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Humanist Drama in *A Clockwork Orange*

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This essay relates Alex's story in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) to Anthony Burgess's thinking about the novel as a formal genre. Burgess maintained that the novel is 'a humane form': it is uniquely suited to depict human psychology and action, but it is ill-equipped to represent the abstract and complexly mediated dynamics of institutional authority and agency.¹ If the latter drain each citizen of his or her capacity to think and act freely, then the novel may cease to exist. As Burgess put it, 'I don't think it's possible to produce fiction in a community which does not accept the importance of individuality.'² Thus, for Burgess, Alex's fate in *A Clockwork Orange* is tied to that of the novel. In maintaining his individual self despite government efforts to erase it, Alex defends the raw human material that Burgess sees as necessary for the survival of fiction.

Still, Burgess failed to consider that impersonal institutions — whether political, legal, cultural, or economic — often neutralize threats to their authority by defining the terms of resistance that could be used against them. For example, Alex commits assault, rape, and murder in order to demonstrate his freedom from government and legal control, arguing:

the not-self cannot have the bad, meaning they of the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self. And is not our modern history, my brothers, the story of brave malenky selves fighting these big machines?³

Alex believes he is a freedom fighter, but government and police officials label him a juvenile delinquent. Moreover, they use the threat of juvenile delinquency to introduce the Ludovico treatment, a behavioural conditioning technique that will help to shore up state power and, as F. Alexander puts it, clear a path for the 'full apparatus of totalitarianism' (p. 179). Alex's crimes, therefore, represent local moments of autonomy from political and legal forces that, paradoxically, serve to strengthen these very forces. The latter thus have an

¹ *Conversations with Anthony Burgess*, ed. by Earl G. Ingersoll and Mary C. Ingersoll (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 138.

² *Ibid.*

³ Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962; New York: Norton, 1986), pp. 44–45. (All page references are to this edition and will hereafter be given in parentheses in the text.)

interest in generating the delinquent behaviour they ostensibly oppose. Unable or perhaps unwilling to recognize this fact, Alex privately tells the reader that 'what I do I do because I like to do' (p. 45). Yet the assertion that he commits crimes because he likes to only begs the question of why he likes to do it. Alex believes that he courageously defends his individuality, never realizing that his criminal desires, along with his more mundane likes and dislikes, his aesthetic tastes, even, are all socially or institutionally conditioned. Put differently, Alex does not act so much as he reacts, and it is this dialectical movement between action and reaction, freedom and servitude, that constitutes the drama of humanism and serves as the focus of my essay.

I shall look first at Alex's aesthetic sensibility because the social pressures exerted on it help us to understand his criminal behaviour. Consider, for example, his aversion to strong smells, untidy personal appearances, and dirtiness. After robbing a local merchant, Alex and his droogs encounter 'a burbling old pyahnitsa or drunkie' whose 'platties were a disgrace, all creased and untidy and covered in cal and mud and filth and stuff. So we got hold of him and cracked him with a few good horrorshow tolchocks' (p. 16). That the old man's lack of self-respect is demonstrated not only by his public drunkenness but also by his filthy 'platties' reflects Alex's belief that character flaws are betrayed by personal appearances. In turn, this visually mediated flaw elicits a round of boot-kicking violence, forging a link between assaults on Alex's aesthetic sensibility and his criminality.

This link is also demonstrated in the fight with Billyboy, leader of a rival gang, who, Alex says,

made me want to sick just to viddy his fat grinning litso, and he always had this von of very stale oil that's been used for frying over and over, even when he was dressed in his best platties, like now. (p. 18)

Billyboy's offence is different from that of the old drunkard in that he is smelly rather than unkempt, but similar in so far as it denotes a character flaw. He literally stinks of poverty because he, or whoever does the cooking for him, cannot afford to buy oil and therefore recycles it. The problem from Alex's point of view must be that Billy could simply steal what he wants or needs, in this case more oil or else the hygiene products needed to conceal his odour. The fact that he does not suggests laziness, a flaw exhibited in his physique and smell rather than in his dress. Naturally, then, Alex thinks '[i]t was stinking fatty Billyboy I wanted now', and he takes great pleasure in redressing the latter's aesthetic offences with his own stylized violence:

And, my brothers, it was real satisfaction to me to waltz — left two three, right two three — and carve left cheeky and right cheeky, so that like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out at the same time, one on either side of his fat filthy oily snout in the winter starlight. (p. 20)

This scene again establishes a link between an Other's aesthetic malfeasance and Alex's criminality. In both of these examples Alex seeks to punish those who spoil his environment. Paradoxically, then, his violence is often prompted by his own sense of justice.

