

Thrice Told Tales

Andrew Biswell, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* (London: Picador, 2005)

If they cannot be courteous, reviewers should at least be accurate, and if they cannot possibly be either, being apologetic is their last resort. Coming from Robert Graves, these injunctions were primarily meant for the ears of a youthfully arrogant critic of his, Graves's, own work. The "pushy lad, too anxious to tell the famous poet . . . how to go about his job" was none other than John Wilson, an undergraduate student of English literature at Manchester University, himself eventually to become an internationally acclaimed writer, known to the world as Anthony Burgess. If a biography can be seen as an extended review of sorts – and why should it not be seen as such? – then the least to be said of Andrew Biswell's *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess*, the source of the story involving Graves and Burgess (68), is that its writer took the late poet's advice to heart. While being meticulously accurate about his facts, Biswell is always courteous to a fault when it comes to offering opinion. As for being apologetic, this latest account of Burgess's life and times displays so many of the virtues and so few of the shortcomings of the genre that its author has no reason whatever to beg the reader's forgiveness. What follows is an attempt at rendering Andrew Biswell

the courtesy of being as accurate in its assessment of his work's impressive strengths and negligible weaknesses as he was when going about his incomparably more challenging job of writing what can aspire to be Anthony Burgess's authoritative, if not authorised, biography.

Twelve years after the death of its subject, the arrival of a truly reliable assessment of Burgess' life was long overdue. Not that *The Real Life* was the only guide to the phenomenon called Anthony Burgess. But then, putting down a previous treatment of Burgess's life, the uninformed reader with little else than Roger Lewis's misguided effort¹ to go by will have inferred that a somewhat less rancorous assessment of John Anthony Wilson Burgess's failures and achievements than that produced by the author of *Anthony Burgess* would take considerably more courtesy than the journalist-writer of Burgess's first comprehensive post-mortem biography had at his command. Lacking the passionate intensity which animates Lewis, Biswell shows incomparably more courtesy and sympathy to his book's subject than his fellow-biographer's tabloid-style compendium of half-truths and mad imaginings displays. Biswell's Burgess emerges from the plentiful factual evidence amassed by the author of the bulky *Real Life* as a very likeable character bearing little, if any, resemblance to Lewis's monstrous bogeyman. While duly taking

note of Burgess's weaknesses as a human being – his class-snobbery, his drunken rowdiness well beyond the age of unreason, a more than healthy amount of self-pity coupled with a tendency of self-mythologisation and even self-aggrandisement – Biswell convincingly describes the writer of the Enderby-novels as a person far surpassing Burgess's own, fictionalized self-portrait in *The Clockwork Testament's* Enderby in terms of intelligence, tact, forgiveness and generosity (221). Spiteful as he could get when confronted with the stupid arrogance of the high and the mighty, this lapsed Catholic always remained "your true Christian." His masochistic devotion to a drunken nymphomaniac of a first wife throughout twenty-four years of their married life before her shrunk liver collapsed, his untiring politeness, on account of their undeniable talent, to a churlish Kingsley Amis or a peevish Graham Greene, or his inexhaustible patience with the less gifted in his capacity as practical literary critic, present Andrew Biswell's Burgess as a very decent person indeed.

Biswell's thesis that Burgess was only too full of the milk of human kindness is amply documented by a wide variety of testimonials painstakingly collected by the scholarly author of *The Real Life*. Ranging from reminiscences voiced by brothers-in-arms with whom Burgess served during World War II to warm words of acknowledgement spoken by

fellow-faculty in England, Malaya and the United States as well as writers, editors and artists of all descriptions, these miscellaneous recollections carefully filed away in Biswell's archives for his magnum opus include the complementary opinion of no lesser figure than Joseph Heller. In an interview given shortly after being diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, the American novelist spoke about his one-time colleague at City College, New York, a municipal institution of supposedly higher education whose dubious academic standards resulted from the school's politically correct open-admission policies. Heller recalls Burgess as a human being whose "enormous inner generosity" the interviewee himself had never come near to in his whole life. No matter what "rubbish . . . a rebellious, angry student with a broken life" threw at him, Burgess, already an internationally acclaimed writer at the time, would continue to care, to "give serious thought to even their most absurd statements." "To him," Heller concludes, "everyone mattered" (quoted 350).

