

Autoportrait

by Anthony Burgess

My 1968 passport photograph shows a meaty confident cattle-broker with a biblical nose, sly eyes, and the slack mouth of one who is evidently drunk.



The new one (taken, admittedly, at nine on a crapulous autumn morning in the basement studio of a store on Regent Street) is of a victim-haunted murderer-at-large, the lips thin and pursed, cheeks sunken, eyes bagged - old, certainly old. "This passport expires," says Page 2, "October 16, 1988." Its holder will, I think, have expired some time before then. A ghastly thought, that this should be one's last passport.

What strikes me particularly, apart from the horrid evidence of age, is that the upper lip has, in the last ten years, grown more simian, more Irish. My Italian wife, fighting to prevent my paying German and French tax on my literary earnings, has become interested in my Irish ancestry. If I can provide evidence that I really had a grandmother called Mary Ann Finnegan, and that she was born in the county of Tipperary, I may be able to get an Irish passport and invoke those reciprocal fiscal arrangements that will keep the French and German tax hounds off. So, I am turning into an Irishman. My son, who is Anglo-Italian, has revolted against the French culture

pumped into him in Monaco and has decided that he is Scots. He goes around the *rues* and *bo ulevards*

in a kilt and sporran. Whatever my old age is to be, it seems likely to stress the Celt in me, and hence him, and diminish the Anglo-Saxon.

That I was not much of an Anglo-Saxon was made clear to me when I decided to leave England ten years ago. I found that to quit my London house, pubs and friends was not so much a wrench as I had feared. Living in one Mediterranean country or another (meaning: forced out of one to move to another), I discovered that I was far more at home in an oil and garlic ambience than in a dripping and HP sauce one, and especially at home where the poor made the sign of the cross and a Protestant church was an exotic. I am called by Italian newspapers to deliver articles on the Vatican. I am back not only with my Irish ancestors but also with my Catholic Anglo-Saxon ones, especially the one who stood out against Henry VIII's reformation and got executed for his pains. But it is not all that easy to give up one's Anglo-Saxon secular inheritance - meaning, chiefly, being surrounded by people who speak English in an English way, especially in pubs -and, at the age of sixty-one, I find it impossible to propose living in a damp house outside Dublin, drinking (as opposed to writing, which is more difficult) creatively. For that matter, I can never become a Maltese, Italian, Frenchman or Monégasque. In other words, on the threshold of old age I find myself pretty well without roots--except, as it were, mythical or historical ones that would do better in a TV series than in real life. With everybody these days being so keen about roots, thanks chiefly to Alex Haley, I stick myself in plastic earth-surrogate, an artificial flower smelling of nothing, rootless, fruitless, bootless. This is, of course, not at all as it should be. An old man should prepare to meet those ancestors who are buried a few yards away, surrounded by grandchildren, prepared to go back to the earth that produced him. I shall die somewhere in the Mediterranean lands, with an inaccurate obituary in the *Nice-Matin*, unmourned, soon forgotten.

Apart from the rootlessness, I am not too happy about the person I am and that, for sixty-one years, I have been stealthily becoming. I can find few virtues in myself. Apart from age and ugliness and an obscene inability to grow timely bald and toothless, I see in the morning mirror a man lacking serenity and generosity. I work too much, and that is a terrible vice. I cannot take a day off without guilt. Indeed, if I do take a day off I can find nothing to do with it. I do not play games or jog or even stroll by the sea. I have lost my taste for reading anything except the most reprehensible paperback tripe that my local tobacconist and newsagent carries in his *drehstand*

(I cannot remember the English word, nor even the French one. My vocabulary becomes increasingly useless and eccentric). I cannot even drink much any more. I smoke, and excessively: twenty Schimmelpenninck Duet a day.

My only activity of the daytime is to sit at the typewriter and churn out words - ungenerously, for all the words are for sale, and I begrudge the time and stamp-money spent on personal letters. I work, I tell myself, to earn money for my prospective widow and orphan. But the work has become an unlovely drug, no more.

The clack of the typewriter justifies my existence: the value of the words I weave together has become a matter of secondary moment. "The tiger in the tiger-pit," T.S. Eliot wrote of a generic old man, "is not more irritable than I." A sound observation (Eliot was young enough when he made it, only about fifty). My capacity for rage is large and shocking. I used to be timid, prepared to let injustice and insolence prevail against me rather than disturb the universe. Now I curse officials and people I wrongly imagine have jumped the queue. The huge mouths of obscenity and blasphemy I make set my heart hugely pumping. I do the family cooking, and if any member of the family makes mild culinary suggestions or even steps into the kitchen to look for the morning paper (which ought not to be there, let's be quite clear about that,) I howl and swear and stamp. The ingenuity and foulness of my language, abetted by the permissiveness that surrounds me, is a kind of impersonal horror: it does not seem to emanate from me, but from slyly cached devil in my gut. I sometimes seem to myself to have been taken over entirely by a diabolic force. Where am I? What has happened to me? Who is that howling creature in the corridor-mirror?

