

L'étrange cas d'Antoine Bourgeois, écrivain français

by [Dougie Milton](#)

I apologise in advance for beginning on a personal note. There is a reason, apart from vanity and the desire to immortalise myself in the pages of the *Burgess Newsletter*. For the past five years I've been living in France, first in St-Germain-en-Laye and latterly in Paris. I've also lived in Paris on and off over the previous two decades. I've been reading Burgess even longer than that, and I've recently been struck by the disparity between his views on the French and my own. In addition, I've come to realise that Burgess either didn't realise just how much he was respected in France, or chose to ignore this in case relations ever got dangerously close to an entente cordiale. In this essay I will attempt to reassess his position vis-a-vis a culture which I believe was absolutely crucial to his development as an artist for most of his life.

One can start in 1929, when the young Burgess or Wilson was fiddling with a crystal radio set he'd built himself. By chance he happened upon a performance of Debussy's *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune*

and was entranced. It was a defining moment for him, and awakened the interest in classical music and composition which was to play such an important role, not just because he taught himself to write music, but also for the influence it was later to have on his prose and his idea of how a novel should be structured. Had it not been for this early exposure to impressionism, it's quite possible that novels like

Napoleon Symphony

and

Mozart and the Wolf Gang

would never have been written. Interestingly, the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music describes the young Debussy as 'an erratic pianist and a recalcitrant in matters of harmony and theory', which sounds familiar. In later life he was to write reverent essays not just about Debussy but also on Ravel and Berlioz, most of which are to be found in

One Man's Chorus

, edited by Ben Forkner. He was less respectful about Pierre Boulez as a composer but admired his restrained conducting style. So, the music of France was of tremendous importance to him

from an early age, and in that department at least he had no complaints about the French.

His first encounter with the country itself was less happy. In 1939 he, his wife-to-be Lynne and a girl called Margaret Williams went on a walking holiday through Belgium, France and Holland. On arrival at Zeebrugge, the girls drew the attention of the local Flemish youths, at whom Burgess swore in French, a linguistic faux-pas he would not have made later on. When they finally crossed the border into France it was pouring with rain, they were served a filthy meal and a female taxi driver was rude to them. This incident seems to have obsessed Burgess, for the subject of French arrogance and haughtiness is referred to again and again in his later essays and novels like *Earthly Powers*. A bad beginning. And yet the book in his knapsack was Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. While the French might be rebarbative in person, the culture was calling out to him.

In his early novel *The Worm and the Ring*, a book almost immediately withdrawn because of a notorious libel action, there is an account of a school trip to Paris. Burgess had not yet visited the city, but in a *Paris Review* interview – 1974, I think, I don't have a copy – he says that although it smelt of maps and guide books it was 'better than the real thing'. This could be seen as an early example of Burgess's strategy of coping with a people he disliked and distrusted by encasing them within his own art. He was to do it again many times.

The next long account we have of Burgess's clash with the French is in the second volume of his autobiography, where he describes the trip he took across France, in straitened circumstances, with his second wife Liana in a Bedford Dormobile. It's very funny but it must have been harrowing at the time. They were thoroughly robbed in Avignon, and the loss of Liana's passport was to prove a major problem in the months to come. Yet again, France had let him down.

It only began to make amends when Burgess's novels started to appear in French. I recently spent a long hot afternoon in the basement newspaper archives of the Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand tracking down old reviews of Burgess's books. The number of unfavourable reviews is vastly outnumbered by those that praise his work. He was beginning to attract the attention of serious critics. In November 1968 the first two Enderby books were reviewed by Hélène Cixous for *Le Monde*. Cixous, a structuralist and a Joyce scholar, was already a heavyweight and her review, while not entirely a rave, is respectful and sees the point of Burgess. He was to be seen by the French as a European writer, not a mere provincial English one, and he was taken seriously.

He was later to become a mainstay on Bernard Pivot's literary TV programme "Apostrophes". Upstairs in the media room of that same library, I watched on a computer screen the famous edition where Burgess was appearing to promote *Beard's Roman Women* along with Alberto Moravia and Günter Grass. In his autobiography Burgess is disparaging about his command of the language, describing it as 'adequate', but in fact he gives a great performance through mephitic clouds of cigar smoke, and even though he's speaking French he still sounds exactly like Anthony Burgess. Pivot, a rare anglophile in the French literary world, is respectful and obviously delighted to have such a literary lion on the programme. What comes across most is that Burgess is perfectly at ease here, and not at all the grumpy Englishman smarting over waitresses who correct his grammar. I believe that was all part of a persona he constructed for himself, as most great writers do, a way of keeping the world at arm's length. The French were to be admired for many things, but they musn't be allowed to get above themselves. He may have been an Englishman abroad, but he was still an Englishman, dammit. The battle of Waterloo was an on-going process, not a mere fact of history.

