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# The rise and fall of the Angry Young Men

31-39 minutes

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## Outline of The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men

All literary movements acquire enemies, but the Angry Young Men of the 1950s accumulated more than most. Why? Because, I suppose, the idea of writers demanding attention on the grounds that they are “angry” arouses the irritation we feel listening to the yells of a spoilt child.

In the case of John Osborne, the first writer to whom the label was applied, there was perhaps some justification in this reaction - as I listened to those self-pitying outbursts of his hero Jimmy Porter back in 1956, I felt that what he needed was a good smack across the head.

Still, the story of Osborne’s downward spiral, as a playwright and human being, is sad enough to satisfy the most vengeful of his critics, ending in the slide into alcoholism after his last play had been taken off because no one wanted to see it. The same descent into low-key tragedy can be felt about many other members of the movement: Kenneth Tynan, dying of emphysema from chain-smoking, Kingsley Amis, alcoholism, John Braine, depression and a burst ulcer, John Wain, discouragement, living off handouts from the Society of Authors. Among my contemporaries of that original Declaration group,

the only one who really developed was Doris Lessing, who moved from communism to a wider preoccupation with the evolution of consciousness..

On May 7, 1956, a new play called *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square. The author was a young actor/stage manager named John Osborne, and the play was actually a blast of rage directed at his ex-wife, actress Pamela Lane, from whom he had separated rather painfully. Osborne was working-class, Pamela was middle-class, and they had married secretly; however, her parents had learned about the wedding and came all the same - an episode that forms the subject of one of the play's best-known tirades.

*Look Back in Anger* was highly personal - an explosion of adolescent fury and misery that hardly seemed - to me - to deserve a West End premiere. But the English Stage Company, formed by actor-manager George Devine in the previous year, had had a series of flops, and urgently needed a success if it was to survive. Devine gambled on this play because, even if clumsy and immature, it was manifestly alive.

Sadly, the most of critics who attended that first night felt it was a failure, although a few of them were kind about it, since it was a first effort. It looked, after all, as if the English Stage Company was going to go into liquidation. But the following Sunday, they were granted the miracle they had been praying for. A controversial young drama critic named Kenneth Tynan gave *Look Back in Anger* a rave review in the *Observer*, hailing Osborne as the most important playwright since the war. Suddenly, Osborne found himself famous and the English Stage Company became solvent overnight.

I became part of this story because before the end of that month, it was my first book *The Outsider* that received an

unprecedented welcome in the two “serious” Sundays. I quite literally woke up that morning to find myself famous, one critic heading his review: “HE’S A MAJOR WRITER AND HE’S ONLY 24”. *The Outsider*, a study in alienated artists and writers, became a best-seller in the UK and America, and went into 16 languages in its first year.

I had written it in the Reading Room of the British Museum while sleeping in a sleeping bag on Hampstead Heath to save rent, and this (and my working-class background and lack of university education) is what the media concentrated on.

The popular press insisted on labelling Osborne and myself “Angry Young Men”, although I certainly wasn’t angry about anything. (I regarded *The Outsider* as a work of existentialist philosophy). But it was summertime and the silly season, when there was very little hard news to write about, and the press publicised the Angry Young Men for all they were worth, plunging us into a maelstrom of feeble-minded publicity.

Tynan was himself labelled an Angry Young Man, with more justification. At Oxford he had gone to considerable lengths to get himself noticed, wearing plum-coloured suits, lavender ties and a ruby signet ring, adorning the walls of his rooms with the knickers of his girlfriends, and advertising his taste for spanking their bottoms. (He told the audience at the Oxford Union: “My theme is: just a thong at twilight”.) His passion was the theatre, and he came to London hoping to become a director. When this failed, he became a theatre critic, whose outspoken and outrageous reviews soon made him feared and hated by every actor and producer in the West End. He pinned on his desk a notice: “Rouse tempers, goad and lacerate, raise whirlwinds”.

