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Aesthetics as an Aspect of Good in Enderby Novels by Anthony Burgess

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Abstract

This article considers the interaction of ethics and aesthetics in A. Burgess's worldview. It is based on an analysis of the novels about the minor poet Enderby, who is interpreted as the writer's alter ego. The material for the article is represented by the novels "Inside Mr. Enderby", "Enderby outside", "The Clockwork Testament, or Enderby's End", "Enderby's Dark Lady", or "No End of Enderby". Particular attention is paid to the personality of the protagonist and his worldview. In the course of the analysis, the superficial interpretations of Enderby's image and the system of his relationships with the outside world are rejected in favor of deeper ones, arising from the system of the author's outlooks on creativity. The material of other writer's novels is also attracted to the study ("A Clockwork Orange", "The Wanting Seed", "Little Wilson and Big God", etc), where his religious and ethical views are most clearly manifested. The analysis of Burgess's search for faith, his path from congenital Catholicism through Manichaeism to the development of his own religious and ethical picture of the world has been performed in this paper. It has shown that according to Burgess the Beauty is of primary value and the writer is seen as the creator of such a world view where the original duality of reality can be overcome through the language.

Keywords: English literature, A. Burgess, Enderby, Aesthetics, Ethics, Religion.

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Introduction

Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline about a person's perception of reality and about the essence and the manifestations of beauty in different spheres of life is directly related to art and its nature. To some extent this science is related to ethics which is the system of knowledge that allows a person to distinguish between good and evil, beauty and ugliness. In his works Burgess is preoccupied with the issues of ethics and aesthetics in connection with his own reflections on art, its essence and the creator's role in it and the society. The writer touches upon these topics in the novels about both real and fictional artists, but the most detailed ethical and aesthetic aspects of creativity are represented in Burgess's tetralogy about the poet Enderby (2012).

Methods

The analysis of the artistic world of the Enderby novels is used in this article. The aesthetic component of creativity is considered from Burgess's point of view, reflected in the work on both image and plot-compositional levels.

Results and discussion

The novels about Enderby have been the subject of literary research many times, but they have been considered either in the context of the general study of Burgess's oeuvre, or from the position of an analysis of a particular novel aspect, as in L.F. Khabibullina's article about the comic element of the first novel of tetralogy (Coale, 1981; De Vitis, 1972; Stinson, 1991; Khabibullina, 2004). The novelty of this article consists in an attempt to analyze the problems of the aesthetic component of Burgess's oeuvre on material of the Enderby novels. It should be noted that the issue of aesthetics will be considered in connection with ethics and another similar cultural phenomenon - religion.

Burgess was born in a Protestant country, but was brought up as a Catholic. During his life, especially in the 1960s, he was in polemics with his innate religion, which becomes evident in his works. Like the author, the protagonist of the tetralogy, a forty-five-year-old poet named Enderby, has a tense relationship with the Catholic Church complicated with difficulty in communicating with the outside world¹. From the first novel of the tetralogy it is known that Enderby was born in a Catholic family and was raised in the traditions of Catholicism, which was very weak in Enderby "Weak in the tobacconist-father... it had died in the poet-son, thanks to that stepmother" (2012: 45). Enderby was brought up by an unloved and unloving stepmother, an untidy and an illiterate woman who became the personification of the evil and hostile outside world for the poet and influenced his psychological need to hide in the toilet in his youth. One July night, the horrible and disgusting stepmother slipped into the bed to her stepchild, frightened by the thunder. Having found her in her bed, fearfully clinging to him, the seventeen-year-old Enderby "got up, was sick in the lavatory, then locked himself in, reading till dawn the scraps of newspaper on the floor" (2012: 24). Since then, every woman has been seen by the poet as his stepmother, and her habit of crossing herself with every roll of the thunder caused rejection in Enderby, as his stepmother's faith was based mainly on her piety and religiosity, expressed, for example, in the superstitious fear of thunderstorms as the manifestation of God's wrath: "As far as I'm concerned, the Church is all tied up with that bitch, superstitious and nasty and unclean" (2012: 153).

Like his literary hero, Burgess was raised by a Catholic stepmother and soon became a renegade Catholic, too. The clue to understanding Burgess's polemic with Catholicism is the author's fascination with the ideas of Manichaeism during 1960s, vividly represented in the anti-utopian novels "A Clockwork Orange" (1998) and "The Wanting Seed" (2016). The doctrine of the ancient Persian monk Mani, like the Catholic dogma, is characterized by dualism: flesh/soul, good/evil, light/darkness. However, according to the views

of the Manichaeans, these opposite concepts do not exclude each other, but constitute a whole, since the unity of the world is the combination of opposites. A clear example of Manichaeism ideas embodiment is Burgess's conviction about the existence of two Gods, true and wrong ones.