Nor does membership of the gang ensure escape from punishment. In his critique of a fellow droog or gang member, Alex remarks that 'I didn't like the look of Dim; he looked dirty and untidy, like a veck who'd been in a fight, which he had been, of course, but you should never *look* as though you have been' (p. 14). Dim's appearance betrays the fact that he and his droogs have just robbed a local merchant. However, Alex is offended not because Dim might give away their guilt, but because he dismisses the importance of proper self-presentation. That the latter here serves a practical purpose links Dim's lack of intelligence — the dimwittedness from which he gets his name — to his under-developed aesthetic sensibility. And whereas Dim's untidiness does not violently provoke Alex, as does the old drunkard's, his disrespect for the arts certainly does. While sitting in the Korova Milkbar, Alex's ecstatic appreciation of an opera is interrupted when Dim lets off 'one of his vulgarities, which in this case was a lip-trump followed by a dog-howl followed by two fingers pronging twice at the air followed by a clowny guffaw' (p. 32). In turn, Alex bloodies Dim's mouth with a swift punch. When asked by the latter why he did it, Alex again transmutes poor taste, or the incapacity for aesthetic appreciation, into the symptom of a character flaw: "For being a bastard with no manners and not the dook of an idea how to comport yourself publicwise, O my brother" (p. 32). As with the old drunkard and Billyboy, so too with Dim: Alex arrogates to himself the authority to punish those who spoil the aesthetics of his environment, and he justifies that authority by making taste the barometer of character.

In assuming this authority, it may seem that Alex is, in fact, free from the cultural and legal authorities. Is he not, after all, breaking the law in the name of his own sense of justice and fidelity to his aesthetic desires? The answer, of course, is yes, he is, but the impetus for this transgression is his own inability to remake the environment in a way that would gratify rather than repress his need for sensuous gratification. He arrogates to himself small moments of authority because the big Other against which he must strike in order to remake his world in any significant way is institutional and thus intangible rather than personal. He cannot use his knife to carve the cheeks of government as he does those of Billyboy, nor, for example, crack with 'horrowshow tolchocks' his probation officer, lest he harm a bureaucrat while leaving intact the bureaucracy that creates him. In short, the world Alex finds unsatisfactory is unchanging despite his criminal behaviour, so that his exercise of authority paradoxically underscores his impotence.

Most people dodge this sense of impotence by subconsciously accepting the official ideology of freedom, or the notion that servitude is self-motivated: I freely choose to subject myself to subjection. This choice is entirely reasonable because it is profitable, or, perhaps more generous but also more regrettable, because it is necessary. Consider, for example, the people living in Alex's housing complex, Municipal Flatblock 18A. The latter provides private space for each individual to cultivate his or her independent self, but the technological extension of mass culture facilitates the 'false identity of the general and the particular'.⁴ This fact is dramatized when Alex and his droogs stop to rest after fleeing the fight with Billyboy's gang: 'It was like resting between the feet of two terrific and very enormous mountains, these being the flatblocks, and in the windows of all of the flats you could viddy like blue dancing light. This would be the telly' (p. 21). Here the monolithic architecture visibly mimes the condition of mass culture, which merely pretends to immanent differentiation. And on this particular night even the latter pretence is dropped. For not only are the flat-block inhabitants all watching television, they are watching a world-cast, 'meaning that the same programme was being viddied by everybody in the world that wanted to, that being mostly the middle-aged middle-class lewdies' (p. 21). The moral register of the word 'lewdie', along with the comparison with 'two terrific and very enormous mountains', implicitly recalls Kant's dynamic sublime, in which a great natural force overwhelms the power of imagination to comprehend it. Faced with this limit, the spectator must thrust aside sensible barriers, preparing the way for a suprasensible moral law and the creation of moral subjectivity. By contrast, the world-cast is a piece of cultural trash that, passively received, provides relaxation needed to recreate the energy for work, 'there being this law for everybody not a child nor with child nor ill to go out rabbitting' (p. 40). The seemingly natural collusion of culture and industry overwhelms consumers and renders its own version of a suprasensible moral law, namely the command to rabbit, or claw one's way to the middle. It is a credit to Alex's sublime sensibility that he perceives the grim authoritarianism of that command, as well as to his playful rebelliousness that he can signal that perception with the 'lewdie' neologism.