A Paris production by Brecht’s company, the Berliner Ensemble convinced him that this was what theatre ought to be

doing, and he promptly proclaimed himself a convert to Marxism (although, curiously enough, he preferred not to mention this in his “credo” in Declaration)..

So that first night of Look Back in Anger was just what he had been waiting for. Launching Osborne established him as the “king maker”.

Another brilliant young man had ambitions in the same direction. His name was Tom Maschler, and he was an editor at the publisher MacGibbon and Kee. Maschler decided to cash in on that summer of non-stop publicity by editing a book called Declaration, which purported to consist of the “credos” of its “Angry” contributors, including Osborne, myself, Tynan, the novelists John Wain and Doris Lessing, film-maker Lindsay Anderson, and two of my close friends, Bill Hopkins and Stuart Holroyd, whose first books appeared soon after Declaration. Although savaged by the critics, it certainly added to the furore surrounding the Angry Young Men. (Hopkins and Holroyd, I should add, soon regretted their inclusion as their books were also savaged.)

As the above list suggests, the phrase Angry Young Men was no longer confined to Osborne and myself. Lindsay Anderson was a left-wing film maker - in fact, a Marxist. John Wain was a poet and novelist who had attracted attention with his first novel *Hurry on Down* in 1952, about a hero who rejects the kind of respectable employment for which his university degree qualifies him, and prefers to drift from job to job. Doris Lessing came to London from Africa, and her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1949) had been an angry portrayal of the attitude of white males in Rhodesia towards women and blacks. Wain’s friend Kingsley Amis, who had achieved success with *Lucky Jim*, wisely declined to contribute to Declaration, thereby showing

more wisdom than Hopkins and Holroyd.

In fact, long before the end of 1956, everyone was sick of the Angry Young Man cult, including the popular newspapers that had launched it. In 1957, my second book *Religion and the Rebel* received an unprecedented panning from the same critics who had praised *The Outsider*. Osborne's second play *The Entertainer* escaped the backlash largely because Laurence Olivier played the lead, but the critics made up for it with the reception of his musical *The World of Paul Slickey*, a satire on gossip columnists, after which Osborne was actually chased down Shaftesbury Avenue by enraged members of the audience.

By this time the AYM movement had achieved too much momentum to fade away - particularly since the emergence of America's Beat Generation, and a volume called *Protest: The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* included contributions from Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs as well as myself, Osborne, Amis, Wain and John Braine.

The latter was a Yorkshire librarian from a working class background, who became famous when his novel *Room at the Top* was published in 1957. It was the story of a working class municipal clerk who seduces the pretty daughter of a wealthy factory owner, and ends by marrying her and becoming her father's business partner. The plot was to some extent autobiographical. Braine told me how he had fallen in love with a colonel's daughter who had allowed him to become her first lover, and decided that he had to make himself "worthy of her" by becoming a successful writer. He drew out all his savings and went to London, where he starved for six months, and had only a couple of articles accepted before he was sent back to

Yorkshire on a train with TB. The girl had by now decided to marry someone of “her own class”, and John learned about this while he was in hospital. It devastated him, and he wrote *Room at the Top* to get her out of his system.

After a dozen rejections, the book was accepted, and became a best-seller, as well as being turned into one of the most successful films of the Fifties.

Another working class writer, Alan Sillitoe, achieved the same kind of success with his novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. The hero is a young factory worker whose main interests in life are “pulling the birds” and getting drunk every Saturday night. This also became a highly successful film, like his story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

By early 1957, I had become aware that my only chance of continuing to write seriously was to move out of London. A poet who lived in the next room offered to rent me his cottage in Cornwall for thirty shillings a week; together with my girlfriend Joy, I moved there in early 1957, and we have been in Cornwall ever since.

