

“This lump of minor art”: *Napoleon Symphony* and the travesty of France

When Anthony Burgess travelled with his new wife Liana in their Bedford Dormobile -- a very British vehicle -- to the south of France in the summer of 1968, the journey was marked by a series of accidents that seemed to belong to a previous age. Burgess's account of their progress is reminiscent in its splenetic disgust of the eighteenth-century novelist Tobias Smollett, whose *Travels through France and Italy* represents the origin of the familiar figure of the Brit abroad. Smollett travelled for his health, Burgess to escape the ruinously high level of income tax which he was obliged to pay under Britain's Labour government. Burgess, of course, had written the previous year about the Englishman's encounter with France in his introduction to the coffee-table volume *The Grand Tour*, in which he fails to mention Smollett. Perhaps he saw something of himself in the earlier writer. Both travellers were eloquent in their description of the French. Smollett, memorably lampooned as “Smelfungus” by Sterne, went so far as to produce a sort of caricature identikit Frenchman, whose attributes he compared unfavourably with those of the typical Englishman:

If a Frenchman is capable of real friendship, it must certainly be the most disagreeable present he can possibly make to a man of a true English character. You know, madam, we are naturally taciturn, soon tired of impertinence, and much subject to fits of disgust. Your French friend intrudes upon you at all hours; he stuns you with his loquacity; he teases you with impertinent questions about your domestic and private affairs; he attempts to meddle in all your concerns, and forces his advice upon you with the most unwearied importunity; he asks the price of everything you wear, and, so sure as you tell him, undervalues it without hesitation; he affirms it is in a bad taste, ill contrived, ill made; that you have been imposed upon both with respect to the fashion and the price; that the marquis of this, or the countess of that, has one that is perfectly elegant, quite in the bon ton, and yet it cost her little more than you gave for a thing that nobody would wear.¹

Once on foreign soil, Smollett turns a cold eye on his surroundings. Dyspeptic, irascible, assailed at every turn by the devious foreigner, Smollett is distinctly unimpressed by the sights and sounds of the continent. Here he is on the poor inhabitants of Nice:

They are all diminutive, meagre, withered, dirty, and half naked; in their complexions, not barely swarthy, but as black as Moors; and I believe many of them are descendants of that people. They are very hard favoured; and their women in general have the coarsest features I have ever seen: it must be owned, however, they have the finest teeth in the world. The nourishment of those poor creatures consists of the refuse of the garden, very coarse bread, a kind of meal called polenta, made of Indian corn, which is very nourishing and agreeable, and a little oil; but even in these particulars, they seem to be stinted to very scanty meals. I have known a peasant feed his family with the skins of boiled beans. Their hogs are much better fed than their children. 'Tis pity they have no cows, which would yield milk, butter, and cheese, for the sustenance of their families. With all this wretchedness, one of these peasants will not work in your garden for less than eighteen sols, about eleven pence sterling, per diem; and then he does not half the work of an English labourer. If there is fruit in it, or any thing he can convey, he will infallibly steal it, if you do not keep a very watchful eye over him. All the common people are thieves and beggars; and I believe this is always the case with people who are extremely indigent and miserable.²

Smollett is, doubtless exaggerating a little, a trait not unknown in Burgess. The account of his and Liana's journey across Europe is, like Smollett's, peppered with accounts of run-ins with local officials, encounters with grubby locals, and affronts to his dignity. This is typical:

We were not robbed until we got to Avignon. The old papal town was full of mean-eyed Algerians. Liana had a great leather bag which contained all our documents and money as well as the gold trinkets of a dead wife. After an evening in which Paolo Andrea pranced naked through the streets (*'Il est fou,'* muttered the Avignon crones), his mother laid the bag down to open the Dormobile door and put the inert child to bed. It was whisked off by an Algerian who had been skulking in the shadows. (...) Avignon and the Algerians had bred a new version of an old song: *'Sur le pont d'Avignon, on y vole.'*³

Of course, the peripatetic Burgesses eventually settled in Monaco -- which is as French as you can be without actually being in France -- and Burgess frequently wrote admiringly of the country, accepting the accolade of *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres*, so we can assume that his attitude to the French mellowed after the incident in Avignon. Still, it seems that Burgess, to some degree at least, channels the spirit of Smollett in his initial animosity to France and its inhabitants.

