

## Introduction to *Revolutionary Sonnets & Other Poems* by Anthony Burgess (edited by K. Jackson), Carcanet, 2002.

**Anthony Burgess, 1917-1993: English poet.**

### Poet?

Well, many other things, to be sure: exuberantly fecund and original and various novelist; equally prolific composer of symphonies and ballet scores and musicals and quartets and fugues; witty, learned and much-published reviewer, biographer, journalist, critic; noted polyglot, skilled amateur of, and fervent advocate for popular education in, phonetics and other mysteries of linguistic science; inventor of primaeval languages (for Jean-Jacques Annaud's lavish caveman movie *Quest for Fire*) and of the Russian-based teenage sociolect "Nadsat" (for a short novel, his most famous, about juvenile thuggery, the basis for a film by Stanley Kubrick which has been distorting his popular reputation for three decades now); habitual world traveller; energetic teacher and lecturer; translator; pub pianist; showman and television celebrity; highly paid screenwriter; internationally recognised

*hom*

*me de lettres*

on a Johnsonian or Edmund-Wilsonian scale, and author of some sixty published volumes, including the two-volume

*Confessions*,

which rank among the most sublimely entertaining and endlessly re-readable autobiographies in English.

But, also, yes: poet:

*`Wachet auf!' A fretful dunghill cock*

*Flinted the noisy beacon through the shires.  
A martin's nest clogged the cathedral clock,  
But it was morning: birds could not be liars.  
A key cleft rusty age in lock and lock,  
Men shivered by a hundred kitchen fires.*

(The "martin" is Martin Luther; the theme is the Reformation; the allusiveness typically Burgessian.)

Perhaps one should even say: first and last, poet. This claim might seem a perversely exaggerated one, since until this year, with Carcanet's publication of *Revolutionary Sonnets and Other Poems*, only one of those threescore books listed on Burgess's increasingly crowded "By the same author" pages was ever offered to the world as "verse"; and that lonely volume, the long narrative poem *Moses*, found few readers and fewer advocates.

Burgess himself was always somewhat diffident in putting himself forward as a poet, even though one of his acknowledged masterpieces, the superbly funny quartet of comic novels about his (partial) alter ego, the dyspeptic bard F.X. Enderby, is richly crammed with original poems - not a few of which, including that one about Luther, had previously appeared in print under the name of "Anthony Burgess", or (since Burgess's legal name, the name of his first four decades, was John Burgess Wilson) the initials "J.B.W."

Interviewed by the *Paris Review* in the 1970s, Burgess shyly admitted that he was sometimes tempted by the idea of publishing a volume of Enderby's collected poems. "I can see the sense", he told his interviewer, "of pretending that some one else has written your book for you, especially your book of poems. It frees you of responsibility - 'Look, I know this is bad but I didn't write it - one of my characters wrote it...' He went on to explain that his poetic ambitions, such as they were, would henceforward be confined to verse translations (he mentions *Peer Gynt* and "Tcheckhov's *Chaika*", neither of which appears to have been completed, as well as "a musical of

*Ulysses*

", which eventually emerged in time for the Joyce centenary as

*Blooms of Dublin*

). Poetry of the more conventional kind - lyrical, autobiographical - was not for him: "too naked, too personal."

Now, while not exactly disingenuous, these remarks do not quite tell the full story. It's true that the bulk of Burgess's work in metre - and that is a pretty sizeable bulk, since a *Complete Poems of Anthony Burgess*

would easily run to several hundred pages - is written the more or less impersonal modes of epic, drama, and translation, both free and precise. Yet the publication record shows that Burgess, far from 'knowing it to be bad', also took a touching pride in his slim body of highly wrought lyrics, and wanted it to be both read and valued.

In fact, there is a perfectly straightforward sense in which our author may be described as a poet "first and last": he book-ended his career as a writer with lyrics. Apart from competition entries, letters to the editor and similar juvenilia, the very earliest literary productions of John Burgess Wilson were the short poems he published in Manchester University's student magazine *The Serpent* in the late 1930s. The last full-scale work Anthony Burgess completed, just months before his death, was the Byronic verse novel

*Byrne*

(published posthumously in 1995.) His valediction, a lovely and immensely readable display of self-delighting virtuosity, is an unmistakably Burgessian compound of new and old.

