

Tremor of Intent

An eschatological spy novel

Anthony Burgess



A complete catalogue record for this book can be obtained
from the British Library on request

The right of Anthony Burgess to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Copyright © 1966 Anthony Burgess
Introduction copyright © Andrew Biswell, 2013

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

First published in 1966

First published in this edition in 2013 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 920 8
eISBN 978 1 84765 894 4

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

One

1

The position at the moment is as follows. I joined the gastronomic cruise at Venice, as planned, and the *Polyolbion* is now throbbing south-east in glorious summer Adriatic weather. Everything at Pulj is in order. D. R. arrived there three days ago to take over, and it was good to have a large vinous night and talk about old adventures. I am well, fit, except for my two chronic diseases of gluttony and satyriasis which, anyway, continue to cancel each other out. There will be little opportunity for either to be indulged on this outward voyage (we shall be in the Black Sea the day after tomorrow), but I dribble at the glutinous thought of the mission-accomplished, unbuttoned-with-relief week that will come after the turn-around. Istanbul, Corfu, Villefranche, Ibiza, Southampton. And then free, finished. Me, anyway. But what about poor Roper?

D.R. handed over, as arranged, the ampoules of PSTX; I have, of course, my own syringe. I know the procedure. A sort of proleptic wraith of poor Roper is already lying on the other bunk of this Bibby cabin. I explained to the purser that my friend Mr Innes had been called by unforeseen business to Murfiater but that he would be making his way by road or rail or ferry or something to Yarylyuk and would be joining us there. That was all right, he said, so long as it was clearly understood that there could be no rebate in respect of his missed fifteen hundred miles of cruising (meaning gorging and fornication). Very well, then. For Roper all things are ready, including a new identity. John Innes, expert in fertilisers. The

bearded face of that rubbery man from Metfiz looks sadly back at me from the Innes passport. He has been many things in his time, has he not, that all-purposes lay-figure. He has been a pimp from Mdina, a syphilitic computer-brain skulking in Palaiokastritsa, a kind of small Greek Orthodox deacon, R. J. Geist who had the formula, even a distinguished Ukrainian man of letters set upon for his allegations of pederasty in the Praesidium. And now he is John Innes, who is a sort of egg-cosy for soft-boiled Roper.

I well understand, sir, Her Majesty's Government's palpitating need to have Roper back. Questions in the House, especially after Tass passed through the jubilant news of the breakthrough in rocket-fuel research and Eurovision showed the Beast gliding through May-day Moscow. What I cannot so well understand is the choice of myself as the agent of Roper's repatriation, unless, of course, it is the pure, the ultimate trust which, if I were not modest, I would say I have earned in my fifteen years of work for the Department. But you must surely be aware of a residue of sympathy for a schoolfellow, the fact that until his defection we maintained a sort of exterior friendship, though with many lacunae (war, peace, his marriage, my posting to Pulj); his last communication with the West was a picture post-card to myself, the message cryptic and, so I gather, still being pored over by the cipher-boys: *Two minutes to four – up all their pipes – martyrs' blood flows through them*. Let us get certain things straight about Roper. Approach Number One will never work. I don't think for one moment that Roper can be persuaded to go back to anything. He has this scientist's thoroughness about disposing of the past. He never rummaged among old discarded answers. If he's a heretic at all it's your heresy he subscribes to – the belief that life can be better and man nobler. It's not up to me, of course, to say what a load of bloody nonsense that is. It's not up to me to have a philosophy at all, since I'm nothing more than a superior technician.

I understand the reason, sir, for two approaches to Roper,

persuasion first and force after. There's the propaganda value of freedom of choice, even though the horse's-mouth official letters in my jacket-lining neigh fantastic offers. And then, after a month or so, the judgement. Anyway, I confront Roper. I prepare to confront him by being not myself but Mr Sebastian Jagger (the rubber man wasn't needed, of course, for my fake passport). Jagger, typewriter expert; why didn't you christen me Qwert Yuiop? Jagger goes ashore and, in some restaurant lavatory, is swiftly transformed into something plausible and quacking, totally Slavonic. And then, if things go as they ought to go, a swift taxi journey to wherever Roper is at that hour of night, to be peeled off from the rest of the delegates of the scientific *sbyezd*. And then it will be I, very much the past, very much the old ways, not merely smelling of a West that has given him no answers but smelling of himself, an old formula discarded.

