‘Mr Burgess’s latest failure’: the reception of *Napoleon Symphony*.

When Anthony Burgess died in 1993, the obituary columns which followed were unanimous in their praise. It was clear from the words of critics such as Malcolm Bradbury, D.J. Enright, David Lodge and Peter Ackroyd that the man whose death they marked was a major figure in the literature of our time, the producer of a significant corpus of work, a writer who might be ranked with the foremost novelists of his generation. Bradbury’s account is typical:

> The books which came, almost unremittingly, from 1956 on make a vast record of the second half of the twentieth century, a collective pulling together of what a deeply engaged literary and linguistic mind might draw from what had already been written, what it was now time to write. Burgess is the great postmodern storehouse of British writing, maker not just of contemporary stories, but of innumerable new narrative codes. He is a popular writer, but also an important experimentalist; an encyclopedic amasser, but also a maker of form; a playful comic, with a dark gloom.[1]

Bradbury’s view is echoed by David Lodge, quoted in one obituary as saying that ‘he was a giant of contemporary literature.’[2] D.J. Enright praised his ‘novelist’s drive to tell a

story, to clothe his fierce preoccupations in the flesh and blood of characters.'[3] A.S. Byatt declared that he 'must have been more verbally inventive than any other contemporary writer' and that he was 'a great European novelist'.[4] Peter Ackroyd saw Burgess's work as belonging to an older tradition, and labelled him 'the last of the great nineteenth century novelists…he was a modern Dickens or Thackeray.'[5] The uniformly approving tone of the obituaries concealed, however, an uncomfortable fact, one which Bradbury hints at in his notice: Burgess's reputation was never particularly high in the country of his birth, suffering vicissitudes almost from the moment his work was first published. That the size rather than the quality of Burgess's output had been a critical commonplace in accounts of his work is summarised by Bradbury:

> He also claimed, as a reason for living abroad, that the British public ignored him, as they did by comparison with his large reputation around the world. Critics here also showed a disturbing inclination to contain him, put him in this box or that, demand more and more of the same, and less of the different.[6]

This perception that Burgess's importance as novelist of world stature was never fully recognised in Britain was a focus for several of the contemporary writers and critics asked to offer an opinion on his career. One obituary, having summarised the nomadic nature of Burgess's life, and commented on his failure to gain official honours, suggested that his attitude to his home country had become one of 'unconcealed contempt.'[7] Bradbury's hint that Burgess's critical reception was different in Britain compared to the

rest of the world, suggests a difference in literary cultures, exemplified by contrasting approaches to the Burgess oeuvre. That Burgess was aware of this difference, and was exercised by it, is suggested by Victoria Glendinning's comment that 'He always said that he felt like a prophet without honour in this country, but actually had more honour than he would have liked to admit.'[8] Clearly, it would seem that although Burgess's death occasioned much laudatory positive reflection on his achievements, there was at best an ambivalence, and at worst a hostility towards his work in Britain. It is this discrepancy between the British reception of Burgess's work, compared to that in America and Europe which this paper aims to explore. If, at the time of his death, leading British critics felt obliged to place Burgess in the front rank of novelists writing in English, the question arises as to why that status was not accorded him while he was alive.

In America, where he had been a Distinguished Visiting Professor, and the subject of several books of literary criticism, and in Europe, where he had been lauded with official recognitions of his work, in the form of literary prizes and the award of state honours, Burgess was clearly accepted as a leading literary figure; in Britain, by contrast, he was never deemed worthy of such public acknowledgement. This attitude is reflected in the way that Burgess is absent from much of the critical discourse on British fiction emanating from London. Both the academic world and the world of literary journalism seem to have seen Burgess as unworthy of serious consideration, despite the very substantial critical reputation his work commanded in the United States and in mainland Europe. Burgess is absent, for example, from most standard accounts of the British novel published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries . He is not mentioned in Gasiorek's *Post War British Fiction*, nor in either of D.J. Taylor's works on the topic, *A*