He chose to say goodbye to the fleshly world in a demanding form he had never practised before: *Byrne* is composed mainly in mock-Byronic *ottava rima*, alternating with a modified Spenserian stanza, and it purports to be narrated by a self-confessed "poetaster" named Tomlinson. But some of *Byrne* is in other metres. There is, for example, an epigraph of three enigmatic quatrains which decode the song of birds:

*'Prudence prudence,' the pigeons call,  
'Serpents lurk in the gilded meadow.*

*An eye is embossed on the garden wall:  
The running tap casts a static shadow'....*

There is a light erotic conceit, in a different quatrain form:

*I have raised and poised a fiddle,  
Which, will you lend it ears,  
Will utter music's model -  
The music of the spheres*

And there are five rather cryptic, intellectually dense sonnets on the theme of revolution from Genesis to the Enlightenment:

*Sick of the sycophantic singing, sick  
Of every afternoon's compulsory games,  
Sick of the little clique of county names,  
He let the inner timebomb start to tick...*

(The "He", it soon becomes plain, is Lucifer; and this minor public school is Heaven before the angelic rebellion.)

To most of Burgess's admirers, these seven short poems were, are, at once recognisable as vintage F.X. Enderby. Quite a few readers would have recalled that he had also published them outside the Enderby books - notably in the autobiographical *Little Wilson and Big God* and *You've Had Your Time*

, as well as in various small-circulation magazines. Now, a man who set scant if any store by verses he had composed more than thirty years earlier would hardly have troubled to embed them so prominently and so firmly in his

*envoi*

. (Burgess also enjoyed pointing out that T.S. Eliot, no less, had marked out "Prudence prudence" and two other poems for special approval in a polite rejection note from his editor's chair at the

*Criterion*

.) However reluctant he was about laying claim to the grand title of "poet", Burgess clearly cared a great deal for these miniatures, and did his best to see that they would be remembered.

I do not think he was mistaken in this. Without wishing to make inflated claims for his future place in the history of English poetry, I believe that, especially when judged as a whole, Burgess's poetry is (among other, not always fashionable virtues) not merely skilled but at times brilliantly inventive, not merely pyrotechnical but thoughtful, thought-provoking and, above all, richly entertaining. At the very least, he is - above all in his stage work - surely one of the funniest "serious" poets of the last century, worthy of a place in the pantheon somewhere near, say, Richard Wilbur - and not too far away from those American verse entertainers like Ogden Nash, whom he once saluted in appropriate form:

*I have never in my life said anything other than laudatory  
Of the work of Ogden Nash, whose innivations were chiefly auditory,  
Meaning that he brought a new kind of sound to our literary diversions  
And didn't care much about breaking the poetic laws of the Medes and the Persians...*

"Literary diversions" is a happy phrase: Burgess seldom forgot the Johnsonian wisdom that one of the two main obligations of the writer (better to enjoy life, better to endure it) is to give the reader pleasure.

I'd also like to underline the extent to which poetry was a major presence in much, if not almost all of his work as a novelist - an *oeuvre*, which, incidentally, teems with poet-characters. Apart from the mock-heroic Enderby, there are the godly likes of Shakespeare (in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

), Christopher Marlowe (

*A Dead Man in Deptford*

), Keats and Belli (

*ABBA ABBA*

) representing the art at its most sublime, and, at the other extreme, a whole regiment of ghastly poetasters from Enderby's arch-enemy Rawcliffe, author of a single dud lyric "in all the anthologies" via the twittering idiocies of Dawson Wignall and Val Wrigley in

*Earthly Powers*

to the artless Lloyd Utterage, splenetic advocate of Black Power and sullen attender at Enderby's creative writing class in

*The Clockwork Testament*

:

It will be your balls next, whitey...

<hrdata-mce-alt="Part 2" class="system-pagebreak" title="Part 2" /> Even some of Burgess's most minor creations often give vent to some kind of lyric, as though Burgess simply could not keep the poetry from busting out at the seams of his narrative.

Nor, at times, could he. As most readers will know, Burgess was always a "poetic" writer in his novels - not, perish the thought, in the hack reviewer's sense that he wrote swooning purple passages, but more exactly because he exploited all those resources of syntax, diction, ambiguity and even punctuation (he was one of the twentieth century's grand masters of the parenthesis) that his more plodding contemporaries in the art of fiction usually neglected.

