reader suspects that the kind of "prodding" that Alexander refers to here—the prodding into political consciousness of the masses—will come through acts of violence. From this kind of diatribe, it is clear that Alexander and his friends are the kind of political prisoners to which the Government Official referred in the second section of the novel. It is only by some strange coincidence, it seems, that if Alexander's group manages to "save" Alex by getting the Government to stop and undo the effects of the Ludovico Technique, that they are also simultaneously saving themselves from the same torturous process in the future. However, this is just an interesting aside. What Burgess makes abundantly clear in this passage is that there is a need for people to retain the ability to fight. "Some of us have to fight" (119), Alexander states; and, in the circumstance of a Government that is clearly moving toward the kind of totalitarianism that commits atrocities on its own people, it seems he is right.

One thing, though, is for certain. If the ability to fight is removed—if the ability to become violent is drawn from a person—then there can be no real opposition to the maneuvers of a totalitarian Government. As Alexander asks, "Will not the Government itself now decide what is and is not crime and pump out the life and guts and will of whoever sees fit to displease the Government?" (118). As Hannah Arendt points out in her important book *On Violence*, the use of violence is, under certain conditions such as these, justified. Yet, it is important to remember that such violence can only break political power; it can never, itself, transform into political power. That is to say, it can only be applied as a force of destabilization. Yet, for Alexander and his group, destabilizing the thought processes of the common man is all that they want to achieve. His is a project to shock people into realizing the way in which the Government is positioning not only itself but also its citizens.

There is, also, another important reason presented in the novel for why the capacity to become violent should not be wrestled away from the individual; and that is made clear

when Alex learns that he can no longer listen to his favorite music without feeling the same kind of sickness that comes over him at the sight of physical violence. Since the music of Beethoven was used to anchor the images that now make him feel sick, Alex becomes aware that the Ludovico reconditioning experiment has not only affected his will to violence but also his love for Beethoven. Dr Brodsky, who is organizing the Ludovico experiment, speculates that this unforeseen situation is a problem of separation. He says:

Delimitation is always difficult. The world is one, life is one. The sweetest and most heavenly of activities partake in some measure of violence—the act of love, for instance; music, for instance. (86)

What Dr Brodsky is saying here is that emotions, like everything else, are not discrete forms; they are, rather, composite experiences. So, he says, there is a certain amount of anger and violence in love—and, how else do we account for the feelings that sweep across us when we have lost love? Similarly, violence is present in our appreciation of music and, indeed, other “high” cultural expressions of civilization. The young Alex himself spoke of the way in which classical music:

Always sort of sharpened me up, O my brothers, and made me like feel like old Bog [God] himself, ready to make with the old donner and blitzen [violence] and have vecks [men] and ptitsas [women] creeding away [screaming] in my ha ha power. (32)

And, it seems, this logic plays out across the entire spectrum of human emotions. Every emotion seems to be the product of a complex matrix of emotions that ranges from the highest ethical love to the basest and most raw expression of anger and violence.

By way of brief conclusion, it is interesting to note that Dr Brodsky’s speculation concerning the interrelatedness of emotional life is reinforced by Alex’s journey to the public library. Searching for a way to painlessly end his troubled life, he lifts down “the big book”—the Bible—looking for some kind of spiritual comfort. Yet, Alex tells the reader that “all I found was about smiting seventy times seven and a lot of Jews cursing and tolchooking [beating] each other, and that made me want to sick” (106). What this passage demonstrates is that even in the Bible one cannot separate out the egalitarian philosophy from the episodes of violence that eventually give it its contours. We are, at this point, given a rather clear example of both the veracity and importance of Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (391). Simply, no document of civilization can exist without the violence that first makes it possible. Likewise, no man, Burgess would argue, can exist who does not have the capacity to reach into a reserve of violence and aggression. Only this “will to violence”, which we should rightly keep tightly guarded, can guarantee the human experience that we understand and keep at a distance the threat of totalitarian thinking.

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