After its spectacular beginnings, Osborne’s career became in many way anticlimactic. It was obvious to me after seeing *Look Back in Anger* that his basic problems were self-pity and failure to control his temper. This became clear to everyone in 1961 when he published in *Tribune* an open letter that started: “This is a letter of hate. It is for you my countrymen”, and went on: “Damn you, England. You’re rotting now, and quite soon you’ll disappear...”

Critics of his plays were not surprised; they had become accustomed to receiving abusive letters from him. When, in 1966, *The Times* listed in its diary column some negative reviews of his adaptation of Lope de Vega’s *A Bond Honoured*,

Osborne sent the newspaper a telegram announcing that he was now declaring “open and frontal war” on newspapers and their paid hacks.

Luther (1961) is a Brechtian play that is ultimately unsatisfactory because he failed to bring Luther’s personality into focus. Inadmissible Evidence (1964) is about a divorce lawyer who is on the verge of a mental breakdown because of a sense of personal inadequacy.

What became obvious in subsequent plays was that Osborne was writing much too fast (he admitted that his plays were thrown down on paper at top speed), and without real attention to workmanship. The result is a slapdash quality that led most critics to see a steady deterioration in the work of the Sixties. Ronald Hayman, whose book on Osborne is basically sympathetic, says of *Time Present* and *A Hotel in Amsterdam*: “What was most disappointing about them was a total lack of the energy that had made the earlier plays so exciting...”, and he says of the next play *West of Suez*: “There is very little shape or situation or action...” Of *A Sense of Detachment* (1972) in which an actor/manager sits on stage and exchanges chit-chat with the audience, *The Financial Times* remarked: “This must surely be his farewell to the theatre”. And indeed it was, virtually, for a play called *Watch it Come Down* (1974) was taken off after only a few performances.

There was still to come a sequel to *Look Back in Anger* called *Déjà vu* (1991) which was rejected by several managements, and when finally produced, dismissed by critics as self-absorbed and overlong. By the time he died of diabetes in 1994, Osborne had become an alcoholic.

The later career of Kenneth Tynan was equally a downward spiral. Although he claimed to be an extreme leftist (once getting

himself locked in the BBC overnight with the intention of setting it on fire) he nevertheless adored the trappings of success and celebrity, and loved to mix with the famous. He revolutionised both the British and American theatre by devising *Oh Calcutta*, with nakedness and sex on stage for the first time.

Several books about him have appeared since his death, (including one by his wife), and interest in him has remained steady, including three biographies, his diaries, letters and a one-man show about him.

This is undoubtedly due in part to a morbid interest in following the decline of his career, and in his sexual obsessions. He became literary adviser to the National Theatre, although Laurence Olivier's dislike of him made it a difficult relationship; but his enthusiasm for plays with a social content led to some bad misjudgements that caused him to be demoted and virtually sacked. His profiles of the famous in the *New Yorker* have led to the accusation that he was partly responsible for today's vacuous celebrity culture.

Predictably, there is much in these books about his obsession with bottoms and spanking. He even enjoyed threesomes in which he and a regular spanking partner played a count and countess, and one of his pick-ups the dishonest ladies' maid who has to be chastised. (It was a taste he and Osborne shared; Tynan wrote in his diary: "I love little pink anuses", said John at one point; and it was confirmed - what I'd known at second hand for years - that John is as entranced by smacked bottoms and open bumholes as I am".) But one vigorous session caused some painful damage to his penis. And after another night of peculiar indulgences, his journal records that he awoke from a dream of girls covered in dust and excrement "filled with horror". "At once dogs in the hotel began to bark pointlessly, as they are



said to do when the King of Evil, invisible to man, passes by”.

After he caused a scandal by saying “fuck” on television (which led to questions being asked in parliament) Mary Whitehouse wrote indignantly to the Queen saying that he ought to have his bottom spanked.

