

THE NEW YORK ART SCENE AND PSYCHOPATHIC NIHILISM

Richard Burgin. *Rivers Last Longer: A Novel*. Huntsville: Texas Review Press, 2010.

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Burgin usually writes short stories, but he should give the novel more of a try. On the evidence of *Rivers Last Longer*, he is in complete mastery of the longer form, his plotting and narrative turns impeccably executed. The novel is a complex mingling of genres—there is something of Evelyn Waugh’s merciless satire in it, something of Anthony Powell’s off-kilter comedy of manners, something of Kurt Vonnegut’s light-hearted absurdity, something of Raymond Chandler’s noirish moral deviancy, and something of Irish Murdoch’s fine philosophical subtlety. Burgin, like Dostoevsky, is relatively light on place description; he indulges in it only to the extent necessary. Dialogue is his great forte; interior meditation, such as one might experience in Joyce Carol Oates as she stays close to a single character’s convolutions of thought, is closely related to dialogue, and here too Burgin excels. The extreme emotional claustrophobia of the great absurdist playwrights is present too, and it is to Burgin’s credit how finely he manages the balance between this enclosedness and the light and air that must be present to make the narrative sustainable over the long haul.

Sexual humiliation has been one of Burgin’s perennial themes; here he returns to it with more complexity and subtlety than the parameters of a short story allow it. We have very well-established notions of sexual perversion, what is acceptable and not acceptable in intimate relations. But the borderline between legitimate thrill and outright cruelty is often difficult to demarcate; hence we see the many “victims” of Burgin’s protagonist Barry Auer complying at least to some extent in their own humiliation. Still, it has to be said that whereas a short story might allow a perpetual ambiguity about moral responsibility, the wider scope of the novel demands that the writer come down more clearly on one side or the other. Elliot, Barry’s lifelong friend, plays the role of the average person without the Raskolnikov complex, without the Jekyll and Hyde complexity, the touchstone against whom we can measure our own bourgeois normality. If in the end Elliot comes across as a little boring, a little on the unimaginative side, then that too seems very much part of Burgin’s overall indictment of civilization as split between the two irreconcilable poles of selfish pleasure and balanced

give-and-take.

The story is set in motion when Barry's mother Roberta dies, leaving him a substantial fortune. Barry and Elliot have had a rift some years earlier, but Elliot still looks up to the more suave and urbane Barry, who's spent time in Europe, seeking to be a writer. They've long had a dream, at Barry's prompting, of starting a top-notch literary journal. Elliot teaches English at a non-tenure-track job in Philadelphia, and Barry wonders why he can't take his mother's apartment at their luxurious Beekman Place residence on Manhattan's east side. Elliot can't think of a good reason to turn down any of Barry's inducements, so he accepts and moves in, commuting by train to Philadelphia. At a party Barry takes him to, Elliot meets Cheri, who will turn out to be the love of his life. Cheri is kind, gentle, sweet, and not very ambitious—though she obviously has some talent as an artist; in short, just the perfect sort for Elliot. But Barry, who brags about his exploits with women picked up at bars, is jealous, and won't resign until he's played out his delusional fantasy that Cheri actually loves him and not Elliot.

At the beginning of the novel, when the focus is on Barry, Burgin takes us to a very dark, claustrophobic, schizophrenic world, where a bereaved Barry is seeking to drown his grief—and keep his censoring internal “police” at bay—by picking up and humiliating prostitutes in assorted places, from Madrid to Los Angeles. One particular adventure gets completely out of control, as he ends up killing a hooker named Jordan, yet retains the composure to dispose of her body. In comparison to this dark and depressing beginning, Elliot's mere blandness seems more tolerable. Barry's second-worst failing—after his tendency to torture and murder women—may be his deep cultural insecurity, leading to affected speech sprinkled with European catch-phrases, self-denial about his lack of writerly talent, and sycophantic attitude toward the great and famous, including Hollywood mediocrities. Barry, in other words, is a reasonable compendium of many of American culture's anxieties; he just represents their extreme form. If violence against women is an ingrained part of capitalist behavior—like violence against any lesser-endowed creature—then in that aspect too Barry is not exactly a radical outlier. The difference is that for most of us our internal “police” is an effective barrier, most of the time, against the commission of overtly evil deeds; but for someone like Barry, the police become ineffective from time to time. In short, it would be unfair to read the novel as a study of madness; such a reading lets us off the hook too easily.

In a very adept way, Burgin is addressing both the limits and deep reaches of socialization, its infinity as well as its paucity, in a culture given over to nothing but socialization from cradle to grave. Thus the novel is a

detached observation of our many daily rituals of socialization; in this case, two culturally well-positioned adults in early twenty-first century New York, hobnobbing with those who have “made it” or those who aspire to make it; and the many fissures, yielding to hypocrisy and deceit, that open up as a result of the gap between desire and talent. This is familiar Tennessee Williams territory; and much of the dialogue reminds one of the desperation of some of Williams’s most haunted characters. Everyone in Burgin’s milieu wants to believe that they are better than they are, that while their potential may yet be untapped, there is something authentically unique about them; this too is Williams territory, the sincere belief in self-improvement and the possibility of redemption through hard work and determination.

