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NADSAT: THE ARGOT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN ANTHONY BURGESS'
A CLOCKWORK ORANGE

The dustjacket of the Heinemann edition of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) promises that "it will take the reader no more than fifteen pages to master and revel in the expressive language of Nadsat." Perhaps that is what it will take to guess most of the meanings from context, but to master the argot of the teenage set with which the novel deals may be somewhat more difficult. It is indeed something like learning Russian vocabulary without the grammar. There are about a dozen words on every page of the novel that are non-English, and these words are almost entirely substantives. At a rough estimate about three per cent of the text is foreign or borrowed. That is a rather large amount of invasion, considering the nature of the non-English words. Were these words entirely symbolic, or imaginative, the novel might be as unintelligible as if it had been written in Esperanto. But in fact the roots are mostly Slavic. What the author has done is to inject a heavy element of Russian vocabulary into the speech of his characters.

There is one clear clue in the novel to the nature of this vocabulary. Somewhere beyond the middle of the book the protagonist, Alex, uses Nadsat words in conversation with two psychiatrists who are treating him. His language, Dr. Brodsky says, is "quaint." Then, he asks his partner, Dr. Branom, if he knows anything about its provenance. "Odd bits of rhyming slang," Dr. Branom answers, with "a bit of gypsy talk, too. But most of the roots are Slav. Propaganda. Subliminal penetration." All of these remarks quite exact, except perhaps the reference to gypsy talk. While there is plenty of slang, an odd German word or two, I can discover no gypsy words. Russian words are, however, ubiquitous.

Examine the first fifteen pages, that the dustjacket says will provide sufficient clue to meaning to enjoy the rest of the novel. We begin in the company of Alex and his three friends. They are called *droogs*, the Russian word for *friend* slightly Anglicized. They are marking up their *rassodocks* (Russian *minds*) what to do that evening. The times are *skorry* (*sorry*). There is no law yet against some of the new *vesches* (*things*) they put into *moloko* (*milk*) to give one a *horrorshow* (*good*) feeling. Their pockets are full of *deng* (*money*). They decide to *tolchock* (*push, pound*) and old *veck* (*man*) in an alley. They *viddy* (*see*) him swim in his own blood. They consider doing violence to some *starry* (*old*) *ptitsas* (*birds, feminine; women*). They go away *smecking* (*laughing*) with the contents of a till.

Not all of the Russian words have to be guessed from context, for the author does not wish the novel to be totally unintelligible. Pete had a "rooker (*hand, that is*)" on the front of his tights. Georgie had a "clown's litso (*face, that is*)" in the same place. They wore built up shoulders "pletchoes we called them," as indeed every Russian calls them.

They met some *devotchkas* (*girls*)—the number of words for girls is remarkable—who wore little silver medals bearing the names of boys they had gone with (euphem-

ism?) before they were fourteen on the *groody* (*bosomy*) part of their dresses. They considered spending the evening with a bit of *pol* (*sex*) but decided against it. There were only four *devotchkas*, which would mean *kuppeting* (*buying*) one of the unwholesome four enough to drink to keep him busy while the others enjoyed themselves.

The *chelloveck* (*man*) sitting next to them was already far gone on the drug. His *glazzies* (*eyes*) were glazed—a rather apparent pun. His *slovos* (*words*) were slurred. All this time in the background you can hear the *goloss* (*voice*) of the singer, crooning a real *starry* (*old*) oldie, *You Blister My Paint*, a more sophisticated play on words here. If we hadn't already guessed, the author would show us by such repetitions that here at least he was pulling our legs.

They go out into the winter *nochy* (*night*), searching for a *malenky* (*small, petty*) jest. They meet an old man, or at least an adult, coming from the Public Library. Pete holds his *rookers* (*arms*), while Dim yanks out his false *zoobies* (*teeth*). He makes *chumbling* (*dirty*) *shooms* (*noises*), so that George stops holding his *goobers* (*lips*) apart—exactly what he was doing is not especially clear even after translation. They pull off his *platties* (*trousers*) and read his private letters, which they consider to be filled with *chepooka* (*nonsense*). Their violence is punctuated with disgusting gestures. After a sentimental passage in a letter one of the four pretends to wipe his *yahma* (*hole*) with it.

They decide on a bit of *shop-crasting* (*stealing*), set up an alibi with three or four old *baboochkas* (*women*) in a bar, where the waiter has on a *grazzy* (*dirty*) apron, and spend all the money in their *carfans* (*pockets*). Dim is quiet for fear of being considered *gloopy* (*stupid*). They take pains to avoid the *millicents* (*policemen*) and *rozz* patrols. I take *rozz* to be a clipped reference to the Russian for *criminal investigation department*. Many of the English words in the novel, especially slang words, are clipped forms, and there is reason to believe the author employs the same practice with Russian words. For example, Pete keeps *chasso* (*sentry*—clipped) while they rob a smoke shop.

