

readers, who, as every writer knows, frequently forget or garble the names of books they claim to admire. I have been credited with novels called *Changing Wives*, *Trading Places* and *Small Change*, and Professor Bernard Crick once mentioned in a letter that he had enjoyed my *Having It Off*, but perhaps he was having me on. (I couldn't tell which of my books he was referring to.)

## 44 Ideas

"Please, I must do something. Shall I clean your boots? Look, I'll get down and lick them." And, my brothers, believe it or kiss my shannies, I got down on my knees and pushed my red yahzick out a mile and half to lick his grahzny vonny boots. But all this veck did was to kick me not too hard on the rot. So then it seemed to me that it would not bring on the sickness and pain if I just gripped his ankles with my rookers tight round them and brought this grahzny bratchny down to the floor. So I did this and he got a real bolshty surprise, coming down crack amid loud laughter from the vonny audience. But viddyng him on the floor I could feel the whole horrible feeling coming over me, so I gave him my rooker to lift him up skorry and up he came. Then just as he was going to give me a real nasty and earnest tolchok on the litso Dr Brodsky said:

"All right, that will do very well." Then this horrible veck sort of bowed and danced off like an actor while the lights came up on me blinking and with my rot square for howling. Dr Brodsky said to the audience: "Our subject is, you see, impelled towards the good by, paradoxically, being impelled towards evil. The intention to act violently is accompanied by strong feelings of physical distress. To counter these the subject has to switch to a diametrically opposed attitude. Any questions?"

"Choice," rumbled a rich deep goloss. I viddied it belonged to the prison charlie. "He has no real choice, has he? Self-interest, fear of physical pain, drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement. Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice."

ANTHONY BURGESS *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)

THE TERM "novel of ideas" usually suggests a book light on narrative interest, in which abnormally articulate characters bat philosophical questions back and forth between themselves, with brief intervals for eating, drinking and flirtation. It is a venerable tradition which goes back to Plato's Dialogues, but it has a high rate of obsolescence. In the nineteenth century, for example, hundreds of novels were published in which the rival claims and merits of High- and Low-Church Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Dissent and Honest Doubt were expounded in this fashion, with a dash of melodrama thrown in for the sake of the circulating libraries, and most of them are utterly and deservedly forgotten. The ideas no longer interest, and their exposition has deprived the characters and action of any life.

A name sometimes given to that kind of novel is *roman à thèse*, the novel with a thesis, and it is significant that we have borrowed it from the French language. The novel of ideas, whether it has a specific thesis, or is more broadly speculative and dialectical, has always seemed more at home in Continental European literature than in English. Perhaps this has something to do with the often-noted absence of a self-defined intelligentsia in English society, a fact sometimes attributed to the fact that Britain has not experienced a Revolution since the seventeenth century, and has remained comparatively untouched by the convulsions of modern European history. Whatever the reason, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Jean-Paul Sartre, are novelists for whom there is no real equivalent to be found in modern English literature. Perhaps D. H. Lawrence came closest, especially in *Women in Love*, but the ideas debated and expounded in his work were very personal, not to say eccentric, and sat at an odd angle to the main current of modern European thought.

Of course any novel worth more than a cursory glance contains ideas, provokes ideas, and can be discussed in terms of ideas. But by "novel of ideas" one means to denote a novel in which ideas seem to be the source of the work's energy, originating and shaping and maintaining its narrative momentum — rather than, say, emotions, moral choice, personal relationships, or the mutations of human fortune. In this sense English novelists have been more

comfortable dealing directly with ideas either in comic and satirical fiction (including the campus novel) or in various forms of fable and utopian or dystopian fantasy. I have glanced earlier at examples of both types — Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, for instance. Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* belongs to the second type.

Anthony Burgess has recorded in his autobiography that this novel was originally inspired by the delinquent behaviour of the young hooligans who went under the tribal names of Mods and Rockers in Britain circa 1960, and the perennial problem they posed: how can a civilized society protect itself against anarchic violence without compromising its own ethical standards? "I saw," the maverick Catholic Burgess recalls, "that the novel would have to have a metaphysical or theological base . . . the artificial extirpation of free will through scientific conditioning; the question whether this might not . . . be a greater evil than the free choice of evil."