I mutter the litany of the seven deadly sins, deciding that I regularly commit them all, except perhaps gluttony. Sloth? Well, what is this vice of writing except a kind of sloth disguised as loud cracking? I'm not out there feeding the hungry or giving cash to the poor. I'm not doing the real work of a human being; I'm just stringing words together. If I were a glutton, there might at

least be something healthily balzacien about it - ten dozen oysters proclaiming the glory of God's esculent universe. I merely drink two gallons of overstrong tea each day and mumble a bit of stale bread. I suffer terribly from lust, and thus brings on anger at and envy of those who are young and handsome enough to justify their indulgence in it. An old man's lust is not pleasant.

Do I have any virtues? Let me be honest and search hard. What virtues, my son? Examine your conscience with care. Well, Father, I'm honest about money. I try to pay my bills when they fall due. I will not accept from a publisher an advance on work not written. I will, naturally, cheat the fiscal tyrants, but it would be inhuman not to. I consider it to be a virtue that I have not become too fat. I get fat only when I take exercise, which seems to promote appetite. I try to write well. I am not cynical about writing, saying to myself: nobody reads with attention nowadays, I can get away with the most resounding inaccuracy or blatant inconsistency. I try, I say, but that does not mean I necessarily succeed. If I am given a book for review, I read it all, every page. I try, desperately hard, to be kind to my wife and son. I express love as often as I can, which means whenever this damned Anglo-Saxon devil of reticence or shyness is briefly asleep. Anything else, my son? I'm damned, Father, if I can think of anything else.

What, so far in this attempt at a self-portrait, I have been trying to evade should be clear enough to the reader by now. The biggest sin, the sin that swallows up all others, is indifference to life. Hatred of life is very different: hatred of life springs from a vitality that, in its mad way, proclaims the value of life. But to be indifferent whether one lives or dies is, I think, a big sin, far worse than the suicidal opting out. In other words, I take no care to ensure my life continues (up to the point, say, of having to apply for a new passport). I neither cut down my smoking nor my sporadic intake of the wrong foods. I take no exercise. I am doing nothing to promote life, even if I am not actively embracing death.

Naturally, I have self-indulgent day-dreams about suicide. I cannot get barbiturates, so

self-slaughter has to be a rather strenuous affair, at least in imagination. I climb up to Monacoville and hurl myself from the rocks. There is a lot of high-rise building going on here. I hover voluptuously over a jump from this building or from that. Perhaps, if I am lucky, I will die in my sleep. What a messy lot of work for others, especially for my loved ones, whatever the nature of my being taken off. This holds me to life for a while.

Of course, this indifference to living has much to do with that boredom which inevitably comes with old age. I have done most of the things I wanted to do, even if I have not done them well. I have published nearly forty books, though I have made little money on them. I have had my music performed. I have written a Broadway musical which, coming on at the same time as *Watergate*, was a flop. I have been round the world. I do not think that travel to the countries I have not visited will result in new and delicious surprises. I have heard Beethoven's nine symphonies so often that I am indifferent as to whether I hear them again. No new books I may read can afford the excitement I felt when I first read James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins. There seemed a new twitch of excitement possible when I first began to read Nabokov's *Lolita*. Or when, a few years ago, I first saw in Barcelona the architecture of Gaudi. But the fact of imaginative moribundity is confirmed by the lack of belief that I shall ever again know the aesthetic thrills which, from books and music and pictures, permeated my youth. After dinner I go to bed.

I am not quite sure, these days, when old age is supposed to start. In four years' time I shall become that abstract euphemism known as a senior citizen. The body certainly grows old -- dries up, stiffens, stoops. But the real age, as we are always being told, is an effect of the mind. It is manifested chiefly in lack of interest in life. I am not curious about what my 1988 passport photograph will look like, because I do not think I shall be tottering to a basement studio to have it taken. I feel a twitch of resentment that, in that year, I shall probably be forgotten and that the world will go on indifferently without me. But that is an unworthy flicker from the devils of ego which have to die with me. Move on, reader, and admire the thin, evil-eyed girls who flaunt the latest fashions, drink in the beauty hints that proclaim the value of living. Life is for you. My portrait is of an empty cup, a melon-rind, a crushed yoghurt carton, a stamped-out Schimmelpennick. The artist as an old man.