Vain Conceit : British Fiction in the 1980s and *After the War: the Novel and English Society Since 1945*.[9] More recently, Dominic Head's *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000* [10] covers only *A Clockwork Orange.* James English's 2006 edited volume *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*[11], whose starting point is the 1970s, mentions Burgess as a contender for the Nobel Prize in the introduction, but then manages only one brief reference (to *Earthly Powers*) in the text. Burgess fares better in the survey written by his obituarist, Malcolm Bradbury, whose *The Modern British Novel* affords him a total of two pages of critique, a third of the consideration allotted to Graham Greene. Steven Connor's account of the English novel of the second half of this century mentions only *The End of the World News*, in the context of a chapter on novelistic representations of apocalypse. [12]

This bifurcation in the attitudes of two literary-critical communities towards Burgess's work suggests that, as many writers have bitterly observed, literary reputation is not solely an index of perceived worth. At the time of his death, this matter was the subject of a *Times* leading article:

> Anthony Burgess's productivity, excelling that of all but his most voluminous contemporaries, was laudable as well as lucrative. Literary critics, however, do not like the great producers; they begrudge the time needed to keep up with their work. Thus immediately after his death, his reputation stands in the same jeopardy as those of Trollope and Scott, both of whose works had to be rescued from long periods

> of neglect. […]it will be decades before any critic does justice to the baroque palace of his achievement.[13]

The writer here unwittingly demonstrates the problem of Burgess's reputation. As almost always seems to be the case when Burgess's work is considered, much emphasis is placed on his productivity. Here, there is also an assumption that he has not attracted critical acclaim: the large body of Burgess criticism emanating from America is a factor of which the writer seems unaware.

In Britain, the mechanics of gaining a reputation at the time that Burgess was trying to establish one seem to have been a complex matter. Association with the 'right' people, attendance at influential functions, appearances at the appropriate London establishments all seem to have played a part in the making of literary names. Burgess, as a northerner with an Irish Catholic ancestry, and a background in teaching in the colonies, had few of the attributes looked for by the metropolitan coterie of writers and critics which was instrumental in the promotion of literary taste.

Peter Vansittart, in his memoir *In the Fifties*, devotes a chapter to 'The Wednesday Club', a group of writers, philosophers, artists and intellectuals which met weekly at Bertorelli's, a London restaurant. The chapter consists largely of Vansittart's assiduous name-dropping, some paragraphs comprising little more than a list of more or less familiar names. In the midst of this chapter, Vansittart mentions Burgess's rejection of his invitation to join this somewhat self-satisfied group: 'Burgess suspected the club was an insider's ring to fix reputations and debase his own.'[14] This brief anecdote is suggestive, not least because Vansittart must obviously have considered Burgess worthy

of joining this privileged group. The incident, unrecorded in the volumes of Burgess autobiography, reveals the extent of Burgess's isolation from the London literary establishment in the 1950s, and is an early indication of Burgess's long-standing status as an outsider. That status was confirmed and emphasised by Burgess's decision to live overseas after 1968; taking into account his time as a officer of the colonial service in Malaya and Borneo, then, Burgess was resident in England for only sixteen of the forty seven years he lived following his discharge from the Army in 1946. Thus physically apart from the metropolitan literary coteries of the period, (especially since, even when resident in England, he did not live in London for any extended period of time) it would appear from the Vansittart anecdote that Burgess was also temperamentally disinclined to be part of any contemporary literary grouping. It is clear from Vansittart's account of the literary scene of the time that writers' reputations might be built and maintained through supportive mutual reviews, with regular meetings such as those he describes (referring to them elsewhere in the book as 'London literary parties'[15]) providing the ideal opportunity to grease the wheels of fame. Burgess's exclusion, self-inflicted or not, from the cliques whose judgements went some way to making a literary reputation must have had a damaging effect on the process of making his name known.

Later, in the close-knit world of letters in the sixties, Burgess might well have been disadvantaged in the establishment of a literary reputation by his absence from the social circles in which writers and critics moved. Certainly, Burgess would have been the only member of Vansittart's group of Hampstead intellectuals with a northern English working-class background. Undeniably, he cultivated his 'outsider' status, in a way comparable perhaps to Wyndham Lewis in the thirties, but Burgess, unlike Lewis, relied

for the major part of his career solely on writing to earn a living. The building of a reputation was important, therefore, and his self-willed exclusion from the London literary scene was probably a contributory factor in the generally pejorative tone of the reception of his early work in the English press. Indeed, as Burgess's career developed, he was routinely characterised in the English press as being a journeyman producer of slight fictions, more notable for his fecundity than for his quality. That pat judgement dogged Burgess, and affected his status in Britain throughout the sixties and seventies, ending only with the world-wide success of *Earthly Powers* in 1980.