The sympathy with which Biswell regards Burgess the man is extended to Burgess the creative artist, too. Biswell's exhaustive discussion of the central pieces in the Burgess-canon as well as his passing remarks on the works on the peripheries of the writer's phenomenally large oeuvre of thirty-three novels, sixteen non-fiction books and innumerable

shorter pieces in every major literary – and sub- or paraliterary – genre reveal a critic whose erudition enhances, rather than blunts, his readiness to appreciate all that is worth appreciating. Whether it is the attentiveness with which he discovers how the earliest Burgess's, or Wilson's, prompt appropriation of fresh voices, such as the poetic idiom of a then newly published Hopkins, anticipated the future novelist's hallmark preoccupations and literary techniques (38–39), or his casual gesture impressing even the veteran specialist as he inserts an exhaustive list of fictional devices borrowed by Burgess from Joyce to add another dimension to *Nothing Like the Sun* (287, 290), or his alertness to Burgess's undiscovered strengths as a short-story writer (66), the acumen of Biswell's observations rarely fails to command respect.

This is not to say that the author of *The Real Life* is always infallible as a guide to the vast field he covers. Although he is remarkably well informed on just about everything however vaguely related to his subject from the mortality rate among patients of the 1918–19 Spanish flu pandemic, through the ethnic makeup of Manchester's fabled Hallé Orchestra, or the poet Dylan Thomas's drinking and sexual habits, Biswell does make the occasional faux pass as he goes along. Among these is the implied claim, made in connection with Burgess's first novel *A Vision of*

Battlements, that the reader of *Ulysses* is constrained, by some unspecified intrinsic quality of the novel, to recognize, rather than freely discard, the epic scaffolding of Joyce's classic (102), or the remark that the first Polish-language translation of *One Hand Clapping* was made in 1973 and that it was in Warsaw that the novel was "adapted as a popular stage musical" (225n⁺). Venturing further afield to comment on the original form of Lynne Burgess's Christian name, Biswell remarks on the difficulties confronting an Englishman trying to pronounce the fabled Welsh "consonantal double L" (72), thus coining a pleonasm that Llewela's husband would never have let slip – despite his being condescendingly referred to as an "inspired amateur" of a linguist by Peter Green, a novelist-translator cited approvingly in *The Real Life* (291).

It is to his credit that Biswell himself does not, at any point in his impressive work, lay claim to professional expertise in linguistics. Yet this minor, and in most cases irrelevant, deficiency might be the reason why he overlooks the significance of a language-related remark made by the character Dr Branom in *A Clockwork Orange*. The "subliminal penetration" that the scientist overseeing Alex's brainwashing believes to be responsible for the predominance of Slavic, as opposed to Gypsy or Cockney, roots in his patient's "tribal dialect" must come from outside the location

where the story unfolds.² Russian, as opposed to Alex and his droogs' Nadsat, a patois clearly based on Standard English before all else, is thus understood to be spoken in the geopolitical "other" of Alex and Dr Branom's mutual country, a rival very much like the Soviet Union at the time the novel was written. From this it logically follows that "the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" cannot, as Biswell believes (241–42), be among the theoretically possible spatial settings of *A Clockwork Orange*. Familiar as some salient features of little Alex's dystopian world may be to readers on either side of what used to be the Iron Curtain, *A Clockwork Orange* is not a Soviet-style dictatorship. If neither linguistics nor geography is Biswell's forte, astronomy is not among his strengths either. Otherwise he would not speak of an asteroid wiping out human life at the end of *The End of the World News*. Emphatically described as a major planet early on in the novel,³ the iron-heavy Lynx cannot possibly "crash-land" on Earth (114, 384), whose mass is but a fraction of the giant heavenly – or hellish – body, which literally pulverizes this world of ours in the novel's horrific conclusion.⁴ To avoid such an astronomical howler one does not have to keep pace with the rapidly changing definitions of what is and what is not a planet issued by the International Astronomical Union or some such gathering of authorized stargazers; it is enough to have a look at

the cover illustration on a paperback edition of *The End of the World News*.

It would not be merely ungenerous, or discourteous, to continue listing Biswell's lapses of attention – it would be well-nigh impossible, too. On the whole, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* strikes one as the most reliable, the most meticulously accurate, and certainly the most up-to-date source of factual information on its subject. Sparing no time, effort or expense to unearth the last bit of decisive evidence pertaining to the controversial, exemplary or simply interesting aspects of Anthony Burgess's endlessly exciting life and continually relevant work, Andrew Biswell must have covered thousands of miles and spent hundreds of hours as he delved into archival material held in Manchester, Texas, Angers or Monaco, recorded interviews and exchanged letters with the late writer's friends, relatives, enemies and acquaintances besides reading and rereading those millions upon millions of words that one of the previous century's most prolific poet-novelist-reviewer-scholar-scriptwriter-composers had ever set to paper. Carefully collected, classified and edited before astutely commented on, this daunting wealth of material yields credible answers to all the major issues, critical as well as biographical, that Anthony Burgess's acts, thoughts and writings have prompted. Did Burgess's distant ancestors include Bonnie Prince Charlie