Before they get down to violence in the robbery, they are momentarily attracted by an advertisement for *cancers* (English coinage for *cigarettes*) in the form of a pretty girl showing off her *goodies* (*breasts*). The old woman in the shop is “all *nuiking*” (*smelling*) of scent. After the robbery and violence they go back to the bar and ring the *collocoll* (*bell*) for the waiter. The *rozzes* (let us say, *cops*) come in wearing their *shlemmies* (*helmets*). But the cops have nothing on the young criminals. “Everything [was] as easy as kiss-my-sharries” (*balls*).

In the beginning of the next chapter they run into a “burbling old *pyahnitsa*” (*drunk*) whose words interest Alex. He likes to *slooshy* (*hear*) what some of these old *decreps* (clipped, *decrepit ones*, one supposes) have to say. An odd blurb rises from his *keeshkas* (perhaps Russian clipped for *intestines, guts*). Then they run across Billyboy and his five *droogs* (*friends*). Now there will be gang war. This is not the mean violence they commit on shopkeepers, drunks, and little girls but rather serious business with the *noz* (*knife*), the *oozy* (this one escapes me), and the *britva* (*razor*). So the story progresses, but that takes us through the first fifteen pages which the dustjacket behooves us to master. The Russian vocabulary continues, but the introduction of new words is cut down—and many of those we subsequently meet are reasonably familiar, such as *chai* (*tea*) or *gavoreet* (*speak*). There is then some truth to the promise that if we master the first fifteen pages we can read the rest of the novel with little difficulty.

The fifty odd Russian borrowings we have been examining constitute a fair sampling of the vocabulary of the first fifteen pages of the novel, but they by no means exhaust the subject. There are a few borrowings from other languages; for example, *tashtook* for *handkerchief* (German) and *kartoffel* for *potato*. There are English coinages, some of them purely imaginative, as *vellocet*, *synthemesc*, *drencom* for LSD-type additives to the evil milk the boys drink, which puts knives in your stomach. Money can be *polly* or *cutter* as well as *deng*, and potatoes are also *spuds*. Heads are *gullivers*, and women are sometimes *sharps* or *lighters*, as well as *ptitsas*, *cheenas*, *baboochkas*, and *devotchkas*. Smokes are *cancers*, and a drink of whisky is a *Large Scotchman*. On the whole the language is as unusual and versatile as anyone might wish.

The novel is not, however, filled with linguistic pyrotechnics in the same way that Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is. Joyce is attempting, however successfully, to delve beneath the conscious levels of speech; Burgess is playing with ordinary speech conventions. It is as if he were testing our ability to read. As we know, to read Shakespeare, say, requires coming to terms with the vocabulary, some of which is slang, some of which is simply out-of-date. To read *A Clockwork Orange* is to go through the same process artificially. Indeed it is even more difficult, for there is no apparatus with footnotes, and most readers will have too little Russian to provide the necessary clues.

It is fair to ask what is the purpose of this linguistic innovation? That is, what has the author accomplished with his unusual vocabulary? To do so is not quite the same as inquiring what the author intended by all this verbiage—clearly there are times when the words ran away with him and his intention, so far as one can ascertain, was simply to amuse the reader in the way that puns or nonsense verse amuse us. But *A Clockwork Orange* is not nonsense, nor is it simply “horror comedy,” or sick humor, as the writer for Heinemann implies on the dustjacket. And it is certainly not “a fable of good and evil” demonstrating “the importance of human choice,” the alternative suggested by the publisher.

It is, to begin with, a distopia related to the genre of Eugene Zamiatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *1984*, Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, or even Edmund Wilson's unsuccessful play, *A Little Blue Light*. Like *We* and *Brave New World* and *1984* it presents a vision of society as it has developed at some future time, a vision that is not only unpleasant but is almost entirely unbearable. Unlike Zamiatin, Huxley, and Orwell (and there are of course others in the same category), Burgess holds no shred of hope for society. There are no important characters in *A Clockwork Orange* capable of seeing through the foibles and evils of the society created. There is no sign of hope for the future.

Like the characters in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, those in *A Clockwork Orange* are all children—indeed the book is entirely the autobiography of Alex. The others hardly matter except as participants in events that illustrate Alex's total lack of moral values. But unlike Golding's novel this one is not about youngsters in order to clarify its moral purpose. Golding is discussing original sin; in order to do so without clouding the issues with sexual matters he makes all of his characters children below the age of puberty. Burgess's characters—or character—are not below the age of sexual experience. Indeed vicious rape is one of the attendant pleasures they enjoy as early as the second chapter of the novel.

That is not to say that the author is totally unconcerned with moral values. No doubt he deplores the actions of Alex as much as we do. What he is doing is creating a hopeless vision of a society taken over by youth. The youth do not share the values of their elders, nor do they admit any sort of normal associations with them. Parents are not to be obeyed, nor do they set examples. The best that can be hoped for in the world of Burgess is that the young will eventually grow up into copies of their parents. Physical and mental attrition will set in—it does for some of the gang. Dim and Billyboy, for example, end up as millicents (policemen).

