

Burgess as Fictional Character in Theroux and Byatt

By [John J. Stinson](#)

Burgess has lived on after his death in 1993. He lives on, of course, in his artistry generally, but his continuing presence has also been manifested in the posthumous publication of three significant books: *A Dead Man in Deptford* (London, 1993; New York, 1995) the fictional presentation of the life of Christopher Marlowe; *Byrne* (London, 1995; New York, 1997) the rollicking novel in verse; and *One Man's Chorus* (1998), the previously uncollected essays. The year 1996, however, gave us other embodiments of Burgess: he appears as a character in two highly discussible works of fiction.

My Other Life (1996), by Paul Theroux, intentionally blurring the boundaries between memoir and fiction, could be discussed (elsewhere) from philosophical, ethical, and, yes, I would certainly think, although I am no lawyer, legal standpoints. Those of you who recall the piece in the August 7, 1995 *New Yorker* titled "A. Burgess, Slightly Foxed: Fact and Fiction" will catch on immediately. The piece strongly suggested itself as fact to most readers, even sophisticated ones of my acquaintance who asked me if I knew that Burgess was unbearably rude and condescending, a nasty drunk, a man of the prickliest disposition, and the like. Readers who had previously known nothing about Burgess as a person now felt that they did know him or, rather, -- unlikeable as they "found out" he was (in Evelyn Waugh-like guise)--they were thoroughly glad they had never known him.

In both the *New Yorker* piece and the story in *My Other Life*, Theroux, a longtime acquaintance of Burgess, knows a lawyer who is also a book collector and one of Burgess's biggest "fans," as the collector puts it himself. This man, Lettfish, begs Theroux to introduce him to Burgess. Theroux finally accedes to Lettfish's pleas and invites, on short notice (against the objections of Mrs. Theroux) Lettfish and Burgess to dinner at his home. Burgess arrives late, drunk, and surly, and thoroughly, although not cleverly, insults and humiliates the previously worshipful

lawyer who leaves "heartbroken," as Theroux sees it.

The *New Yorker* piece is followed by a note in an italic font smaller than the text, which reads, "Author's note: My dinner with Anthony Burgess took place on November 14, 1981. Or perhaps it didn't." Did many readers put this coy caution together with the "Fact and Fiction" of the subtitle to deduce, correctly, that they had just read about a fictional "Anthony Burgess" and a fictional "Paul Theroux"? It is doubtful. On page 65 there is a half-page photograph of the very real Anthony Burgess, taken by Helmut Newton in Monaco in 1985. Moreover, the fictional Burgess has written the same books as the real one, and so too has Theroux.

Observations reported to me suggest that most readers, understandably enough, thought that what they had read about Burgess in the *New Yorker* was essentially "true." The ex-Mrs. Paul Theroux correctly realized what people were thinking too. About six weeks after the "A. Burgess Slightly Foxed" piece was published, the "In the Mail" column of the *New Yorker*

led with a clear, concise, but seemingly anxious and flat denial by Anne Theroux, writing from London, that Burgess had ever been a dinner guest at the house she lived in with her then-husband: "I was dismayed to read in your August 7th edition a story called 'A. Burgess, Slightly Foxed (Fact and Fiction),' by Paul Theroux, in which a very unpleasant character with my name said and did things that I have never said or done'." She continues by writing that not only did she never say that she was not a Burgess fan, but that "I have been a Burgess fan for as long as I can remember. In 1980 (the year before the event in the story), I interviewed him [Burgess] for the BBC World Service about his superb novel

Earthly Powers

. . . I would have been delighted to have Burgess to dinner at my house, but, alas, it didn't happen." Another letter in the same issue of the

New Yorker

expresses the writer's dismay after reading "the revealing portrait of Anthony Burgess," noting how "Theroux ends the essay by describing, in excruciating detail, a series of deliberate small cruelties that Burgess took pleasure in inflicting upon a sincere, if unbearably enthusiastic fan." One assumes that this writer saw the letter of Anne Theroux immediately above her own, and found it restorative of her admiration for Burgess. I, however, know several people who missed the Anne Theroux letter and confidently retain the impression that they have the inside story on how Burgess gave some rudely dismissive treatment to a fan named Lettfish one evening at the Theroux home in London.

