

**THE ROLE OF THE NARRATOR IN “MAN OF NAZARETH” BY ANTHONY
BURGESS**

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with description specificity of the narrator in the novel “Man of Nazareth” by Anthony Burgess. Azor is definitely one of the most significant characters in the novel. We can assume that the images of the author and the narrator seem to be identical and Burgess’s main ideas are sent by Azor. The article gives a particular attention to the analysis of the narrative features of Azor. Under the guise of the narrator Burgess engages in polemics with evangelists, giving the author’s interpretation of the gospels, which he understands in a different way. His interpretation of the characters is not very different from the well-known versions of apocryphal stories. But at the same time, the narrator becomes some kind of victim of the author. Giving his own interpretation of the Apostles’ archetypal features and the image of Jesus Christ, Burgess also compromises the origin nature of the narrator. The author gives him the name of the son of Sadoc, the ancestor of Jesus Christ, tearing the Old Testament connection.

Keywords: English literature of the twentieth century, Anthony Burgess, Man of Nazareth, the image of the narrator.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a large number of literary interpretations of Jesus Christ's life. "The Master and Margarita" by M. Bulgakov, "The Gospel According to Jesus" by J. Saramago, "The Gospel According to the Son of God" by N. Meiler, "The Last Temptation of Christ" by N. Kazandzakis, "The Life of Jesus" by E. Renan are among the most famous ones. The novel *Man of Nazareth* (1979) by Anthony Burgess is one of such interpretations. This novel belongs to "the biblical trilogy"¹ of the writer, which also includes the works of *Moses* (1976) and *The Kingdom of the Wicked* (1985). The novel *Man of Nazareth* has become the subject of attention of the scholars more than once [1-3]. In Russian literary criticism, the articles "Temptation of Christ in the Novels of E. Burgess and N. Mailer" by N.S. Bochkareva [4], where the image of Christ is analyzed, "Function of the Images of the Apostles in E. Burgess's Novel "Man of Nazareth" by L. F. Khabibullina [5], "Interpretation of the Archetypal Features of the Images of the Apostles in E. Burgess's "bible" trilogy" by A.G. Gainutdinova [6] and some others cover this Burgess's novel. The novelty of this work is to consider the image of the narrator from the viewpoint of narration organization. The narrator, not being an eyewitness to the events, but only their translator and interpreter, remains, like a central character, a kind of connecting center between the author and the reader

METHODS

This paper uses the method of narrative analysis, special attention is devoted to the study of the position of the narrator in the fictional reality created by the author, high emphasis is also paid on the interaction of the author's level and the level of the narrator.

RESULTS

It is generally believed that the work by A. Burgess is based on the scenario of Franco Zeffirelli's television version of *Jesus of Nazareth* of 1977. However, the famous monogram of J. Stinson notes: "Some Burgess remarks, however, seem to indicate that the creation of the novel and the miniseries were nearly simultaneous – that he was writing the novel during intervals when he was not being pressed for script revision" [2:137-138]. "In its method, the novel never wanders too far away from its sibling, the television script", - writes he [2:138]. In view of this fact, one can conclude, that both versions for the author were of equal importance. It is known that "The King Jacob Bible"² had a significant influence on Catholic Burgess, but in preparation for writing the novel *Man of Nazareth*, Anthony Burgess reread, in addition to the traditional English Bible, also the New Testament in Greek, the books on the history of

the Roman Empire, Josephus's texts about the Jews, "instructions" on the technique of carrying out the crucifixion, since, in the author's opinion, some Gospels would not be sufficient for an accurate depiction of details. Plunging into details, Burgess thus strayed from the very text of the Bible, considering it somewhat illogical and inaccurate. "They're good propagandists but bad historians, and they'd never make a Fiction Writers' Union" - writes Burgess about evangelicals [7: 36]. From this point of view, "*Man of Nazareth*" is an attempt of author's interpretation of traditional biblical images. So, for example, the author reinterprets the image of Judas, subjecting it to a complete transformation: "Judas, in fact, had to be remade from scratch" [7:36]. In order to avoid the biblical "blur", Burgess endows twelve apostles with specific features, who, in his opinion, are not sufficiently characterized in the Gospels: "I had to bestow qualities on them which would make them clearly recognizable, even when they were all there in the round dozen. Not easy; far too easy to let them blur together into twelve interchangeable bewildered bearded artisans in dirty smocks" [7:37]. In his own way, the author approaches portraiture of the main character, considering that the main task of the work is not so much the narrative of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, but rather of the specific "earthly" facts of his existence, the writer considers it important first of all to describe the human qualities of his character, that the title of the novel focuses on.

