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KINGSLEY AMIS, MORALIST

THE HARD LOT of any one who writes a brilliantly successful first novel is to have to compete ever after with his own reputation. Had he not given to the world in 1954 the story of the tribulations of Jim Dixon, Kingsley Amis might have been known simply as a novelist with a fine comic talent; but, as it is, he is marked down as the author of *Lucky Jim*, and each new novel he produces is held up for comparison. Explicitly or implicitly the comment is raised: "Almost as good as" or "Not so good as" or "Not nearly so good as *Lucky Jim*".

Certainly, Amis himself has been partly responsible for the situation. Novels two and three—*That Uncertain Feeling* (1955) and *I Like It Here* (1958)—might almost have been named *Lucky Jim Married* and *Lucky Jim Abroad*, so much did their respective heroes follow the Jim Dixon pattern. And, on top of that, *I Like It Here* was a very laboured piece of work. The impression given by this trio was of a modest stream of inspiration running rapidly into the ground. Such an impression was proved false, however, by the appearance of *Take a Girl Like You* in 1960 and of *One Fat Englishman* three years later. It was not only that Amis's comic inventiveness was shown to be alive and kicking (a phrase that seems appropriate in view of the sentiments expressed by many of the Amis characters), but also that the shape of a controlling vision began to emerge out of the scraps of inverted class-consciousness, irreverence, and slapstick which seemingly had constituted his stock-in-trade so far.

The vision was there from the beginning, of course; otherwise *Lucky Jim* would hardly have made the impact that it did. Social comedy-satire cannot be constructed out of a few mildly improper words and a professed antipathy toward mothers-in-law. (It was a sign of Amis's desperation in *I Like It Here* that he fell back on the use of this kind of material.) Real comic effects are produced by imaginative clear-sightedness brought into focus by moral integrity. For all laughter which does not die as soon as it is born—mere crackling of thorns under a pot—is

antiseptic. It seeks out sham to destroy it. It throws a banana-skin in the path of pride, and it pushes a custard pie against the face of overbearing authority. Looking back over ten years of Amis books, we can see an underlying consistency of moral judgment quite visible beneath the fooling. Their author has variously been represented as an anti-intellectual iconoclast, a light-weight funny-man in the tradition of (though much inferior to) P. G. Wodehouse, an irresponsible individualist, and even a pornographer. Yet there is actually more reason for supposing him to be essentially, if not always consciously, a moralist.

Indeed, all the signs indicate that Amis most of the time senses the strength of his moral concern and covers up the basic seriousness of his outlook by protesting—rather too loudly—his position of detachment and his belief in a studied policy of non-involvement. Kenneth Allsop, who in his book *The Angry Decade* (1958) has given an excellent account of Amis's earlier writings in relation to those of his contemporaries, comments there on the pose of "awfulness" which Amis affects: "that symptom of the Fifties, the stubborn disenchantment and insistent lowbrowism, that runs through all Amis's work". Allsop concentrates particularly on this phenomenon in connection with Amis's clearly misleading efforts to suggest that he is not to be numbered among the intellectuals—efforts ending in the plain admission that he is one, after all. But the pose (which is more than a mere pretence) has wider applications than this. It leads us into the whole area of Amis's attitudes towards politics and society.

Like many another British intellectual, Amis was once a Marxist; but he now, while still emotionally attached to the Labour Party, has little faith in the reconstruction of society through socialism of any stamp. His (commissioned) Fabian pamphlet *Socialism and the Intellectuals* records his pilgrim's regress from crusading utopianism to political defeatism, and states his final belief that the individual has no more certain guide than self-interest. As Allsop remarks, the manifesto is "more commendable for the honesty of its puzzlement than for either deep political intuition or clarity of thought". On the face of it, Amis stands as a disillusioned Candide who has learned, the hard way, that the world is as it is, so that the best for every man is to cultivate his own garden. Yet this is not in the least the frame of mind that appears in his books. He may be sceptical about the results that can be achieved through political action in the Britain of his generation. He may be a "neutralist" (which is Allsop's label for him) in the field of practical participation in social change. But he is very far from being indifferent to or acquiescent in the social pattern around him. While having no regrets over the passing of the crusading Leftism of the 1930's, he is still a *moral* crusader for the humane ideals of the Left.

