

M/F

by [Frank Kermode](#)

M/F was published in 1971, by which time Burgess was already famous as the possessor of a powerful and resourceful intellect and exceptional narrative skill. His celebrity was established in the public mind by the fame of *A Clockwork Orange*, a novel of striking linguistic virtuosity which was made into a remarkable film, though that transformation brought little pleasure or reward to its begetter. (I remember meeting him for a drink at Brown's Hotel; he arrived a little late and very agitated, throwing on to the table a paperback book with *Stanley Kubrick's Clockwork Orange* emblazoned on the cover, unaccompanied by any allusion to Anthony Burgess.)

Fortunately his was a resilient personality, and in a life that contained many severe setbacks and disappointments his vitality and curiosity did not diminish. He delighted in the tension between texture and structure in fiction or narrative more generally, and his favoured solutions were musical: hence *Napoleon Symphony*, an heroic attempt to replicate the structure of Beethoven's Third Symphony, the Eroica, an attempt, he said, 'to make true history fit into musical patterns'. The intricate problems he set himself are expounded in an essay called 'Bonaparte in E flat', in *This Man And Music*, published in 1982. Whether anybody else could be expected to understand the solutions offered in that essay is a real question.

Napoleon Symphony

is described by its author as 'a more ambitious structure' than

M/F

, the book that immediately preceded it, in 1971.

Already a warm admirer of Burgess, I was glad to be sent *M/F* for review, and my reflections on the novel appeared in *The*

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M/F

is a puzzle, or a riddle consisting of a great many lesser riddles, all better left unanswered; I remember without contrition that I was very pleased with myself for making some sense of the book, at first sight so madly strange in plot and language, and earning the author's kind commendation that I alone among the reviewers had done so. In saying so he was over-generous; although I was right to look for answers in Levi-Strauss, and particularly in his lecture on 'The Scope of Anthropology,' I did, of course, miss a great many tricks and jokes. For a fuller and more privileged key to

M/F

the reader will have to consult Burgess's obliging essay, 'Oedipus Wrecks,' in

This Man And Music

. Meanwhile, this is what I wrote.

"Iris, Angus, Charles, Pamela, John, Penelope, Brigid, Anthony, Muriel, Mary, Norman, Saul, Philip, Ivy." This is a list, as it happens, of Burgess birds. Who is Anthony? As the sequel may show, this is a question you should try not to answer .

Mr Burgess is already known to be an ingenious linguist, and it need cause no surprise that he has been boning up on semiotics: his new book is a complicated structure of riddles, and he suggests not only that they should in most cases not be answered but that "hunger for an alembicated moral" is a contemptible, or at least professorial, weakness. Nevertheless *MF* is not going to make much sense to readers without a clue, and although I haven't myself picked up everything --knowing too few languages, lacking the necessary skill in riddle and palinlogue-- I intend to say part at least of what I know.

The narrative is, in itself, lively but not easily intelligible. A young man called Miles Faber, expelled from his American college for public copulation (a demonstration against something), defies the opposition of his father's lawyers and proceeds to the West Indian island of Castita in search of the remains of the great Neo-Surrealist poet Sib Legaru. His father's wish is that he should marry a Chinese, and so extravagantly avoid incest with his unknown sister; but after many adventures, including an encounter with his unknown twin double, he does marry his sister, the setting being a circus and the priest a riddling clown. His double has been disposed

of: but the twin's putative mother, a marvellous circus trainer of birds, subjects him to a difficult avian test; and only after that does he meet his father and find out what, structurally speaking, the whole thing amounts to.

This isn't the half of it by any means but it may be enough to indicate the source of MF; this, to be a little too precise, is Levi-Strauss, specifically *The Scope of Anthropology*, pages 34-39 (Cape Editions 1967, a sort of incest in itself). Levi-Strauss tells an Algonquin story (Miles Faber, the youthful hero, is staying at the Algonquin in New York as the story opens) of a young girl "subjected to the amorous leanings of a naughty twin." This happens in the book, and the wicked half of the double is killed in both cases, in order to demonstrate the unincestuous integrity of the other half. Levi-Strauss goes on to speak of the revenge exacted by the dead double's mother. She is a sorceress, mistress of owls. The only way to mislead her about the death of her son is to have the sister marry the good surviving brother. The owls are not deceived.

