"O my brothers": Reading the Anti-Ethics of the Pseudo-Family in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*

As novels are about the ways in which human beings behave, they tend to imply a judgment of behavior, which means that the novel is what the symphony or painting or sculpture is not—namely, a form steeped in morality.

Anthony Burgess

In 1987, W. W. Norton and Company emended the American edition of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) by publishing the novel's missing twenty-first chapter, previously only available in British and other international editions of the book. The introduction of the excised chapter into the American literary and critical mainstream prompted a number of debates regarding the artistic and thematic efficacy of its inclusion in Burgess's narrative. In "A Clockwork Orange Resucked," his introduction to the unabridged American version of his novel, Burgess summarizes the significance of the

Davis is Associate Professor of English at Goshen College and co-editor (with Kenneth Womack) of *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (2001). Womack is Assistant Professor of English at Penn State University's Altoona College. He the author of *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (2001).
twenty-first chapter: “Briefly, my young thuggish protagonist grows up,” Burgess writes. “He grows bored with violence and recognizes that human energy is better expended on creation than destruction” (1987b, vii). Despite what appears at first glance to be a positive, life-affirming conclusion to Burgess’s novel of linguistic terror and “ultra-violence,” critics continue to register a variety of different responses to the publication of A Clockwork Orange in its entirety. Michael Gorra, for instance, argues that the original British version seems “far darker than the glibly apocalyptic American version” (1990, 641). While Deanna Madden recognizes the marked differences between the abridged and unabridged versions of Burgess’s text, she dismisses A Clockwork Orange—with or without the twenty-first chapter—as a continuation of the protagonist’s misogyny in “true patriarchal fashion” (1992, 306). Finally, John J. Stinson calls the excised chapter “problematic,” contending that “the truncated ending, which leaves the reader with a stark presentation of unregenerate evil, surely carries more impact” (1991, 59).

Yet each critic neglects to consider the tremendous ethical import of A Clockwork Orange’s twenty-first chapter as a rejoinder to the vacuous moral and family systems that fail Alex, Burgess’s teen-aged protagonist, as he attempts to achieve selfhood. In spite of what appear to be Alex’s obvious attempts to establish and participate in various family structures throughout the novel—indeed, to search for some form of “HOME”—critics continue to ignore the role of the family as a substantial narrative force in Burgess’s text. An interdisciplinary reading of A Clockwork Orange using recent insights in ethical criticism and family systems psychotherapy demonstrates not only the necessity of the twenty-first chapter as the fruition of Burgess’s moral vision, but also the centrality of family structures as catalysts for interpersonal development and as ethical foundations for individual change. In Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, Martha C. Nussbaum illustrates the nature of ethical criticism’s recent emergence as a viable interpretive paradigm: “Questions about justice, about well-being and social distribution, about moral realism and relativism, about the nature of rationality, about the concept of the person, about the emotions and desires, about the role of luck in human life—all these and others are debated from many sides with considerable excitement and even urgency” (1990, 169–70). In addition to functioning as a self-reflexive means for critics to explain the contradictory emotions and problematic moral stances that often mask literary characters, ethical criticism provides its practitioners with the capacity for positing socially relevant interpretations by celebrating the Aristotelian qualities of living well and flourishing. In this way, ethical criticism evokes the particularly “human character” of literature that Tobin Siebers praises in The Ethics of Criticism (1988, 10).1
The contemporary practice of ethical criticism finds its origins in the reader–response theories of Louise M. Rosenblatt, as well as in the moral philosophy of such thinkers as Nussbaum and Bernard Williams. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, Rosenblatt devotes particular attention to the notion of “efferent” reading, an interpretive methodology in which readers primarily interest themselves in what will be derived materially from the reading experience (1978, 23–25). According to Rosenblatt, efferent readers reflect upon the verbal symbols in literature, “what the symbols designate, what they may be contributing to the end result that [the reader] seeks—the information, the concepts, the guides to action, that will be left with [the reader] when the reading is over” (27). The reflective nature of efferent reading underscores the interpretive power of ethical criticism as a means of literary critique, especially as a tool for addressing the moral and interpersonal qualities in novels such as *A Clockwork Orange* that consider a host of dystopian and ethical imperatives. Moral philosophy often provides ethical critics with intellectual insight into the most vexing issues inherent in human experience, moreover, from the nature of selfhood and love to the often divergent qualities of goodness, evil, and commitment. As Williams notes in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, “Critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical material that, in the context of the reflective discussion, makes some sense and commands some loyalty. The only serious enterprise is living.” Williams adds, “and we have to live after the reflection” (1985, 117).

