

Anthony Burgess In The Yorkshire Post

By [Andrew Biswell](#)

The circular Brotherton Library, built in 1936, stands at the heart of the city campus of the University of Leeds. The university buildings, including the magnificent library, are loftily dismissed as "a bad moment" by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in his architectural gazetteer, *The Buildings of England: Yorkshire West Riding* (second edition, Penguin, 1967, p. 329). Yet beneath the Brotherton's impressive dome stands a remarkable set of archives, including the private papers of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the records of the Independent Labour Party (among whose prominent members were George Orwell and Graham Greene). The Brotherton Library also holds a complete collection of back numbers of *The Yorkshire Post*, the most significant regional newspaper of the North of England, whose editorial offices are in Leeds. Like most English newspapers, the *Yorkshire Post* has no published index, but a few months ago I visited the Brotherton (with Russell Thorne, my research assistant) in search of Anthony Burgess's "lost" journalism from the early 1960s. The purpose of this short article is to describe – and, for the first time, to catalogue – what we found there.

Burgess was hired by the *Yorkshire Post* as a fiction reviewer in January 1961. He wrote a fortnightly column on new novels until May 1963, contributing a total of 65 long articles over this period. He reviewed four or five novels in each piece, but it is worth noting that he was simultaneously writing for *The Listener* and *The Observer*, as well as working regularly for BBC Radio. While writing for the *Yorkshire Post*, Burgess also published six novels: *Devil of a State*, *One Hand Clapping*, *The Worm and the Ring*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Wanting Seed* and *Inside Mr Enderby*.

His fellow contributors to the books pages were a distinguished bunch: they included the novelist and translator Peter Green, the historian Asa (later Lord) Briggs, the Yeats scholar A. Norman Jeffares (who taught at Leeds University in the 1960s), Bonamy Dobrée (an influential critic and close friend of T.S. Eliot), and the literary historian David Daiches. It is clear from this list that the *Yorkshire Post's* literary editor, Kenneth Young, had taken care to assemble a stable of high-calibre reviewers. It seems that Burgess had been recommended to the vacant post of fiction critic by Peter Green, who had reviewed *Time for a Tiger* on its first publication in 1956.

The interest of Burgess's reviews is considerable, not least because, taken together, they give us a clear picture of what he was reading over the course of these twenty-eight months. Most of the novels he covered have long since sunk without trace, but (as my bibliography shows) a number of significant post-war works came under his scrutiny during this period: Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*; Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*; Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*; two novels by Iris Murdoch; John Updike's first two books; new novels by William Faulkner, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh, Christine Brooke-Rose and John Braine; and Graham Greene's non-fiction book, *In Search of a Character*. We might say, in fact, that this reviewing job laid the ground for Burgess's long study of contemporary fiction, *The Novel Now* (Faber, 1967; new edition, 1971). Beyond this, the reviews provide an intriguing chronicle of new fiction, as well as various examples of Burgess's journalism at its best.

One of the genuinely surprising features of Burgess's fiction columns is that he often uses them as a means of discussing his own theory of the novel. For example, on 25 January 1962, he writes that most contemporary novels are like "metallic beefburgers, dry pasta, flat television meals [...] fashionable maybe, speciously tasty, perhaps – but not likely to stick to one's ribs." This gives rise to a speculation about what might give the novel "nutritious solidity". His answer involves "More than length, variety of characters, scenic richness." What Burgess demands is "moral depth, a concern with the roots of action and the consequences of unconsidered actions, a willingness to enter the labyrinth."

Reviewing Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* on 28 June 1962, Burgess was once again looking for nutritious solidity, but he was not convinced that Heller had enough of it to offer:

Catch 22 is a satire on War, and its theme is the unheroic one of how to survive it. It is an orchestration of *Arms and the Man* (Shaw, being an English liberal, was always too moderate) and Captain Yossarian is bigger, tougher, more neurotic, more intellectual, than any chocolate soldier [...] He sees the enemy quite simply as the people who have no objection to his dying, and these are to be found on both sides.

[...] All this is fine, funny, bitter, but underneath the implied ethos is there not something of that William Saroyan sentimentality that came out sickeningly in the novel about Wesley Jackson – that ordinary men are all decent whatever their nation, and don't really love their big-jowled leaders?

One knows that the Second World War was a case of defending the bad against the worse, but what was a democrat to do when faced by Hitler's children in arms? The thesis of *Catch 22* (a brilliantly contrived book) can only be universally valid when the whole world has been absorbed into the American empire.

This is judiciously put, but it is interesting to compare Burgess's contemporary review with his later, more enthusiastic, critical statements in *The Novel Now* (pp. 54-55) and *Ninety-Nine Novels*

Now
describes
Catch 22

(p. 79). In
The Novel
he

as "America's most recent major contribution to war fiction," and says that Heller's approach to fiction is "surrealistic, absurd, even lunatic, though the aim is serious enough – to show the mess of war, the victimization of the conscripts, the monstrous egotism of the top brass."