Levy-Strauss regards this myth as a transformation of the Oedipus story. The very precautions taken to avoid incest make it inevitable, the twins are a version of the double character of Oedipus, supposed dead but actually alive, "condemned child and triumphant hero." All that is lacking to establish the full relationship is an element comparable to the Sphinx and its riddles. Riddles and puzzles are rare in Amerindian myth, but the Algonquin have myths in which owls ask riddles to be answered on pain of death; and the Pueblos have ceremonial clowns thought to have been born of incestuous unions, who also ask riddles. The character of all such riddles is their unanswerability --or, better, their unansweredness-- not their difficulty (this is reflected in the old Holy Grail cycle). For a solved puzzle, like incest, brings together elements that ought to stay separate; and this "audacious union of masked words or of consanguines unknown to themselves engenders decay and fermentation."

Mr Burgess extrapolates, of course, but with this or a fuller version of it in mind (and a copy of Edmund Leach's *Lévy-Strauss* at hand) the reader may more confidently take on *MF*. Mile's public copulation isn't as random as it looks: the girl is surnamed Tukang (Faber in Malayan). The quest for the unstructured leads straight to the over-simple order of incest.

His father, himself incestuous, tried to insist on the extreme of exogamy represented by miscegeneation, as preferable to the extreme of endogamy, incest. Miles is an obsessive riddle-maker and solver till he learns better; he is mistakenly in love with the random, personified by the poet Sib Legeru ("incest" Old English): "the break-down of order, the collapse of communication," as he later learns from his father Zoon Fonanta ("speaking animal" Greek). "It is a man's job to impose manifest order on the universe." At the climax the bird sorceress

Averyn ("bird" Welsh) sets him a riddle he must attempt to answer. He fails, is attacked by hawks in their hierarchical order (transformations of the owls of which he had dreamt at the Algonquin), and saves himself by using a symbol of manifest human order, a police whistle.

Mr Burgess can well supply what the texture of the book requires, great lexical profuseness; he uses all the resources of his exogamous idiolect, so that Miles can luxuriate, sometimes inappositely, among its etymological and onomastic potentialities. "Order has both to be and not to be challenged, this being the anomalous condition of the sustention of the cosmos." The island he visits has a Romance language invented by Burgess. He is pursued by variants of the word "lion" - a lawyer called Loewe, another called Pardeleos, a lion faced philosopher who tells him that 'only by entry into myth can reconciliation be effected,' and lots of other lion and loin allusions. For all the careful Lévi-Straussian plotting (note a subplot of sugar, tobacco and rotten meat), and the provision of a hero who is a compulsive taxonomist (when a woman attacks a man's crotch with scissors he is not shocked but merely records the propinquity of three dual forms: trousers, scissors, ballocks) and can keep up, more or less, with the developing structure of his own narrative; for all the gnomic explanations in the final conversations between Z. Fontana and M. Faber, one's first impression is of random invention powered by a remarkable riddling fantasy. And the book ends with a celebration of apparently total exogamous disorder.

What, on this fragment of the evidence, is one to make of it? It is a puzzle and on its own terms forbids solutions. But Burgess is rather movingly putting to use the self-begotten systems of his own imagination and language to protest against spurious disorder in art and life. This is too solemn an account of a book so bewilderingly funny, so much what it calls a Higher Game. Its fertility is fantastic, and so too is its ingenuity. In an epigraph from Péguy (there are three epigraphs, all puzzles) God laments that when the French die out nobody will understand what He is doing: which implies that the Lévi-Straussian permutations on Greek and Algonquin and Grail myths really seem acceptable to Burgess as universal explanations. But Lévi-Strauss is confessedly myth-making, and so is Mr. Burgess, even more enterprisingly. According to Oscar Wilde 'the critic will certainly be an interpreter, but he will not treat Art as riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed.' Perhaps all one ought to do is to characterise this book as a riddling Sphinx, and abstain from guessing further, but it should be added that it is a work of astonishing narrative and intellectual energy, and that everybody who thinks the English novel lacking in those qualities should read it, twice. Anthony has earned his place among the birds.

Two or three times in half a century of writing criticism I have had the experience of stumbling

on a clue, missed by others, as to what a particular author is up to. I must say that the pleasure of such discoveries far outweighs that of the most refined acts of interpretation when they cannot claim the retrieval of some such master key. Burgess, with his delight in puzzles, in lateral thinking, in what he calls 're-Joycing', and in his musical passion for detecting structures amid apparent randomness, was more likely to offer such challenges and pleasures than novelists content with more sedate and conventional procedures. He was to write many more ambitious and ingenious fictions, and seems himself to have thought of the musical *Napoleon Symphony*

as his best book; but for selfish reasons as well as unselfish delight in Burgess's mastery, I reserve a special affection for

M/F

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