

## Any old form

By [Peter French Hodges](#)

If *The Way We Live Now* wasn't such a long book, Trollope's saga of nineteenth century London life would be read by subscribers to *Hello Magazine*, fitting new names to old characters. Ten years ago, Melmot was Maxwell.

Larger than life characters should be remembered in literature even if they are not anticipating Nicolas Mosley's *Hopeful Monsters*, the Whitbread winning novel which was not about his father Oswald, as the biography came out later. Anthony Burgess's

*Earthly Powers*

was a not unsympathetic portrait of Somerset Maugham, Pope John and most of the twentieth century. In his last novel, the epic verse

*Byrne*

, Burgess makes lightning raids on most of the above.

Michel Tournier once described himself as 'plongé jusqu'au cou dans la Bible'; the twins, the Old and the New Testament in his novel *Gemini*; so in *Byrne* Michael Byrne has twin sons one of them a priest. Yet Michael Byrne is himself a twin, half Russian doll, half Moses.

"To Michael Byrne The technical term 'tragic' / Can be applied with absolute precision / When a man's inner quiescent flaws / Are lashed alive by an external cause."

[Note 1](#)

The verse of the novel has great panache, nodding occasionally to Yeats or Betjeman, even to Ogden Nash.

'Of schnapps the joy of being drunk and Aryan / Though Hitler was a teetotalitarian.'

[Note 2](#)

Lady Gregory plays Lady Boxfox and Betjeman's London Underground is a snowy background.

What happened to the great courtesans of the nineteen thirties: 'She had survived abortions as well as miscarriages/ As well as alcohol and drug accesses/ The ravages of four disastrous marriages/ - Her fault - and yet with bright Teutonic tresses...'

[Note 3](#)

Forgotten now when the earth was their oyster, Burgess misses nothing of the atmosphere of the Thirties and Britain's ignoble ignorance of anti-semiticism.

'The Nazi's, at that time, did not abuse/ The basic Lebensrecht of German jews.'

[Note 4](#)

The upper echelons of the artistic German world ran parallel to Isherwood's Berlin books as Byrne becomes involved in the opera with Goebbels providing the libretto for a new production. Eventually foregoing it for his new job as Minister of Propaganda, the old wartime joke of Hitler's single ball is conjured up with the line 'His Führer's talent too was even littler.'

[Note 5](#)

When war comes Byrne decamps to neutral Switzerland from where he disappears into the Brazilian jungle and becomes a myth. Later, he is sighted in outlandish places as a kind of bi-sexual Paul Bowles 'A late attempt to mortify the flesh/ I met him in a bar in Marakesh' [Note 6](#) and

'A change of sexual tropism: 'My boys,/ I prefer women, but these make less noise'.

'And white men go to pieces as we've seen/ In overlauded trash by Graham Greene.'

[Note 7](#)

This is also Graham Greene land, too, (he usually stayed at the Ritz after he had spent some years in Fountain Court off St. James's Street) but it is also the land of rubbish strikes, skinheads, bogus literary musicals and militant Muslims burning books, presently outraged at Dante putting Mohammed in hell, something which escaped their notice for the odd six hundred years.

The old Christian prejudices from the past 'And how is Manchester?

[Note 8](#)

I rather fear/ The Holy Name is going to be assigned/ To mosquedom, The multiple muezzin's call/ reigns in a town where there's no rain at all' have given way to new ones and while modern Byrnes are involved in popular musicals the old Michael Byrne appears as composer of the music backing a porno video while lost in the Brazilian jungle like Edward James.

Exit father Byrne for most of the rest of the book and enter his twin sons. First the priest Father Byrne, at Green Park station, perhaps an earlier allusion to the tropics:

Nurgess takes his twins to Venice to near death there with Timothy, the priestly twin pursuing not a boy but a teenage girl, an anarchist straight from a Fassbinder film while Thomas, the other twin, has his one testicle surgically removed and is libidiously pursued by a well known authoress, her real name laced into the remark: 'See how she's pricked your progenitive balloons and also kicked your/ Male chauvinism.'

[Note 9](#)

Like the *Clockwork Orange*, Burgess is more than hinting at the future. Although his twins are

not cloned, all identical twins are clones of the sort and have been a feature of modern fiction since *Joy and Josephine* by Monica Dickens. That Thomas, the other twin, is sexually deformed may be seen as a warning that cloning may have physical dangers, let alone moral and social ones. International rights to clone human embryos have already been patented and although the world could do with a few more Byrnes, father or twins, only the Dutch could wish for another Calvin, but Tim has undertaken to write twelve one hour episodes of John Calvin's life with the advice to cut out the art.

'It led your osacr Wilde to condign hell./ We want no art. We want the thing done well.'

[Note 10](#)

Finally, out of the blue, an ancient Michael Byrne appears like Howard Hughes to stay at Claridges rather than the Inn on the Park. He is accompanied by giant black men and wears a long black robe sitting on a litter. He has come to see his offspring for the last time, dramtically, even cinematically. 'Dying, a rather well rewarded part/ For Guinness, though life pays too much for art.'

[Note 11](#)

### **Peter ffrench-Hodges**

*P. fH. was Head of Overseas Press with the British Tourist Authority from 1957 to 1988. As Chairman of the Arts Committee of the Foreign Press Association he met Anthony Burgess when he was invited as an official guest at a luncheon at a Foreign Press Association in Carlton House Terrace in the early 80's.*



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1. Anthony Burgess, *Byrne, a novel*. Hutchinson, London, 1995. Page 25. [Return to article](#) .

2. *Ibidem*, page 30. [Return to article](#) .

3. *Ib.*, page 26. [Return to article](#) .

4. *Ib.*, page 27. [Return to article](#) .

5. *Ib.*, page 32. [Return to article](#) .

6. *Ib.*, page 41. [Return to article](#) .

7. *Ib.*, page 39. [Return to article](#) .

8. *Ib.*, page 50. [Return to article](#) .

9. *Ib.*, page 89. [Return to article](#) .

10. *Ib.*, page 79. [Return to article](#) .

11. *Ib.*, page 149. [Return to article](#)