

Anthony Burgess: Composer of Comic Fiction

DAVID McNEIL, *McMaster University*

Anthony Burgess was both a composer and a linguist long before he became a writer,¹ and the question that critics should be asking is what has Burgess contributed to the contemporary novel in light of this dual background? The answer seems to lie not in his latest novel *Earthly Powers* (1980), nor in his virtuoso experiment *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), but in his early work where cultural conflicts, represented by the Tongues of Babel, are finally resolved in a comic reconciliation. The fallen world is resurrected by a vision of harmony that is based upon the mythic and musical patterns of life—and also upon man's capacity to laugh at his own inadequacies, his forked tongue being the most important of these. Classified as "British," the nomadic Burgess is really an international figure who speaks several languages and has lived in several countries since he left Britain for good in 1968. The last twenty years of refugee and third world immigration has produced a swirl of shifting cultures in North America and Britain. With the potential for cultural conflict greater than ever, Burgess's comic vision of an aggregate musical harmony arising out of cultural diversity is a badly needed one. Ironically, this vision is best expressed in two pre-1968 novels and has its roots in his Malaysian experience of the 1950s.²

Joyce was the first modernist to structure a piece of fiction on a musical form when he wrote his fugal "Sirens" episode in *Ulysses*, and Burgess has commented at length on Joyce's "Musicalization."³ Then came Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* which was a simpler adaptation of the fugue form—many characters acting out a number of parallel or contrapuntal plots. Burgess sees this contrapuntal form as reflecting Huxley's central theme of the irreconcilable plurality in the human world.⁴

But plurality lends itself to the ludicrous, and for Burgess, as for many traditional humorists (Burton, Fielding, Sterne), laughter is therapeutic. It releases the tension created by disparate elements. This release is similar to the form of

¹Burgess's musical compositions include several concertos and sonatas and three full-length symphonies. His three hour musical adaptation of *Ulysses* was performed on the BBC in December 1981. As a linguist, Burgess has published the primer *Language Made Plain* (London: Fontana, 1975) and recently he devised a neanderthal language based on Indo-European for the film *Quest for Fire* (1982). The Nadsat slang he created in *A Clockwork Orange* (1961) was largely based on Russian.

Burgess's fascination for how the novel can borrow from music seems to have been a career-long affair. See his early article, "The Writer and Music," *The Listener*, 3 May 1962, p. 762; and his latest interview, Samuel Coale, "An Interview with Anthony Burgess," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27, No. 3 (1981 Anthony Burgess Number), 444.

²See Burgess's essay "Conflict and Confluence," in *Urgent Copy* (New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 269-70.

A detailed analysis has been made of the sonata form in Burgess's spy-spoof novel *Tremor of Intent* (1966), see James I. Bly, "Sonata Form in *Tremor of Intent*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27, No. 3 (1981 Anthony Burgess Number), 489-504. Bly, however, does not explore the implications of using musical forms in the novel, nor does the most substantial book on Burgess to date—Geoffrey Aggeler, *Anthony Burgess: The Artist as Novelist* (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1979).

³See Anthony Burgess, *Joystrick* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), pp. 82-92.

⁴See Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 211.

comedy and musical harmony as well. The issue even takes on a spiritual dimension for Northrop Frye has compared the "total *mythos* of comedy" to the "ternary form" in music (stability—disruption—resolution) and to the "central Christian myth."⁵ Burgess has proclaimed himself a Manichaean believing that light and darkness, or the forces of good and evil, are forever in conflict in the world.⁶ However, a comic novelist may be said to play God, in a Christian sense, when his art form somehow resolves conflict and tension. This musical pattern is central to Burgess's first published work, *The Malayan Trilogy* or *The Long Day Wanes*, and another early novel, *Devil of a State*.

Being a linguist, Burgess is fond of using a dialect or locution as a means of characterization. His early characters are both flat and representative of various cultures and social levels. What they lack in depth they make up for in breadth. Their range may be likened to that of a symphony orchestra. Usually, these flat characters rotate around the typical Burgess antihero. The antihero in *The Long Day Wanes*, Victor Crabbe, appears in all three novels, yet the cartoon characters who make up the contrapuntal plots differ in each instalment. While remaining in Malaysia, the specific settings also vary in each part of the trilogy. One can identify three distinct contrapuntal plots in the opening instalment, *Time for a Tiger*. The first involves Nabby Adams, the hopeless alcoholic, and his perpetual thirst for Tiger beer. Alladad's home life makes up the second. His wife wants him to live strictly according to Muslim law, but he wants to abandon his Muslim culture and adopt the superficial values of the West. Finally, there are the Crabbes—Fenella's efforts to enjoy Malaysia and Victor's conflicts with the school headmaster, Boothby.