Burgess has been cast as a fictional character both by Paul Theroux and A. S. Byatt, but it was a Frenchman who first immortalised him in a novel. This was the novelist, critic and literary gadfly Philippe Sollers, ex-structuralist and Maoist, co-founder of the influential magazine *Tel Quel*

and all-round provocateur. In his 1983 novel *Femmes*

, he gives an account of a Paris cocktail party given to promote the French translation of *Earthly Powers*

, *Les Puissances des ténèbres*

. He approaches Burgess and asks him for his opinions on Vatican II. Burgess would rather talk about Joyce. (Sollers is another French Joycean and moreover reads him in English, something many respected French critics can't do.) Sollers, or his literary avatar, presses him and Burgess gets pugnacious. An American journalist, Kate, challenges his views on marriage for priests, abortion etc. Burgess gets more pugnacious. It's a satirical portrait but a believable one. It's interesting that it should have been Sollers who fictionalised Burgess for he seems to me to be the closest equivalent to AB in France. Prolific, with a wide-range of interests, a musician (he's written an excellent short book on Mozart), another anglophile (his family hid British airmen in their house on Bordeaux during the war and he grew up listening in secret to the BBC), frequently criticised by the literary establishment for the size of his output and for being, as they say here, *trop médiatique*, the producer of two doorstop volumes of brilliant literary essays which remind me a lot of

Homage To Qwert Yuiop

and

One Man's Chorus

, it seems to me that, despite the difference in their social backgrounds, they have a lot in common. The reader may deduce that I'm a fan, but let me temper the praise with the fact that

our esteemed editor once met Sollers at a party and was almost driven to punch him in the face.

Burgess was also well-served by his French translators. Throughout the decades Georges Belmont and Hortense Chabrier have produced superb versions of all of Burgess's major novels. Belmont seems to have something of Burgess's ability to work under any circumstances. Andrew Biswell, who interviewed him for his biography of Burgess, recounts how Belmont translated the final Epistle To The Reader from *Napoleon Symphony* – which is in rhyming couplets - during the course of a car journey. More recently, Jean-Luc Beaudiment-Piningre has wonderfully rendered three of Burgess's early novels for Le Cherche Midi. For one of them, the translation of

A Right To An Answer

, the publishers cleverly used the iconic photograph of a naked Christine Keeler sitting on a chair for the cover photo, and the French, being French, gave it maximum window space.

Shortly before emailing this article to Angers I paid a visit to my local branch of the Fnac book chain on the Avenue des Ternes. Inspecting the shelves I found over half a dozen of Burgess's books in French – *Napoleon Symphony*, *Pianoplayers*, *The Doctor Is Sick*, *A Clockwork Orange* of course,

others. A small fraction of his output of course, but I've never been in a French bookshop which didn't have at least a few of them. One can't always be so confident of finding his work in the UK. I was shocked, on visiting a branch of Waterstones in London, to find not one Burgess novel, although many of them are in print from Penguin and Vintage. But it's all of a piece with the way Burgess was always more honoured abroad than in his native country. The French made him a Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres,

Les Puissances des ténèbres

won a prize for best translation, the late Prince Rainier made him a Commandeur du Mérite Culturel, in Italy he won countless awards. In England he was once made Critic of the Year, essentially for his

Observer

reviews, and presented with a perspex statue by Margaret Thatcher. Apart from that all he got was some piffling Best Northern Writer prize. Unlike Kingsley Amis or Angus Wilson, he received no official honours. Not much in return for a lifetime's dedication to teaching and to expanding the boundaries of the English novel in a way none of his contemporaries could ever achieve.

His sales were always better in France too, something he acknowledges in his autobiography. He was appreciated here. So why this continued hostility, exemplified in essays like *Morbus Gallicus*

and

That Sweet Enemy

? I think the reasons are two-fold. Firstly, he was a very sensitive man, easily hurt despite the bluff persona, and the French can be merciless when they scent weakness. There is still plenty of Anglophobia floating about here – Americanophobia too now since the Iraq war, which has been an absolute godsend for a France that was beginning to despair of ever playing a part again on the world stage – although more commonly among media types and politicians than among the ordinary people whom I've always found charming and courteous. But secondly, I'm reminded of Vladimir Nabokov's account in his autobiography of how, while a student at Cambridge and later as a young writer in Berlin, he became terrified of losing contact with his native tongue and would deliberately shut himself off from the surrounding culture, immersing himself in his beloved Russian and keeping contact with the locals to a minimum. Burgess had a tortuous relationship with England and the English, but he also knew that it had produced the greatest literature in the world and he was damned if he was going to defer to any damned foreigners, even if he had translated

Cyrano

and could discourse learnedly – and in French – on Debussy's use of the whole tone scale.

Despite this, Burgess was a French writer, just as he was an Italian writer and a German writer and even an American writer. He knew no boundaries, suffered no limitations. To be a writer was to be universal and he succeeded at this where perhaps only Joyce and Hemingway had succeeded before him. The haughty waiters, the rude taxi drivers, they were the stuff of newspaper squibs, mere material for anecdotes. Burgess was a citizen of the world and in an era when nationalism and xenophobia are rearing their heads again, we should treasure that. Salut mon ami.

Mind you, I spent over an hour trying to pay an electricity bill this morning. When it comes to French bureaucracy, I'm with Burgess all the way.

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