But what has this to do with the special argot of youth, which incidentally—like the uniforms they wear—will inevitably change as new youths replace those who have passed into the ossifying adult world? Why should three per cent, or so, of the words be Anglicized Russian words instead of, say, Arabic or French? If most readers have to arrive at meaning from contextual repetition, Arabic would do for them quite as well. If the writer is merely trying to amuse with sounds and still wishes to communicate a large percentage of what his words say at once, surely French would better serve English and American readers. It is interesting to speculate on what such a story might sound like written in Franglais. But in fact neither French nor Arabic would do. There is a real sense in the novel in which, to borrow Marshall McLuhan's terminology, the medium becomes the message. For the Anglo-American reader the Slavic words connote communist dictatorship, the society of *Darkness at Noon*, without moral value and without hope. How the young people in the novel learn the argot is never explained. It seems to come to them through the air somehow. Their parents, the police, the psychiatrists know about it, but they cannot speak it.

The writer is of course describing a common enough linguistic phenomenon. Those of us in our forties may understand "Cool it, man," but we cannot speak Beat. Where our children learned the argot, we do not know, nor do they. But Burgess is exaggerating beyond all reasonable bounds this sort of linguistic process. And he makes the argot Russian, as if to warn his readers of what society may become if it communizes itself along Soviet lines. The medium becomes the message in *A Clockwork Orange* with a vengeance, and the message is similar to that in other dystopias that deal in visions of society in the future after it has become static, completely controlled, amoral, and heartless. The difference between *A Clockwork Orange* and, say, *We* or *Brave New World* lies in the fact that complete submission and total control in the latter novels, products of an earlier generation, lead to inaction or submission most of the time; whereas in Burgess the same destruction of moral values leads to absolute anarchy. The message is the same, but the specific warning of events to come is quite different.

Much of the appeal of works like *We*, *Brave New World*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Darkness at Noon* rests on what we consider to be the authenticity of the vision. It is on that count that Edmund Wilson's play, *A Little Blue Light*, particularly fails. Wilson was unable to convince us that his vision was clear, in the sense that Huxley's or Golding's is supposed to be. The test, after all, will come only with time. The problem, artistically speaking, is how the author goes about creating authenticity—in short the problem with works of this genre is the old one of verisimilitude.

On this score, I believe, *A Clockwork Orange* fails. Alex, the protagonist, is a totally amoral person—a thief, an arsonist, a rapist, though there are one or two qualities

that tend to detract from Burgess's total version of a teenage fiend incarnate. For one thing, Alex likes serious music, though he uses it to encourage his nefarious escapades. When he is finally captured and incarcerated, he is given a chance to receive pardon and his freedom by submitting to a psychiatric experiment. Doubtless the author has his tongue in his cheek about psychiatrists while he describes this process. Alex is drugged, tied down, and subjected to very heavy doses of violence on film. It is suggested that by this method of vicarious participation in an extraordinary amount of violence, the violent part of his mind can be changed—or, more simply, the subject can be conditioned so that even the thought of violence can make him physically ill. It is as if he underwent a psychic frontal lobotomy, which altered his entire personality—not forever in the novel, however.

What Burgess suggests is that the spectacle of brutality can be used as a deterrent. Authors are not the only ones to think up such things. As Marshall McLuhan points out, the Santa Monica police offered (in 1962) a five dollar reduction in traffic fines to persons willing to watch the Ohio State Police movie *Signal 30*. But he also argues that the spectacle of brutality can itself brutalize. "Numbness," he says, "is the result of prolonged terror . . . The price of eternal vigilance is indifference." Whether a hot film, as McLuhan calls it, would cool off hot behavior is a psychologically moot point. Whether we accept media distinctions such as McLuhan makes does not really matter in attempting to weigh the success in terms of verisimilitude of the events depicted in a novel like *A Clockwork Orange*. We know, rationally and intuitively, if not from experience, that a hot book will not cool sexual ardor—or there would be no market for pornography. In short there is enough in question about the events of Burgess's novel to make its solution seem improbable rather than probable. If I am correct in that impression, the novel then is less than successful despite the attention it has attracted—that is, it is less than successful artistically. It breaks on the crux of verisimilitude. It fails to convince us because we do not believe in, as Mr. Branom called it, this kind of subliminal penetration. If that is so, it is certainly no moral fable of the importance of good and evil and human choice. It is a nightmare rather than a social satire.

There is admittedly always the possibility that the author intended to create a nightmare. Whether he wished to or not does not really matter, for we are left with what he gave us. The use of Nadsat as a device makes of the novel a sort of tour-de-force, and tour-de-force rates high with the English reading public these days. Witness Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* or Muriel Sharp's *Momento Mori*. In that sense we have a literary work worthy of our attention. Beyond that, beyond the fire of the words, as a humanistic document and a vision of the future to make us sit back and think how we can mend ourselves to prevent its coming true—*A Clockwork Orange* is a failure, on artistic grounds probably and surely on moral grounds.

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