His last years recall Shakespeare’s phrase “an expense of spirit in a waste of shame”. His wife tells how he was filled with rage and bitterness towards fate when he learned he had emphysema, apparently disinclined to apportion some of the blame to his habit of smoking forty cigarettes a day. He died of it in 1980, at the age of 53.

Of Kingsley Amis, it might be said that his decline was caused by taking up an unsustainable attitude and sticking to it. The attitude in question was admiration for the “ordinary chap” who regards culture as an affectation. Lucky Jim is a satire on the recorder-playing, folk-dancing crowd at a provincial university (based on Leicester, where Philip Larkin was working). The “ordinary chap”, junior lecturer Jim Dixon, is contrasted with the pretentious bores who talk in drawling upper-class voices and dote on “filthy Mozart”. Dixon had decided to teach mediaeval history because it was a “soft option”, but everything about his job and his colleagues reduces him to “orgiastic boredom” and rage. (Perhaps Amis’s attitude was influenced by the fact that his own thesis on Victorian poetry had been turned down at Oxford, and he was forced to take a teaching job in Swansea.)

The frustration and disgust induced by Jim Dixon’s job has made him incapable of distinguishing - or wanting to distinguish - between cultural affectation and intellectual seriousness. He assumes them to be the same thing. The same was true of Amis. Even Larkin, who had been his closest friend at Oxford,

and who had helped him write *Lucky Jim*, found his “lowbrowism” irritating, writing to his girlfriend: “I sought his company because it gave me a wonderful sense of relief - I’ve always needed this ‘fourth form friend’, with whom I can pretend things are not as I know they are... Now I don’t feel like pretending any longer... He doesn’t like books. He doesn’t like reading. And I wouldn’t take his opinion on anything, books, people, places...” Larkin’s characterisation of Amis as a fourth former goes to the heart of the problem. I suspect that, like Jim Dixon’s disproportionate loathing of the culture crowd, it sprang out of some kind of inferiority complex.

When I saw Amis’s review of *The Outsider* in the *Spectator*, I was not surprised that it was entitled “The Legion of the Lost”, and began: “Here they come - tramp, tramp, tramp - all those characters you thought were discredited, or had never read, or (if you were like me) had never heard of: Barbusse, Sartre, Camus...” I took this for a tongue-in-cheek pose, Amis pretending to be the intellectual barbarian.

When I met Amis, not long after his *Spectator* review, I found him likeable, as everybody did. For many years, during which we met occasionally at parties or in television studios or literary gatherings, I regarded him as a friend. It was not until after his death, when I read his vitriolic comments on me to Larkin in his collected letters, that I realised that, where I was concerned, there was a genuine dislike tinged with alarm. It was then that I understood that the attitude he had expressed in the review was more than a flippant affectation.

The problem with living out a false attitude is that it inflicts unseen damage and blocks personal growth. For Amis, Dostoevsky, Sartre and the rest were “glum chums”, who could quite validly be ignored in favour of a pint in the local. Some

inner dissatisfaction made him a lifelong abuser of alcohol and a serial adulterer. There is a photograph of him lying on a foreign beach with his back to the camera, on which his first wife has written in lipstick: '1 FAT ENGLISHMAN. I FUCK ANYTHING'. Shortly after it was taken, they separated.

In her autobiography, his second wife, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, tells the depressing story of their increasing alienation due to Amis's heavy drinking and his tendency to escape to the Garrick Club or Bertorellis for long lunches with right-wing cronies. (As he grew older, the one-time communist became increasingly right-wing). This made her feel increasingly sidelined and ignored.

The breakdown of their marriage becomes understandable when she notes his attitude to women: "He regarded them as intellectually inferior, and often as 'pests', hanging about and getting in the way, and interrupting men. Women were for bed and board..." But alcohol had destroyed even his enthusiasm for bed by his late fifties.