A neo–humanist criticism in its own right, family systems psychotherapy provides readers with a powerful mechanism for reflecting upon the role of the family in literary texts. Its theoretical rapport with ethical criticism finds its origins, moreover, in each paradigm’s valuation of the significant interrelationships that inevitably exist between our senses of selfhood and the larger worlds in which we live. In *The Theory and Technique of Family Therapy*, Charles P. Barnard and Ramon Garrido Corrales observe that “the members of one’s family are one’s significant others par excellence” (1979, 9). As an inherently open system, the family must at once provide support for integration into a solid family unit as well as differentiation into relatively autonomous selves. According to the terminology of family systems psychotherapy, functional families possess the capacity for achieving morphogenesis, which John V. Knapp defines as the process that allows a given family system “to deviate from its usual relationship among component parts and even to amplify that deviation” (1996, 67). William C. Nichols and Craig E. Everett further explain morphogenesis as the process through which families effect radical, meaningful change. Morphogenesis “involves altering the
nature of the system itself so that new levels of functioning are achieved” (1986, 130). Reaching such “new levels of functioning” allows family members to achieve selfhood beyond the boundaries of their family systems. While most families succeed in accomplishing morphogenesis and creating other functional and differentiated family units outside of their original family systems, some families succumb, rather understandably, to the pleasing equilibrium of homeostasis, which Barnard and Corrales define as a family’s tendency—no matter how detrimental it may be—to preserve constancy. “There is no question,” they write, “that families devote considerable energy to maintain a certain amount of order and stability. Security,” they add, “seems to be tied with a certain amount of stability and predictability” (1979, 13). Despite its considerable danger to a given family member’s ability to achieve selfhood beyond the family system, homeostasis provides the family with a means for preserving its various—and often unhealthy—value systems.

In addition to its obvious therapeutic applications, family systems psychotherapy’s clinical vocabulary affords literary scholars with a critical mode for investigating, in fictional narratives, the role of the family both as an agent of change and as a mechanism for maintaining stasis. In contrast with Freudian and psychoanalytic approaches to literary study, family systems psychotherapy maintains that the family presupposes the individual as the matrix of identity. Interpretive paradigms that rely on Freudian and other forms of psychoanalysis—perhaps because of their intense focus upon issues of “downstream causality” and early childhood experiences—simply neglect to consider the interpersonal family dynamics that impact a given literary character’s evolution toward selfhood. Reading the terminology of family systems psychotherapy through the lens of ethical criticism underscores the value and meaning inherent in the concept of efferent reading. In one sense, efferent reading ultimately provides Burgess’s protagonist with the means for establishing his own form of ethical renewal. Yet in a larger sense, the act of efferent reading affords the audience of A Clockwork Orange with a mechanism for questioning the dubious ethics that undergird the value systems depicted in the novel, as well as the ethical dilemmas that we encounter in our lives beyond the text. Merging the terminology of family systems psychotherapy with the moral philosophy inherent in contemporary ethical criticism allows us to recognize the vital intersections in the novel between Burgess’s satirical anti-ethics and the problematic familial structures that Alex encounters throughout the narrative.

In A Clockwork Orange, Burgess depicts numerous incarnations of what for the purposes of this essay we will refer to as the “pseudo-family,” the dysfunctional interpersonal unit that problematizes Alex’s various efforts to establish selfhood and to transcend the violent landscapes of his youth. In
contrast with the family, which by its very definition attempts to provide its members with secure states of being in which to develop and thrive as differentiated selves, the pseudo-family offers only the illusion of genuine community. Lying beneath the façade of the pseudo-family is the interpersonal violence of self-indulgence that leads inevitably to betrayal and the creation of pseudo-selves, or those individuals, according to Barnard and Corrales, who remain unable to maintain any real stasis between their inner feelings and their outward behavior (1979, 85–87). Alex’s destructive encounters with the pseudo-family in the novel force him to persist in various states of homeostatic equilibrium, rendering him unable to effect the process of morphogenesis that might provide him with the means for finally glimpsing a mature, fully realized sense of self.

While the first twenty chapters of Burgess’s novel offer various representations of the pseudo-family—from Alex’s ultra-violent gang of “droogs” and his self-serving Post-Corrective Adviser, P. R. Deltoid, to his ineffectual parents and the sadistic practitioners of Ludovico’s Technique—A Clockwork Orange’s restored twenty-first chapter depicts Alex’s single creative act: his hopeful vision of a healthy, functional family. In dramatic opposition to the arguments of Robert Martin Adams, who perceives Burgess’s narrative as “largely unconcerned with morality in any form” (1987, 98), an ethical reading of A Clockwork Orange demonstrates that the very absence of any system of virtue, any code of “right conduct,” actually highlights Alex’s need for such a system. In order for Burgess to attempt moral satire, he must trust that his audience will perceive his portrayal of a world filled with surreal violence, sadistic sexuality, and uncontrollable drug abuse as one that calls for some moral equivalent, some sense of implicit humanity. Alex’s anti-ethics—his refusal to engage in ethical deliberation, his pursuit of destructive action, his disregard for any other life—ultimately ends in exhaustion, and his ensuing vision of a potentially healthy family structure suggests the possibility for individual change rooted in a community of nurture.