Now consider the flatblocks themselves. In so far as they are erected for the welfare of the city's inhabitants, they are proof that city planners and government authorities make good on their duty to care for the public. However, the subservience of morality to economic power is demonstrated by the erection of housing units that draw inhabitants into the city centre so that they may

⁴ For more on the role of public housing in perpetuating what Adorno and Horkheimer call 'the false identity of the general and the particular' see Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming, 2nd edn (New York: Continuum, 1997), pp. 120–21.

produce and consume more efficiently. The ideal of efficiency is as cold as the flatblocks whose planning it guided, and, to fool residents into embracing this coldness, housing managers use a wall mural to pump artificial warmth into the lobby of Alex's building. We glimpse this mural when he returns home after the first night of rape, robbery, and assault:

And too I saw just by 18A a pair of devotchka's neezhnies doubtless rudely wrenched off in the heat of the moment, O my brothers. And so in. In the hallway was the good old municipal painting on the walls — vecks and pitisas very well developed, stern in the dignity of labour, at workbench and machine with not one stitch of platties on their well-developed plotts. (p. 35)

Here the associative logic of the text suggests that the 'devotchka's' nudity and apparent rape have the same source as the depicted workers' nudity and 'rape'. That is, the mural conveys the idea that instinctual needs and desires are satisfied by the work routines of people like Alex's mother and father in the dyeworks and Statemarts. What these routines actually do, though, is limit the scope of satisfaction; for when the body is reified as an instrument of labour, erotic energy diminishes and sexual energy intensifies.⁵ While this intensification conditions the public not to begrudge its aesthetically impoverished environment, it will result in a periodic eruption of suppressed sexuality like that suffered by the girl whose neezhnies were 'rudely wrenched off'.⁶ Metaphoric rape leads to a literal rape. Blind to this fact, or simply uncaring, political and economic authorities disseminate capitalist ideology through art works that teach the masses to repress libidinal needs and desires until repression itself becomes a basic need. The message sent by the mural in Alex's building can thus be reduced to an obscene phrase: 'Go fuck yourself'.

This (implied) obscenity is so transparent that brazen youths living in the building actually add it, or something approximating it, to the mural's surface:

But of course some of the malchicks living in 18A had, as was to be expected, embellished and decorated the said big painting with handy pencil and ballpoint, adding hair and stiff rods and dirty ballooning slovos out of the dignified rots of these nagoy (bare, that is) cheenas and vecks. (pp. 35–36)

Youths in this building scrawl over officially sanctioned obscenity with indecencies of their own. Alex's suggestion that this defacement 'was to be expected' signals a belief that everyone already knows what they only pretend not to, namely that the dignity of labour is a false ideology, a ruse of power. Thus the threat posed by this defacement is not exposure of a secret, but a challenge to conventional ways of challenging power. For the latter depend on

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 73.

⁶ Marcuse draws explicit connections between labour, libidinal repression, and the threat of sexual violence, in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud*, new edn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 201–02.

the pretence that middle-class 'lewdies' do not know and feel what they actually do, namely that the daily routine of labour is both ungratifying and undignified.⁷ Calling that pretence by its name suggests an appetite for the destruction of welfare capitalism and subsequent institution of socialism in postwar Britain.

Still, the radical potential of that threat remains undeveloped because it has been displaced from the political and economic arena into the realm of culture. It is as if, in the knowledge that the painting will be recognized as a lie, it has been erected as a safe target of aggression rather than a purveyor of essential truths and values. Disaffected youth can use it to expend their anger and assuage their boredom without ever considering the cause of their feelings. To be sure, particular persons are affected by such actions — the manager whose job it is to maintain the building, or parents upset by their children's behaviour — but the larger social sources of disenchantment are unaffected. In this way the painting fulfils its function of pacifying rebellious desire, and its patent lie becomes a bitter truth. Everyone will continue to act as if the daily routine of labour is in fact gratifying and dignified, even if it is not.