aka Prince Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender? Could the Manchester-born artist as a young man smuggle into his prudish country a banned copy of *Ulysses* in cut-up pieces hidden beneath his clothes? Is it true that Burgess's first wife was raped by a gang of American army deserters in London during the blitz? Was the ailment sending him sprawling unconscious before his class in Brunei the inoperable brain tumour he believed his doctors had told Lynne about or was the medical case dreamed up by his imagination working overtime? Had he some thinly veiled homosexual tendencies or was he just a curious observer of sexual practices that his "omnifutnant" acquaintances were continually engaged in? Was he arm-twisted by his American publishers into truncating *A Clockwork Orange* to unwittingly provide Stanley Kubrick with the brutally pessimistic story of the American director's (in)famous film adaptation or was little Alex denied freedom of choice of Burgess's own free choosing? Was Burgess the novelist cheated of royalties rightfully his by the producers of the *Clockwork* movie? Did he leave England permanently for respectable reasons based on righteous moral principles or was he no more than another irritatingly rich English tax-exile evading his financial obligations to his poorer fellow citizens? These are some of the questions bedeviling the expert researcher as well as the "common reader" that Biswell

answers convincingly or demonstrates to be unanswerable in the absence of conclusive evidence.

Had he done no more than that, Andrew Biswell would deserve every praise. And it is far from all. Biswell's major contribution to Burgess-scholarship has very much to offer to the non-specialist and the professional student of the great twentieth-century writer's work. Besides qualifying as a highly readable, upmarket specimen of a genre enormously popular with a large audience outside as well as inside the groves of academe, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* is an intelligently self-questioning work that engages issues that have preoccupied professional practitioners of advanced literary theory for some time now. As the allusion in the book's very title to Burgess's much-liked writer Vladimir Nabokov's first English-language novel reveals, Biswell is as much interested in the process of how the chronicler of a famous life is continuously frustrated in his efforts to reconstruct what in fact happened as he is in achieving his goal of writing the definitive, or real, biography of the notability whose life is under scrutiny. Recognizing Burgess's tendencies to fictionalize his life and indeed to ransack his fiction for his autobiography – as the aging writer did when rehashing the story of *Honey for the Bears* in the Leningrad-episodes of his "Confessions"⁵ – respecting his interviewee's diffidence, jealousy or plain forgetful-

ness, acknowledging the lack or contradictory nature of the documents at his disposal, or simply abhorring the “knowingness” endemic to much current academic criticism, Biswell often refrains from formulating a final answer. Like “V,” the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and very much unlike the writer of another biography mentioned above bearing the self-assured title *Anthony Burgess*, Biswell is only too aware of the fact that one should never be “too certain of learning the past from the lips of the present.”⁶ As his refusal to offer his, presumably *real*, version of what happened to Lynne on that blacked-out night in London before she lost her pregnancy or his unwillingness to choose the real ending of *A Clockwork Orange* on the basis of the original manuscript and the belated exchange between a retroactively righteous author and a deeply offended American editor, Biswell does not need Sebastian Knight’s biographer to warn him: *caveat auctor*. Biswell knows it fully well on his own that “what you are told is threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale.”⁷

Suspicious as we, too, had better be as readers in general, when we come across the occasional confident claim in *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess*, we can safely suspend our own, postmodern, disbelief. When Biswell proposes to date a young Burgess’s – or Wilson’s – first

exposure to *Ulysses*, to locate the Wilsons’ residence in the seaside town of Hove, or to establish the identity of the anonymous “Canadian academic” who had offered to write what was meant to be Burgess’s very first biography, we can safely assume that Inspector Biswell interprets his clues correctly. Provided we do not take our philosophical nominalism too seriously, and still hold the unfashionable belief that there is a life out there and that it is real.

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Notes

1. Roger Lewis, *Anthony Burgess* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).
2. Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 91.
3. Anthony Burgess, *The End of the World News* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 22.
4. Burgess, *The End*, p. 386.
5. Anthony Burgess, *You’ve Had Your Time: Being the Second Part of the Confessions of Anthony Burgess* (London: Penguin, 1991), 37–53.
6. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 52.
7. Nabokov, p. 52.