The objections of Anne Theroux were apparently vehement enough to cause Paul to make some changes when the Burgess piece went into book form. Chapter Six of *My Other Life*, titled "The Writer and His Reader," is identical to the earlier *New Yorker* piece save for a few minor changes. The Mrs. Theroux present at the dinner is now called Alison, not Anne, and references

to her working at the BBC have been removed. No photograph appears, either of a real or imagined Burgess. Then, too, the "real" Theroux chooses [perhaps after some legal prompting?] to include a prefatory "Author's Note" intended to serve as a general disclaimer, but it is couched in enough double-talk to preserve the fun and games and the feeling that what we are reading might well be ninety-nine per cent true. Theroux writes:

This is the story of a life I could have lived had things been different--an imaginary memoir ... these characters do not exist outside this intentionally tall story ... There are some names you know--Anthony Burgess, Nathan Leopold, Queen Elizabeth II, and more--but they too are alter egos, other hes and shes. As for the other I, the Paul Theroux who looks like me, he is just a fellow wearing a mask. It is the writer's privilege to keep some facades intact and use his own face in the masquerade. I was the only area in which I took no liberties. The man is fiction, but the mask is real.

What is it that Theroux is really trying to do? Several things, of course. Skeptics might say--and they might not be entirely wrong--that Theroux's blurring of the line between fact and fiction is more a transparent (and successful) effort to drive up sales than it is any serious extension of the postmodernist enterprise. They might even allege that the taking of gross liberties by the merging of fact and fiction has long been the practice of the trashiest tabloids of Britain and America as they "report" on the lives of celebrities.

Fictions that raise epistemological issues or incorporate matters more traditionally discussed in philosophy have been common now for the last thirty-five years or so, with some antecedent texts going back a hundred years, and a few even beyond that. Certainly, themes involving the personae that we all develop (public selves, and private selves,) have absolute universality yet are even more central and compelling in our own day than ever before. Theroux seems implicitly to claim that his approach to these themes is both playful and radical, teasing yet deeply illuminating. And, yes, authors, maybe even more than public figures, often do have several personae. Burgess would, at times, seem to be playing self-scripted roles in his fictions, non-fiction writings, and public performances such as public lectures and live television appearances. Enderby in *The Clockwork Testament*, for example, is surrounded by circumstances that correspond closely to Burgess's own during the year of his City College of New York stint, yet Enderby represents only a small part of his creator: Burgess's humor is self-deprecating. As another example, Andrew Biswell, in the first issue of the *Newsletter* rightly points to the persona Burgess created for himself as a television critic. And Ben Forkner begins his introduction to *One Man's Chorus* by noting "the multitude of different voices Anthony Burgess could apparently summon at will."

Then again, too, Burgess himself wrote fictionalized biographies of Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Marlowe. Furthermore, scholarly theory that underlies a number of disciplinary areas has

insistently reminded us in the last thirty years of the shifting and subjective nature of "truth." Still, one asks, should Theroux not have engaged himself in greater ethical introspection before he began his project? Does his ironically deprecatory representation of himself, in *My Other Life*, provide full sanction for his treatment of an Anthony Burgess only recently deceased, or a Prince Philip, still alive? Heated discussion of these questions is almost certain to ensue if others follow Theroux in the deliberate knocking down of the boundaries between biography and fiction. (James Joyce, whom Burgess greatly admired admittedly did something similar to what Theroux did, but we might remember that Reuben J. Dodd, Jr. eventually won a legal judgment in the *Ulysses* case, albeit against the BBC.)

The appearance of Anthony Burgess in another 1996 book, A. S. Byatt's 600-page novel *Babel Tower*, is not likely to give rise to controversy since readers will be certain from the very beginning that they are reading a work of fiction, in fact, Byatt's next novel after the enormously successful *Possession*. Like Anne Theroux, Antonia Byatt had interviewed Burgess for British television (an "ICA Guardian Conversations" program). It is difficult to ascertain from the interview itself whether the scholarly and widely-read Byatt had any really deep or extensive knowledge of Burgess's oeuvre, but it can be discovered that she wrote an enthusiastic and discerning review of *The Clockwork Testament* for the *Times* (London) back in 1974. In *Babel Tower* Byatt does not really come close to any direct use of the interview material, but she does employ Burgess's concept of the alternating cycles of Augustinianism and Pelagianism, the issue of theological debate that serves as a basic metaphor and thematic underpinning for a number of Burgess's novels. In the *Times* review Byatt knowledgeably discusses the Pelagian/Augustinian debate as it appears in *The Wanting Seed* and *The Clockwork Testament*.