The story is told in the confessional, colloquial mode, by Alex, a vicious young hoodlum who is convicted of appalling crimes of sex and violence. To obtain his release from prison, he agrees to undergo Pavlovian aversion therapy, in which exposure to films revelling in the kind of acts he committed is accompanied by nausea-inducing drugs. The effectiveness of the treatment is demonstrated in the scene from which this extract is taken. Before an audience of criminologists, Alex is taunted and abused (by an actor hired for the purpose), but as soon as he feels an urge to retaliate he is overcome with nausea and reduced to grovelling appeasement. The prison chaplain asks whether he has not been dehumanized in the process.

Like many similar novels of ideas — Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, for example — *A Clockwork Orange* is set in the future (though not very far) so that the novelist can set up the terms of his ethical debate with dramatic starkness, and without the constraints of social realism. Burgess's masterpiece was to combine this well-tryed strategy with a highly inventive version of what I called, in discussing Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, "teenage skaz" (see

Section 4). Teenagers and criminals alike use slang as a tribal shibboleth, to distinguish themselves from adult, respectable society. Burgess imagines that in the England of the 1970s, youthful delinquents have adopted a style of speech heavily influenced by Russian (a conceit that would not have seemed so outlandish in the days of the Sputnik as it does now). Alex tells his story to an implied audience of "droogs" (Russian *drug*: friends) in this argot, which is known as *nadsat* (the Russian suffix for "teen"), though he uses standard English in dialogue with officialdom. There is a bit of Cockney rhyming slang in the dialect ("charlie" = Charlie Chaplin = chaplain) but basically it's derived from Russian. You don't have to know Russian, however, to guess that, in the second sentence of this extract, "sharries" means buttocks, "yahzick" tongue, "grahzny" dirty and "vonny" stinking, especially if you've read the previous 99 pages of the novel. Burgess intended that his readers should gradually learn the language of *nadsat* as they went along, inferring the meaning of the loanwords from the context and other clues. The reader thus undergoes a kind of Pavlovian conditioning, though reinforced by reward (being able to follow the story) rather than punishment. A bonus is that the stylized language keeps the appalling acts that are described in it at a certain aesthetic distance, and protects us from being too revolted by them – or too excited. When the novel was made into a film by Stanley Kubrick, the power of conditioning was given a further ironic demonstration: Kubrick's brilliant translation of its violent action into the more illusionistic and accessible visual medium made the movie an incitement to the very hooliganism it was examining, and caused the director to withdraw it.

## 45 The Non-Fiction Novel

By and by, we note a thickset Individual, in round hat and peruke, arm-and-arm with some servant, seemingly of the Runner or Courier sort; he also issues through Villequier's door; starts a shoebuckle as he passes one of the sentries, stoops down to clasp it again; is however, by the Glass-coachman, still more cheerfully admitted. And now, is his fare complete? Not yet; the Glass-coachman still waits. – Alas! and the false Chambermaid has warned Gouvion that she thinks the Royal Family will fly this very night; and Gouvion, distrusting his own glazed eyes, has sent express for Lafayette; and Lafayette's Carriage, flaring with lights, rolls this moment through the inner Arch of the Carrousel, – where a Lady shaded in broad gypsy-hat, and leaning on the arm of a servant, also of the Runner or Courier sort, stands aside to let it pass, and has even the whim to touch a spoke of it with her *badine*, – light little magic rod which she calls *badine*, such as the Beautiful then wore. The flare of Lafayette's Carriage rolls past: all is found quiet in the Court-of-Princes; sentries at their post; Majesties' Apartments closed in smooth rest. Your false Chambermaid must have been mistaken? Watch thou, Gouvion, with Argus' vigilance; for, of a truth, treachery is within these walls.

But where is the Lady that stood aside in gypsy-hat, and touched the wheel-spoke with her *badine*? O Reader, that Lady that touched the wheel-spoke was the Queen of France! She has issued safe through that inner Arch, into the Carrousel itself; but not into the Rue de l'Echelle. Flurried by the rattle and rencounter, she took the right hand not the left; neither she nor her Courier knows Paris; he indeed is no Courier, but a loyal stupid *ci-devant* Bodyguard disguised as one. They are off, quite wrong, over the Pont Royal and River; roaming disconsolate in the Rue de Bac; far from the Glass-coachman,