You think he can be persuaded? Or rather, do you think I can find it in my heart to be all that persuasive? How far am I (I am able to speak boldly now, this being my last assignment) convinced enough to want to convince? It's all been a bloody big game – the genocidal formulae, the rocketry, the foolproof early warning devices mere counters in it. But nobody, sir, is going to kill anybody. This concept of a megadeath is as remotely unreal as specular stone or any other mediaeval nonsense. Some day anthropologists will comment in gently concealed wonder on the ludic element in our serious flirting with collective suicide. For my part, I've always played the game of being a good technician, superb at languages, agile, light-fingered, cool. But otherwise I'm a void, a dark sack crammed with skills. I have a dream of life, but no one ideology will realise it for me better than any other. I mean a warm flat, a sufficiency of spirits, a record-player, the whole of *The Ring* on disc. I would be glad to be rid of my other appetites, since they represent disease, and disease, besides being expensive, robs one of self-sufficiency. A doctor I met in Mohammedia on that hashish-ring

assignment persuaded me that a simple operation would take care of both, since they are somehow cognate. Ultimately I have a desire for a spacious loghouse on a vast Northern lake, conifers all about, all oxygen and chlorophyll, paddle-steamers honking through the mist. The bar on board the *Männikkö* is stocked with drinks of intriguing nomenclature – *Juhannus*, *Huhtikuu*, *Edustaja*, *Kreikka*, *Silmäpari* – and the captain, who has a large private income, is round-buyingly drunk but never offensive. They serve mouth-watering food – fish soured and salted, garnished with gherkins; slivers of hot spiced meat on toasted rye–and there are blonde pouting girls who twitch for savage anonymous love. Some day I will have that operation.

Look in my glands and not in the psychologist's report. I am mentally and morally sound. I tut-tut at St Augustine, with his 'O God make me pure but not yet'. Irresponsible, no appointment duly noted in the diary, the abrogation of free will. If you, sir, were really reading this, you would frown an instant, sniffing a connection between St Augustine (though of Canterbury, not Hippo, not less worthy but duller), Roper and myself. He was the patron saint of the Catholic college in Bradcaster where Roper and I were fellow-pupils. You have the name of the school in the files but you have not its smell, nor the smell of the city surrounding it. Bradcaster smelt of tanneries, breweries, dray-horses, canals, dirt in old crevices, brick-dust, the wood of tram-benches, hash, hot pies with gravy, cowheel stew, beer. It did not, sir, smell of Rupert Brooke's or your England. The school smelt of Catholicism, meaning the thick black cloth of clerical habits, stale incense, holy water, fasting breaths, stockfish, the tensions of celibacy. It was a day-school, but it had room for forty or so boarders. Roper and I were boarders, our homes being so far away, exiles from the South – Kent I, Dorset he – who had sat for scholarships and got them. The best Catholic schools are in the North, since the English Reformation, like blood from the feet when the arteries harden, could not push up so far so

easily. And, of course, you have Catholic Liverpool, a kind of debased Dublin. There we were then, two Southern exiles among Old Catholics, transplanted Irish, the odd foreigner with a father in the consular service. We were Catholics, but we sounded Protestants with our long-aaaa'd English; our tones were not those of pure-vowelled orthodoxy. And so Roper and I had to be friends. We had adjoining desks and beds. There was nothing homosexual about our relationship. I think we even found each other's flesh antipathetic, never wrestling as friends often do. I know I would cringe a little at Roper's whiteness, exposed for bed or the showers, fancying that a smell of decay came off it. As for heterosexuality, well, that was fornication, you see. The heterosexual act was a mortal sin outside the married state, that was made very clear. Except, we accepted, for such foreigners as had had Catholicism before we got it and hence had sort of founder members' special concessions.

Meaning swarthy foreigners like little Cristo Gomez, Alf Pereira, Pete Queval, Donkey Camus of the Lower Fifth. They had money, and they would buy women (the ones that hung round the corner of Merle Street and London Road) whom they would take to the derelict art-room, the cricket pavilion (a hairy boy called Jorge de Tormes was secretary to the First Eleven at that time), even the new chapel. That was discovered *in flagrante* and ended in a thrilling ceremony of expulsion. What must the Blessed Sacrament have thought, looking down on those moving buttocks in the aisle? It was surprising that so much was able to be got away with, considering how the Rector, Father Byrne, was so strong against sex. He would come round the dormitories some nights, smelling of neat J. J., feeling under the bedclothes for impure thoughts. On various occasions, having felt under the bedclothes with special lavishness, he would stand at the end of our dormitory to deliver a sermon on the evils of sex. He had a fine Irish instinct for the dramatic and, instead of turning on the lights, he would illuminate his ranting face with a pocket-torch, a decollated saint's head brave above a kind of