In the second (*The Enemy in the Blanket*) and third (*Beds in the East*) instalments the contrapuntal plots can be associated with a particular culture. When these cultures converge, the confusion often produces comic crescendos. In *The Enemy in the Blanket*, 'Che Normah sounds the Islamic trumpet (in the ear of her new husband, Hardman, an unsuccessful Muslim convert); Mohinder Singh, Teja Singh, and Kartar Singh provide the Sikh strings; Kadir, Abidin, and Jaganathan — the Malay strings; Ah Wing and the shopkeeper make up the Chinese part; Father Laforgue is the French horn; and finally there are the Talbots and again the Crabbes who serve as the bass colonialists. At certain points throughout the novel, these groups come into crescendo-like conflicts. In one scene, the Sikhs, after consuming much *samsu* in the local *kedai*, begin yelling at one another; the noise brings an insult from a Malay workman, which leads to a *forté* Sikh-Malay confrontation.⁷ The Crabbes happen by and Fenella says, "it's beginning. Riots, fights, brawls" (*LDW*, pp. 237-38).

What actually does begin in the next chapter is something of a Huxleyan fugue. This is the device used to narrate the State party given by the Abang, and it is reminiscent of the Tantamount House party in *Point Counter Point*. The episode really consists of various fragments from the individual conversations, or parts, which are playing in the "Great Hall." Victor is nagged by Anne Talbot, with whom he is having an affair; Fenella eagerly takes in the Abang's compliments; 'Che Normah shouts after her Muslim-convert husband to keep his *songkok* on; Hardman, meanwhile, is unintentionally feeding Jaganathan's suspicious imagination by referring to the communist sympathies that Victor had as a youth; and Kadir, extremely drunk, stumbles about slurring obscenities (*LDW*, pp. 238-44). Toward the

⁵Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 171, 185.

⁶Anthony Burgess, "The Manichaeans," *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 March 1966, 154.

⁷Anthony Burgess, *The Long Day Wanes* (New York: Norton, 1964), p. 237. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation, "*LDW*."

end of the episode, the speech fragments become shorter, and there is no need to identify the characters. This is precisely what Burgess means when he says that one aspect of musicalized fiction is the attempt to make prose seem as if it is not monody, or to capture the impression of simultaneity between the various parallel plots.⁸ The shorter the fragments, the greater the effect will be, as Joyce shows in the "Sirens" section. Joyce's narrative is hard to follow because the reader cannot discern the meaning of the first fragments until the greater structure begins to emerge. Burgess establishes the set pieces first so that the speakers of the shorter fragments are immediately recognizable. This section in *The Enemy in the Blanket* demonstrates how Burgess forms his own hybrid between Joyce's intricacy and Huxley's drawn out adaptation. As a result, he avoids the monotony that can be charged to his predecessors.

Burgess has said that *The Long Day Wanes* follows a "symphonic scheme":

When I first began to write my *Malayan Trilogy* (called *The Long Day Wanes* in America), I saw how a symphonic scheme (the second movement is a scherzo) would enable me to record, each as a very nearly complete entity, the different stages of an expatriate Englishman's love affair with Malay, as well as the stages of the process which brought Malay from British protection to independence. A single long novel would not do: there had to be the feel of a very substantial pause between movements which could, at a pinch, be taken as separate and isolated compositions.⁹

Burgess's identification of the second instalment as a "scherzo" can probably be interpreted in the general etymological sense of a joke, yet this association should be made cautiously. The second instalment is perhaps, like the typical Beethoven scherzo, more bustling and humorous than the first instalment, but it does not seem to surpass the third instalment in these respects. Furthermore, there is nothing which distinguishes the first instalment as a model of the First Movement (or Sonata) form which usually precedes a scherzo.