And he views his fellow creatures in terms of their relation to the class struggle, almost as keenly as any champion of the Popular Front of former days could have wished.

Thus the theme that Amis has exploited almost continually from *Lucky Jim* through to *One Fat Englishman* has been the theme of revenge: the revenge of the underprivileged who rise in righteous anger against those whose position in society has made them seemingly immune from attack. The ludicrous nature of snobbery in itself receives some attention, but much more emphasis is laid upon its power to hurt. Amis might be inclined to amend Thackeray's definition of a snob as *he who meanly admires mean things to he who meanly delights in mean acts*. He thinks revenge is significant because oppression is real. Believing that the Welfare State has not unsettled the dogma of the divine right of the upper classes, he feels that any sort of counter-action is justified which succeeds in challenging that dogma; for the relative strength of the parties concerned is so unequal. Class-warfare in Britain is still—in spite of the political gains of Labour—an engagement between dwarfs and giants. And, while the dwarfs may occasionally win a limited and local victory that is a matter for gleeful triumph at the time, yet the damage inflicted on the enemy is no more than a pin-prick. In the ordinary course of things, force can be countered only through guile and the giants deceived by a show of deferential submission.

In this connection, three short stories, published in a collection of seven entitled *My Enemy's Enemy* (1962), give us substantial insight into Amis's handling of the revenge theme. These stories deal with the officers of a Signals unit located in Belgium during 1944-45. The characters in each overlap, and each concerns a case of persecution based on personal spite. In the title story, the key-figure is the Oxford-trained intellectual Captain Thurston, enemy of the Adjutant and his "bunch" from the Territorial Army whose quick promotion and privileged position "rested not on their own abilities, but on those of people who had arrived in the unit by a different route". The Adjutant plots to disgrace the line-duty officer, Captain Dalessio, in order to advance his own protégé, Cleaver. Cleaver is incompetent and Dalessio exceptionally competent, but Dalessio, besides being Italian-born, does not belong to the Adjutant's in-group and openly shows his contempt for it. Thurston is pressured into inaction. But the Adjutant's plot is wrecked finally by the initiative of Captain Bentham, a Regular Army ex-ranker disliked by the Adjutant for lowering the tone of the Officers' Mess and previously written off by Thurston as colourless and conforming. Bentham does not approve of Dalessio, yet approves

less of injustice, and tells Thurston: "I think you're really quite sold on the Adj.'s crowd, never mind what you say about them. Chew that over".

The second story, "Court of Inquiry", introduces Major Raleigh, an officious nonentity who has dreams of being a lieutenant-colonel and, after the War, chairman of the local Conservative Association. Raleigh convenes a quite unconstitutional Court of Inquiry over the loss of an obsolete piece of equipment—actually because he has "had just about enough of young Archer". Lieutenant Archer, however, ties his hands by shamelessly pretending to throw himself on the Major's mercy. He explains afterwards: "If I'd stood up for my rights or anything, he'd just have decided to step up his little war of nerves in other ways. As it was I think I even made him feel he'd gone too far". It is revenge through apparent submission. When the stupid giants kick and miss, they are liable to be tripped up by their own big boots.

In the third story, "I Spy Strangers", Raleigh and Archer feature again, but this time in a situation much like that of "My Enemy's Enemy". One of the men in Archer's section, an ardent socialist named Hargreaves, has mortally offended Raleigh during a session of a mock parliament at which Archer acted as Speaker. Hargreaves escapes the full force of Raleigh's vindictiveness through the intervention of Sergeant Doll, a near-Fascist in high favour with Raleigh. The extreme Right, represented by Doll, joins with the moderate Left, represented by Archer, in despising Raleigh as a man of no principle. Now the Major's world begins to fall to pieces. He loses control of himself when Hargreaves comes to apologize to him, and there is almost a brawl. This incident destroys his self-confidence. Then the speeding-up of the withdrawal of troops shatters his dream of being an Area Commandant. He learns from Doll that Archer is to have an early release from the Army in order to return to Oxford. And, to cap all, news comes of the Labour landslide in the British elections and of the defeat of his local Conservative candidate—a Major-General. In the darkness, one ray of hope alone remains: "Despite everything that Hargreaves and Archer and the rest of them might do, England would muddle through somehow".