A character named Shonny becomes Burgess's mouthpiece in the anti-utopian novel "The Wanting Seed". Shonny is a deeply religious man who lost his children during the cruel period of the Pelphase: "There are two Gods, you understand? They are messed up, and it's hard for us to find the true one... But it's better to live like that than without any God at all" (Burgess: 229-230). The idea of the wrong God existence appears much later in the autobiographical novel "Little Wilson and Big God", where Burgess speaks sharply of the Lord's generosity towards a man, giving an example of the pandemic of influenza (during which the writer's mother and sister died) sent by the God immediately after the end of the First World War: "There was no doubt of the existence of a God: only the supreme being could contrive so brilliant an afterpeace to four years of unprecedented suffering and devastation" (Burgess, 1987: 18). Nevertheless, Burgess never called himself an atheist (Hartill, 2008: 159), and the novel "The Wanting Seed" was described by him as the most Catholic of all his works (Churchill, 2008: 13). Following L.F. Khabibullina, we believe that this author's definition is partly explained by the very subject of the novel (the death of human civilization), which gives a warning to people who forgot God (Khabibullina, 1993: 62).

Thus, despite the writer's apostasy from the Church, he paid a great attention to the issues of religion, and Catholicism remained an important teaching for Burgess. This can be seen by the main themes of the writer's works and by the interest he expressed in the processes which were taking place in the Catholic world. Thus, denying the official institutions of Catholicism (Burgess negatively perceived the reforms in the Catholic Church, adopted during the Second Vatican Council), the writer, nevertheless, saw useful elements in it. In particular, Burgess singled out the doctrines of original sin and free will.

The essence of free will doctrine consists in the independent choice of a man between good and evil and the subsequent responsibility of the man for his choice. The problem lies in the inviolability of the right to choose, which is upheld by the writer in "A Clockwork Orange" and "The Clockwork Testament, or Enderby's End"². Thus, from Burgess's point of view, a person has the right to take the side of evil, because, according to the writer's opinion, such a choice can be a greater virtue than artificially implanted good: the choice in favor of evil gives rise to a sense of guilt later that is extirpated by behaviorist methods of treatment in the anti-utopia "A Clockwork Orange", the methods which are aimed at generating unconscious mechanistic good but which turn out to be completely ineffective in practice.

In Enderby novels, where the author depicts the world primarily from the point of view of a creative personality, the writer reveals one more aspect of his religiosity which is the vision of good not only as an ethical phenomenon but also as an aesthetic one. In one of the main scenes of the third novel of the tetralogy, in the conversation with his student³, Enderby defines evil as an original sin⁴, and when he clarifies the concept of good, he identifies two kinds of the latter: "But what the imbecilic sods don't realize that there are two kinds of good – one is neutral, outside ethics, purely aesthetic. You get it in music or in sunset if you like that sort of thing or in a grilled steak or in an apple. If God's good, if God exists that is, God's probably good on that way" (Burgess, 2012: 430). The protagonist's point of view is the reflection of the author's position stated in an interview with S. Coale: "There's good beyond ethical good which is always existential. There's the central good, that aspect of God which we can prefigure more in the taste of an apple or the sound of music" (2008: 123).

Burgess's idea of the existence of two kinds of good explains his idea of two kinds of Gods described in the anti-utopian novel "The Wanting Seed" and the following own statement presented by A. de Vitis in the monographic study of Burgess's works: "I was brought up Catholic, became an agnostic, flirted with Islam, and now may be termed Manichee – I believe the wrong god is temporarily ruling the world and that the

true god has gone under. Thus I am a pessimist but believe that the world has much solace to offer – love, food, music, the immense variety of race, language, literature, the pleasure of artistic creation” (de Vitis, 1972: 15).

If Shonny does not know where to find the true God in "The Wanting Seed" due to the constant and rapid change in history development phases, in the third novel of the tetralogy the poet opposes the true God, embodied in eternal and beautiful things (the taste of an apple, the sounds of music, the joy of creativity and the greatness of art) to the wrong God, called not God.

In conversation with his student, Enderby defines the true God as something traditional and unchanging. Answering Lydia Tietjens's question if he believes in God, the poet says: "I believe in God and so what? I don't believe in God and so what again? It doesn't affect his own position, does it? ...Doesn't matter really. A matter of tradition and convention and so on" (2012: 428). In this sense, the reaction of conservative Enderby to the feminist Lydia's statement that Jesus was a woman (Lydia works in a magazine "Women for Jesus") is noteworthy. The poet does not begin polemics with a young girl; on the contrary he offers a concession to her, proposing to introduce a new pronoun for the definition of God, a derivative from "he"/"she", which will offend none of the sexes, since from the poet's point of view God's gender does not matter, because God for Enderby is an abstract representation of the all-embracing and eternal beauty. The poet gives this definition of God answering Lydia's question what happens then when a man dies: "You're finished with...Done for. And even if you weren't – well, you die then, gasp your last, then you're sort of wandering, free of your body. You wander around and then you come into contact with a sort of big thing. What is this big thing? God, if you like. What's it, or shehit, like? I would say,' Enderby said thoughtfully, 'like a big symphony, the page of the score of infinite length, the number of instruments infinite but all bound into one big unity. This big symphony pays itself for ever and ever. And who listens to it? It listens to itself. Enjoys itself for ever and ever and ever. It doesn't give a bugger whether you hear it or not...a kind of infinite Ninth Symphony. God as eternal Beauty. God as truth? Nonsense. God as Goodness. That means shehit has to be in some sort of ethical relationship with beings that are not God. But God is moved, cut off, self-subsistent, not giving a damn" (2012: 429).