In this, he obviously took some cues from the modern novelist he most admired, James Joyce (his two introductory books on Joyce's use of language are outstanding, and his abridged version of *Finnegans Wake* a godsend for students). Less obviously, he had also paid attention to Ezra Pound - a poet he greatly respected, and could quote by heart even after a long evening of alcoholic refreshment. Pound had proposed that the three defining qualities of poetry were melopoeia, phanopoeia and logopoeia: the music of verse, the casting of images on the visual imagination, and "the dance of the intellect among words". Burgess, who suffered from poor eyesight, is a less phanopoetic writer than many, but in melopoeia and logopoeia he excelled.

Sometimes, as in

*Napoleon Symphony* (based on Beethoven's *Eroica*)

or parts of

*Mozart and the Wolf Gang*

, he took the Paterian aspiration towards the condition of music about as far as intelligibility permits:

*The squarecut pattern of the carpet. Squarecut the carpet's pattern. Pattern the cut square carpet. Stretching from open door to windows. Soon, if not burned, ripped, merely purloined, as was all too likely, other feet would, other feet would tread. He himself, he himself, he himself trod in the glum morning. From shut casement to open door and back, to and to and back. Wig fresh powdered, brocade unspotted, patch on cheek new pimple in decorum and decency hiding, stockings silk most lustrous, hands behind folded unfolded refolded as he trod on squarecut patterns softness...*

(Compare Mozart's K.550, first movement.) That, no doubt, goes a little too far; but there are many other occasions when a wedding of extravagantly mellifluous phrasing with dark matter comes off triumphantly well - for those, at any rate, with a taste for a prose thickened with allusion and made tart with all the resources of Burgess's famously hypertrophied word-hoard. A sample, chosen more or less at random, from the final chapter of *Nothing Like the Sun*, written in an allusive, punning hybrid of the language spoken by the subjects of Elizabeth I and that familiar to Elizabeth II's people :

*Let's swell a space on the irony of a poet's desperately wringing out the last of his sweetness while the corrosives closed in. It was she, though, the goddess, unseen as yet but stirring and kicking like a foetus, that dictated the titles, for this was indeed much ado and that what they willed and the other as they liked it. Meanwhile that bud I carried opened like a pomegranate, the roseate macules and papules blossomed and later grew to a hint of delectable copper - coins over my body, the hint of a leopard's (not a tiger's) hide. When it left, it left a stain as of dirty eaters. All my parts must be hoarse parts (thou wilt make a ghost yet, see if though wilt not, that is a very graveyard voice)....*

Not to everyone's taste, this heavy stew? Decidedly not: Burgess was often accused of schoolboyish or schoolmasterly showing off, just as Enderby was routinely patronised or declared hopelessly *passe* by the critics. ("Enderby's addiction to the sonnet-form proclaims that the 'thirties are his true home....") Those of us who do warm to it are responding to its qualities of zestful excess, of Burgess's word-man's relish for the "delectable" flavours in which fine language may dress and make piquant the most sordid subject matter (syphilitic sores), of a composer *manque's* ambition to use the full orchestral resources of English rather than just the odd squeak or toot of piccolo or cello.

Yoked together with this astonishing vitality is, almost always, an exacting sense of medium. In one of his rare moments of self-assertion, Enderby says "I stand for form and denseness. The seventeenth-century tradition modified." Though Enderby does not spell out the allegiance at greater length, it is clear that he wishes to be numbered alongside the generation of poets who, taking their cue from Eliot, were enraptured by the recently revived Metaphysicals, and wished to apply the tunes and conceits of Donne and Herbert to contemporary experience. Put another way, Enderby is, *toutes proportions gardees*, something of a William Empson, with perhaps a jigger or two of Robert Graves (the goddess mythology) and W.H. Auden for good measure.

The Eliotic/Empsonian strain remained deep in all of Burgess's lyrics until he was well into his forties. With fame came the possibility of new kinds of public voice: hence Burgess the poetic editorialist, treating readers of the *New York Times* and other publications to metrical musings on the Apollo project or the State of the Union; Burgess the composer of verse letters; Burgess the dabbler in epic. In all of this public verse, he becomes a much more eighteenth- than seventeenth- century figure, preaching the virtues of reason and tolerance in an age of violence



and the widespread worship of irrationality. For the most part, alas, these poems are more polished than memorable.