Alex’s lack of any functional family system in which he can interact with mature and fully realized adult selves manifests itself in his own hyper-exaggerated sense of pseudo-self, the persona that he invents in order to fulfill his desires to belong to and be accepted by the various spurious family structures that Burgess depicts in the novel. While he clearly creates a work of dystopian satire in A Clockwork Orange, Burgess nevertheless avails himself of genuine teen angst in his characterization of Alex, a fifteen-year-old at the beginning of the novel, who, like many his age, finds his sense of self precariously lost in a state of flux and moments of beguiling awkwardness. Alex responds to these feelings of uncertainty and change by trying on different costumes, behavioral modes, and verbal mannerisms in an effort to establish
what he perceives to be a stable sense of identity. "The self concept is synthesized out of a myriad of interactions across the life span, and at any given time its contents or internalized roles, statuses, norms, and values are bound to be contradictory and mutually exclusive," Donald E. Polkinghorne notes. "It appears that for the major part of daily life a person's self-concept is raised, edited, and implemented preconsciously, at the prelinguistic level of emotion and 'felt' dispositions" (1988, 150). Alex's daily existence likewise consists of a series of painstaking activities—including his outrageously stylized manner of dress, his felicitous use of the Nadsat language, and his self-indulgent abuse of drugs, music, and violence—that converge in the deliberate construction of the puzzle that comprises his pseudo-self.

Alex naturally begins the manufacture of his pseudo-persona with the transformation of his outward appearance. Intentionally constructing an ersatz costume in order to conceal the fact that his inner self lacks any real depth of character, Alex proudly describes his surreal form of dress as the "height of fashion." In addition to a pair of black "very tight" tights, Alex sports a spider-shaped jelly mould that protrudes menacingly around his crotch and that signifies the pent-up sexual violence that he sporadically releases in scenes of horrifying misogyny. As with his over-pronounced crotchwear, Alex wears a waistcoat with absurdly enhanced shoulders, "which were kind of a mockery of having real shoulders like that," he admits (Burgess 1987a, 2). The jelly mould and the shoulder pads, themselves the false trappings of manhood, underscore Alex's juvenile fascination with the phallus and his immature correlation of large, muscular shoulders with a domineering sense of masculinity. Alex completes his ensemble with an off-white, potato-colored tie, short hair, and "flip horrorshow boots for kicking" (2). He occasionally accents his costume with a face-concealing mask designed to replicate the visage of Benjamin Disraeli. "They were a real like disguise, hair and all," Alex remarks about the construction of such masks, "and they were some very special plastic veshch so you could roll up when you're done with it and hide it in your boot" (9). In conjunction with the rest of his ridiculous attire, the mask completes Alex's outward transformation into an entirely new persona.

Alex effects his internal metamorphosis through his ritualized devotion to drug-laced milk cocktails and the thundering classical music of Beethoven, Schoenberg, and Mozart. Before embarking on an evening of ultra-violence, Alex and his droogs must first imbibe the drugs that sharpen them like "knives" in order to disguise any semblance of human compassion. A regular at the Korova Milkbar, Alex consumes glasses of milk—an essential staple in the diet of any growing boy—loaded with assorted drugs designed to "make you ready for a bit of dirty twenty-to-one," his metaphor
for the gangland violence that punctuates his evenings (Burgess 1987a, 1). In addition to providing him with the necessary adrenaline rush for a night of mayhem, the drugs that Alex ingests afford him with the means for numbing any true sense of self and negating the possibility of any interior ethical judgment. As with the drugs with which he fortifies himself before his brutal nocturnal forays into the novel’s dystopian cityscape, classical music furnishes Alex with the deafening soundtrack for his bouts of violence. The musical art of the classical compositions that Alex devours with maniacal pleasure as he listens to “the old Joy Joy Joy Joy crashing and howling away” provide him with both the demonic energy for committing his heinous acts and with the means for drowning out the cries of his luckless victims (47). In one remarkable instance of self-reflection, however, music provides Alex with a means, if only momentarily, for glimpsing genuine compassion and aesthetic beauty beyond the false pretensions of his pseudo-self. As a mysterious female patron spontaneously bursts into a lovely aria in the Korova Milkbar, Alex confesses that he “felt all the little malenky hairs on my plott standing endwise and the shivers crawling up like slow malenky lizards and then down again” (27). Transfixed by the otherworldly nature of her song, Alex lingers on the brink of an epiphany of self-revelation when Dim, Alex’s chain-wielding companion, interrupts his transcendent moment with a stream of vulgarities, suddenly transporting him back to the motley environs of the Korova Milkbar and his pathetic pseudo-self: “Bastard,” Alex laments, “filthy drooling mannerless bastard” (28).