The potential objection to be raised here is that actual workers living in the building do not deface the painting: their children do. However, that argument is neutralized by educational studies like *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), in which Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintess conclude that the primary task of schools is 'to produce a compliant and obedient labor force, that is, to reproduce rather than obliterate unequal relations'.⁸ And whereas in Britain the 1944 Butler Education Act made secondary education free to all, Alan Sinfield observes that 'the retention of fee-paying schools and division of the rest into grammar and secondary modern, with an extension of "intelligence" testing, continued prewar trends'.⁹ In turn, Angus Calder condemned the Butler act for ensuring 'that privilege was perpetuated behind a façade of democratic advance'.¹⁰ Simply put, the extension of free education was a means to advance democratic inequality. Alex signals his intuition of this fact when he calls his own school 'that great seat of gloopy useless learning' (p. 39). No wonder, then,

⁷ My reading of this painting is heavily indebted to Slavoj Žižek's treatment of the political significance of Wikileaks: 'The real disturbance was at the level of appearances; we can no longer pretend we don't know what everyone knows we know. This is the paradox of public space: Even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, saying it in public changes everything. [...] We shouldn't forget that power comprises not only institutions and their rules but also legitimate (normal) ways of challenging it' (S. Žižek, 'Tact in the Age of Wikileaks', *Harper's Magazine* (April 2011), pp. 13–16 (p. 15)).

⁸ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintess, cited in Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 161.

⁹ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 3rd edn (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63.

¹⁰ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939–1945* (London: Granada, 1969), p. 627; also cited in Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, p. 63.

that the youth in his building deface a public art work depicting the dignity of labour. They are aware of what awaits them, and to relieve their frustration they hurl aggression at the representation of an official lie that disavows that very awareness. In turn, this relief makes their eventual servitude all the more likely.

Alex never falls into this trap. He says that 'some of the malchicks living in 18A' had defaced the painting, but not that he had. Furthermore, he is consciously aware that culture can be used to manipulate the masses, and youth in particular:

I had to have a smeck, though, thinking of what I'd viddied in one of these like articles on Modern Youth, about how Modern Youth would be better off if A Lively Appreciation Of The Arts could be like encouraged. Great Music, it said, and Great Poetry would like quieten Modern Youth down and make Modern Youth more Civilized. Civilized my syphilised yarbles. Music always sort of sharpened me up, O my brothers, and made me like feel like old Bog himself, ready to make with the old donner and blitzen and have vecks and pptsas creeching away in my ha ha power. (p. 46)

Here Alex references an idea shared by many postwar literary intellectuals: the state must make access to high culture a right of every citizen, no different from the right to health care and education. Hence the formation of the Arts Council in 1945 and the BBC Third Programme in 1946. The point was to use culture to forge a sense of national identity, one that, crucially, might ward off any temptation to socialism.¹¹ This idea prompted Cyril Connolly's admonition of artists to help ensure that a Soviet-style workers' state 'does not happen here',¹² and it fuels Alex's suspicion that the arts are used as bribes for correct political behaviour. Alex rejects such bribes, asserting that classical music makes him feel violent and elicits fantasies of victims whose desperate screams verify his power.¹³ Part of the reason for this violent reaction must be that the thing he most loves, music, has been degraded to a means of political pacification, a source of false consolation for libidinal repressions demanded by capitalist modes of production and consumption. This degradation cheapens the music. It still provides sensual and spiritual satisfactions which are missing from the broader realm of social life, but, paradoxically, this provision emphasizes the ubiquity of sensual and spiritual poverty.

On the one hand, Alex's violent feelings are understandable: they move him to forms of criminality that symbolically attest his 'ha ha power', or freedom

¹¹ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, p. 56.

¹² Cyril Connolly, *Ideas and Places* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), p. 136; also cited in Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, p. 56.

¹³ Ironically, the Interior Minister does successfully bribe Alex towards the end of the novel, offering him a job 'in the National Gramodisc Archives on the music side [. . .] and a lot of free discs for my own malenky self' (p. 201) in exchange for participating in a publicity drive to discredit F. Alexander. Still, this cultural bribe does not curtail Alex's violent behaviour; he continues to engage in it until he 'like groweth up' (p. 212).

from forces that menace high culture as well as more mundane, everyday aesthetic satisfactions. On the other hand, Alex's violence is unreasonable because directed at individual 'vecks and ptitsas', leaving those menacing forces to go unchecked. He does not fall into the ideological trap set by the painterly depiction of the dignity of labour, but he is not very different from the mischievous malchicks who scrawl obscenities all over its surface. His protests are superficial, mere scratches on the surface of a complex and deep-rooted politico-economic problem.