It is quite obvious that for an author, brought up in the Catholic tradition, like Anthony Burgess, who returns to the problems of faith throughout his life and understands the significance of the biblical canon for a huge number of people, any "liberty" in interpreting the image of Christ requires an extremely delicate approach and special means, which can constitute justification for such liberties; the introduction of an image of the narrator becomes such means. This method is prepared by the very Gospels that have already given the first different interpretations of the image of Jesus. Being thoroughly familiar with M. Bulgakov's novel "*The Master and Margarita*"³, naturally Burgess also knew the "trick" given in the novel of the Russian writer, which allows modern authors to make endless interpretations of Christ's life; so in the novel Yehoshua says Pontius Pilate about Levi Matthew: "One walks, walks alone with a goat parchment and writes something continuously. But I have once looked into this parchment and was horrified. I did not say absolutely nothing of what is written there. I implored him: burn your parchment for God's sake! But he tore it from my hands and ran away" [9:18]. The presence of "narrators" - Evangelists and the obvious possibility of doubt in their testimonies gives occasion for modern authors to introduce their own "true" narrators, as Bulgakov did it in his time.

Another reason for making an author's interpretation of the life of Christ is given by the gaps (or omissions) in the canonical texts, which, according to F. Kermode, attract Burgess, as a famous "puzzle-solver". Kermode believes that it is with the purpose of filling these gaps that Burgess introduces into the novel the image of the narrator of Azor, whose task is not simply to relate from the first person, but to logically "complete" the biblical plot through the author's interpretation [1].

Despite the fact that Azor narrates about the events of the past, in which he did not take part, he is undoubtedly one of the most significant characters in the novel. The author delegates many of his past and present views to the narrator. So, Burgess himself with the aid of the narrator enters into controversy with Evangelists, giving the Gospels his own treatment, which does not purport to be "sacred text" though, but cannot be only "pure diversion", as Azor is "supposed to be writing before the Gospels appeared" [1]. Nevertheless, in the novel one can clearly trace the links with all four "canonical" Gospels in the depiction of each single event (the phenomenon of the Magi, the birth of John the Baptist, etc.). Azor, being "no Christian" and "non-believer", expresses the position of the author who, knowing about the writer's philosophical predilections, can be defined as Manichaean. Manichaeism, as is known, operates with categories of a dualistic nature, affirming the presence of two opposing forces, the struggle of which determines the state of the world. This dualistic picture of the world, to which, in a certain period, Anthony Burgess himself inclined, is vividly represented by Azor. Though the narrator says that he does not set the target to talk about Good and Evil, nevertheless he expresses a specific point of view: "His is the evil, else he would be walking in the streets, a good and honest citizen, laughing in the taverns, playing with his children... Yet the evil done by the crucified was to himself a sort of good, or he would not have pursued it to the limit of his own death; and the evil done by the agents of the crucifixion is presented as a means of protecting and preserving the commonalty and keeping it good and also happy" [10:5]. Following the Manichean tradition, the narrator, according to Kermode, describes the very process of crucifixion as something wrong and unnatural [1]. Azor thoroughly acquaints the reader with the procedure of the crucifixion, giving his own assessment of this process: "I do not approve this mode of punishing the state's offenders, and I am with Cicero in considering it a most horrible form of death, unworthy of an advanced civilization..." [10: 5].

Assuming possible interpretations of the narrator's image, the author admonishes against jumping to conclusions, pointing out that Azor is "no moral philosopher", "no arbiter of the game", but a narrator who tells a little and plain story but with zest [10: 356-357]. Azor is a

free narrator whose main task is to make four evangelical narratives confluent [1], thereby constructing a model of the surrounding reality plotted out by Burgess. He is as a **translator** of history, who organizes the harmonious course of the narrative, making a switch of one event to another: “WetravelnorthandofJudaeatoHa-Galil...” [10: 19] или “You will have heard of the three wise men, or magi...” [10: 48]. The significance of the narrator’s figure for the author is also manifested in the attempts to offer him a “place” in history: for example, references to the figure of Azor we see later in the third part of the biblical trilogy by A. Burgess - the novel “Kingdom of the Wicked” (1985), where the narration is from Sadoc, the son of Azor, who often mentions his father [11]. Everything in many ways confirms the position of Kermode, who is so confident in the confluence of the author and the narrator that he calls him Azor-Burgess [1]. However, in our opinion, it is needless to speak of a complete embodiment, given the narrator his own subjectivity, which was introduced by the author by no means accidental.

Azor appears in the novel as an explicit narrator, exhibiting his personal traits in some cases. Thus, Azor considers himself to be an exemplary narrator, since, in his opinion, only “no Christian” and “non-believer” is capable of giving “disinterested recording” of Jesus Christ’s life like no one else. However, this does not negate his subjectivity in presenting the story known to all, which is opposed to the subjectivity of the evangelists (thus, once again the question of their subjectivity is raised). For example, the narrator categorically denies the fact of the resurrection of Lazarus, but is sure of the existence of archangel Gabriel [3: 180]. Azor differently views the betrayal of Judas, who appears in the novel as an unfortunate character, slightly reckless, but fascinated by Jesus and confident of his divine destiny. The author-narrator rehabilitates the character of Mary Magdalene, whose earnings “go to the purchase of the precious ointment and the seamless robe” [1]. All this allows us to state that Azor is not only as a translator, but also as **an interpreter** of the story of Christ, which gives him, as S. Coale notes, perception of the surrounding reality far from rational.