Alex conjoins his inner and outer worlds through his adroit use of the neo-Slavic Nadsat language, the linguistic signifier of his pseudo-self. Language, which represents the internal life of the mind through external expression, provides Alex with a means for interacting with his peers, as well as for delivering violence to the unfortunate bystanders who cross his path. Esther Petix describes the Nadsat tongue as “the language of the droogs and of the night. It is the jargon of rape, plunder, and murder veiled in unfamiliarity” (1986, 124). While the Nadsat language offers numerous phrases for describing acts of violence and an entire lexicon of misogynistic tropes—including several different epithets for deriding women—it lacks noticeably any words for denoting love, compassion, or the kind of interrelationship that one might experience in a functional family system. Essentially a pseudo-language constructed upon a series of playful phrases, puns, and uncertain connotations, Nadsat, despite its braggadocio, succeeds rather ironically in demonstrating Alex’s tremendous feelings of insecurity, his lack of sophistication, and his naïveté. Alex’s indeterminate usage of the word “like,” for example, exemplifies the manner in which his application of the Nadsat language parallels the pseudo-experiences that he undergoes in the skewed real-
ity of his life. Often used as a means for reconciling his inner emotions with the outer world from which he feels so utterly disconnected, Alex's constant use of “like” connotes his social dislocation and his emotional separation from the world beyond the self. In one instance, after he and his droogs terrorize yet another hapless victim, he remarks that “there was like quiet and we were full of like hate” (Burgess 1987a, 23), revealing his inability to comment with any certainty about the validity of either the quality of his environment or his degree of emotional response, respectively. Yet this linguistic phenomenon does not simply relate to the description of negative emotional reactions, as Alex demonstrates in his confusion about the full range of emotional responses during his late encounter with love: “And he like gave this Georgina of his a like loving look” (189), Alex observes, unable to identify with any precision the passionate import of a romantic gesture.

In addition to its inherent uncertainty about the nature of emotional responses, the Nadsat language lacks any signifiers that allude to the future and all that it might entail. Alex’s uncertainty about the future elicits his repeated refrain: “What’s it going to be then, eh?” (Burgess 1987a, 1). While Alex frequently avails himself of Nadsat’s neo-Slavic vocabulary, his efforts at communicating about the future force him to revert to English for any discussion about his fate, rather than employing the Russian sud’ba as the potentially appropriate phrase for referring to this future state of being. For Alex, the notion of fate simply remains yet another confusing and unfamiliar concept—an idea that he can only fathom by invoking the distancing mechanism provided by the Nadsat articulation of “like”: “It all seemed right and proper and like Fate,” he remarks in one instance (77). Alex and other progenitors of the teen language of Nadsat simply cannot imagine a future, fated or otherwise, because they devote all of their energies to sustaining the façade of the pseudo-selves that they must maintain to survive in the present. When he finally refers to the darker possibilities of his own fate while undergoing the controversial Ludovico’s Technique, Alex lacks any concrete signifier for describing his future: “I viddied that there would be no escaping from any of all this,” he says, stunned into a linguistic stupor (111). Alex’s inability to express his feelings about the future is only matched, rather ironically, by his unparalleled capacity for registering insolence and disrespect. His irreverent appropriation of a mock-Elizabethan discourse constitutes the single fullest and most unrestrained expression of his pseudo-self in *A Clockwork Orange*. As his personal idiom for expressing vitriol and contempt for his elders, Alex’s mock-Elizabethan prattle imbues him with the means for verbally lampooning his victims even as he prepares to assault them with his steely “britva”: “Never fear,” Alex proclaims; “if fear thou hast in thy heart, O brother, pray banish it forthwith” (21).
With the outlandish nuances of his Nadsat verbal system in place, Alex establishes the ideology of his pseudo-self, the interpersonal doctrine of free will that ultimately characterizes many of his dealings with the various pseudo-families depicted in Burgess’s novel. For Alex, the idea of free will—the glorification of the self-determined individual whose actions are not, and cannot be, controlled by any outside force, spiritual or material—represents a radically truncated and undeniably immature philosophical position based upon nothing more than desire and self-indulgence. Unable to grasp how the structures of his pseudo-family, other broader cultural systems, and the material reality of his existence impinge upon and essentially diminish much of his “free will,” Alex blindly follows the patterns of destruction modeled by his peer group in an effort to eschew any notion that others might exert various measures of control over him. Blinded by his immaturity and self-indulgence, Alex offers an irreconcilable system of good and evil: “This biting of their toe-nails over what is the cause of badness is what turns me into a fine laughing malchick. They don’t go into what is the cause of goodness, so why of the other shop? If lewdies are good that’s because they like it, and I wouldn’t interfere with their pleasures” (Burgess 1987a, 40).

