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Dead reckoning

B. Ball

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Abstract

Four hundred years after Christopher Marlowe's death in a Deptford inn, stabbed through the right eye by one Ingram Frizer, two books continue searching for the reasons behind the murder: Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning* and Anthony Burgess's *A Dead Man in Deptford*. In part, the anniversary itself is occasion to reopen the inquest, particularly for the clockwatcher Burgess. Moreover, some new evidence has emerged in the last few decades which needs to be incorporated in the story. But underlying these motives is the feeling that after four hundred years we are getting closer to understanding the duplicitous, seething cauldron of the Elizabethan world, rather than further away. Marlowe's plays speak to us of Power with shifting irony, in our own 'modern' cynical voice. His brief life, too, is a psychological link between the sixteenth and twentieth-centuries: the original antiauthoritarian James Dean, Marlowe lived fast and died young, a rebel with a cause.

DEAD RECKONING

Ben Ball

Charles Nicholl. *The Reckoning*. London: Picador, 1993. \$16.95.

Anthony Burgess. *A Dead Man in Deptford*. London: Vintage, 1994. \$15.95.

Four hundred years after Christopher Marlowe's death in a Deptford inn, stabbed through the right eye by one Ingram Frizer, two books continue searching for the reasons behind the murder: Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning*, and Anthony Burgess's *A Dead Man in Deptford*. In part, the anniversary itself is occasion to reopen the inquest, particularly for the clock-watcher Burgess. Moreover, some new evidence has emerged in the last few decades which needs to be incorporated in the story. But underlying these motives is the feeling that after four hundred years we are getting closer to understanding the duplicitous, seething cauldron of the Elizabethan world, rather than further away. Marlowe's plays speak to us of Power with shifting irony, in our own 'modern' cynical voice. His brief life, too, is a psychological link between the sixteenth and twentieth-centuries: the original anti-authoritarian James Dean, Marlowe lived fast and died young, a rebel with a cause.

It is well known that one of Marlowe's causes was the Elizabethan Secret Service, and in *The Reckoning* Nicholl attempts to trace through contemporary sources the extent to which this resulted in his untimely exit. Nicholl begins by revealing the criss-crossing histories of the four men at Mrs. Bull's house on the 30th May 1593: Robert Poley, smooth spymaster and manipulator, Nicholas Skeres, hired thug and follower of the Earl of Essex; and Ingram Frizer, loanshark and the man credited with killing Christopher Marlowe - poet and dangerously loose cog in Sir Francis Walsingham's anti-Catholic rack. From there we are drawn into the labyrinthine sub-world of money and murder, treachery and torture that sustained the sparkling Elizabethan court. Marlowe, Nicholl suggests, was caught in the cross-fire between two of the court's brightest gems - Essex and Sir Walter Raleigh - vying for the Queen's favour. Nicholl weaves complex and detailed scholarship with a literary insight into character to create a tapestry of the age. His account is lean, sustained and compelling.

A Dead Man in Deptford approaches the same material through the medium of a fictional biography rather than a formal historical study. The narra-

tor is a boy-actor/ sometime lover of Marlowe. Burgess can thus indulge his comprehensive knowledge of Elizabethan English as it was spoken; mercifully for his readers he can't resist a little pedantry - or, more kindly, vast learning - to aid comprehension (but can't resist pointing this out at the end of the book). Burgess handles the language with such assurance that it passes the irritation test, the stumbling block of many adopted accents. This narrator might be Thomas Pope, subsequently of Shakespeare's troupe and named in the First Folio. Like much of Burgess's work, *A Dead Man in Deptford* is littered with these in-jokes and suggestions, making the book a great (if somewhat self-satisfied) pleasure for those who know, and an inducer of inferiority complexes for those who don't. Best go in armed with *The Reckoning*.

Those gripes aside, *A Dead Man in Deptford* is the work of a master craftsman at the height of his powers. Burgess's first-person narrative, often from 'Kit' Marlowe's perspective, shows us what Nicholl can only tell us about: the grimy streets and clothes are filled with complete characters, and those characters filled with life and motivation. While Nicholl's interest is in the external forces lined up against Marlowe - Essex, Richards Baines and Cholmeley, Thomas Kyd - Burgess is also able to explore the internal forces working for Kit's destruction - the impetuous indiscretion of a talented young poet who is torn between being forced to continue spying and his contempt for the hypocrisy of Church and State.

While the two accounts agree that the Essex/ Raleigh feud was the immediate reason for Marlowe's death, they vary in some aspects. Not bound by documentary evidence, Burgess has Marlowe indulge in more smoking sessions with Raleigh and his cronies, which is probable but unrecorded. He invents a younger sister, Dorothy Marlowe, whose vulnerability reminds Kit of human frailty and prevents him surrendering completely to Machiavelli's cynical exploitativeness. Even more significantly, although less contentiously, Burgess emphasises Marlowe's homosexuality, conjecturing a life-long affair with his patron Thomas Walsingham. Nicholl canvasses this possibility in his afterword, rejecting the affair and generally down-playing the homosexuality on the basis that we have little idea what it meant to be homosexual in an age when men were physically affectionate as matter of custom, and shared beds as a matter of necessity. While this is true, in comparison with Burgess it impoverishes our picture of Marlowe without necessarily making it more accurate.

These differences between the two writers are consequences of the different genres they use. As Burgess concludes, "The virtue of the historical novel is its vice - the flatfooted affirmation of possibility as fact". Literature's ability to affirm is perhaps not so flat-footed: Burgess manages to construct a convincing set of motivations and relationships, a matrix of felt-life in which the facts we know fit and make sense as the actions of

human beings. Moreover, his device of first person narrator who must “suppose” much of the action avoids a bold assertion of Marlowe’s state of mind or activities.

While Nicholl’s claim is that his story is true “in the sense that it is fact rather than fiction. ... I have not invented anything”, he recognises the need to fill the gaps in historical knowledge with “probabilities and speculations and sometimes with guesswork”, for a more complete and useful picture to emerge. Thus his tale is “as true as I can make it”. This sort of deduction of probabilities from known acts is a common forensic technique, but it is Nicholl’s literary insight into Elizabethan mentality which makes *The Reckoning* such a valuable work. A psychological portrait is not Nicholl’s aim, but it is his constant temptation, and, when he indulges it, his success. He is at his best when teasing out connections between the “secret theatre” of espionage and the work of the poet which might have attracted Marlowe to the job, or working out the “psychologically complex” Richard Baines. However, his form allows him limited scope: we are told that “physical violence is not [Poley’s] style”, but it is only in Burgess’s novel that we understand what Poley’s style is.

Perhaps the best contrast, aside from the sustained portrait of Marlowe, is the treatment of fellow-playwright Thomas Kyd. For Nicholl, he is an inferior craftsman who, perhaps understandably, implicates Marlowe to save his own skin when under torture. Burgess’s portrait of Kyd is infinitely richer and thus rings much more true: an impoverished aging playwright trying to trade upon - and believing in - his past glory, *The Spanish Tragedy*, thinking he just needs a break to show he’s still got it, and without the protection of Marlowe’s powerful friends. The pursuit of all truth contains elements of conjecture. Here, when both books have to work on the same ontological plane (that of uncertainties and possibilities), fiction is better able to approx-

imate the ‘truth’ than the ‘non-fiction novel’.