The establishment of literary status in the late fifties and early sixties rested largely with a few editors and reviewers, who operated in a somewhat incestuous world based on the pubs and clubs of London. Vansittart's book shows how intellectual credibility was to some extent a matter of the circles in which an aspiring writer (such as Vansittart) moved. Even so, Burgess did have some supporters in the English literary scene of the time. In a 1964 article in *The London Magazine*, part of a series entitled 'Reputations', the novelist Julian Mitchell praised the early Burgess, and posited a theory as to why, at that stage, his work had received little critical attention:

> Anthony Burgess is, I believe, the only youngish English novelist whose reputation can afford to rest on his work as a whole rather than on one or two outstanding books. The authors of *Lucky Jim, Lord of the Flies, Mr Nicholas, The Bell, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Memento Mori* (to name a few obvious successes) are one- or at most

> two-book men and women, constantly dismaying their admirers with new work. Only V.S. Naipaul has written as consistently well as Burgess, and he hasn't, of course, produced nearly as much. Yet though he has his fans, and has once been picked by the Book Society, Burgess hasn't had much critical attention. Perhaps the sheer volume of his work has scared off the critics: it's much easier to come to linger over a small easily destructible corpus than to come to grips with a talent as various and productive as his. The variety is quite as impressive as the productivity. [16]

This analysis of Burgess's position at this early stage of his career is a prescient comment on the way in which the reputation was to develop. The emphasis on the quantity of work (though here seen as something to be admired rather than disapproved of) is echoed in nearly every reference to Burgess's work in the years which followed. Not so prescient is Mitchell's account of the other 'youngish' British novelists: Amis, Golding, Murdoch, Sillitoe and Spark all enjoyed a higher profile and more critical acclaim than Burgess after Mitchell dismissed them as 'one- or at most two-book men and women': of his list, only Thomas Hinde, who published *Mr Nicholas* at the age of twenty-five in 1952, and never repeated his early success, eventually abandoning fiction after sixteen novels, is now unread. The others in Mitchell's list are all now part of the modern canon, established in a way that Burgess has never been. This early attempt by a British author and critic to promote Burgess as a major novelist is unusual, if not unique: Christopher

Ricks's review article in 1963 on the publication of *Honey for the Bears* [17] was a similar attempt to position Burgess as an emergent force in English fiction. These examples are isolated, however: the dominant tone of reviews written by English critics in the early years of Burgess's career is one of grudging praise for his verbal dexterity combined with distaste both for his subject matter and the very fertility admired by Mitchell and Ricks.

What becomes increasingly noticeable as Burgess's career develops, is the tendency of American and European critics to respond to his work far more positively, and to locate his work, as a matter of course, within the emerging post-modern canon. British critics, on the other hand, Ricks and Mitchell being rare exceptions, are typically negative in their response, and usually see Burgess's work as being at best poor imitations of various models- Maugham and Waugh for the colonial fictions, James Joyce for the experimental novels, for example.

This pattern can be seen in the treatment of the 1974 novel *Napoleon Symphony.* The novel attempts to shadow the musical form of Beethoven's 'Eroica' symphony in prose, with the language closely corresponding to the movements of the symphony. It uses Napoleon, the symphony's original dedicatee, as its central figure. This blending of musical and novelistic form had long been a project dear to Burgess, and the standard biographical note on Burgess printed in paperback editions of his work routinely referred to this ambition. The novel's correspondence to the symphony is, in Burgess's eyes at any rate, exact:

> On the most general level, this means that the book is in
> four movements, just as a symphony is in four movements.