This anecdote is by way of background to establish that, when it comes to the French, Burgess had some history before he wrote the novel which, out of all his *oeuvre*, is most immersed in the matter of France: *Napoleon Symphony*. *Napoleon Symphony* presents a phantasmagorical alternative version of post-revolutionary France, presided over by a Napoleon who bears more than a little resemblance to some of Burgess's other heroes -- Enderby, WS, or Shakespeare in *Nothing Like the Sun*, and maybe even Burgess himself. In Joycean style, Burgess uses pastiche and parody to convey his portrait of Napoleon's France, and in doing so, I would contend, constructs a composite portrait of a France that is completely fictional, and based more on the literary sources Burgess used than the historical record. I want to examine those sources in some detail later, but first I want to look at Burgess's intentions in this novel.

The central conceit of the novel, as Burgess explains in *This Man and Music*, was to compose a lengthy piece of prose fiction that took as its template the score of Beethoven's 'Eroica' symphony. The novel attempts to shadow the musical form of the symphony in prose, with the language closely corresponding to the movements of the symphony, using Napoleon, its original dedicatee, as its central figure. This blending of musical and novelistic form had long been a project of which Burgess spoke, and the standard biographical note on Burgess printed in paperback editions of his work routinely referred to this ambition.

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 mixes anachronous 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 structure of the novel follows closely the career of Napoleon from his emergence as a political and military force to his exile on St Helena. "The problem," as Burgess himself points out, "was nearly completely formal: how to make true history fit into musical patterns."⁴ No doubt Burgess was aware of the oxymoronic irony of the phrase "true history" and used it in a deliberately provocative fashion. Not only does the novel use the structure of the symphony as an organising principle for the plot, but Burgess daringly uses the music as a stylistic template too, attempting to match the quality of the prose to the texture of the music. There is an attempt to match lengths as well, with the four sections of the book corresponding with the respective durations of Beethoven's movements. Burgess is explicit in his account of the writing of the novel that it was roughly worked out in terms of how much typescript would be needed to correspond with the equivalent movement in the symphony:

Thus, if the last section of the novel was to be about eighty pages long, the penultimate section could not be more than about thirty - this indicating roughly the proportion in playing time between Beethoven's scherzo and his finale.⁵

But a novel is not a symphony, and the formal patterning of this novel on the basis of the symphony requires some sleight of hand on the author's part. Music depends for effect on repetition, often exact and often, as is the case with the *Eroica*, optional. Clearly, a novelist cannot exactly replicate the symphonist's use of repeated passages without the risk of alienating the reader completely, and Burgess, in his well-cultivated persona of the jobbing writer, was never likely to consent to that. This is not the place to expound on Burgess's success or failure in his intentions, as that has been expertly covered elsewhere in the writings of Alan Shockley⁶ and Paul Phillips.⁷ Instead, I will turn instead to the variety of prose in the novel, and examine the way in which it represents France.

The novel veers wildly between relatively conventional prose narrative, to stream of consciousness, to pastiches of canonical verse and prose, and is constantly ambushing the reader with surprising shifts of tone and emphasis. This creates a sense of pace in the narrative, equivalent perhaps to the speed with which Beethoven changes moods in the symphony. The Burgess variations are reminiscent of Joyce's versions of the variety of English writing in the "Oxen of the Sun" episode of *Ulysses*, although those in *Napoleon Symphony* are more varied and concentrated in short bursts. Burgess moves apparently at random from Dickens-like dialogue to Joycean stream of consciousness by way of Henry James. Thus, the reader encounters a baffling range of literary styles in furious succession. They are recognisable as pastiche rather than genuine, perhaps because of their excesses, though some come very close to the original. And all of these travesties of English writers are in the service of a novel about France, a novel moreover whose author had stated that his objective was to write a "true history." As an aside, Burgess's line in *This Man and Music* about attempting to present a true history is undercut by his account in *You've Had Your Time*, where he says that

