

ANTHONY BURGESS

His problem seems to have been the flesh rather than faith, the discomfort of confessing and the dread prospect of eternal punishment.

To the classical question, "What would you do if you were told you had a year to live?", Anthony Burgess responded with the resolution to write three or four novels, the income from which would cushion the loss to his widow.

The brain tumor that was supposed to kill him did not, it was his wife who died, and Anthony Burgess, once embarked on a literary career, never looked back until his death a few months ago.

Although he published much, very much, it was Burgess's fate to be chiefly known for *The Clockwork Orange* -- and that in its filmed form. He was also a musician, an expert on Shakespeare and Joyce. His was a capacious mind, messy, teeming with incoherence. He was also -- this is not a conclusion from the above -- uxorious. He married again and noted, late in his life, that he had no friends, just his wife.

His *nom de plume* takes the filling from the sandwich of his name, John Anthony Burgess Wilson. The Anthony was his confirmation name. The Catholicism of the Wilson family had survived from the persecution and ostracism that followed on the Reformation in England. Not that Wilson was an old Catholic in the manner of the denizens of Brideshead

Hall.

Far from it. He came from humble surroundings and despite his formidable accomplishments always felt lower class and despised by the English elite. His exile from England was motivated in part by a desire to escape the confiscatory taxation of socialism; something which did not stop him from the usual snide remarks about Margaret Thatcher. But more basically, Burgess was driven by nostalgia for a Catholic Europe that no longer was.

His first wife was an Anglican and during the marriage he drifted from the faith, though wanting to go back. His second wife was an anticlerical Italian, an atheist. Burgess seems to have been ruled by his wives in religious matters. Kingsley Amis in his *Memoirs* has a chapter on Burgess in which both wives, Lynne and Liana, are cattily skewered by an Amis who seems genuinely to have liked Burgess despite his "frightening fecundity."

Was Burgess a Catholic? Certainly not a practicing one. Did he disbelieve? Perhaps, but he did not have the courage of his lack of conviction. "I took the opportunity, while Liana was sleeping, to baptise Paolo Andrea in rain-water: *Ego te baptizo Paulum* -- did Andrea take a Latin or Greek accusative? -- *in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, Amen*. At need any layman was permitted to do it. It was best to be on the safe side."

This is from the second volume of his autobiography, in which one continues to come on reminders of Burgess's not quite lost faith. The linguistic allusion in the midst of this furtive liturgy rings true. Burgess's *A Mouthful of Air* is a fascinating and quite scholarly study of language. Of course he invented a language for *The Clockwork Orange*. In part it was his fascination with that old language teacher, James Joyce, another exile from faith and fatherland, who eventually wrote, as one might say, Indo-European. Burgess's book on the Irish author is called *Re Joyce*.

Burgess's literary career began with a trilogy set in Malaya which has many good things in it, but is after all an instance of its genre, the British colonial novel, though it is savingly Orwellian and Greenian in its outlook. It was after this that Burgess got the unnerving news that the tumor on his brain would kill him within a year. The novels he desperately wrote for motives already stated show signs of hasty composition.

He had been warned off an earlier novel which, he tells us, arose out of a "phase of Catholic guilt" promoted by reading Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. "I am still capable of moaning and breast-beating at my defection from, as I recognize, the only system that makes spiritual and intellectual sense. But I see that the novel, an essentially comic and Protestant art-form, is no place for the naked posturing of religious guilt." An odd remark, coming after the mention of Greene's masterful story of religious guilt.

As a serious and professional writer, Burgess was amused by the effortless nonsense that was thought to express 'creativity.' He knew the difficulty of writing well. "We need some Johnsonian or Ruskinian pundit to frighten everybody with near impossible conditions for true creativity. We have to stop thinking that what kindergarten children produce with pencil or watercolor, is anything more than charming or quaint. If you want to be considered a poet, you will have to show mastery of the Petrarchan sonnet form or the sestina. Your musical efforts must begin with well-formed fugues. There is no substitute for craft."

There is no one, I imagine, who has read all of Burgess now that he is dead, except perhaps his second wife Liana. He published over thirty novels, as many volumes of non-fiction, he wrote for children, he was a poet and also a translator. He was a man of letters who lived by his pen. His pen was mightier than his sorrow, driving away the sense of being lower class, not accepted by Oxbridge intellectuals, salvaging somewhat, perhaps, his ambiguous attitude toward the faith.

"I say that I lost my faith, but really I was no more than a lapsed Catholic, as boring a figure as the stage Irishman and sometimes the same figure. What makes him a bore is his lachrymosity, especially in drink, about being a bad son who has struck his mother and dare not go home."

He occupies this role fitfully in giving us a narrative version of his life. The first volume of his autobiography is called *Little Wilson and Big*

God. His problem seems to have been the flesh rather than faith, the discomfort of confessing and the dread prospect of eternal punishment.

"The rage I wake to and take to bed is a turbulence not always related to an object." This is from the epilogue to the autobiography.

Burgess was a regular on television where he paraded eccentricities and a kind of schoolyard, though erudite, naughtiness about sexual matters. He points out that a reason Catholicism retained its hold on him is that it contains a philosophical as well as a theological system. In that philosophical base is the common morality of mankind. Why remorse as moral failure should be called religious guilt is not wholly clear. It was hell that haunted Burgess, death and hell. They amount to half of the Four Last Things so one wants to think that he spent a lifetime pondering the end that came last year at 76.

Theologians write, with studied ambiguity, of anonymous Christians. Sociologists speak of ethnic Catholics as if faith, like freckles, is willy nilly with you till the end. Nonetheless, it is certain that there are some authors who have lapsed and yet go on being Catholic in their imaginative fix on the world. The driven, daunting, diverting, polytalented Anthony Burgess was one of them. He is often in my prayers. I commend him to yours, along with his books.