These three stories reflect the mood of the end of the War. Yet they also provide a good summary of Amis's continuing convictions. His political "neutrality" is nicely set out in Archer's silent response to Doll's toast to England when the election results have come in:

Not your England, Archer said to himself, not the petrol-flogging C.Q.M.S.'s England, not the major's England or the Adjutant's or the Colonel's or Jack Rowney's or Tom Thurston's England, but to a certain extent Hargreaves's England and absolutely my

England, full of girls and drinks and jazz and books and decent houses and decent jobs and being your own boss.

The non-political, anti-intellectualist note here is just a little too hearty to be convincing. It carries an overtone of defeatism, as though Archer feels inwardly that the Major's England, muddling through, awaits him at Oxford. Amis-Archer cannot really hope that the giants will meekly capitulate. In "My Enemy's Enemy" Thurston is indignant over an order given on the phone by Brigadier the Lord Fawcett, but fails to circumvent it. " 'Very good, sir,'. There was never anything one could do". The comment is applicable, perhaps, to more than Army life.

Such, at any rate, is the impression gained from the picture of life in a red-brick university painted in *Lucky Jim*. Jim Dixon, a lecturer without tenure, has to practise tactical submission to Professor Welch even more assiduously than Archer did to the Major. (" 'Oh, of course, Professor; I'm sorry,' he said, having been well schooled in giving apologies at the very times when he ought to be demanding them".) He can find a safety-valve for his feelings only in making secret faces and in watching the enemy suffer occasional petty reverses—taking a beating from a revolving door, for instance; for, like the Major, Welch makes it quite clear that he dispenses favours to those who please him but that those who cross him need not expect justice. Being in this situation of helplessness in the face of arbitrary power makes Jim convinced that one's career depends upon luck and not merit: "It was luck you needed all along". Because *Lucky Jim* is a comic novel and not a social tract, Jim is proved wrong. Mr. Gore-Urquhart, the rich patron, arrives as a most improbable *deus ex machina* to rescue him. Jim wins a job and Gore-Urquhart's niece, and wins them on his modest merits. "It's not that you've got the qualifications, for this or any other work, but there are plenty who have", says the rescuer, "You haven't got the qualifications, though, and that's much rarer." Judgment has been pronounced against the Welch hegemony, because Jim's new job was originally supposed to be offered to the Professor's son Bertrand, and Jim's new girl was snatched from Bertrand too. Here Gore-Urquhart fills the same role (though less plausibly) as Bentham and Doll in the Army stories. He stands outside the in-group and condemns it for lack of principle and misuse of power.

The interaction between class and power is the centre of Amis's moral concern. Failure to appreciate this led to a good deal of rather irrelevant moralizing when *Lucky Jim* first attracted attention. Somerset Maugham's bitter comment on "the white-collar proletariat" is well-known. But it is too easy to disapprove from an Olympian height and to make the blanket condemnation "They are scum", when the question that Amis is asking us to consider is whether the accepted social stand-