Although he seemed friendly enough when we met, there was always an element of ambivalence in his attitude towards me. Wain told me how, at a publisher's party, he and Amis came out on to the flat roof, Amis drunk as usual, and when they saw me standing with a friend at the edge of the roof, Amis said: "Look, there's that bugger Wilson - I'm going to push him off", and lurched towards me. Wain grabbed him and held him back. I was totally oblivious of what was going on as I stood talking to Bill Hopkins, and only learned about it years later.

His friend John Wain was basically a more serious writer, but his good qualities were overshadowed by a self-preoccupation of which he is obviously quite unconscious, and which imparts to his work an irritating air of egocentrism.

Hurry on Down made his reputation as early as 1953, but was soon overtaken by the fame of Lucky Jim, and throughout Wain's life, his friend's greater success never ceased to rankle.

Like Amis, Wain was a serial seducer, but there is something about his attitude to women, as it emerges in his novels - his sexual opportunism and tendency to treat them as sex objects - that is curiously off-putting, a flavour of selfishness, as if the purpose of his "conquests" is to prove something to himself.

This also came across in his rather prickly personality, which had a touch of paranoia. He took himself extremely seriously, having no doubt that he was a great writer who would one day win the Nobel Prize, and obviously experiencing immense frustration as novel after novel seemed to bring him no nearer to his goal. The problem here was that he saw himself as a humourist, but that his humour is too broad and farcical, as if he is determined to be funny, so that he seldom succeeds in creating character, only caricature.

It is the curiously obsessive egoism that spoils his biggest and most serious novel *A Winter in the Hills* (1971). Here the hero, an academic, goes to Wales to learn Welsh, planning to get a job at the University of Uppsala, which he hopes will be full of long-legged blondes with good teeth and a casual attitude to sex; but after two unsuccessful attempts at seducing local girls, he settles for stealing the wife of a bus driver who has been kind to him. For me at least, the book has - as the critic Kenneth Allsop said about two earlier novels - "a repellently cold and scaly feel" about it.

While Amis plays at being the anti-intellectual, Wain goes one further and poses as the intellectual who wishes to sound anti-intellectual - that is, practical, down to earth, even grumpy. This is somehow encapsulated in the photograph on the jacket of his

book on Dr Johnson, showing the author in a flat cloth cap, as if telling the reader that, although a professor of literature, his feet are firmly on the ground. The brisk dedication to the book: "Ken's", seems designed to emphasise the point.

In mid-life, Wain's career began to falter, and he lived as a freelance journalist and writer. In later life he was often seriously short of money, and ended by being subsidised by the Royal Literary Fund. He died in 1994, the year before Amis.

The story of John Braine also contains an element of tragedy. When I first met him - soon after *Room at the Top* - he was agonising about what to write next. And he decided on another slice of autobiography, a novel called *The Vodi*, about a man lying in hospital with tuberculosis when he hears that his girl has dumped him. Predictably, this was a failure.

In 1960, he and I went to Leningrad together on a Russian ship; he was tormented by his anxiety about his next book, and although on the wagon when we set out, soon fell off it and spent much of his time gloomily boozing.

I had taken my wife Joy, but John made the mistake of leaving his wife behind. He got home earlier than expected, to find her in a compromising situation, and plunged even deeper into alcoholism. But at least it did him some good, for it gave him the idea of a sequel to *Room at the Top* in which the hero returns home unexpectedly to find his wife in bed with someone else. *Life at the Top* was a great success and was turned into a film.

Unfortunately, he once again found himself facing the problem of what to write next, and produced a number of novels with an autobiographical element, some of them (like *The Queen of a Distant Country*) excellent. But when he had used up the autobiography, he began to write novels about couples in the

stockbroker belt who spend their time in one another's beds.

John was a great admirer of the American John O'Hara, who specialised in huge "social novels", each requiring enormous preparation, examining some small section of American society, usually the well-off. But Braine was simply not geared to this kind of writing. He was at his best writing about something he knew well.