Alex’s laissez-faire approach to good and evil neglects to account for his infringement of the “pleasures” of people who avail themselves of an ethical doctrine based upon goodness. Whose free will should prevail, then, when opposing systems clash? Quite obviously, the limitations of material goods, governmental systems, and our very own mortality undermine any unqualified notion of free will. Of course, Alex scarcely begins to admit that his terrorist activities often infringe upon the free will of others, nor does he recognize the wide ranging forces at play in his own life that temper, if not destroy, any semblance of free will. Thus, Alex’s immaturity drives his desire for adopting such a free-market approach to the ethics of good and evil. Intellectually ill-equipped and unable to render distinctions about the conflicted nature of our world—as well as the inevitable friction created by clashes between good and evil as they vie for position within a finite space—Alex, through the guise of his pseudo-self, embraces an untenable ideology made possible only by his youth, a twisted language of convenience, and the ritualized use of drugs and classical music that function as the wicked machinery of his misanthropic behavior. It is only through this convoluted system of self-delusion, then, that Alex can continue to subscribe to such a flawed ideology of free will.

For this reason, Alex’s belief system necessarily alters his (and our own) understanding of the elaborate metaphor that informs A Clockwork Orange’s title. Alex first encounters the urtext of Burgess’s novel in the hands of F. Alexander, who denounces the imposition of governmental policies upon
the individual for its creation of a kind of clockwork orange, a mechanical creature devoid of the human capacity for enjoying free will. Yet Alex, flush
in the throes of his pseudo-self, misreads and confuses Alexander’s caution-
ary dictum for his own self-indulgent ends. Rather than astutely heeding
Alexander’s words as a warning about the inherent dangers in all forms of
hierarchical power structures—including governments, religious organiza-
tions, educational institutions, and even families themselves—Alex co-opts
the writer’s clockwork orange metaphor as a means for justifying the pseudo-
do-self that sanctions his horrific violations of the humanity of others. In a
lengthy diatribe that mimics Alexander’s own contentions about the mecha-
nization of the self by the government, Alex reveals the real motivation for
his adoption of Alexander’s arguments regarding free will: “What I do I do
because I like to do,” he confesses (Burgess 1987a, 40). Unable to compre-
hend the philosophical implications of the writer’s words, Alex deliberately
allows himself to function as Alexander’s ideological marionette in order to
sate the hedonistic desires of his pseudo-self.

The series of pseudo-families that Alex encounters throughout much of
the novel provides him with the means for sustaining the homeostatic equi-
librium of his pseudo-self. The dysfunctional pseudo-families with which
Alex associates prevent him, moreover, from developing a healthy and differ-
entiated sense of self. In Family Healing: Strategies for Hope and Healing,
Salvador Minuchin and Michael P. Nichols note that family systems therapy
challenges “the equally cherished belief in self-determination by illuminat-
ings the power of the family” as a locus of change and as a “site of interven-
tion” (1993, 36). While Alex wallows in the illusion of self-determination, in
reality the pseudo-families that Alex seeks out or that he meets by chance in
A Clockwork Orange mitigate his agency of free will and his capacity for per-
sonal growth. “O my brothers”—Alex’s frequent salutation both to his
droogs and to his readers—functions as the narrative trope via which he
attempts to establish family structures wherever and whenever he can. “As
the individual slowly moves toward an incorporation of the other into his or
her Weltanschauung,” Knapp writes about functional family systems, “the
‘self’ becomes more conversational, embodying a plurality of voices” (1996,
171). Yet Alex’s dysfunctional interactions with pseudo-families deny him the
capacity for interpersonal development. As Knapp reminds us, “The self can
be said to exist largely because others help create the world the self lives in”
(171). Alex’s pseudo-self, constructed for the most part within the environ
of pseudo-families, restricts him from inaugurating the life-changing process
of morphogenesis as long as he subsists in systems that lack the healthy “plu-
rality of voices” of which Knapp speaks.
During his metaphorical search for “HOME,” Alex comes into contact with a variety of pseudo-families that might usefully be considered in terms of traditional sociological categories, including nuclear, extended, and institutional families—common support systems that all individuals seek out in order to fulfill the realization of the self. Rather than affording him with the opportunity to alter his dysfunctional patterns, each of these pseudo-families allows him to sustain the homeostasis of his vacuous existence. Alex encounters nuclear families in the form of his parents and his droogs. Despite their significant role as his family-of-origin, Alex’s parents offer little more than a physical presence in his life. While he and his parents live together at Municipal Flatblock 18A, their concern for him manifests itself only in the dream world, as opposed to the reality of their daily existence. In one instance, Alex’s father complains about a vivid dream in which he sees Alex lying on the street in a pool of his own blood after being severely beaten by street thugs like his son. Rather than attempting to placate his father’s fears, Alex instead gives his father money with which to buy Scotch, a gesture that suddenly allays his father’s concerns and leaves his parents “with loving smiles all round” (Burgess 1987a, 41). Later, after returning “home” from prison, Alex’s parents fail him once again by replacing him with a stranger whom they treat as their de facto son. Again, the father’s paternal loyalty seems to be motivated by the possibility of financial gain: “Well, you see, son,” Alex’s father tells him, “Joe’s paid next month’s rent already. I mean, whatever we do in the future we can’t say to Joe to get out, can we?” (136).