The indifference of the true God similar in many respects, according to the above quotation, to the indifference of the wrong God in "The Wanting Seed" is explained by the writer's philosophical and aesthetic notions of art as neutral by nature. In Burgess's opinion, the task of literature is not to teach people how to live and behave, but reveal to a man the problem of moral choice as the only reason for life problems. This point of view is upheld by Enderby in the dispute with Prof. Balaglas in the third part of the tetralogy. In the course of the debate, the poet declares: "People always blame art literature drama for their own evil. Or other peoples. Art only imitates life. Evil already there. Original sin" (2012: 469). Thus, the neutrality of art, which is one of the forms of expression of the true God (the embodiment of beauty) is explained primarily by the neutral nature of the latter.

A creator as a person who is very close to beauty by definition has a special place in Burgess's worldview. At the heart of the binary picture of the Burgess's world lies a clear division into opposites, which can be united by means of a ritual. To Burgess's mind, the language as the system of signs is also a kind of ritual (one of the traditional forms) which is capable to resolve the contradictions of the world: "You can make rituals out of language. And it is in the rituals that opposites are reconciled, of course" (Coale, 2008: 125)⁵. Thus, the writer, whose work is connected with the language, is given, in Burgess's opinion, a special gift to reconcile contradictions which is realized in the creation of a whole (single) artistic work by the writer, capable of revealing to a man the essence of life by means of introducing him to the eternity. This skill marks out a creative person from the crowd, often turning him into a social pariah and a kind of hermit as Enderby is represented in the first novel.

The general sense of estrangement, as well as the writer's selfless devotion to art, explains Enderby's strangeness and his discrepancy with the generally accepted norms, which the poet's spouse, Vesta Bainbridge, attempts to eliminate in the first book. The realization of a creator's detachment from the outside world as a necessary condition for artist's work is experienced by Enderby in the dispute with his wife after their "accidental" trip to the Pope's summer residence during the honeymoon. In conversation with Vesta about the reasons for the drastically changed relationship between them and the strange (to her mind) behavior of her husband Enderby comes to the sad conclusion that a creator should live alone: "There's no obligation to accept society or women or religion or anything else, not for anyone there isn't. And as for poetry, that's a job for anarchists. Poetry's made by rebels and exiles and outsiders, it's made by people on their own, not by sheep baaing bravo to the Pope. Poets don't need religion and they don't need bloody little cocktail-party gossip either; it's they who make language and make myths. Poets don't need anybody expect themselves" (2012: 153). Enderby completely disagrees with Vesta's words, that an artist needs a place in the world and that his works must meet its requirements. From his point of view, a poet and his works exist out of time and space, as an artist serves the Eternal Beauty. Art is Enderby's religion, his form of the world view, in which beauty overcomes the conventions and the ugliness of the mortal world.

Conclusion

Any selfless devotion is a dedication, hence a sacrifice. A poet's sacrifice as a creator is self-denial for the benefit of greater and more significant things: being an individualist, Enderby sacrifices himself for the sake of humanity, which, by virtue of his sinful nature, sometimes forgets that a man is a bearer of eternal values first of all. Acting as a mediator between the world of the beauty and the world of ugliness, the writer in the creative transformation of the perishable into the eternal one becomes not only the creator, but also the witness of the birth of the Truth which is the Beauty as the embodiment of good.

Burgess's world view has two kinds of good, belonging to the category of ethics and aesthetics, respectively. In his works the writer analyzes the aesthetic component of creativity in detail. From Burgess's point of view, the creator's vocation is to soften the contradictions of being by the means of his works, which help to bring a man to good and morality through beauty as it is the ultimate truth.

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Footnotes

- 1- The writer leads a secluded life and spends most of his time in the toilet, which he uses as an office: he keeps his finished and unfinished works in the bathroom and often combines the creative process with the physiological one because of dyspepsia. In addition to the problems with digestion Enderby has difficulty in communicating with the outside world: he has no relations with women, neighbors.
- 2- The problem of moral choice is thoroughly analyzed in the article "The Problem of Free Will in "The Clockwork Testament: or Enderby's End" by A. Burgess" (Smyslova & Khabibullina, 2016).
- 3- In the third novel Enderby works at the University of Manhattan as a visiting professor on Creative Writing.
- 4- Here we mean the loss of Paradise and the responsibility the man will always bear for it: "Everybody knows evil. Brought up to see it. Original sin" (Burgess, 2012: 431).
- 5- Thus, in spite of the writer's apostasy from the church, the Eucharist is often mentioned in his works (it is the scene of the poet's failed suicide in the first novel about Enderby).