These are Elliot’s thoughts, as he walks in Philadelphia with Cheri, before he has made the move to New York:

He was surprised and angry at how banal he was acting, at how tepidly socialized he was turning out to be. It was odd, on the one hand the world pleaded for distinctive individuals while on the other it did everything in its power to keep you like everybody else. They did it with their writers and artists, pleading for more Kafkas or van Goghs while rewarding mainstream and politically correct artists at every step of the way. The same rule applied to human behavior in general and that invisible but all-powerful process of socialization (for want of a better word) had been what had shut him down today when he wanted to kiss her [Cheri].

Socialization allows normal, sometimes even relatively unselfish or at least thoughtful, behavior; it may also well be the most important check on artistic greatness. Elliot’s observation is perfectly valid, and the strength of the novel is that it plunges us into this paradox, without ever showing the way out. Some degree of Raskolnikov-like behavior seems mandatory for artistic greatness—but where is the dividing line between the permissible and outright madness? If we keep our eyes too closely on Barry’s pathologies, and not enough on all those he interacts with, we will miss the ultimate clues to the novel’s meaning.

Many of the greatest novels contain the writer’s manifesto within its pages, and *Rivers Last Longer* satisfies on this count as well. Elliot again:

Strange, too, now that he thought about it, how rarely literature described people honestly, or completely. People were generally depicted as good or evil and the ambivalence that inhabited almost every decision and feeling in life was all but ignored.... What surprised Eliot the most about literature so far was this lack of honesty.... The literature of the 20th century, even the second half of the 20th century, despite all its four letter words and graphic descriptions

of sex was far more dishonest [than 19th century literature]. It was as if there were an all-pervasive, unspoken conspiracy emanating perhaps in the network of MFA writing programs and fanning out from them across the country (and eventually through literary magazines to the world) to not make honesty about human life a top priority in fiction or perhaps any kind of priority at all. Instead of devoting their art to describing how people really thought and behaved, the goal was to represent people according to what publishers thought the literary marketplace could sell. No wonder biographies were more popular than fiction and that documentaries were so popular now at the movie theater and even “reality TV” was such a big thing—not that any of them provided much reality either. But people were starved for truth, even if they couldn’t articulate it, and they knew on some level they weren’t getting it in their fiction.... Could a play like *Othello* even be produced today, Elliot thought? Of course not, it would be condemned as racist and sexist, it would never even be written because the writer would censor him or herself first before the industry did it, and so there could be no new Shakespeare now either.

First of all, this kind of elevated literary discourse is not typical of the writing in the novel, which exemplifies the rapidly shifting noir tendency more than anything; yet the section is worth quoting at length because it serves its purpose as one of the multiple discourses that inhabits this novel and gives it additional punch than if it were to be related, for example, from Barry’s point of view alone. As for the content of this excerpt, Burgin/Elliot are right that there can be no Shakespeare today because of self-censorship; before there is censorship in writing, there is censorship in thought. Socialization, to be more accurate, makes it impossible. Everything Shakespeare wrote is considered universal—yet as often as not, Shakespeare is interested in depicting extremes of human behavior. Many of his most universal characters are unlikable; many of his greatest characters are not socialized; many of his most enduring characters are politically incorrect. We are all voyeurs, and that is the least of our perversions. Barry has simply taken his voyeurism to the last degree. He likes to watch—but so do we all. When we watch, we desire a great degree of authenticity to the truth, or what we like to call these days “reality.”

In any of a number of ways, Burgin is fully truthful to his own difficult manifesto. He doesn’t give us a Barry we can easily place in some psychoanalytical case study; it’s interesting that it’s in fact Elliot, the more socialized one, who is seeing Dr. Hodge, the bragging psychotherapist, in Philadelphia. Elliot must make a break from Hodge to encounter reality more directly in the person of Barry. Does Barry behave the way he does because he is grieving for his mother? Even within the parameters of the novel, this notion can’t be taken as a full explanation. Has he always been “mentally

disturbed” then, and is that how we should explain him? But then he seems by far the smartest, if also the most nihilist, of the characters in the novel; his perceptions of the vacuity of leading artists and celebrities at Lillian Davis’s party are close to what any writer would agree to.

Why won’t Cheri and Elliot take a clearer stand against Barry’s ruthless behavior? What is in it for them—particularly Elliot? Elliot literally has to be confronted with undeniable evidence of Barry’s earlier crime against Susan Hunt—one of those women Barry picks up in Philadelphia and unceremoniously dumps at a train station in the middle of the night, after he has had his way with her and frightened and abused her—before he comes to his senses. But this is almost the same as not coming to his senses at all. Even when the story has played itself out—that Barry, after kidnapping Cheri, could easily have murdered her—in the epilogue Elliot can’t quite let go of Barry. He thinks about him. And not always in condemnatory terms, we must assume.

Elliot, not Barry, is more of the problem character. Elliot can’t live up to his potential—whatever there is of it, as a fiction writer, as a realist, as an honest appraiser of his own reality. This desperate blandness has killed all originality. Burgin plays out this conflict on the grand twenty-first century stage of prosperous, insanely self-satisfied New York, in the strongest of colors with the strongest of vibes, forcing us to look at the flat hypocrisy of so much of our art and imagination. *Rivers Last Longer* is no less than a full-fledged assault on the barricade against inhumanity, the gated community of censored thoughts and censored actions we like to live in as we each claim authenticity for ourselves.