Alex’s metaphorical “droog” brothers—the remaining members of his nuclear family—also falter as participants in his implicit support system. Rather than enjoying genuine feelings of compassion and fraternity, Alex and his droogs share nothing more than a brotherhood of violence and depravity. Ironically described by Alex as “a very smiling and polite square” (Burgess 1987a, 5), his droog brethren offer no loyalty to Alex beyond what his leadership and their sheer numbers allow them to achieve during their nightly rampages. As with any group of small children, Alex and his droogs vie for position and manipulate each other to satisfy their selfish desires. Their relationship even functions upon a hierarchy of sorts, with Alex asserting himself as patriarch while the others protest about democracy: “There has to be a leader,” Alex argues. “Discipline there has to be. Right?” (30). Dim, the slow-witted brute, Georgie, Alex’s traitorous subordinate, and Pete, the quartet’s smooth-talking diplomat, round out the membership of Alex’s gang. A self-assured and self-deluded leader, Alex foolishly considers his droogs to be mere “sheep” under his control. In a robbery gone awry, Alex’s droogs shock his sense of fraternal propriety after they betray him by knocking him unconscious and abandoning him to the police: “Where are my stinking trai-
rurous drogs?” (Burgess 1987a, 65). Alex laments, only to effect a double betrayal later when he implicates Dim, Georgie, and Pete by name for their role in the crime. As with his parents, Alex’s droog brothers function as his support system only as long as he serves to further their selfish ends. The same pseudo-self that allows Alex to be betrayed by his droogs deludes him into believing in their absolute loyalty and in his own unparalleled authority.

Alex experiences an extended family of sorts during his nightly adventures with his droog brethren, as well as during his days as a truant from school. Alex’s encounters with his metaphorical extended family largely manifest themselves in acts of violence, and his deviant behavior underscores his inability to communicate with and to make sense of the world outside of his pseudo-self. According to Frances A. Boudreau, “[a]buse is a response to perceived powerlessness” and “is used as a resource to establish control” (1993, 150). Alex’s physical and sexual abuse of the members of his extended pseudo-family functions as his only means of interpersonal communication and offers him a perceived sense of authority. Going out into the night with his droogs, Alex deliberately searches for the powerless and the weak as potential members of his pseudo-family. In addition to assaulting a defiant, grandfatherly old man, Alex and his droogs terrorize the home of an “old baboochka,” bludgeoning her on her living room floor amidst a throng of cats. While his physical assaults upon his elders prove horrifying, Alex’s sexual abuse of his “nieces”—a metaphorical incestual relationship—offers one of A Clockwork Orange’s most devastating and distressing portrayals of unregenerate evil. During a chance meeting at a record store, he lures two ten-year-old girls back to his house by referring to himself as “Uncle Alex”: “These two young ptisas were much alike, though not sisters. They had the same ideas, or lack of, and the same colour hair—a like dyed strawy. Well, they would grow up real today. Today I would make a day of it. No school this afterlunch, but education certain, Alex as teacher” (Burgess 1987a, 44). Alex’s molestation of Marty and Sonietta demonstrates his inability to care for even the most vulnerable members of his “family,” as well as his compulsion to dominate his community through abuse and control.

While Alex demands loyalty and security from his nuclear family, he expects nothing but derision or indifference from his extended family, opting instead to pummel them into submission. With his institutional family, Alex—still under the spell of his pseudo-self—assumes that the impersonal structures of the government and his community will consider his welfare in their dealings with him. Like a child, Alex naively believes the Minister of the Interior when he says, “I and the government of which I am a member want you to regard us as friends. Yes, friends” (Burgess 1987a, 177). Yet such “friends” inevitably betray Alex, even as he prepares to betray and manipu-
late them. When Alex hopes, for example, that his Post-Corrective Advisor will defend his character against the accusations of the police, Deltoid responds by spitting in the teenager’s face. Later, as Alex attempts to avail himself of the trappings of religion to expedite his release from prison—even going so far as to study the Bible and to participate in the administration of chapel services—he succeeds only in frustrating his own desires for freedom. When Alex requires the assistance of the police, whom he believes to be there to serve and protect him, he finds himself in the custody of Dim, his old droog, and Billyboy, a rival gang member. After they beat Alex senseless and abandon him in a deserted field, he expresses his disillusion with the institutions that fail him, wondering “where was I to go, who had no home and not much cutter in my carmans? I cried for myself boo hoo hoo” (151). Once again prostrating himself before an institution, Alex wins his early release from prison after agreeing to undergo Ludovico’s Technique, a series of ultra-violent films accompanied by a classical-music soundtrack and designed to purge the young hoodlum of any desire to commit evil acts. Yet the process—which successfully rids him of any violent compulsions and causes Alex to experience severe nausea when confronted by scenes of brutality and aggression—renders him unable to enjoy his beloved Beethoven: “Stop, you grahznly disgusting sods. It’s a sin, that’s what it is, a filthy unforgivable sin, you bratchnies!” he cries, as the Ninth Symphony causes him to reel in abject pain (Burgess 1987a, 113). In each instance, Alex’s blind faith in the implicit goodness and charity of government and its institutions rewards him with disillusionment and hopelessness.