The point to reiterate is that Alex's crimes are not the spectacular assertions of free will that he believes them to be and that Burgess claims they are. They are expressions of resistance to political and economic authority, but they are also circumscribed and controlled by that very authority. Moreover, celebrating them as acts of resistance romanticizes what in other contexts would be considered downright reprehensible. Consider, for example, Burgess's assertion that this novel teaches a lesson about 'the fundamental importance of moral choice' (p. xiv), that it is better freely to choose to be bad than to be apathetic. It is a flagrant contradiction to assert that assault, rape, and robbery evince heroic individualism predicated on moral choice, and this contradiction illustrates the danger of framing Alex's criminality in a purely personal register. In a social and political register, Alex is forced to choose between totalitarianism and anarchy. That choice is false and, if anything, testifies to a lack of individual freedom. If there are no good options, then individual choice is a mere abstraction; one might as well flip a coin.

To be sure, criminality is not the only means by which Alex attempts to forge his freedom: his use of Nadsat slang as well as his peculiar sense of fashion serve both 'to shore up the solidity of a unified and coherent subject' and also to bind collective identities of resistance.¹⁴ Consider, for example, the particular symbolic threat posed by Nadsat. Of the latter, Alex's doctor notes that "most of the roots are Slav. Propaganda. Subliminal penetration" (p. 129). While many literary intellectuals were calling for cultural productions that could temper the threat of socialism, Alex and his droogs construct a new language that, owing to its Slavic roots, implicitly celebrates that threat. Nadsat is thus the language of opposition. But as with any language or discourse, Nadsat 'speaks' and constructs Alex every bit as much as he speaks and constructs it. Indeed, the irregularity of his speech congeals into a form of linguistic hypnosis, creating an oppositional subject who loses sight of the aim of opposition. Nadsat thus becomes a self-referential end in itself, another negatively

¹⁴ Veronica Hollinger, "A Language of the Future": Discursive Constructions of the Subject in *A Clockwork Orange* and *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*, in *Speaking Science Fiction: Dialogues and Interpretations*, ed. by Andy Sawyer and David Seed (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp. 82–95 (p. 90).

determined token of freedom whose vitality depends on the continued existence of a prior source of oppression.

This same dependence plagues Alex's dress, which 'in those days was a pair of black very tight tights with the old jelly mould, as we called it, fitting on the crutch underneath' (p. 4). The tights and codpiece are complemented by jackets with 'very big built-up shoulders', off-white cravats, and 'flip horrowshow boots for kicking' (p. 4). Alex's get-up is menacing to say the least, and it functions as a fetish in a twofold sense. In the psychoanalytic register, it is a prosthetic extension of the bodily sensorium that compensates for traumatic disparity between the need for sensuous gratification and a social environment that represses it. This sort of compensation allows Alex to make do with aesthetic and spiritual impoverishment and, indeed, even contributes to it. After all, his outfit is hideous. In the economic register, the clothes demonstrate a penchant for commodity fetishism, which perpetuates libidinal repression. Limits to the accumulation and turnover of hard goods are overcome by the ephemerality of fashion, thereby accelerating turnover time and meeting the need for growth in rates of exchange and profit.¹⁵ Consequently, no one benefits more from the production and consumption of fashion than economic agents whose dominance ensures the unsatisfactory work experience that lies in store for Alex and his droogs. As with the use of Nadsat, then, so too with Alex's perch atop 'the height of fashion' (p. 4): the latter is negatively determined and demonstrates that he unknowingly courts his own servitude.

Burgess's failure to consider these sorts of negative determinations meant that, for him, consumption played a superficial role in the development of personality, one completely dissociated from the cultivation of moral sensibility:

I don't think it matters whether we are free to choose this make of car, or this brand of cornflakes or cigarettes. That doesn't matter. We can be conditioned to the limit by advertising, and be forced by other elements to do various things against our will. But as far as moral choices are concerned, I think we are free; we must be free. I have to desperately hold on to that belief that we are free to make moral choices.¹⁶

Here, the imperative to be free undercuts its conceptual thrust and is belied by the adverb 'desperately', as if Burgess must implore himself to hang on to the notion of freedom because it has already ceased to reflect contemporary reality. In turn, the tone of desperation affectively reflects the tautological nature of Burgess's conception of morality, which escapes economic determination simply because it cannot be determined, and is a barometer of freedom because it is freely developed. By contrast, consider how economic interests seem to

¹⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 285.