Historical facts had to be checked, battle plans closely examined, but, in the modern manner, the reader had to be kept in doubt about the competence of the narrator. (this is a kind of bet-hedging: genuine auctorial errors can be blamed on an author the author has invented.)⁸

He then goes on to list the anachronisms in the novel. As the *New York Times* review of the novel noted: "Essentially this book is not so much about Napoleon as about Anthony Burgess writing a novel."⁹

The France that is rendered in the novel, however much Burgess checked his historical facts, seems in many respects, very English. The characters speak in a demotic English idiom, and the France they return to after their military campaigns is a country not unlike that presented by the quintessentially English author Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Burgess seems to have developed his pastiche France through his interpretation of Dickens. Here is Dickens, describing the death of a child at the hands of the Marquis St. Evrémonde as he rides through the streets of Paris recklessly:

His man drove as if he were charging an enemy, and the furious recklessness of the man brought no check into the face, or to the lips, of the master. The complaint had sometimes made itself audible, even in that deaf city and dumb age, that, in the narrow streets without footways, the fierce patrician custom of hard driving endangered and maimed the mere vulgar in a barbarous manner. But, few cared enough for that to think of it a second time, and, in this matter, as in all others, the common wretches were left to get out of their difficulties as they could.

With a wild rattle and clatter, and an inhuman abandonment of consideration not easy to be understood in these days, the carriage dashed through streets and swept round corners, with women screaming before it, and men clutching each other and clutching children out of its way. At last, swooping at a street corner by a fountain, one of its wheels came to a sickening little jolt, and there was a loud cry from a number of voices, and the horses reared and plunged.

But for the latter inconvenience, the carriage probably would not have stopped; carriages were often known to drive on, and leave their wounded behind, and why not? But the frightened valet had got down in a hurry, and there were twenty hands at the horses' bridles.

"What has gone wrong?" said Monsieur, calmly looking out.

A tall man in a nightcap had caught up a bundle from among the feet of the horses, and had laid it on the basement of the fountain, and was down in the mud and wet, howling over it like a wild animal.

"Pardon, Monsieur the Marquis!" said a ragged and submissive man, "it is a child."

"Why does he make that abominable noise? Is it his child?"

"Excuse me, Monsieur the Marquis—it is a pity—yes."

The fountain was a little removed; for the street opened, where it was, into a space some ten or twelve yards square. As the tall man suddenly got up from the ground, and came running at the carriage, Monsieur the Marquis clapped his hand for an instant on his sword-hilt.

"Killed!" shrieked the man, in wild desperation, extending both arms at their length above his head, and staring at him.

"Dead!"¹⁰

This miserable and not-at-all sentimental scene has no exact parallel in Burgess's novel, since most of the set piece descriptive passages are about battles, and much of the action is carried through dialogue. But the portrayal of the poor, the soldiers, servants, cooks and whores who form a sort of chorus to the increasingly manic arias of Napoleon in this novel enables a comparison to be made. Dickens's disenfranchised poor, betrayed by the revolution, are paralleled in Burgess by the exploited masses, crushed under the weight of Napoleon's ambition. And they suffer at his hands, if not directly, then as collateral damage. Typically, in Burgess's novel, a street scene can end in only one way – with sudden death:

Rue Sainte-Nicaise. Some recognised the coach, waved and cheered. He leaned out to smile and wave back. The street light could be better here, there must be some sort of estimate made out on the cost of improving street lighting. Good lighting deterred crime. Leaning out, he saw with surprise and annoyance a horse and cart set along the street partly blocking free passage. What was needed was a sort of street or traffic police: streets and roads were arteries of civilised life. The drunk mad Cesar did not, as he might have done, pull up and curse the owner of the horse and cart. Instead he dared the narrowness and rushed through to the rue de la Loi. Some sort of cask or barrel on the cart there.

The street exploded. *Representation of Chaos*: in a minute pellucid bubble of his brain, the connection was made, the gross image of unity allowed to flash. [...] The instant of impossible noise sealed his ears from the noises that followed – screams of women and children, a whole street turned to fuming rubble, that horse with its cart and cask commingling in the undifferentiability of chaos, splinters and bits of hot soft gut floating high in the air and reluctant to descend.¹¹

The subsequent visceral description of the aftermath goes well beyond anything Dickens would have written, however, and at that point the resemblance fades.