Finally consumed by his despair, Alex decides to explode the homeostasis that marks his youth and his interactions with the pseudo-families of his past by attempting suicide. After glimpsing a booklet with a window on its cover and the words, “Open the window to fresh air, fresh ideas, a new way of living” (Burgess 1987a, 168), Alex opts to “snuff it.” While his attempt to kill himself fails, the act itself prepares the way for the cataleptic impression in A Clockwork Orange’s controversial twenty-first chapter that will make possible the morphogenesis that ultimately changes his life. When Alex awakens in the hospital, he finds himself deprogrammed of the effects of the Ludovico’s Technique—free once more to exert his ostensible free will, as well as to enjoy the pleasing strains of classical music: “Oh, it was gorgeosity and yumyumyum,” he exclaims (179). After being discharged from the hospital, Alex quickly assimilates into a new pseudo-family of droogs—Len, Rick, and Bully—although now he seems uninterested in frequenting the Korova Milkbar and pursuing violent activities. A withdrawn Alex laments that “more and more these days I had been just giving the orders and standing back to viddy them being carried out” (182). In contrast with the “Uncle
“Alex” of old who enthusiastically molests his “nieces,” Alex registers dissatisfaction with his return to his old droog life. His inattentiveness—manifested as apathy toward the ultra-violent acts and sexual perversity he once feverishly embraced—conveys his exhaustion with his old way of life and, ultimately, suggests his potential for change. No longer fascinated by his droog “play,” Alex begins to look elsewhere for possible fulfillment. In this context, perhaps surprisingly, we find Alex yearning for a genuine family. We witness an astonishing shift in his affections from exploits of visceral brutality to a photograph of a “dear little itsy witsy bitsy bit of a baby . . . gurgling goo goo goo” (184) that he has recently taken to carrying in his pocket.

While Burgess intimates that Alex’s desire for a healthy, functioning family will only grow stronger, he does not proffer a miraculous transformation in *A Clockwork Orange*. Instead, in a scene that demonstrates both Alex’s longing and his continued emotional immaturity, Burgess depicts Alex tearing the photo to pieces when his droogs heckle him for carrying an image of such goodness, such innocence. Like an elementary school bully who has been caught helping a classmate, Alex at first acts with disdain toward the very thing he now cherishes. Tellingly, though, when Alex’s mates ask him to lead the group into some nightly terror, he replies, “Look, droogies. Listen. Tonight I am somehow just not in the mood. I know not why or how it is, but there it is. You three go your own ways this nightwise, leaving me out. Tomorrow we shall meet same place same time, me hoping to be like a lot better” (Burgess 1987a, 185). But there will be no other time, no other place, for Alex to partake in such ghastly diversions. Unbeknownst even to himself, Alex’s transition toward some other life—in some other kind of family system—has already been set into motion. The photograph of “a dear little itsy witsy bitsy bit of a baby,” torn to pieces and resting upon the floor, remains indelibly etched upon Alex’s soul.

Alex completes the initial stages of his ethical transition during a chance meeting with his old droog Pete, now married and selling insurance. By witnessing Pete’s radical transformation from droog to husband, Alex undergoes a conversion of his own and experiences a “cataleptic impression”—a cognitive, philosophical phenomenon that, according to Nussbaum, “has the power, just through its own felt quality, to drag us to assent, to convince us that things could not be otherwise. It is defined as a mark or impress upon the soul” (1990, 265). For Alex, the future suddenly exists; no longer trapped in the endless cycle of gang violence, he finally usurps his pseudo-self and imagines the creation of his own family: “Tomorrow is all like sweet flowers and the turning vanny earth and the stars and the old Luna up there and your old droog Alex all on his oddy knocky seeking like a mate” (Burgess 1987a, 191). While this moment marks the beginning of Alex’s transforma-
tion, it should not be misconstrued as some naïve happy ending, shot in technicolor and accompanied by the joyous song of a bluebird. As suggested before, Alex’s use of the word “like” alludes to his inability to truly understand the range of emotional experience. Because Alex has never been part of (nor truly known) a fully functioning, healthy family, he cannot abandon, even in this moment of catalepsy, the linguistic qualifiers of his past life. While he is able to transcend the parameters of the Nadsat language in order to speak about his hope for the future, he continues to reveal his insecurity about what being and having an adult, romantic companion may entail when he says that he is “seeking like a mate” (emphasis added). Yet, given the nihilistic brutality of his past life and the absence of any person who has demonstrated care or love toward him, Alex’s yearning for a mate and child, his very capacity to conceive of such a community, suggests a far more hopeful turn than the novel’s first twenty chapters would ever have allowed us to expect.