His interpretation also gives a description of his own character. Thus, at the beginning of the work Azor assesses his own personality and, in spite of his high level of education, erudition and perfect knowledge of several languages, we see that the narrator is ironic in his statements about himself: “I am called in Greek by various names: Psilos, meaning the Tall One, since I am below the average in size; Leptos, meaning the Thin One, as I am inclined to plumpness; Makarious, meaning, among other things, fortunate” – admits he [10: 3]. He is also derisive in the final, considering himself as a narrator and giving a concluding assessment of his work: “This story of mine makes no claim to be a sacred text,

but it does not base itself either to the level of a pure diversion" [10: 354]. Such an explication of the narrator at the beginning and at the end is very characteristic of archaic texts, where the author (or the scribe) mentions himself only at the beginning and / or at the end of the narrative (for example, in "The Song of Roland"), however, the modern approach is manifested precisely in the author's irony, rendered through the self-irony of the narrator.

DISCUSSION

In this regard, we can say that the element of the author's fiction relation to the narrative is translated through the narrator. The need for a game approach to life is legitimized through an appeal to the figures of God the Creator and his son Jesus. God, according to Burgess, is "laughing God", which is "dearly loves a jest" [10:17]. It is God only with a sense of humor, according to Burgess, who can choose, for example, the "long past child-bearing" woman for the birth of John the Baptist instead of a virgin, and the virgin for the birth of the Messiah: "It is God's humour that his son and the prophet of his son should be conceived where conception is impossible" [10: 30]. The narrator says: "It is said by some that the creator of the universe made it in sport and maintains it as a diversion... and I am half-inclined to believe it" [10: 354]. The life given to man by God is "a little more than a game", it is the game of duty and responsibility, it is "the game of forbearance", "the game of turning the other cheek". Those who win a victory in this game, win a just reward – "the kingdom of heaven". Asor says that "the game makes life uncommonly interesting", but only the eligible ones can go through the game to the end, those who do not take the life "too seriously". "Jesus and his men did not take life seriously at all", - says the narrator [10: 355]. Ordinary people are distinguished by inability of being frivolous, which is inherent in the whole nature of being, which is proved by a popular biblical citation about lilies: «frivolous like the lilies of the field and do not try... playing the game of forbearance and charity" [10: 357]. Asor believed, "that Jesus was a great man, playing a beautiful game of which the rules are to love and take nothing seriously" [1]. Christ is compared in this relation to one of the evangelists, Matthew: "Matthew had to be rescued from taken it seriously, as we have seen, but the rest of the followers were men who possessed nothing, and hence had nothing they could take seriously" [10: 357], which implicitly refers to the already quoted Bulgakov's text and simultaneously should convince the reader of the advantages of this version.

Continuation of the assertion of the game approach to the representation of the classic story is the author's play with the image of the very narrator, which manifests itself in the fact that

Burgess makes Azor responsible for those moments of the novel that are too obviously different from the biblical text and from the Christian canon in general [1]. Indeed, “the involved” moments of the author’s interpretation, such as, for example, the description of Joseph’s male incapacity and, on the contrary, a rather detailed description of Jesus’s sexual life, Lazarus’s “posthumous life”, which was “wholly vicious” and “did not last long, ending as it did at the points of knives in a tavern brawl” [10: 238], are shifted on to Azor as the only narrator. From this point of view, the narrator is responsible for the whole world, imagined and portrayed by Burgess in the novel.

Shifting responsibility onto the narrator, Burgess challenges the very origin and existence of Azor: “...so I give my name, which is Azor the son of Sadoc” [10:3]. In the third novel “The Kingdom of the Wicked” in continuation of this game Burgess writes: “My father was Azor the son of Sadoc, and I am Sadoc the son of, necessarily, Azor. In our family there has always been a feeble alternation of names, grandfather tossing the ball to grandson, and the custom goes back to time’s mists” [11:7]. By sight, an innocuous and elusive play of words leads to a complete loss of communication between the narrator and the biblical world in which he could exist⁴. But Burgess puts him in a world he invented, created, perhaps, as his Creator, only “in sport”.

SUMMARY

Azor is a storyteller interested, but not attached, carefree, and therefore “fortunate”. The novel “*Man of Nazareth*” by Anthony Burgess is an example of a multifunctional narrator, onto whom one can impose the responsibility for the authenticity of “the facts”, for the author’s interpretation of the figure of the main character, and for the translation of the author’s philosophy. The narrator’s figure is an essential and necessary component of that combination of the game and the author’s correctness in relation to such an important material as the biblical that provides the novel with its significant place in the series of biographies of Christ in the literature of the twentieth century.

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