ards by means of which praise and blame are meted out are honest standards. One of the most frequent—and seemingly damaging—accusations made against Jim Dixon was that he was a university teacher and yet resented culture. In an article in *Encounter* (February, 1964), Amis remarks that his student days at Oxford gave him his early picture (since modified only in detail) “of British culture as the property of some sort of exclusive club”. One of the memorable scenes in *Lucky Jim* is the one where, as the notables of town and gown assemble before his public lecture, Jim is made to realize how rigid social barriers are. “Dixon couldn’t help admiring the way in which, without saying or doing anything specific, they established so effortlessly that he himself wasn’t expected to accompany them.” Culture and class, Amis suggests, are intertwined in such a way that the Jim Dixons are continually reminded of their lowly status. Not unnaturally, then, the Jim Dixons view culture pragmatically and rate it no higher than they rate those whose property it seems to be. A second objection to Amis’s hero was his shocking disregard for the decencies of life, especially for courtesy. Mr. Maugham wrote, expanding Jim into the white-collar proletariat as such, “They have no manners and are woefully unable to deal with any social predicament”. But one’s estimate of manners depends mostly upon where one happens to be standing. In his *Encounter* piece Amis has written of his recent (1961-63) stay at Cambridge. He found undergraduate Cambridge “still the resort of the upper classes”, and he did not appreciate their behaviour. “At times I became a one-man resistance movement, broadcasting baleful glares, trying to force them to thank me when I stood aside for them in shop doorways, stopping them from hijacking taxis. No good. They were too firmly seated.” It is amusing to remember that Jim’s hijacking a taxi was one of the proofs produced to show his ignorance of the gentlemanly code. Actually, the significance as well as the humour of Jim’s actions is that they are reactions to his position of vulnerability and stem from his frustrated sense of justice. Amis’s one-man resistance movement is the real-life counterpart of Jim’s “guerilla warfare”—as Kenneth Allsop named it in the 1950’s. C. P. Snow shot in the target area when he pointed out that those who were thought to be scum were rather the contemporary guardians of the puritan conscience.

“. . . mean, malicious and envious”, said Somerset Maugham. Jim does not display these qualities when he triumphs over the Welch clan. But his triumph is absolute, and poetic justice cannot be meted out to all, even in fiction. In *That Uncertain Feeling* Amis faces up to the need for cheerfulness and resourcefulness when no *deus ex machina* turns up to smooth out complications and rectify past mistakes. His hero, John Lewis, changes his job at the Aberdarcy Public Library

for a worse one as clerk in the Fforestfawr colliery in order to save his marriage and his self-respect. He has learned that mingling with the "anglicised upper classes" leads only to futile adultery and parasitic feeding upon influence. *There was never anything one could do No good. They were too firmly seated.* Fighting the giants is a waste of time. But John Lewis sees a way out—flight. If you can't lick 'em, avoid 'em. He tells his wife: "Our kind of running away was a stroke of bloody genius. It's always the best thing to do in that kind of situation, provided you can do it". He has previously told himself: "Not giving up was the important thing".

Yet running away has its limitations as a technique for living; for, like it or not, one has to live in the society that happens to be around at the moment. This seems to be the "message" (the word is unavoidable) of *Take A Girl Like You*, Amis's longest and most ambitious work to date. The main plot is that of *Clarissa Harlowe*, updated and treated comedy-style. Clarissa appears as Jenny Bunn, an elementary school-teacher from Northern Ireland, and Lovelace as Patrick Standish, M.A. (London), the Latin master at a private school in a small town in the Home Counties. Where Clarissa was drugged when she was seduced, Jenny was merely drunk. Yet Jenny's predicament is, in its own way, tragic. She begins by having certain expectations: "It was plain that her new life was going to be full of what she would not have expected". She ends by saying to her seducer (who intended to marry her, anyway), "But I can't help feeling it's rather a pity". The comment applies to the whole of the panorama of private lives displayed in this novel. Amis attempts to enliven the story with a couple of side-show revenges. Dick Thompson, a Labour Party hypocrite, is duly chastised along with F. B. Charlton, a Tory hypocrite. Yet, since neither of these men is in a position of real power, their downfall is depressing rather than hilarious. There is much genuinely funny writing in the book. Nevertheless, the total impression is sombre. The bright colours of satire have been drained to a pathetic Welfare-State grey.

Colour and lively mockery make a comeback in *One Fat Englishman*. What a visit to Portugal had failed to do for the author, a stay at Princeton achieved in good measure. The trouble with *I Like It Here* was that there was nothing in the foreground to make the background count for anything. *One Fat Englishman*, on the other hand, matches the subject to the setting. The revenge theme is given a new twist in this tale of a giant away from Giantland, and set upon by giant-baiting dwarfs. Roger Micheldene—*unlucky* Roger, prosperous, fat and forty—finds that the U.S.A. not only remains unimpressed by him as an embodiment of British culture but also exposes the unlovely egotism which is the actual source of his tastes