¹⁶ *Conversations*, ed. by Ingersoll and Ingersoll, p. 164.

prepare Alex's outbursts of sexual violence. In the store he robs there is 'a big cut-out showing a sharp with all her zoobies going flash at the customers and her groodies near hanging out to advertise some new brand of cancers' (p. 13). Similarly, the local newspaper depicts 'a lovely smeking young ptitsa with her groodies hanging out to advertise, my brothers, the Glories of the Yugoslav Beaches' (p. 42). Not even Alex's probation officer is immune to the allure of this young ptitsa, for we see him 'sort of eating her up in two swallows' (p. 42) before questioning Alex about his role in the robbery. The link between advertising and sexuality suggests not only that sex sells, but that if one has the money one can then buy the possibility of sexual satisfaction which, in a cheap and tawdry world, is the only sort of satisfaction available. Given this limitation, however, the primary message of these advertisements is not that one *can* buy sexual satisfaction, but rather that one *ought* to want to buy it. Refusing the latter desire is in a sense immoral because it contravenes conventional, economic standards of value. Put differently, this refusal is tantamount to deviancy and, in so far as it slows the wheels of economy, it is also subversive. Is it not the case, then, that when Alex rapes F. Alexander's wife he affirms the very desires and values that give contemporary morality what little vitality it has? Under these conditions his moral fault must be distinguished from his crime: the former lies not with the rape, but with a stubborn refusal to pay for what he merely takes.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, then, morality does not derive from a transcendent realm beyond the limits of economic and political reality but is instead determined by that very reality. It follows that any attempt to take seriously Burgess's own understanding of his novel must frame morality, which for him is indispensable, in an economic and political register. Hence the following conclusion: Burgess tries to save the twin notions of individual freedom and moral responsibility by having his protagonist choose anarchy over totalitarianism. In turn, that choice becomes his primary dramatic vehicle.

We have already seen the subtle ways in which economic and political agents determine individual behaviour and thereby negate personal claims to moral authority. Capitalist modes of production reify the body as an instrument of labour, limiting the scope of, and need for, libidinal satisfactions beyond the genital level. Sexuality is then liberalized and commodified, so that even sexual deviance props up the economic underpinnings of a society it symbolically rejects. We have also seen that collective identities of resistance bound, for example, by particular forms of dress depend on economic agents who are the ostensible targets of resistance. Further still, we have seen that the extension of free education and culture serves to advance democratic inequality. The tendency to totalitarianism is predetermined by the very structure of the welfare capitalist state in which Alex lives and, in so far as

this tendency is structurally determined, it is so pervasive as to be almost invisible.

Burgess's problem is thus not how to represent anarchistic rebellion, but rather the totalitarian tendencies that foster it. The above examples are so complexly mediated as to resist formal figuration, so seamlessly woven into the fabric of everyday life that even Alex fails to register them: 'But, myself, I couldn't help a bit of disappointment at things as they were in those days. Nothing to fight against really' (p. 15). The fact that Alex spends all his time fighting contradicts the assertion that he has nothing to fight against, and this contradiction dramatizes Burgess's dilemma. On the one hand, he must urgently render the need to fight for individual freedom against the prevailing tendency to totalitarianism. On the other hand, he must give the latter a clearly recognizable shape and form, eliminating its most insidious quality — invisibility — so that it ceases to be dangerous and becomes instead a plaything for the reader's imagination. In turn, this transmutation undercuts the urgency he means to establish.

The famed 'Ludovico Technique', a form of behavioural aversion therapy, is the figure or most recognizable form of totalitarian domination in the novel. After murdering an old woman, Alex is sent to prison, where he is involved in yet another murder, this time of a fellow inmate. Having heard of the new Ludovico treatment, he volunteers to undergo it in exchange for early release. The procedure itself is relatively simple: he is given nausea-inducing drugs and then forced to watch films depicting various sorts of physical violence, thereby learning to feel nauseous at the emergence of his own violent impulses. Not only will he no longer be a criminal, but, crucially, he will no longer want to be one. Thus cured, he can safely be released.