It seems to me that the importance of the *Yorkshire Post* review is that it was written before Heller's novel had acquired its international reputation. Burgess's initial hesitations and reservations are serious ones, and he's concerned that historical novels, particularly those dealing with the events of recent history, should give a morally honest account of the real world to which they refer.

The review of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (15 November 1962) goes to great lengths to correct the general perception of Nabokov as the "smutty" author of *Lolita*, and it draws a firm distinction between the narrator of that novel and Nabokov himself, who is said to be crazy not for nymphets but for words alone. "His love affair with the English language achieves a prolonged consummation in *Pale Fire*," Burgess tells his readers.

Explaining the complicated interaction between Shade, the deceased author of the 999-line "Pale Fire" poem within the novel, and Kinbote, the poem's fictional editor, Burgess pronounces this book a satisfying return to form after the slight disappointment of *Laughter in the Dark* (which he had reviewed in the *Yorkshire Post* of 23 March 1961):

Some of the satire is uproarious: Nabokov is primarily a great humorist. But the real joy of the book is the joy the author takes in the manipulation of language, the deliberate naughty perverting of literature, the thrown-away build-up of Kinbote's eccentric personality, the modern America that is always, like some loved furry beast with odd habits, lurking in the Nabokovian background.

Part of Burgess's pleasure in this novel is the prospect that some readers (aware of *Lolita's* scandalous reputation) would be buying it in the expectation of finding smut between its covers, and discovering instead that they had been sold a perfectly chaste satire against literary pedantry.

When Burgess turns his attention to Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (on 3 May 1962), he does so with evident mixed feelings. His review finds it difficult to conceal an overwhelming sense that the novel (which has gone on to become one of Lessing's most prominent books) is a deeply flawed work:

I am late with the new Doris Lessing. I make no apology: it has taken me a long time to read (568 pages of close print) and at the end of it all I feel cheated. This talented writer has attempted an experiment which has failed, essayed a scale which is beyond her. [...] This is a book of revolt – political, social, sexual. Anna [the heroine] became a Communist in South Africa, seeing in Communism a "moral energy" not to be found in other creeds or in the long-entrenched privileged class. Anna is also concerned with being a "free woman" – rebelling against traditional male dominance – and with achieving maximal erotic fulfilment. [...] There is no doubt about the great moral virtues here – intelligence, honesty, integrity – but it is the aesthetic virtues that seem to be lacking. The characters do not really interest us: when we have dialogue it is strangely unnatural [...] Mrs Lessing's old singleness of vision, her strength as a writer, is not to be found here.

Again, this review needs to be considered alongside his later critical statements in *The Novel Now* (pp. 101-02) and *Ninety-Nine Novels* (p. 86). The second of these declares, with the benefit of twenty-two years' hindsight, that

The Golden Notebook

is "an historical document of some importance," though the praise is carefully qualified even so. The real fascination of comparing these critical utterances is that of seeing Burgess's response to a particular novel as it evolves over time. Whether or not he consistently undervalues Lessing's ground-breaking feminist novel (and the question must remain, for now, an open one), the original review shows us what he thought in the immediate aftermath of a first reading.

Above all, these

Yorkshire Post

reviews communicate the excitement of encountering a range of literary novels, devouring them at speed, and offering a provisional critique of them.

Although the majority of these reviews seem generous and fair-minded, Burgess was not afraid to administer a kicking on those rare occasions when the book seemed to demand it. Of Graham Greene's autobiographical fragment, *In Search of a Character* (reviewed on 23 November 1961), he says: "This is hardly a book at all: combings and cigarette-ends of observation, tired *pensé*
es, the

spores of a novelist's creative agony, all set in what we can only think of now as Querry's country." Querry, of course, is the ecclesiastical architect who is the main character in Greene's novel,

A Burnt-Out Case

(1961). The review continues:

Surely Greene has, in his time, told us plenty about himself? True, he has – the drinking, the tendency to easy ennui, the pessimism, sex – but the core will always remain unprobed. We learn a little more in this journal, but never enough. We can never know enough about any major writer, because what makes him a major writer is the innermost mystery of his personality, never to be disclosed.

The problem with publishing the preliminary notes to a work of fiction, as Greene had done here, is that "a novel is always greater than its parts." Greene, it's argued, "did not find Querry here, nor Dr Colin, nor the Rykers: they came from a bigger and darker world than Africa – the creative imagination." (Incidentally, Norman Sherry overlooks this review in his authorized *Life of Graham Greene*, as do the compilers of other reference works on Greene. I should therefore like to claim it as a minor bibliographical discovery.)