> But it means a little more than that. It means that the proportions of each movement are exactly matched in the novel itself. What I did was play the symphony over on the phonograph and time each movement, and I worked out a kind of proportion of pages to each second or five seconds of playing time. So there is a correspondence between the number of pages and the actual time taken for the thing to be performed. But more than that, I've worked with the score of the Eroica in front of me, the orchestral score, and I've made each section within a given literary movement correspond to a section within the Eroica, so that a passage of eight bars would correspond to so many pages in the novel. And not only the length, the number of pages, but the actual dynamics, the mood and the tempo.[18]

Not only does the title immediately signify the author's intent, but the text itself explicitly examines the impulse towards the project, and describes, in heroic couplets, the author's motivation. This is clearly, on one level, a disarming damage limitation exercise: the author is aware of the folly of the enterprise, but seeks to disable criticism by admitting the impossibility of the task. To some extent, this is disingenuous: the 'Epistle to the Reader' comes after the main text, and might therefore be seen as an attempt to deflect the criticisms of those readers who have just struggled through a multi-faceted novel ending with a self consciously Joycean stream of consciousness passage which juxtaposes

anachronistic images to startling effect. The protocol for apologies to the reader is to place them before the text. Burgess reverses expectations here in a novel which itself is a reversal of expectations - music inspired by literature is commonplace, but a novel which aims to parallel closely the movements of a symphony is, as Burgess attests here and elsewhere, a rarity. The author admits that the project was probably doomed, but hoped it might gain some favour:

> Malignity may munch but Muses bless
> Failed boldness more than orthodox success.[19]

Burgess is, then, defensive about this work, even while acknowledging the self-defeating nature of such an ambitious enterprise. His effort was, it seems, in vain. He quotes an unnamed critic's first sentence: 'Mr Burgess's latest failure is entitled, somewhat grandiosely, *Napoleon Symphony.*'[20] This refusal to engage with the nature of Burgess's project is typical of the response of the critics on publication in 1974. The reviewers largely failed to appreciate how precisely Burgess had worked. Typical of the responses was Peter Ackroyd's review in *The Spectator,* where, under the heading 'Cacophony' he begins:

> Yes, Mr Burgess is fluent and fanciful and inventive: he is even occasionally fertile. He tells us so himself in a 'Verse Epistle' to the reader. And the temptation with this book is to put everything into inverted commas. [21]

This seems disingenuous, given the stated intent, announced even on the jacket of the book, to use the *Eroica* as the template for the narrative. This novel was always, perforce, going to be highly intertextual. In the context of the contemporary literary climate, Burgess's experimentation does not seem so outlandish: Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, which appeared in 1973, appended various critical commentaries ('written' by the characters) to the novel, including what has been described as 'an overblown and clearly inadequate literal Freudian interpretation of events.'; [22] Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* , with its self-reflexive narrative and scholarly footnotes had been published five years before; and Angela Carter had already published *The Magic Toyshop, Heroes and Villains* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*, all increasingly extravagant fantasies replete with intertextual and pastiche elements, by the time Burgess produced *Napoleon Symphony*. These examples are not remarkable in themselves, nor even particularly 'experimental.' They merely reflect the adventurous spirit of the times. After all, a decade had passed since B.S. Johnson's innovatory fiction had first been published, and the work he was doing contemporaneously with *Napoleon Symphony*, most notably the 'documentary' fiction *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975) which incorporates photographs and family archives, was arguably far more 'experimental' Burgess's work. Johnson, whose work included one novel (*The Unfortunates*, 1969) published in loose-leaf format so that the reader could rearrange the narrative at will, seems in hindsight more genuinely radical than Burgess. Moreover, writers such as Murdoch, Fowles and Carter were all seen as mainstream literary writers: *their* experimentations with the form of the novel met with a sympathetic response from the critics, whereas Burgess is,

generally, damned with faint praise for attempting something comparable. Peter Ackroyd (later to be the author, it should not be forgotten, of *Chatterton*) continues in his notice:

> The secret life of a hero is one of those incurably romantic themes which will remain novelettish despite all attempts to enliven it. And Burgess certainly tries. There is, however, a rule in fiction that there are only a finite number of plots and an infinite number of novelists, and Mr Burgess contrives a rhetorical garishness by shifting the surfaces of his writing around like toy bricks: there are many narrative voices, letters, deadpan narrative and a number of poetic intervals (though Mr Burgess is by no means a poet)...[23]