For Burgess, this supposed cure robs Alex of his humanity: he is now a literal production of the state, an automaton without the power to make his own moral decisions. The irony is that, in administering the treatment, the state inadvertently tips its hand and admits to strategies it has already used to co-opt this power. For example, the collusion of culture and industry is almost always co-signed by a state apparatus whose first allegiance is to business interests. Further still, Alex tells us that in Burgess's imagined dystopia the state itself is a direct competitor in the culture industry:

We could viddy from the poster on the Fildrome's face [...] that there was the usual cowboy riot, with the archangels on the side of the US marshal six-shooting at the rustlers out of hell's fighting legions, the kind of hound-and-horny veshch put out by Statefilm in those days. (p. 22)

Stupid and predictable, these films present a hero who always vanquishes the villain and are therefore platforms for the dissemination of ideology: follow the law or suffer the consequences. Seeing through the ruse, Alex and his droogs go

to the Filmdrome 'only for a yell or a razrez or a bit of in-out-in-out in the dark' (p. 22). Against the backdrop of this indifference to Statefilm productions, the cinematic medium of the Ludovico Technique carries its own grim message: rejecting the manipulations of mass media will only result in forced subjection; there is no escape.

We might also consider how Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is used to manipulate Alex's reaction to the images of torture he is forced to watch. As Dr Brodsky puts it, the music is 'a useful emotional heightener' (p. 128). Consequently, Alex feels sick not only when witnessing violence, but also when hearing classical music. Now if the government makes the sort of sensuous gratification provided by music a source of pain, then it has conditioned Alex to repress his own need or desire for sensuous gratification. Repression itself becomes an essential need, ensuring that Alex, like everyone else, will embrace servitude and misery. Again, this immediate demonstration of coercion clarifies what in most circumstances is too mediated to comprehend.

A mouthpiece for Burgess's views, the prison chaplain protests Alex's treatment. For him, the problem is not with coercive social dynamics, which the treatment renders legible, but with the fact that Alex can no longer choose to be good or bad, law-abiding or criminal, as if he had the capacity for free choice to begin with. If the latter is liquidated, then, the chaplain argues, one ceases to be human (p. 93). But if that is the case, then the chaplain also ceases to be human. Economic necessity prevents him from leaving his job in advance of the treatment; he maintains association with the institution that strips Alex of his humanity, quitting only after his widely publicized suicide attempt has made it profitable to preach against Ludovico. The chaplain's choices are thus determined in advance, and his devotion to free-will theology is vitiated by base opportunism.

The great irony is that Burgess, who gives voice to his views via the chaplain's character, ultimately finds his relationship to *A Clockwork Orange* vexed in the same manner as that of the chaplain to free-will theology. He must sell the thing he loves, and in the process he essentially kills it. As Burgess writes:

The book he [the New York publisher] brought out had only twenty chapters. He insisted on cutting out the twenty-first. I could, of course, have demurred at this and taken my book elsewhere, but [...] I needed the money back in 1961, even the pittance I was being offered as an advance, and if the condition of the book's acceptance was also its truncation — well, so be it. (pp. x–xi)

According to Burgess, the twenty-first chapter of *A Clockwork Orange* gives it the status of a novel. It is there that Alex matures, announcing his plan to leave the old, violent life for middle-class domesticity, and without that sort of maturity, Burgess argues, 'you are out of the field of the novel and into that of the fable or the allegory' (p. xii). Yet he could not refuse the American

publisher's offer, even if it meant cutting the final chapter. By his own logic, then, Burgess was forced to publish an allegory. This fact is striking when juxtaposed with his later assertion that moral laziness stems from the contemporary myth of economic determinism, that too many people deny the existence of free will by wrongly suggesting that all the important choices have been delegated 'to the state or to the directors'.¹⁷ Isn't that exactly what happened when publishers decided for Burgess the form that his work would take? And if, as he claims, the possibility for moral progress is represented in the twenty-first chapter (p. xiii), then hasn't he bargained away that very possibility? It is as if he closes his eyes to some of the most important lessons his novel has to teach. One may skirt this fact by claiming that he made his own decision to sell out, but that idea only highlights the paradox of freedom: the latter emerges through particular choices made on a given field of action, but one is rarely able to choose or construct the field on which those choices are made. On the capitalist field of action, Burgess had the option to pay the rent or refuse his publisher's offer: here we have another false choice, one that attests a lack of freedom.