He tried his hand at spy novels about a Catholic agent (he was Catholic) who has to cross himself before killing someone, but then moved back to thinly disguised autobiography in two painfully slow-moving novels about a writer's affair with a middle aged lady he had met after the bitter separation from his wife.

He put up his work-notebooks for sale, but they failed to meet their reserve price. Finally, living alone in a room in Hampstead, John developed a stomach ulcer, and died when it burst. So he was yet another of my fellow "Angries" whose career ended on a tragic note.

But I always felt that the problem went deeper than mere lack of a subject to write about. He struck me as virtually a dual personality. Basically a romantic (as *Room at the Top* makes clear), he liked to present himself as a hard-headed and opinionated Yorkshireman who, in his drinking days (he later gave it up) went in for lengthy monologues on practical subjects (like gas stoves) until everyone was paralysed with boredom. Inside he was obviously full of anxiety and self-doubt. Since he was determined to keep this part of himself hidden from the world, it never succeeded in finding expression in his work, which as a consequence was written with only half his personality, and never again regained that kind of whole-heartedness that made *Room at the Top* so alive

This strange determination to hide behind a kind of mask

became very obvious in later years, when he made a habit of turning up at Bertorelli's, in Soho, for Thursday lunch with Amis and other right-wing friends. (Like Amis, John had started out as a socialist). There he would lay down the law on what was wrong with modern society, modern youth, etc, flogging dead horses until he had reduced everyone to gloomy silence. And he was so obviously a good and well-meaning person behind this façade that no one had the heart to tell him to shut up.

Incidentally, I always felt that Amis's basic problem was the same as Braine's, and that the aggressive lowbrowism was a mask with which he covered up some inner uncertainty. This was an insight that struck me when I read that he was afraid of the dark, and afraid of flying. Similarly, his second wife notes that he was afraid of being alone - hence his preference for spending most of each day drinking with cronies in Bertorellis or the Garrick.

One of the most interesting writers in Declaration, and certainly one who most deserves the label "angry", was Doris Lessing. Born in 1919, her family moved to what is now Zimbabwe in the hope of becoming rich, but this venture failed. Her childhood was unhappy, since her mother wanted her to be a well brought up young lady, and sent her to a convent, which she hated. She left school at 13, but had an inborn craving for books and ideas, and read Dickens and D. H. Lawrence as a form of escape. She left home at 15 to become a housemaid, and married at 19. The role of wife and mother left her frustrated, and she left her husband. At about this time, she joined the Left Book Club because its members (in Salisbury) were book lovers and intellectuals, and married one of them.

She was a committed communist until after World War Two, but became disillusioned and left the CP when she was 25. By

then she was living in London, and had written her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, which was highly acclaimed. During the Angry Young Man period she was writing an autobiographical series about her heroine Martha Quest. *The Golden Notebook* (1966) also broke interesting new ground, with a heroine who has multiple selves. In due course, she became an icon of the feminist movement.

For me, her most important breakthrough was in 1979, with her science fiction series *Canopus in Argos*, where she began to display a preoccupation with a subject dear to my own heart, the evolution of consciousness. (I have always believed that humankind is on the point of an evolutionary breakthrough to a higher level of consciousness). And the final volume of the Martha Quest novels, *The Four Gated City*, is particularly exciting because it moves beyond the leftist social attitudes of the earlier volumes, and speaks of the evolution of mankind as we learn to make use of our latent psychic powers, and achieve a kind of telepathic group unity.

Doris Lessing seems to me by far the most interesting of my “angry” contemporaries, certainly closest to my own preoccupations.

There is one more writer of this period whom I feel deserves a place in any account of its literary history, the remarkable and underrated novelist B. S. Johnson, now the subject of an excellent biography by Jonathan Coe. Bryan Johnson was a working class writer whose first novel, *Travelling People*, I bought in 1963, shortly after its publication. Beautifully and amusingly written, in a variety of styles - first person, third person, film script, letters, stream of consciousness - it is obviously influenced by Beckett, but also by Tristram Shandy.