and social attitudes. This last revelation is one that has always been an important plank in Amis's moral platform. He sees the worst feature of upper-class rule to be the way in which it encourages private interest to pose as public good. Thus he shows us Major Raleigh complacently deciding that "men who annoyed him were certain to be, corresponded one-hundred-per-cent with, men who were bad soldiers". Similarly Bertrand Welch, explaining to Jim that he doesn't allow people of his sort to stand between him and his rights, adds: "Everybody hates you, Dixon". Jim retorts that Bertrand is "a twister and a snob and a bully and a fool". But Jim's is a single voice raised against a power-complex, and when Bertrand is next brought back on the scene it is to announce that Jim has lost his university post. By sending Roger Micheldene across the Atlantic, however, Amis has deprived him temporarily of his position of privilege. So he appears for what he is: an intelligent twister, snob, and bully. And judgment is passed on him by an American Jim Dixon who is not vulnerable. Young Irving Macher remains untouched by sneers, even anti-Semitic ones, dedicating himself to see that the biter is bitten (once, quite literally). Macher's final words round off the lesson. He says, "We don't have group likes and dislikes. It isn't your nationality we don't like, it's you."

One Fat Englishman also gives us Amis's most finished study of the emotion of anger. Ever since the phrase became a literary label, Amis has been linked with the Angry Young Men. He has dissociated himself from the "movement" most energetically, and it should be plain that he sees no virtue in anger as such. It is true that many of his rebels rage, inwardly most often, against authority. ("A hot foam of anger seemed to fizz up in Thurston's chest.") But then his persecutor-figures break out regularly in temper-tantrums. ("Welch's expression was slowly adapting itself to incredulous rage.") They can afford to!

In Roger Micheldene's case the condition is quite self-conscious, for we are told: "Of the seven deadly sins, Roger considered himself qualified in gluttony, sloth and lust but distinguished in anger". Clearly, Amis thinks of Roger as embodying, in caricature form, a class-ideal; and one may well be reminded here of how Evelyn Waugh's Gilbert Pinfold is described by his creator: "Moreover by the narrow standards of the age his habits of life were self-indulgent and his utterances lacked prudence". Like Pinfold, Roger thinks of himself as "well equipped to deal with insolence, real or imagined". Pinfold is annoyed by, and reacts strongly to, "a bad bottle of wine, an impertinent stranger, or a fault in syntax". So does Roger, except that he sends up rockets of wrath over cigars rather than over wine. Pinfold, of course, would hold in utter contempt such a one as Roger is—a gross womanizer and a Catholic living in defiance of the laws of the Church. Yet Amis

suggests that Roger has done very well for himself in England, that his self-image has not been disturbed at home, and that only in America has any one dared to ask him outright: "Why are you so awful?"

If Roger's awfulness has been shaped by the British class-structure, its essence lies deeper: in an absorption in self-gratification, excluding the movement towards outgoing love. Thus his rages take place on two levels. On the social level he puts on a show, proving his superiority by castigating those who offend through lack of taste, breeding, grammar, and so on; and this is where Irving Macher succeeds in making him look silly. On the personal level his anger is spontaneous, the sign of a self-will that would annihilate everything resisting its limitless appetite. It is here that he loses the chance of winning back his ex-mistress, Helene Bang. He is briefly reconciled with Helene when for once he does not register annoyance over being thwarted in his desires. The reconciliation ends abruptly as he becomes absorbed once more in trying to get even with Macher. Helene thereupon chooses Macher as his successor in her favours. One final indignity is his to endure. On the journey home he has for a companion a prize American bore, an egotist so completely self-sufficient that anger cannot reach him.

Amis detests solemnity and protests that his purpose is to write funny books. It is difficult to analyze a good humorist's work without appearing to be intolerably heavy-handed. Nevertheless, every writer must be judged by what he produces and not by what he says about his productions; and Amis plainly gives us novels worth close attention. He *is* a serious writer. His range of interest covers a wide area including politics, contemporary manners and morals, and the abiding relevance of the seven deadly sins. We can hope that he will continue to entertain us. Yet we would be less than grateful and more than obtuse did we not also expect him to keep on being the kind of comic novelist he has proved himself to be—a moralist.