Without the twenty-first chapter, then, A Clockwork Orange’s narrative omits Alex’s ethical transformation and Burgess’s own redaction of the pseudo-families that plague his narrator’s youth. The novel’s twentieth chapter closes with Alex’s sarcastic conclusion to his hospital stay: “I was cured all right” (Burgess 1987a, 179). Yet A Clockwork Orange, published in its entirety, not only allows us to witness the inception of a genuine “cure,” but also enables us to recognize the pseudo-self in all of its absurd proportions. Robbed of Alex’s dream of a functional family system, the novel would languish in Alex’s protracted condition of homeostasis. Alex’s morphogenesis occurs both because of his cataleptic impression and because of his understanding that, as Burgess reasons in his introduction to the novel, “to devastate is easier and more spectacular than to create” (ix). Finally grown up and fully prepared to accept the difficult challenges of selfhood, Alex no longer chooses the easier road to ultra-violence, opting instead to embark upon a lifetime of familial commitment and human renewal.

Notes

1 For a useful definition of “ethics” and discussion of its emergence as a viable reading paradigm during the past decade, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s chapter on “Ethics” (1995). “Understanding the plot of a narrative,” Harpham writes, “we enter into ethics. Ethics will always be at the flashpoint of conflicts and struggles,” he continues, “because such encounters never run smooth” (404). As Wayne Booth observes, “the word ‘ethical’ may mistakenly suggest a project concentrating on quite limited moral standards: of honesty, perhaps, or of decency or tolerance.” In Booth’s postulation of an ethical criticism, however, “ethical” refers to “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self.’ ‘Moral’ judgments are only a small part of it” (1988, 8).
2 Barnard and Corrales define “differentiated” selves as functional family members who possess the transgenerational capacity for producing yet other selves with full senses of identity (1979, 36–37).

3 As Douglas R. Hofstadter observes, “downstream causality” refers to the Freudian assumption that adult personality is determined by childhood patterns of development and that, more specifically, children endure seven irreversible stages of development along the pathway to adulthood (1979, 684–719).

4 Deanna Madden astutely remarks that Alex “appears unable to relate to [women] in any other way or to feel sexually attracted without the urge to be violent. The result is to offer only two extremes of male sexual behavior” that manifest themselves in his “tendency to equate rape with eroticism” (1992, 304). Madden also offers a number of useful asides regarding the function of patriarchy and the misogynistic depiction of female characters in Burgess’s novel.

5 In this instance, Burgess clearly parodies Disraeli’s own well-known penchant during his years as England’s prime minister for outrageous costumery, including his dandified apparel and his foppish social affectations.

6 It should be noted that many of the novel’s critics—and indeed, Anthony Burgess himself in his introduction to A Clockwork Orange (1987b, ix)—view F. Alexander’s brief definition of the clockwork orange metaphor as representative of the ways in which human beings become manipulated and overtly controlled by governmental systems that wish to eliminate individual notions of free will. For additional critical discussion, see Stinson (1991, 57–59). Yet, as the present essay will demonstrate, family systems psychotherapy provides us with a means for illuminating the manner in which various organizational mechanisms, particularly the series of pseudo-families that Alex encounters, have slowly eroded his ability to choose. Any semblance of free will that Alex enjoys prior to undergoing Ludovico’s Technique is actually illusory because the guise of his pseudo-self prohibits him from comprehending fully the grave consequences of his violent activities.

7 Philip E. Ray’s Freudian reading of F. Alexander’s role as a potential father figure for Alex in the novel offers a meaningful illustration of the remarkable differences between family systems psychotherapy and psychoanalysis as interpretive modes. Ray contends that Burgess employs the “Freudian model of family relations by placing the father and the son in competition for the mother and by having the son’s path to manhood lead directly through the father’s defeat or death” (1981, 485). Conversely, family systems theory ignores pre-existing paradigms of human relationships, choosing instead to recognize the differences inherent in every family system and to describe each system in terms of its present formulation.

8 As Stinson notes, critics often read Burgess’s depiction of Ludovico’s Technique and its ideology of negative reinforcement as a devastating critique of the popularization of B. F. Skinner’s behaviorist theories (1991, 58–59).

9 Family systems therapists continue to struggle with the role of gender in our expectations for and subsequent creation of functional family units. As Froma Walsh and Michele Scheinkman observe, “Tremendous social changes over the past two decades have generated an upheaval in beliefs and practices concerning what it
means to be male or female and what gender-linked rules govern interactions and expectations within the family and in the social world in which gender and family norms are embedded” (1989, 16). Clearly, Alex subscribes to a patriarchal model and envisions a family system that consists principally of a wife who would bear his children. While this model may not offer the kind of gender equality to which family systems therapists aspire, Alex's decision to establish a family—any functional family in contrast with the pseudo-families of his past—presents readers with at least the possibility that Alex will develop a healthy differentiated self beyond his family-of-origin.

Works Cited