The important concept is the idea of a "substantial pause" between instalments. Each instalment is self-contained and utilizes Huxley's basic technique of musicalized fiction. But the cultural conflicts, subtle rhythms, and mood contrasts are reminiscent of E. M. Forster, who spoke of two kinds of "Rhythm" in the novel using Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as a point of reference. First, there is the theme ("diddidy dum") or the "repetition plus variation." The second type deals with the work as a whole, "the relation between its movements (The opening movement, the andante, and the trio-scherzo-trio-finale-trio-finale)." Forster calls this relation "rhythmic," and claims that it is not "a rounding off but opening out."¹⁰ Although a work which illustrates this type of rhythm in fiction cannot be found, one feels as if every profound novel has somehow been "rhythmic." There is no doubt that the first type of rhythm is present in *The Long Day Wanes*. As far as the second type is concerned, one might well argue that *The Long Day Wanes* is as "rhythmic" as *A Passage to India*, which contains a similar three-part structure insofar as there is a pause, or narrative gap, between each part. In fact, the phrase, "passage to India," is curiously worked into the narrative at the end of the first instalment (*LDW*, p. 168). *Time for a Tiger* also includes an incident involving Fenella and a Sikh that bears some resemblance to the "muddle" produced by the "Marabar caves."

⁸Anthony Burgess, quoted by Thomas Churchill, "An Interview with Anthony Burgess," *Malabar Review*, 17 (1971), 127. Needless to say prose is always monody, whereas music can be polyphonic.

⁹Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now*, p. 94.

¹⁰E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 165-69.

All three instalments of *The Long Day Wanes* close with somber scenes in which some character begins to sob, and it is in this pattern that the trilogy may be an "opening out" as opposed to a "rounding off." Far from her home and friends on Christmas Eve, Fenella cries in the final scene of *Time for a Tiger*. Abandoned by Fenella, Victor cries at the end of *The Enemy in the Blanket*. In both cases, sadness is brought on by the absence of loved ones. At the end of the final instalment, *Beds in the East*, the tears are shed by Rosemary. She cries for Crabbe who meets his inglorious death-by-water in the second to last chapter. What is so effective about the last chapter is that Crabbe, the only character who appears in all three parts of the trilogy, is now absent. Since Rosemary is really a cartoon character, her sobbing seems to serve merely as a structural ornament that completes the pattern established by the endings of the two previous novels. As the absence of Crabbe is felt, so is the absence of true sorrow. Burgess gives the reader the hint in the last sentence: ". . . tears began to smudge her mascara. 'Poor Victor' . . . and then somebody asked her to dance" (*LDW*, p. 509). *The Malayan Trilogy* is much larger than Crabbe, and the reader is made to feel this by the end of the last novel. It is the greater pattern in human activity that is significant, not the actions of a single man. If there is a Burgess novel which approaches Forster's concept of a "rhythmic" expansion, then this is it. Rosemary's tears are not a "rounding off" but rather an "opening out" because they should remind the reader of the tragic pain that was Fenella's and Crabbe's—thereby hinting at the tragic pain that is borne by the whole of mankind. The superficiality of Rosemary's sobbing represents the superficiality of any one person's grief when dwarfed by the greater scheme of the human world.

The symphonic structure of *The Long Day Wanes* essentially has to do with the various contrapuntal plots or cultures. *Beds in the East* is simply another movement played with the same instrument-sections found in *The Enemy in the Blanket*: the Muslims, the Tamils, the Chinese, the Malays, and the last few colonialists. This time, however, the racial conflict is sharper and one does not have to wait long for it to begin. A few pages into the novel, Syed Omar, a Malay, brutally attacks Maniam, a Tamil whom Omar suspects of trying to oust him from his job. A party provides the setting for the symphonic climax. Crabbe addresses the guests on the diversity of the country: ". . . the component races of Malay have never made much effort to understand each other. . . . There was a cold purely legal unification provided by the state—a British importation—and a sort of superficial culture represented by American films, jazz, chocolate-bars, and refrigerators; for the rest, each race was content to keep alive fragments of culture imported from its own country of origin. There never seemed any necessity to mix" (*LDW*, p. 398). His words describe the situation perfectly. When Crabbe goes on to make his idealistic plea, the party drunk, Vythilingam, sounds the counterpoint:

"But now the time has come." He banged his fist forensically on top of a dinner-wagon. "There must not merely be mixing, there must be fusion."
 "Confusion," said Vythilingam, nodding agreement. He was shushed.
 "There must be inter-marriage, there must be art and literature and music capable of expressing the aspirations of a single unified people." (*LDW*, p. 398)

Just as Crabbe reaches the height of his profound speech, Syed Omar enters and scatters away any vision of hope produced by Crabbe's words by calling the Tamils "Black bastards" (*LDW*, p. 398). Predictably, a fight breaks out and the whole party is thrown into utter chaos. This scene is just the first in a series of crescendos which feature more racial conflicts. Lim Ching Po has the last thoughts on the evening: "A madhouse . . . what a madhouse Asia was" (*LDW*, p. 408).