Where Burgess most obviously pastiches Dickens in his comic mode is, of course, in his portrayal of Napoleon's English guards on St Elba. The guards are minor characters in the novel, but nevertheless are used as a comic counterpoint to the portrayal of Napoleon's decline on the island. The pastiche is an accurate one, and comes very close to the original. Here is Burgess's Dickens:

"Ah," said the sergeant sapiently, "happearances is not all, young un, and I would thank you to bear in mind that little ominy. I had a aunt that was twenty-five stone have her due poids if she was a fluid ounce troy weight. Aunt Flora she was called by all and sundry, that being her name, and she had a tortoise-shell cat named Tiddles, beside being fond of the Hobitary Columns which she read every night with a stick of cinnamon in her hand..."¹²

The grotesque faux-refined accent the sergeant uses is rendered in true Dickensian fashion, and Burgess uses the opportunity for a further mangling of French in the sergeant's attempt at "avoirdupois." We are reminded of Sloppy, the man who "do the Police in different voices" in *Our Mutual Friend*, or Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers*. Burgess's Trouncer and Slodge seem like names Dickens should have used, like Jerry Cruncher who features in *A Tale of Two Cities*. But at this point we are now some distance from the Dickensian France of the main body of the novel.

In the "Epistle to the Reader" with which *Napoleon Symphony* concludes, Burgess offers, in Byronic couplets, complete with groan-inducing rhymes, an assessment of his own work:

Take then or leave this lump of minor art,
A novel on Napoleon Bonaparte
(In a Picwickian sense, I ought to add).¹³

Burgess makes an interesting Dickensian reference there – *Pickwick Papers* is Dickens's first novel of course, and sometimes considered not as a novel at all, but a series of loosely related adventures, as indeed it was first conceived of in monthly instalments. It is also quintessentially English, and whilst it would be a very great stretch to see Bonaparte as a kind of Corsican Pickwick, there is common ground: the baldness, the short stature, the girth, the absurdity.

All of those adjectives apply of course to Burgess's perhaps most enduring creation, F.X. Enderby. The reader who moves from *Inside Mr Enderby* to *Napoleone Symphony* may be struck by the correspondences between Enderby and Napoleon. Enderby's England is not Napoleon's France of course, but the way in which the protagonists interact with their environment suggests some similarities, finding the physical universe a constant barrier to their progress. The France that emerges from *Napoleone Symphony* is a fabrication, as real or as false as the Illyria of *Twelfth Night* that contains Toby Belch and Andrew Aguecheek, names redolent of the mock-Tudor England that Enderby leaves at the beginning of *Enderby Outside*. Both creations have success at the beginning of their careers, and are manipulated by women, who betray them. In Enderby, we see that archetypal figure of the Englishman abroad, like Smollett, and whilst Napoleon's adventures in Egypt and Russia are obviously a result of French territorial ambition, it is not too much of a creative leap to see the French emperor as yet another version of the familiar Burgessian persona: tough, loud, irascible, haunted, hen-pecked, yet somehow a figure that evokes our sympathy.

¹ Smollett, *Travels Through France and Italy*, ed. by Frank Felsenstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p.60

² Smollett, p.173

³ Burgess, *You've Had Your Time* (London: Hutchinson, 1990) p 171-2.

⁴ Burgess, *This Man and Music* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p.181

⁵ *This Man and Music*, p.180

⁶ Alan Shockley, *Music in the Words: Musical Form and Counterpoint in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)

⁷ Paul Phillips, *A Clockwork Counterpoint: The Music and Literature of Anthony Burgess* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010)

⁸ *You've Had Your Time* p.295

⁹ Sara Sanborn, "Napoleon Symphony", *New York Times* June 9, 1974. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/11/30/home/burgess-novel.html>>

¹⁰ Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.103

¹¹ Burgess, *Napoleon Symphony* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2012), p.105

¹² *Napoleon Symphony* p.334

¹³ *Napoleon Symphony* p. 385