Burgess and the chaplain are similarly wrong to suggest that Alex ceases to be human *after* the Ludovico treatment. Even if we grant that prior to it he has the power to make his own moral decisions, the fact remains that his most important choice, the one from which all others will follow, is whether or not to give away that power in the first place, or whether to undergo the treatment at all. For Alex, imprisoned with six others in a cell built for three, there is really no choice to be made. Authoritarian ministers of government know that much, as one says when looking into his cell: "Cram criminals together and see what happens. You get concentrated crime in the midst of criminality, crime in the midst of punishment" (p. 102). The observation of 'crime in the midst of punishment' comes close to a confession that, under these conditions, official punishment has become a crime. Rather than continue facing this sort of criminal menace, Alex takes the only way out. Like a rat seeking cheese at the end of a maze, he does not choose the Ludovico Technique so much as he instinctively reads and responds to the situation into which he is thrown. And if, as Burgess and the chaplain argue, the power to choose is what makes us human, then here we see that Alex has lost his humanity even before undergoing the dehumanizing Ludovico treatment.

The clique of thinkers led by F. Alexander believes that, if the current government can be dislodged and the 'great traditions of liberty' restored, then all will be well (p. 180). However, they show a tendency to repressiveness no different from that of the government against which they define themselves.

¹⁷ *Conversations*, ed. by Ingersoll and Ingersoll, p. 130.

When hatching plans to use Alex for political purposes, for example, Alexander fails to see that he will repeat the objectifying practices he sets out to critique. Moreover, he will lie to the public by presenting Alex as a mere victim when clearly he is not. This fact suggests that Alexander and company need Alex's suffering in order to garner political capital. They need the misery they are supposed to ameliorate. As one of them puts it: "What a superb device he can be, this boy. If anything, of course, he could for preference look even iller and more zombyish than he does. Anything for the cause. No doubt we can think of something" (p. 182). Leading victims of oppression to the promised land of freedom first requires that there be victims, and if none are visibly marked as such, then they must be manufactured. This fact explains why Alexander prompts Alex's suicide attempt, locking him in a room and blasting it with music which, the newspapers have already reported, Alex finds painful to hear. If Alex's suicide could be blamed on after-effects of the Ludovico treatment, then the government that sanctioned its use could be dislodged. In Alexander's hands, Alex is a mere means to an end, and his treatment by government ministers is, arguably, better; after all, they do not try to kill him.

This inversion of means and ends reproduces the drama of humanism that I have been implicitly tracing throughout. Alexander valorizes the humanist ideal of individual autonomy, and he hates the government for its "debilitating and will-sapping techniques of conditioning. [...] Before we know where we are we shall have the full apparatus of totalitarianism" (p. 179). Still, he deprives Alex of individual liberty in order to champion it is an ideal, and he does so because the social structure, in this case the nexus of politics and media, demands it. He fabricates a lie in order to validate a truth that, if his actions are any indication, he does not even believe in. In this novel, then, English liberal humanism is dead, killed by those who most cherish it.

These sorts of intrigues predispose readers to sympathize with Alex. He proclaims himself 'Alexander the Large' (p. 51), but he represents the small who are brutalized by an overwhelming politico-economic apparatus, and we cheer for him because we want to imagine ourselves fighting against and beating it. In doing so, however, we are victimized by the same sort of manipulation that fuels the apparatus to begin with. Consider, for example, how journalism works in this novel. Both the government and its enemies use the press to frame themselves as Alex's protector and their opponents as self-interested and power-hungry monsters. Readers of the novel watch this process unfold, and our behind-the-scenes access provides insight into who the bad guys really are, namely both sides at once. We therefore scorn all the politicians and sympathize with Alex, their most brutalized victim. However, providing insight into press manipulation is itself a manipulative gesture, one designed to elicit sympathy for a character every bit as malicious as those who oppress him. In

trying to predetermine our ultimate judgement of Alex, Burgess contradicts his own assertion that *A Clockwork Orange* teaches a lesson about 'the fundamental importance of moral choice' (p. xiv). He does not seek votes, but he does seek support for liberal humanist ideology, and, much like F. Alexander, he deploys duplicitous tactics that undercut his ideological aims.

Formally and thematically, then, *A Clockwork Orange* overturns some of Burgess's basic assumptions about the novelistic genre. He believed that the novel could not represent social structures or impersonal institutions, and that, if these completely overwhelm the individual, then this genre will cease to exist. However, *A Clockwork Orange* aptly demonstrates how politico-economic structures objectify human beings, assuming an agency once exercised by the latter. It may thus be that Burgess's failed intentions lead to an inadvertent success, one pushing beyond formerly recognized limits of representation. The notion of success born of failure is entirely appropriate for *A Clockwork Orange*, as it is a novel dialectically riven to the core.