hell-glow. One night he began with: 'This damnable sex, boys – ah, you do well to writhe in your beds at very mention of the word. All the evil of our modern times springs from unholy lust, the act of the dog and the bitch on the bouncing bed, limbs going like traction engines, the divine gift of articulate speech diminished to squeals and groans and pantings. It is terrible, terrible, an abomination before God and His Holy Mother. Lust is the fount of all other of the deadly sins, leading to pride of the flesh, covetousness of the flesh, anger in the thwarting of desire, gluttony to feed the spent body to be at it again, envy of the sexual prowess and sexual success of others, sloth to admit enervating day-dreams of lust. Only in the married state, by God's holy grace, is it sanctified, for then it becomes the means of begetting fresh souls for the peopling of the Kingdom of Heaven.'

He took a breath, and a voice from the dark took advantage of the breath to say: 'Mulligan begot a fresh soul and he wasn't married.' This was Roper, and what Roper said was true. Mulligan, long since expelled, had put a local girl in the family way; it was still well remembered.

'Who said that then?' called Father Byrne. 'What boy is talking after lights out?' And he machine-gunned the dark with his torch.

'Me,' said Roper stoutly. 'Sir,' he added. 'I only wanted to know,' he said, now illuminated. 'I don't see how an evil can be turned into a good by a ceremony. That would be like saying that the Devil can be turned into an angel again by just being blessed by a priest. I don't see it, sir.'

'Out, boy,' cried Father Byrne. 'Out of bed this instant.' His torch beckoned. 'You there at the end, turn on the lights.' Feet pattered and horrible raw yellow suddenly struck at our eyes. 'Now then,' cried Father Byrne to Roper, 'down on your knees, boy, and say a prayer for forgiveness. Who are you, worm, to doubt the omnipotence of Almighty God?'

'I wasn't doubting anything, sir,' said Roper, not yet out of bed.

'I was just interested in what you were saying, sir, even though it is a bit late.' And he thrust out a leg from the bed, as from a boat to test the temperature of the water.

'Out, boy,' shouted Father Byrne. 'Down on that floor and pray.'

'Pray for what, sir?' asked Roper, now standing, in faded blue shrunken pyjamas, between his bed and mine. 'For forgiveness because God's given me, in his infinite omnipotence, an enquiring mind?' He, like myself, was something over fifteen.

'No, boy,' said Father Byrne, with a swift Irish change to mellifluous quietness. 'Because you cast doubts on the miraculous, because you blasphemously suggest that God cannot' – crescendo – 'if He so wishes turn evil into good. Kneel, boy. Pray, boy.' (fff.)

'Why doesn't He then, sir?' asked Roper boldly, now down, though as if for an accolade, on his knees. 'Why can't we have what we all want – a universe that's really a unity?'

Ah, God help us, Roper and his unified universe. Father Byrne was now attacked by hiccups. He looked down sternly at Roper as though Roper, and not J. J., had brought them on. And then he looked up and round at us all. 'On your knees, all of you, hic,' he called. 'All of you, hic, pray. A spirit of evil stalks, hic, pardon, this dormitory.' So everybody got out of bed, all except one small boy who was asleep. 'Wake him, hic,' cried Father Byrne. 'Who is that boy there with no, hic, pyjama trousers? I can guess what you've been doing, boy. Hic.'

'If somebody were to thump you on the back,' said Roper kindly. 'Or nine sips of water, sir.'

'Almighty God,' began Father Byrne, 'Who knowest the secret thoughts of, hic, these boys' hearts –' And then he became aware of a certain element of unwilling irreverence, the hiccups breaking in like that. 'Pray on your own,' he cried. 'Get on with it.' And he hiccuped his way out. This was looked on as a sort of victory over authority for Roper.

He was having too many victories over authority, solely because of the exceptional gift of scientific enquiry he'd been demonstrating. I remember one fifth-form chemistry lesson in which Father Beauchamp, an English convert, had been dully revising the combining of elements into compounds. Roper suddenly asked: 'But why should sodium and chlorine want to combine to produce salt?'

The class laughed with pleasure at hope of a diversion. Father Beauchamp grinned sourly, saying, 'There can't be any question of *wanting*, Roper. Only animate things *want*.'

