

Recapitulation

The Private, the Fictional, and the Musical in Anthony Burgess's Lives: Intersections of the Biographical Kind

Sean Gregory, *Three Graves*
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Sean Gregory's biographical novel is the latest addition to the series of volumes exploring the life and times of Anthony Burgess, one of the most multifaceted English authors of the twentieth century. In these various contributions, different aspects of Burgess's life are highlighted, and the meaning and importance attributed to them varies according to the generic qualities of the work in which they are addressed. Geoffrey Aggeler's *Anthony Burgess: The Artist as Novelist* (1979) together with Samuel Coale's *Anthony Burgess* (1981) are the earliest comprehensive scholarly studies to examine Burgess's works in the context of his biography. Focussing more emphatically on the details of his professional and private life are two more recently published volumes: Roger Lewis's *Anthony Burgess* (2002) and Andrew Biswell's *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* (2005). While a quote from *The Independent* on the cover of the paperback edition of Lewis's book advertises it as "[a] grotesque, off-the-wall book-biz satire,"

Biswell's thoroughly researched biography, supported by carefully analysed factual evidence, acts as a corrective to Lewis's tabloid-style sensationalism, as Biswell's title suggests.

Their subject, Burgess himself added to the above studies his own take on his life story in the two volumes of his "Confessions." *Little Wilson and Big God: The Confessions of Anthony Burgess* (1987) and *You've Had Your Time: The Second Part of the Confessions of Anthony Burgess* (1990) are the two parts of his extended autobiography, as the genre is specifically identified by the subtitle of the American edition. But to dispel any false expectation of gaining access to nothing but the factual truth that the words "confession" and "autobiography" may create for some readers, Burgess states in his Preface to the first part of his "Confessions" in good Joycean style: "As a good deal of real life has got into my fiction, I forbear to unscramble it all into what has been fabled by the daughters of memory, though I have unscrambled some" (viii). The process of remembering is only one of the acts that destabilise the possibility of ever knowing the truth about one's life.

Furthermore, the nature of truth itself has become rather elusive since the turn of the twentieth century when an ever-deepening epistemological uncertainty appeared to determine the thinking of modernist authors in search of meaning and truth in an increasingly chaotic world surrounding them. The quest for truth became further complicated by the later challenge posed by postmodernism, a trend that does not only question whether the truth can be found and known but even raises doubts about the very existence of such a thing as one singular truth. These problematic questions concerning the nature of truth relate to the Burgess biographies as well as his autobiographical writing and fictional output. His novels include biofictions of his own about such outstanding literary figures as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, or John Keats, in which he imaginatively recreates controversial episodes in the lives of his protagonists that still lack unambiguous and consensual explanations. Not surprisingly, his attitude to, and use of, modernist and postmodernist ideas and techniques, some of which are connected to the above issue of factual and fictional truth, is the subject of numerous essays, most notably those collected in *Anthony Burgess and Modernity* (2008) edited by Alan Roughley or an earlier collection titled *Anthony Burgess, Autobiographer* (2006) edited by Graham Woodroffe.

That invention in the form of fiction plays an ever-increasing role in recreating one's life to gain a better understanding of it can, at least partly, be ascribed to the more recent phenomenon known as post-truth. The early twenty-first century when regarded as a post-truth era allows for more "freedom with the known facts" (Lane 9), although some even question if facts can be known at all. Sean Gregory's biofiction appears to stem from this post-truth world as he mixes biographical data from Burgess's life with his own peculiar vision of the biographical subject. Admittedly, as he explains in his "Acknowledgements" at the end of *Three Graves*, he has "always seen in [Burgess's] work a demand for dialogue" (324), thus offering one possible way of reading his own novel.

Dialogue takes many forms while Gregory traverses the famous predecessor's private, fictional, and musical universe. It starts in the opening Manchester section, in which the novel's present is situated, although the exact year is never identified by date. It can only be guessed at with some certainty from the fact that the fictional Burgess returns to his native Manchester to promote his latest book, which, again, is not identified by a specific title. It is only when Burgess, autographing a copy, makes a mistake and writes the title as *Any Old Burgess* that the reader, familiar with the author's *oeuvre*, assumes that it should be *Any Old Iron*, a historical fantasia published in 1989. This slippage leads to others of its kind when Burgess's Mancunian relatives also appear in the John Rylands Library: their presence inadvertently makes the author recall his childhood in what was then still known as Cottonopolis and, under the influence of his intruding memories, he ends up signing his name as John Wilson, his name given at birth. Visiting a pub also conjures up images of his father, who used to play the piano in his step-mother's pub, as well as painful memories of the death of his birth mother and sister.