But fame, and more mature years, brought on two great liberations in his verse writing. The first was more or less accidental: marriage to an Italian wife, and residence in Rome, brought him in touch with the extraordinary work of Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (1791-1863), whose thousands of sonnets in Roman dialect - many on sacred themes - are an astonishing, and all but untranslatable combination of scatology and lyricism. Burgess set himself to translating some 70 or them, and then (for it is hard to make money from poems, and Burgess was a *professiona* / writer, one who writes for pay) composed a short novel in which they could be sold on the open market. Had he written no other verses but his Belli translations, Burgess would have been worthy of consideration as a poet of exceptional gifts.

The other liberation was a happy by-product of his fame. The better-known Burgess grew, the more the invitations poured in - not only to write articles or give lectures, but to write screenplays, to translate and adapt for the stage (operas and musicals as well as classical dramas such as *Oedipus the King*), to dream up original plays of his own. This flood of commissions helped sharpen two of his already keen skills. First, it honed the kind of metrical dexterity which allows the jobbing lyricist to fit words to pre-existing music with consummate neatness - to rewrite, for example, *Freude, Schone* both straight  
*Gottfunkeln* -

*Joy, thou glorious spark of heaven,  
Daughter of Elysium...*

And not-so-straight:

*Do not be a clockwork orange,  
Freedom has a lovely voice.  
Here is good, and there is evil -  
Look on both, then take your choice....*

Smart enough work for most, but still not quite smart enough for Burgess, who from his youth had been a keen admirer of all manner of popular songs (his mother had been in the music halls, his father played the piano in cinemas during the silent era), but above all a devotee of the great American wits and dandies of the form: Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter and, supremely, Lorenz Hart. Burgess's admiration for Hart was sincere, profound and enduring; he loved the sheer audacity with which Hart could conjure a rhyme from an apparently rhymeless phrase, or cram more internal rhymes into a couplet than might seem humanly possible - "beans could get no keener re-/ception in a beanery", and the like.

In his memoir of a lifetime as a Sunday composer, *This Man and Music*, Burgess offers a small tribute to Hart in the form of some rhymes on the unrhymable word "fugue":

*A concert, Hugo?  
By all means you go,  
But the very first note of a fugue o-  
presses me, like all polyphony.  
I'd rather have a diamond from Tiffany.*

Burgess's translations for the stage - *Cyrano*, *Carmen*, *Oberon* and all the others are chock-full of such inner rhyming and false rhyming, and amount to compact anthologies of audacious, or sometimes outrageously corny, tricks of sound:

*Warm full-blooded life:  
Women as shining as goddesses  
Under the bustles and bodices,  
Scent you could cut with a knife.  
Warm full-blooded life:  
Frisly silk drawers that have legs in them,  
Omlettes with five hundred eggs in them,  
Sherry and cream in the trif -  
Le.*

(*Blooms of Dublin*, Act One.) If William Empson is the presiding spirit of early Burgess, then Lorenz Hart rules over his later work for the stage; and Burgess would surely have growled at any literary snob who felt that there was something bathetic in that progress. (One hastens to add that he was not an inverted snob, either: among the most vile of his poetasters is the loutish "Yod Crewsy" - loosely modelled on John Lennon, and, curiously, the victim of a mock assassination attempt on the page almost two decades before Mark Chapman squeezed his trigger outside the Dakota). Burgess's position was that a true lover of language will know how to find the joy in any skilled manipulation of its formal properties, whether mandarin like Empson's or popular like Hart's.

Pleasures both demotic and recondite abound in the pages of *Revolutionary Sonnets*; again and again in the course of editing I found myself unexpectedly smiling, chuckling and sometimes laughing out loud at some new felicity or feat. The point is central enough to be worth stressing again: thanks in part to the discipline of the market, Burgess never forgot that it was his job to entertain a reader or a listener who might be bored, distracted, careworn; and it is clear that he also wrote to entertain himself, keeping his own demons (they were many) at bay through the exercise of virtuosity. Was he a great poet? In the final analysis, perhaps not; I leave the verdict to others. But I have no doubt that he was a great entertainer and a wonderful writer. His gift for poetry was an essential part of that wonder.

[\*Kevin Jackson\*](#) , 29 July 2002.