This is criticism which fails to address the subject, and indeed seems to be attacking the novel for not being what Ackroyd wants it to be. To reduce Burgess's intricate interweaving of styles and allusions to the level of a child playing with toy bricks is to do a disservice to the profession of the critic. Ackroyd's main, indeed only, point seems to be that Burgess is excessively self-conscious, which does not stop Ackroyd himself from engaging in a mock-confidential aside to the reader, concluding with a bizarre identification with Queen Victoria:[24]

> ...the literariness of the whole narrative is merely confirmed by a pastiche of Ulysses (Burgess seems to have some proprietorial claim on Joyce, though it is difficult to see any similarity) which sets all of the preceding narrative at an

> aesthetic distance. You could no doubt call the novel a 'sport', Mr Burgess being fanciful and inventive and outrageous, but it is only what the closing epistolary verse would call 'an orthodox success.' We are not particularly amused.

Ackroyd's lifting of the phrase from the 'Epistle' is disingenuous: apart from the jokily self-mocking tone maintained throughout, the particular phrase is quoted out of context: the lines actually acknowledge the project's failure, as noted above. Burgess is willing to admit the failure of his enterprise, but also conscious that it might at least be considered an interesting failure. Ackroyd seems to inveigh against the novel for being self-consciously different, and then concludes that it is 'orthodox' after all.

Burgess might have expected such negative criticism, after the incomprehension which greeted *MF*, and concedes as much in his autobiography: after an uncharacteristically lengthy summary of the (almost universally bad) notices of the novel, he suggests that 'I knew better than anyone that the book was a failure...but no art can progress unless failure is sometimes risked.'[25]

In truth, the critics were unable to accept Burgess as a member of the elite group (which was to include Peter Ackroyd) of English literary novelists who could be expected, like the French, to experiment with form in order to further the art of the novel. Even the partly sympathetic *Times* review by Michael Ratcliffe turned Burgess's willingness to push back the boundaries of fiction into a whimsical eccentricity:

> The fact that, as Mr Burgess himself remarks, the transliteration of musical sounds and forms into letters, words and sentences defeated the authors of *Point Counter Point*, the *Four Quartets* and *Ulysses* is not going to deter him from having a bash. The fact that a thing is known, preferably proved, to be impossible, has never deterred him from having a bash before; it is one of his most English, most Romantic and most likeable qualities, and it will always be one for which he is consistently attacked as impertinent in England. [26]

As for the rest of the English reception of the novel, the reviewers barely bothered to conceal their hostility. For Victoria Glendinning, 'The heart sinks, the eyes glaze when faced with the prospect of reading Burgess: his writing sets up an initial hostility because it is so noisy.' [27]; Nicholas Richardson is similarly weary, finding the novel full of 'tiresomely extended and reiterated semantic echoes' and declaring that 'The trouble with this kind of sustained intellectual extravaganza - and *Jonathan Wild* comes to mind - is that the reader risks exhaustion';[28] for Emma Tennant, the novel attempts 'to give the life, the mind, the sex, the liver of Napoleon Buonaparte, all running at the same time, and, one feels by the end of the book, well into its fifth glorious year'[29]; for Lorna Sage, the novel exuded a

> wonderful deadness: which is really the paradox of Anthony Burgess...he is original, inventive, idiosyncratic

> even, and yet the ingredients are synthetic, ready made. His own attitude to this, so far as one can extricate anything so direct from [the novel] is determinedly, manically cheerful.[30]

The overwhelmingly negative tone of these comments from established English critics (two of whom, like Ackroyd, novelists themselves) reaches its apogee with the long article by Jonathan Raban under the curious heading 'What Shall We Do About Anthony Burgess?' in which, as is the case with so many British responses to the novel, Burgess's invention is praised, only for the exercise of that invention to be rubbished:

> The problem of Burgess remains. He is surely the most intelligent English novelist alive...The question is whether he is a clever man who dabbles in anthropology, history, criticism and metaphysics, then dresses these interests up in fiction...or whether he is a novelist whose ability to think and feel is inseparably bound to the form of prose narrative. Is he, in fact, really a novelist at all?[31]