Of more direct interest to readers of the Malayan trilogy is Burgess's review of Alan Sillitoe's *Key to the Door* (reviewed on 19 Oct 1961), a novel set both in Nottingham and in Malaya, where the young Sillitoe had done his National Service during the Emergency of the 1950s. Burgess had very

much admired Sillitoe's first novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), but he found the Malayan sections of *Key to the Door* to be lacking from several angles:

Young Brian [the book's central character] seems to grouse through a dripping and frightening jungle-and-mountain landscape completely without (if we except his grouching mates) human figures. We hear of the Malaysians, and wonder which of the Malayan races he means. Occasionally a Malay, clad for some reason in a sari, glides through. [...] It is the complete lack of concern or even minimal interest in people other than the ingrowing group of working-class lads that appals. But one is also appalled morally. Brian cannot see the Chinese Communists as enemies. His failure to kill off a terrorist who eventually snipes at his own mates merits no condemnation. The political naiveté of the book is incredible. But, to be just, there is life and a certain poetry [...] Nobody is going to deny Mr Sillitoe's talent. He needs more than talent now: he needs to grow up.

Looking back on the year's fiction on 28 December 1961, Burgess returned to Sillitoe's book and made his objections even clearer. The novel, he said, had "completely falsified" the Malayan jungle war. "For those of us who, living in terrorist territory, saw the garrotted bodies of our friends, the political naiveté of a book like this is nauseating. I am aware, of course, that this is not an aesthetic judgement." These passionate attacks on Sillitoe's position must surely cause us to regard the comedy of Burgess's Malayan novels in a new light.

Given that Burgess later produced, in 1982, a long novel which described the end of the world from three different points of view, what are we to make of the following short review (published on 27 July 1961)?

Finally, as this is the holiday season, a little self-indulgence. *And So Ends the World* [by Richard Pape] is one of those delightfully cosy books described as "a prophetic and terrifying novel of cosmic holocaust." It is rather like Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript*, though far more stately. The moon, you see, comes out of its orbit. Frightening and lovely, to be taken with a pound of soft centres and some really fizzy lemonade.

This is, in fact, remarkably close to the plot of the Lynx chapters in Burgess's own *The End of the World News*. Richard Pape's novel would surely bear further investigation as one of the sources behind the Burgess book.

It's worth saying a few words, too, about the forgotten writers who came under review in these columns. I wonder what became of novelists such as Niccolò Tucci ("very large and very impressive") Sloan Wilson (whose novel, claimed Burgess, did not advance the cause of literature one iota) or Glendon Swarthout (who "creates his own climate" and "leaves his own strange taste"), all reviewed on 18 April 1963.

Elsewhere, the reviews throw up a few surprising and hitherto little-known facts: that Burgess had bought and admired Michael Innes's series of detective thrillers; that he had read Phyllis Bottome's novels as a student in the 1930s and deplored her prose-style; that he regarded the French "anti-novel" (as practised by Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet) as "an heretical concept".

Burgess was probably right to feel aggrieved at his sudden dismissal for having written about one of his pseudonymous "Joseph Kell" novels (on 16 May 1963). In fact he was far from unique in having reviewed his own book: even James Joyce was not above collaborating on an early review of *Finnegans Wake*. But perhaps we should reflect instead on the very many reviews he wrote without being sacked. As so often in his journalistic writing, Burgess's tireless energy and the encyclopaedic range of his interests are the qualities which particularly strike the reader. Unlike most book reviewers, he hardly ever repeats himself: his prose is unfailingly lively, often getting carried away with its own rhetoric, and it goes well beyond the standard clichés of books pages. Reading through these reviews forty years after they first appeared, the thought keeps striking me that each article is crafted to an unusual degree. The best of them would be worth republishing in book form -- if only an enlightened publisher could be found who would be willing to produce a scholarly edition of Burgess's literary journalism.

In his book, *The Metropolitan Critic* (1974; new edition with autocritique, 1994), the poet, novelist and reviewer Clive James replies to Burgess's comments about the conflict between journalism and the supposedly more legitimate forms of literary writing. Disputing Burgess's much-repeated claims that reviewing was mere hack-work and a distraction from novel-writing, James says: "If Burgess's literary journalism was meant to be such an inherently inferior activity he might have done us the grace of being worse at it, so that we could have saved the money it cost to buy *Urgent Copy* and the time it took to enjoy it" (p. 274). James adds that Burgess was "the man who actually gets written the novels that other men only dream of writing," implying that his extensive reviewing work had had no detrimental effect on the quality of his fiction.

Indeed, I would argue that Burgess's involvement in the business of reviewing other people's novels possibly altered his own writing for the better. His *Yorkshire Post* reviews (among other

journalistic work) eventually gave us two important books about the state of the novel after 1939. They also gave Burgess a clear sense of what the competition was up to, and of how and why his own novels should be different.

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