A misunderstanding of language is really at the basis of racial conflicts in Burgess's fiction. Burgess once said that he would never have started to write his novels about Malay had he not been moved by "the drunkenness of living in a multilingual community."¹¹ The inability to achieve perfect communication ensures that human conflict will persist. But this does not mean to say that there is no harmony of mankind, for the harmony of mankind is an aggregate one and is demonstrated by the fact that civilization exists and continues to exist. Hence, the novelist who possesses the comic vision sees laughter as a means of living with incongruity. Conflict is always ready to rear its ugly head, but when it does we would all be better off to look for the joke.

Burgess often uses a locution or dialect as a leitmotif which announces the entrances of particular characters into the action. The leitmotif has great comic potential, as Burgess recognizes,¹² and can be traced back to Jonson's comedy of humors. Perhaps the Burgess novel which best exemplifies the symphonic scheme and the use of the leitmotif is *Devil of a State* (1961). Set in the fantastic country of Dunia (dung?), this novel contains the regular polyphonic cast of characters drawn from various cultures and social strata. Among the Anglos is Lydia Lydgate whose "Oh, how sweet" invariably signals her presence. Besides serving as a means of immediate identification, the phrase also represents her social persona—an all-too-sweet posture. With Dunia's laborers, the leitmotif takes the form of dialect. The road-crew foreman, Forbes, is Australian: "I told him that that sort of thing was the sort of thing that'd mike any good Aussie go a bit crook, I said. And I said that not everybody kime to Austraylia in the prison-ships."¹³ Nando Tasca and his son Paolo are the marble-workers. Nando tries to educate Dunia's British residents, who are shocked by his lewd behavior, in Italian etiquette: "It a custom in a my country to pinch a bottom of woman who is a *bella*. It not a disrespect" (*DS*, p. 22). Carruthers Chung is the Chinese spiritualist whose "blidge parties" are actually religious meetings where people can hopefully "build leal blidges flom the tempolal to the eternal" (*DS*, pp. 40-41). Then there is the arrogant Czech painter, Smetana, who constantly complains that "Even artists must eat, though the world thinks not" (*DS*, p. 89). Smetana's appetite, however, is insatiable. Eileen, a Chadi, works as a prostitute and her English consists of the standard phrases of her trade: "You like darling?—You want, darling?—You want quickie, five bucks?" (*DS*, p. 22).

These are just some of the characters who make up the contrapuntal plots. *Devil of a State* possesses two symphonic crescendos in which several of these characters engage in heated argument. The first occurs when the U.N. Advisor has one of his luncheons to which various Dunia citizens are invited. A conflict soon flares up between the robust Nando and the sneering Smetana. Patu, the leader of Dunia's Nationalist Party, and the U.N. Advisor also get into a dispute. Suddenly, a drunk British guest, feeling that too many insults have been directed at the Anglo-Saxon race, bursts forth with a heap of racial abuse. He brings the crescendo-like scene to a peak by associating Smetana with the Nazis, referring to Nando's countrymen as a race of "bloody organ-grinders," and calling Patu's compatriots "Black bastards" (*DS*, p. 94). Yet one clearly gets the impression that the conflict is created by the individual personalities of those present and not by their cultural diversity. This seems to be Burgess's moral point. Men are too quick to use the obvious, but ultimately superficial, differences to make sense of their animosity.

¹¹Anthony Burgess, "Novels are Made of Words," *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 April 1965, p. 317.

¹²Anthony Burgess, "Wagner's 'The Ring,'" *The Listener*, 17 Sept. 1964, pp. 419-21.

¹³Anthony Burgess *Devil of a State* (London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 19. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation, "DS."

The second outburst occurs at the political meeting of the Nationalists and laborers. Here verbal discord escalates into a full-scale riot. Forbes epigrammatically remarks, "Loonies . . . a bloody madhouse" (*DS*, p. 179). Not only Dunia or Southeast Asia but any place can be a madhouse if a wide range of counterpoint can be raised to a climax.