This problematising of Burgess's very existence goes beyond the off-hand nature of much of the English critical response to *Napoleon Symphony* Raban seems to be unable, oddly, to accept the idea of a novelist whose faculties are bound to the form of prose narrative. Given that the novel in question is one which attempts a radically different form for the novel, this is a bizarre charge to level. Raban asserts, seemingly, that the

novelist's art is about thinking and feeling (and that seems an absurdly opaque description) but Burgess's thinking and feeling is all connected to the form of prose narrative. Why this should be problematic in a novelist, Raban does not consider worth saying. Having established, at least to his own satisfaction, that Burgess is not worthy of the name of novelist, Raban then feels able to alternate scarcely veiled antipathy with patronising near-praise. Thus, he can say at one point that the novel 'seems as long, as complicated and as boring as the whole of the Old Testament' but conclude with:

> And yet, and yet...Burgess's abilities are enormous. Better, perhaps, a crippled great artist like him than a perfectly accomplished minor writer who would never dare the heights that Burgess so very nearly scales.[32]

Even that is undercut by a diminishing comparison with Kingsley Amis in the next paragraph, which praises the 'contemptuous ease' with which Amis portrays character, as opposed to Burgess's failure. Perhaps Raban's attack on Burgess was influenced by the anonymous critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* who jokily asked whether Mr Burgess was 'making a virtuosity out of necessity', the point being, apparently, that 'in an avowedly non-tragic novel, we need some positive assertion of human or divine value.' The writer is disappointed to find none, and having praised, like so many other English critics, the novel's daring, concludes by making a reference to the salty language employed by Burgess's soldiers: 'the lingo recalls the Home Guard more readily than the Old Guard.'[33] This reductive treatment of Burgess's achievement is the main effect of the English notices of the novel. In concentrating on minor details, and failing even to

attempt to appraise the success or otherwise of the novelist's project, they demonstrate the validity of Burgess's assertion that 'What I, and my fellow-novelists, desperately needed, was informed criticism, not hack reviews.'[34] Burgess remarked on several occasions that the lack of serious response to his work was a contributory factor in his decision to exile himself from England. An examination of the American response to *Napoleon Symphony* emphasises the point.

By the time *Napoleon Symphony* appeared in the USA, it was already clear that there was a dichotomy between the critical response to Burgess in his home country, and that he experienced elsewhere in Europe and in the New World. One American reaction demonstrates the gulf between the two critical communities:

> In an age of dull prose, jargon of sociology and psychology, incessant buzz of gossip, journal, the endless dribble of weepy-eyed ghetto hysterics, tin clatter of avant garde mobiles, hollow academic puling: a reader who delights in succulent phrase, unctuous pap, the zest of word play and a saucy paragraph, must fall on each new work of Anthony Burgess with ravenous appetite.[35]

This ecstatic reception is by no means unusual: the novel was generally much better received in America than in Britain. More noticeable than the warmth of the critical response, however, was the seriousness with which the book was considered. Burgess complained of the 'implied lack of an aesthetic' [36]in the English reviews of his early

work, and attributed it to the status of criticism in Britain, where it was mainly applied to canonical work, as opposed to America, where new work was treated with the same seriousness as the classics. This open approach to new work ensured not only a more positive, but also a more considered reception for Burgess's experimental work. The American reception of *Napoleon Symphony* tends to see Burgess as working within the same experimental field as the European writers of the *nouveau roman* and perhaps surpassing them in terms of the achievement of new techniques, displaying a level of engagement with the text lacking in most of the English notices. Even when conceding that the novel was perhaps not entirely successful in achieving its ends, American reviewers tended to praise the attempt, rather than write derogatorily about the apparent failure. The following typifies the informed and laudatory nature of much of the American coverage:

> The expected verbal roulades are abundant, together with the bawdy, the scatological, the witty. The English is liberally peppered with expressions from many other languages, and the whole possesses an almost Joycean inventiveness.(…) The novel is massive and innovative in plan, and though the execution is not wholly successful, it fails on a far higher level than most other novels ever attain. [37]

The contrast in tone is plain, and confirms the general trend in the reception of Burgess's novels up to this stage in his career: in summary, hostile, dismissive notices in London, as against supportive, admiring reviews in New York.