All Johnson’s novels were “experimental”, (his biographer



calls him “Britain’s one-man literary avant garde of the 1960s”) and often pessimistic, but so full of vitality that they are easy to enjoy. He committed suicide in 1973, at the age of forty, due to a tragic misunderstanding. His wife had left him - he thought for good, although she only intended to fire a warning shot across his bows. Always convinced that life is random, chaotic and meaningless, he decided that now was the time to accept the logical consequence of his nonbelief by killing himself.

The reason I would like to write about him is that he was more of an Angry Young Man than any of my 1950s contemporaries. Like Osborne, he seethed and fulminated, and periodically exploded.

Born in 1933 in Hammersmith, son of a barmaid and a stock-keeper in a bookshop, he was evacuated during the war, and found this traumatic. Because he had a somewhat rotund figure, like Orson Welles, he became known to his friends as Orson Cart (cart horses being enormous). Since he possessed a lively sexual impulse, he found his lack of physical attractiveness discouraging.

Too poor to go to university, he learned Latin at evening classes, then gained a place at Birkbeck College, London. But even with a degree he was only able to find an unsatisfying job as a supply teacher.

He was 26 when he began his first novel, *Travelling People*, determined to break every rule in the book - it even has one black page when the hero’s stream of consciousness breaks off. It seemed to him that no writer worthy of the name should begin a novel except where Joyce and Beckett had left off in *Ulysses* and *The Unnameable*. It also seemed to him that readers who wanted to know what happens next are idiots who should not be encouraged. In spite of which this novel about a

footloose young man who spends a summer working at an exclusive country club and has an affair with the proprietor's mistress is a marvellously lively debut.

In the following year he married a beautiful middle class girl he met at a party, and they moved into a house partly paid for by her mother. The succès d'estime of his novel led to reviewing jobs and other journalism (such as working as a sports reporter - he was a lifelong lover of football). He also did television work and made short films financed by the British Film Institute. He and his wife Virginia had two children.

But Johnson was never very good at personal relations. The reverse side of his enthusiasm was a depressive tendency when he encountered setbacks, and an explosive temper, which strained relations with publishers and agents as well as his wife. He was also highly dominant and controlling, one agent remarking that, just as he had gone to a lot of trouble to set up some promising deal, "Bryan would start telling these people their business and being abusive", with predictable consequences. Typical of him was an AGM at the Society of Authors when he called for the resignation of the whole committee.

His novels never achieved public success, but his reputation as a poet and avant garde novelist increased steadily. But his marriage was showing signs of strain, and his life see-sawed between periods of intense hard work at home and drinking all afternoon in Soho clubs. And just below the surface lay emotional insecurity, suddenly intensified by the death of his mother, with whom he had a close relationship reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence. And in his late thirties, he became more reclusive as his wife began to enjoy the Swinging Sixties and turn their house into a kind of hippie commune while he retreated grumpily

to his workroom.

One night after a quarrel she rejected him in bed and he became - for the first time - physically violent. The next morning she walked out, leaving him with the children. She returned, but after more quarrels, left again, this time with both children. But when she rang a few days later to make up, there was no reply. She sent a friend to check and Johnson was found lying in a bath of bloodstained water - like the Roman Petronius, whose *Satyricon* he admired so much. His seventh novel was published after his death.

What were the achievements of the “angry” writers who emerged in the fifties? Historically, they gave birth to the satire movement of the 1960s - *Beyond the Fringe*, *That Was the Week that Was* and *Private Eye*. These (predictably) do not arouse any deep enthusiasm in me, although I enjoyed much of their satire and irreverence, and was glad to observe this new “anti-Establishment” mood that had developed from *Look Back in Anger* and *The Outsider*.

At all events, the story of that period makes a marvellously lively tale which, at the age of 73, I feel deserves to be recorded by someone who was actually there.