The Anthony Burgess who appears in *Babel Tower* is, I think it safe to say, recognizably the man himself. Here he writes a characteristically perspicacious review (which we are given in its entirety) of a 1960s deSadean sort of novel, and, as a result, he is called as a witness in a trial prosecuting the book for alleged obscenity. Byatt's impersonation of Burgess's voice, first, his writerly voice as a reviewer, and then his public speaking voice as a witness at a celebrated trial, is deft and highly accomplished. The Burgess who appears in front of the court is vividly and convincingly realized: "Anthony Burgess is the next witness; his voice is round and beautifully produced. He praises *Babbletower* [sic: the book within the book] in musical terms: brio, appassionata, fugue" (539). Burgess gives his

testimony with characteristic pith and departs.

Byatt's reputation as a serious literateur is deservedly greater than Theroux's, and comparisons might seem forced. Still, in their very self-conscious merging of fact and fiction they are doing something similar, although they approach it from different directions. Whereas Theroux conveys the idea of providing fact before stirring in elements of fiction, Byatt, a writer very much aware of the fictiveness of fiction--at least a borderline metafictionist--clearly signals that she has added generous measures of self-reflexiveness and game playing. Nonetheless, she stays very close to the recognizably "real" world. Such large chunks of minutely realistic detail are present in *Babel Tower* that the reader will often be disposed to think that s/he is reading an old-fashioned, solidly realistic novel, in this case one that provides a sharp evocation of the England of the 1960s. This realism, however, rubs up against and often conjoins typical postmodern concerns as the characters pursue at length questions about the nature and adequacy of language; the shape, function, and possibilities of the modern novel; literature and truth; even the teaching of English.

Babel Tower does not have the sort of "organic unity" valued by the New Critics. The book raises, though, questions worth thinking about even if they seem occasionally ponderous or slightly stuffily academic. While virtually no one objects to a writer's writing about what she or he knows best, some find it improper for the novelist, unless an avowed neo-naturalist, to drop in big slabs of material, when they are not personally refined, into her work, even when the sources are scrupulously acknowledged. As one example from *Babel Tower*, do the sections in the novel on literature and obscenity read too much like the stuff of symposia? Do they properly belong in the novel? Is our judgment in the matter affected by knowledge that Byatt was one of the participants in "Obscenity and the Arts: A Symposium with Anthony Burgess, Clark Glymour, A. S. Byatt, Marina Warner, Richard Eyre, Melvyn Bragg, and Mary Lefkowitz? [See

TLS

, Feb. 12, 1998, n. 4, 428, p. 159 (3)] On the other hand, why judge it ill-advised for a novelist to attempt a microcosmic history of cultural, social, and intellectual matters at a certain period in time?

Burgess, then, appears as a character in two highly interesting works of fiction that can, and probably will, be explored more fully, more vigorously, and more theoretically. Neither book by itself is likely to have any significant influence upon Burgess's final reputation. The two authors obviously decided to make him a part of their fictions because they remembered him as a powerful presence whom they knew in life, and whose work they admired. It seems ironic that Theroux, whose book is generally damaging to Burgess, was really himself a Burgess fan. In fact, Theroux wrote, in 1975, that he, after reading *Inside Mr. Enderby* twelve times, had committed to memory those sections that describe Enderby's stepmother, because he considered them so marvelously done. The fictional Theroux of *My Other Life* says of "Burgess," "I never knew any writer who worked harder or was more generous" [217]. Here, it seems, the real life and the fiction perfectly coalesce. *Babel Tower* can remind readers that

Burgess was a most trenchant and prolific book reviewer, one of the very best literary journalists of our time. It reminds us too that in person Burgess was engaging, formidable, imposing yet friendly, amusing, and, of course, wonderfully articulate--very much, in his own phrase, a "word boy." Each book, especially Theroux's, is in some ways "troubling." Today, of course, that is more a recommendation for them than anything else. We valorize the disruptive, the marginal, the transgressive, and the unruly with the expectation that our encounters with them will yield cultural, political, and psychoanalytic insights more important than aesthetic pleasure alone. Burgess, a man on the margin in several ways, would probably be prone to agree in some ways with these sentiments, and also to disagree vehemently. The two books discussed would have interested him. His comments would have interested us.

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