This novel of four main parts and further divided into shorter sections follows Burgess's life as it unfolds in various locations on three different continents in almost chronological order, which is indicated by the years given in the section headings. However, Gregory returns to the Manchester of 1989 in three more chapters interspersed in the novel at different points to emphasise the impossibility for Burgess to leave his birthplace behind mentally and emotionally, even though he has made his home elsewhere in Europe, not

unlike one of his highly regarded predecessors, James Joyce. Memories keep surfacing as they are triggered by similarities to previous events or people in the course of Burgess's life throughout the whole book. The most poignant of these are connected to Burgess's father, son, and two successive wives. This technique of Gregory's seems to be borrowed from modernist writers, who often broke the straight chronology of the events narrated in their works, thus expressing their view of how the human mind works, in which thoughts and memories float as if in a stream, an idea inspired by the American philosopher and psychologist, William James. By emulating their style, Gregory pays homage to modernist authors as well as to the quasi-modernist Anthony Burgess at the same time. As a result of this strategy, Gregory's novel reads more like a series of snapshots in which flashbacks intersect with more recent experiences, leading to the final sentence of his novel: "The past lives" (322).

Intertextual borrowings from Burgess's works represent another form of dialogue, further enriching Gregory's biofiction. The text on his Dedication page comes from an early part of Burgess's *Little Wilson and Big God*, expressing both authors' tribute to the art of writing: "Mastery never comes, and one serves a lifelong apprenticeship" during his career as a writer is the conviction of both novelists (Burgess 6). Other borrowings shed light on Burgess's creative process as he incorporates elements of his life into his fiction. This is especially prominent in the Malayan section of Gregory's novel about Burgess's time in the British colonial service in the 1950s. His thoughts run parallel to those of Victor Crabbe, the protagonist of *The Malayan Trilogy*: Crabbe's dilemmas on the approaching independence of the region, the responsibility of the colonisers, his fascination with the locals, and his convoluted marital relationship with his wife, Fenella, who feels estranged and threatened in the alien society, appear to reflect those of Burgess. Gregory also presents various people Burgess may have met and have employed them as models for his characters such as the local policemen Lofty and Ibrahim, appearing as Nabby Adams and Alladad Khan, respectively, in Burgess's first-published novel, *Time for a Tiger* (1956).

1968 is a year in Burgess's life that is given special emphasis in Gregory's book by being the main temporal setting of six sections, and not without good reason. This is the time when Burgess's first wife, Lynne, dies, then he marries his second wife, Liana, leaves England for good, works

on the musical, *Will*, to bring Shakespeare's life to the stage in America, and negotiates the film rights of his cult novel, *A Clockwork Orange*. In these chapters, parallels are also established between Burgess's and Shakespeare's lives: the wives of both of them are presented as cheating on their husbands while the latter are away making money and fame for their families, and having affairs of their own, too. Even the letters to their illicit lovers share similarities when Lynne accidentally reads Burgess's letter to Liana, which Burgess claims to be Shakespeare's letter to his Dark Lady in his work-in-progress at the time.

The similarities between the two authors run deeper than their personal lives: both are preoccupied with the question of why to write and what art is. Both Shakespeare and Burgess are hard-pressed for money; so, writing plays for the former and writing novels for the latter are presented as mere ways of paying the bills and putting food on the table. It may not be by chance either that in another episode where Burgess meets George Orwell, Orwell is working on his essay titled "Why I Write." For Burgess, his real passion is music: throughout Gregory's whole novel, he has musical tunes in his mind and is constantly preoccupied with musical compositions; and the more emotionally intense events are, the more musically inspiring they appear to be.

Music is also represented to form a connection between Burgess and his father, who earned his living by playing the piano, as well as the writer's adopted son, Andrea, whom he wants to teach how to play the piano in an effort to develop a bond with him. Images of the three male figures swirl on the last pages of the novel while Burgess's first symphony is performed, although he claims it to be the third he composed: "Anthony reaches out his hand to his son. His dad takes his hand and says, *Stay close, Jackie*" (Gregory 318). At the University of Iowa, Burgess is encouraged by several people to keep on writing, but he insists on being a composer first and foremost, which is the exact image readers are left with at the end of the book presenting a dream come true for him.

The Burgess presented in this biographical novel is usually arrogant and grumpy, hard-pressed for money, haunted by his dead wife, annoyed by distracting children, preoccupied with drinks and smoking his cheroot, and struggles with demanding and exploiting publishers, agents, and producers. Due to the broken chronology, the novel is episodic, which obscures

THE PRIVATE, THE FICTIONAL, AND THE MUSICAL

cause-effect relations and does not allow for any coherent character development. As a result, personal relationships and motives are often hard to discern and the reader might lose interest were it not for moving moments like the death of Lynne or the uplifting reunion of fathers and sons to the accompaniment of musical scores at the very end. This biofiction also manages to project its author's appreciation for the exuberant energy, undeniable talent, and technical virtuosity of its subject as it tries to grapple with the questions of creating great art while maintaining fulfilling personal relationships.

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