Napoleon Symphony represents the high point of Burgess's experimental impulse. As such, it is perhaps inevitable, given the critical consensus among British critics, that it should be received coolly. The *nouveau roman* in France, and the postmodern experiments of American writers such as Thomas Pynchon were contemporaneous with an English scene where experimentation was marginalised. Academic commentaries on post-war fiction have tended to categorise the work of serious English writers of the time as lacking in adventurous linguistic experiment:

> When society finds itself under particular stress or in 'a great whirlwind of change', novelists tend to examine 'Man-in-society' rather than 'Man-alone', renouncing the innovations of modernism or other elaborations of technique in favour of a realistic method reflecting as directly as possible the unsettled circumstances of the time.[38]

Such an appraisal marginalises the work of Burgess, particularly in this late sixties-early seventies experimental phase, and posits a version of British fiction as firmly grounded in a realist tradition of well-plotted structures, populated by Forsterian rounded characters inhabiting a recognisable contemporary or historical environment. It confirms the late fifties view of the English scene, briefly delineated in an article by C.P. Snow, in which

he stated that 'one cannot begin to understand a number of contemporary English novelists unless one realises that to them Joyce's way is at best a cul-de-sac.' [39] The irony of such a statement when applied to Burgess, even in the fifties, is obvious. Certainly, by the time of the publication of *Napoleon Symphony*, the idea that British novelists were characteristically conservative and resistant to non-realist modes of writing, was manifestly untrue. It is true to say, however, that the mainstream literary world, dominated by figures such as Kingsley Amis, continued to subscribe to this notion, thus further marginalising the few writers who, like Burgess, were continuing to develop techniques of experimental writing. In 1975, it is worth recording, Burgess was bracketed with Robert Nye, Gabriel Josipovici and B.S. Johnson in an anthology of writing described as the work of 'new generation British experimentalists.' [40] The tenacity of the establishment view of English fiction can be measured by the responses recorded in the *New Review*'s symposium on fiction, published in 1978, four years after *Napoleon Symphony.* A collection of leading critics and novelists were asked their views on 'The State of Fiction', and their answers are recorded without comment. Only Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge and Anthony Thwaite mention Burgess by name. Bradbury, who does discern a move away from realism, suggests that Burgess, like Muriel Spark, Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing moved away from social realism into more experimental modes. Burgess is, however, omitted from Bradbury's group of British writers 'who are major figures in any comparative international league.' [41] Lodge makes a similar point, and Thwaite suggests that Burgess and William Trevor are 'the most ebullient and consistent talents.'[42]. Much more typical of the survey, though, is Francis King's comment: 'the names of established writers came to me with ease'[43]- they are

Greene, Isherwood, Powell, Murdoch and Amis. Burgess's lack of significant support is interesting in the light of the response to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, praised extravagantly by the same literary establishment on its publication three years later.

Burgess was a combative man, and constructed an image of himself as an outsider, frequently under attack by those possessed of lesser talent but greater influence in the literary establishment. In *Napoleon Symphony*, the attempt to give symphonic shape to verbal narrative is doomed to failure, but the novel reflects the conflict at the heart of Napoleon's life, and Beethoven's musical rendering of it, resolving that conflict in the self-deprecating coda which shows a novelist more aware of his limitations than his detractors.

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[1] Malcolm Bradbury, 'Anthony Burgess: A Passion for Words', *Independent on Sunday*, 28 November, 1993, p.3

[2] *The Guardian*, 26 November, 1993, p.26

[3] D.J. Enright, *The Guardian*, 26 November 1993, p.G2 7

[4] quoted in *The Times*, 26 November, 1993, p.1

[5] quoted in *The Times*, 26 November, 1993, p.1

[6] Bradbury (1993) p.3

[7] Daniel Johnson and Alison Roberts, 'Anthony Burgess Dies of Cancer at 76',*The Times*, 26 November, 1993, p.1

[8] quoted in *The Times*, 26 November, 1993, p.1

[9] Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post War British Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); D.J. Taylor, *A Vain Conceit* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989) and *After the War* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993)

[10] Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
[11] James English (ed.) *The Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006)

[12]Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950 - 1995* (London: Routledge, 1995)

[13] *The Times*, 26 November, 1993, p.21
[14] Peter Vansittart, *In the Fifties* (London: John Murray, 1995), p.151

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[16] Julian Mitchell, *The London Magazine* Vol.3 No. 11 (February, 1964), p. 48

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