'I don't see that,' said Roper. 'Inanimate things must have wanted to become animate, otherwise life wouldn't have started on the earth. There must be a kind of free will in atoms.'

'*Must* there, Roper?' said Father Beauchamp. 'Aren't you rather tending to leave God out of the picture?'

'Oh, sir,' cried Roper impatiently, 'we ought not to bring God into a chemistry lesson.' Father Beauchamp chewed that for two seconds, then swallowed it. Tamely he said: 'You asked the question. See if you can answer it.'

I don't know when all this business of electrovalent methods of combination started, but Roper must, in those late thirties, have known more than most schoolboys knew, and chemistry teachers for that matter. Not that Father Beauchamp knew much; he'd been learning the subject as he went along. What Roper said, I remember, was that the sodium atom had only one electron on its outer shell (nobody had ever taught us about outer shells) but that the chlorine atom had seven. A good stable number, he said, was eight and very popular with the constituents of matter. The two atoms, he said, deliberately came together to form a new substance with eight electrons on the outer shell. Then he said: 'They talk about holy numbers and whatnot – three and seven and nine and so on – but it looks as though eight is the really big number. What I mean is this: if you're going to bring God into

chemistry, as you want to do, then eight must mean a lot to God. Take water, for instance, the substance that God made first, at least the Bible says about the spirit of God moving on the face of the waters. Well, you've got six outer electrons in the oxygen atom and only one in the hydrogen atom, and so you need two of those to one of oxygen to get water. God must have known all this, and yet you don't find eight being blown up as a big important number in the teachings of the Church. It's always the Holy Trinity and the Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments. Eight comes nowhere.'

'There are,' said Father Beauchamp, 'the Eight Beatitudes.' Then he had a brief session of lip-biting, not sure whether he ought to send Roper to the Rector for blasphemous talk. Anyway, he let Roper alone, and the rest of us for that matter, bidding us read up the stuff in our books. A twitch started in his right eye and he couldn't stop it. It was Father Byrne in the dormitory all over again. The sending of Roper to the Rector over God and Science was deferred till a year later, when Roper and I were in the Sixth Form, he inevitably doing science, myself languages. He told me all about it in the refectory afterwards. We were eating a very thin Irish stew. Roper kept his voice down – it was a rather harsh voice – and one lock of his lank straw hair languished in the steam from his plate.

'He tried to get me to pray again, kneeling on the floor and all that nonsense. But I asked him what I was supposed to have done wrong.'

'What was it?'

'Oh, Beauchamp told him. We had a bit of tussle about physical and chemical change and then somehow we got on to the Host. Does Christ reside in the molecules themselves or only in the molecules organised into bread? And then I decided I'd had enough of pretending you can ask questions about some things and not about others. I'm not going to Mass any more.'

‘You told Byrne that?’

‘Yes. And that’s when he shouted at me to get down on my knees. But you should have seen the sweat start out on him.’

‘Ah.’

‘I said what was the point of praying if I didn’t believe there was anyone to pray to. And he said if I prayed I’d be vouchsafed an answer. A lot of bloody nonsense.’

‘Don’t be too sure. There are some very big brains in the Church, scientific brains too.’

‘That’s just what he said. But I told him again that there has to be one universe, not two. That science has to be allowed to knock at all doors.’

‘What’s he going to do with you?’

‘There’s not much he can do. He can’t expel me, because that’s no answer. Besides, he knows that I’ll probably get a state scholarship, and there’s not been one here for a hell of a long time. A bit of a dilemma.’ Roper getting the better of authority again. ‘And the exam isn’t far off now, and he can’t very well send me somewhere for special theological instruction. So there it is.’

There it was. I was still in the Church myself at that time. My own studies were technical and aesthetic, not posing any fundamental questions. I was studying Roman poets who glorified Roman conquerors or, in the long debilitating pax after conquest, pederasty and adultery and fornication. I was also reading, fretting at their masochistic chains, the correct tragedians of the Sun King. But there was one member of the staff who was Polish, a lay brother called – after the inventor of the Russian alphabet – Brother Cyril. He’d only come to the school three years before and there was nobody for him to teach, since he knew only Slavonic languages and a little English and very little German. But one day I found him reading what he told me was Pushkin. I took a liking to those solid black perversions of Greek letters and at once my future (though naturally, sir, I did not know this yet) was fixed. I romped through