The keynote phrase is another feature of musicalized fiction.¹⁴ *Devil of a State* contains a keynote-pun, "The key! The key! Somebody must have the key!" (*DS*, p. 3), which is the first spoken utterance in the novel as Lydgate tries to get into his new house. It is also the last (in reverse form) as the Caliph is about to perform the ceremonial opening of the mosque: "'Somebody must have the key!' 'The key, the key, the key!'" (*DS*, p. 281). This final keynote-pun is anticipated at the beginning of the novel's last Part. Frantic to end Paolo's occupation of the minaret, Dunia's security chief thinks, "'The key. Somebody must have the key.' But that small sun of hope went in; this was Dunia: there would be no key" (*DS*, p. 246—not to the minaret, not to Lydgate's house, not to the mosque, and certainly not to an ultimate understanding of the mad world. So says Carruthers Chung: "Everybody is looking for the key. That is the histoly of Western Philosophy. Flom Alistotle to Bertland Lussell. But the key is not there" (*DS*, p. 3).

The expanding cyclical patterns in *Devil of a State* are enough to make anyone dizzy. First there is the around-the-town chase for Lydgate's key in the opening chapter. Then there is the voice of the divine narrator and the water imagery which Burgess uses at the beginning or the end of the novel's five Parts. The "Roman water-clock" image appears at the beginning of Part One to describe the regularity of Lydgate's dripping sweat. It also appears at the end of Part One to describe the regularity (so very musical) of the drip in his roof. There are no boring mediums in Dunia. Either the country is a wasteland of sweat or a thunderstorm of rain, a rather comic T. S. Eliot structure. Wheels and wheels-within-wheels such as these are the work of novelists who, like Joyce, see through to the absurdity and comedy in mythic cycles. Their characters end up facing what they first ran away from, as the desperate Lydgate does when he meets his spiritual-fanatic wife, or are forever running the treadmill, as the ignorant Forbes seems to do with his prostitute-wife.

Napoleon Symphony presents a far more experimental and daring piece of musicalized fiction than that which one finds in *The Long Day Wanes* or *Devil of a State*. Based upon the score of Beethoven's *Eroica* (apparently bar for bar!), *Napoleon Symphony* is closer to the narrative complexities of the Joycean virtuoso. The result is something radically different from the contrapuntal plots of Huxley or the symphonic schemes of Burgess's early fiction. *Napoleon Symphony* is sheer technical and intellectual improvisation; it synthesizes myth and history, Prometheus and Napoleon. But Burgess expresses a more profound vision of harmony when he composes his own symphonic schemes out of a confluence of cultures. Too much of *Napoleon Symphony* is mere acrobatics.

Of course there are dozens of other Burgess novels. His prolificacy is itself symphonic insofar as he cannot say everything that he wants to say in one novel. This view is consistent with Burgess's own attitude toward the contemporary novelist who is more likely to "present fragments of an individual vision in book after book" rather than the "single achievement" like *Ulysses* or *War and Peace*.¹⁵ Ironically, the

¹⁴Perhaps the best known of these is "What's it going to be then, eh?" in *A Clockwork Orange*, a felicitous keynote for a dystopian novel. For a discussion of the "word-music" or "aural energies" in *A Clockwork Orange* see James Guetti, *Word-Music: The Aesthetic Aspect of Narrative Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979), pp.54-76.

¹⁵Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now*, p. 19.

highly-touted *Earthly Powers* may best be described as the final recapitulation of Burgess's old concerns with racial conflict, morality, language, and art. The musical paradigms and comic structures are gone, yet the composer's approach is still apparent in how the plot is designed to reflect the ambiguous nature of good and evil—a dying boy is miraculously saved by a priest only to grow up into a Reverend Jones figure and cause a mass suicide. Therapeutic laughter gives way to the 1970 potboiler elements of exorcism, religious cults, homosexual harassment, and Papal politics.

Burgess believes that language is terribly inadequate, but besides being the only medium that man has to communicate, language is also terribly fascinating. Men will usually babble all the more if at first they are misunderstood. The true music of man is his desperate babble and sporadic bursts of laughter. Those who assume a comic vision indicate at least a willingness to envisage an aesthetic ideal similar to Christian redemption. Burgess's musical and linguistic background provides him with the comic formula which makes *The Long Day Wanes* and *Devil of a State* truly memorable. In spite of human conflict—or the Tongues of Babel, there is always the greater aggregate harmony of mankind to be appreciated by those who can climb out of the "pit" to listen. The form prevails and transcends the immediate circumstances. Amid discord man may still rest assured for only patterns are important. Being human, however, means that he can never rest assured because the patterns can never be discerned by those inside them. This is the joke that must be endured, or enjoyed, before life's musical intrigue can begin.