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Agnieszka Książek

**The Communication of Culture:
Kingsley Amis's Criticism**

**Submitted to the Faculty of Arts
University of Glasgow
for the degree of M.Phil.
December 2000**

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Abstract

Kingsley Amis was a prolific writer of fiction and poetry, but alongside his literary works he wrote a considerable amount of literary criticism. The body of his non-fiction writing consists of book reviews which appeared in a wide range of periodicals: *The Spectator*, *The New Statesman*, *The Observer* and *The Listener* and two collections of essays *What Became Of Jane Austin? and Other Questions* and *The Amis Collection*. Amis, as a ‘man of letters’ wrote prefaces and introductions to other writers’ books and edited anthologies of poetry. The subject of this dissertation is Amis’s politics of writing, his views on the work and skills of the novelist, the poet and the critic.

Chapter One is a discussion of Amis’s criticism in the context of literary tradition in Britain. Starting from the 1950s and throughout his career as a writer, Amis opposed the tradition of Modernism and the regime of elitist literary Establishment which promoted ‘highbrow’ art. He also engaged in debates with British critics like F.R. Leavis, W.P. Ker, A.T. Quiller-Coach and William Empson. Opposing their approaches to literature and their style of writing, Amis offered his own style of criticism – colloquial, accessible and not requiring a profound knowledge of literary theories.

Amis’s politics of writing are to a great extent reflected in what he says about the art of the novel, and what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ examples of the genre. It is important how Amis relates to the writers who had dominated British literary scene in

the time when he started writing, as well as it is interesting to investigate how he evaluates new movements in the novel after the war.

Amis's reviews of poetry and the literary debates he engaged in focus on the same principle as the rest of his criticism, namely accessibility to the 'general reader'. Poets, whose aim was to communicate (Victorian writers) were, in his opinion, successful; whereas those who cultivated artistic detachment (Romantics and Modernists) remain in the interest of highbrow academics.

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Introduction

One week after Kingsley Amis's death on October 22nd 1995, *The Spectator* published a number of memoirs written by friends of the writer¹. Among them was a passage by Alan Watkins, who remembered Amis as 'an egalitarian who would discuss literature with anybody – provided he or she had read the book and could produce examples from it'². These words seem to sum up Amis's approach to literature, treating it as a medium of communication with 'the general reader', rather than an academic well-versed in theoretical terminology.

Throughout his life Kingsley Amis published 24 novels, 6 collections of short stories and 8 volumes of poetry. He was a prolific writer of fiction, but as well as publishing his novels, poems and short stories, he discussed literature, and his literary criticism constitutes a significant part of his writing. The majority of his non-fiction writing consists of book reviews published in a wide range of periodicals: *The Spectator*, *The Observer*, *The New Statesman*, *The Encounter*, and *The Listener*. In addition to the magazines, Amis expressed the principles of his 'politics of writing' in the anthologies that he edited, in his memoirs and in his private and official letters. 'No "commitment" for me, except to literature'³ Amis once remarked; the question arises, however, what is the place he finds for literature in postwar Britain, what traditions he feels are worth cultivating and what new trends should be developed.

¹ 'Memories of a Great Novelist', *The Spectator*, 28 October 1995, p. 27.

² Ibid. p. 28.

³ Harry Ritchie, 'An Outrageous Talent', *Kingsley Amis in Life and Letters*, ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 186.

Being a novelist and a poet himself, Amis discusses poetry and the novel more specifically and devotes much attention to these forms. According to Dickstein's definition, 'genuine criticism' (as opposed to 'literary theory') aims 'to change the world starting with the mind of the reader'⁴. In his discussion of new movements and the evaluation of the old and young writers appearing on the literary scene, Amis embarks on a task to present his view of literature and to influence the reader.

No less important than the content of Amis's criticism is its manner of conveying its message. The expression of ideas and evaluation of books can be effectively achieved in a magazine article or a book review. These are the forms that Amis used from the publication of his first review in *The Spectator* in November 1953. By giving his reviews a new non-academic face, he did much to change society's approach to literary criticism. Both the message and the form contribute to the establishment of Amis's position in the history of literary criticism in postwar Britain.

⁴ Quoted in Paul Fussell, *The Anti-Egotist: Kingsley Amis, Man of Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 65.

Chapter 1

Amis as a Critic

David Lodge in his chapter on the fiction of Kingsley Amis claims:

The importance of being Amis [...] is in a sense greater than the sum of his works, individually considered as autotelic works of art. His novels, stories, poems, reviews, even *obiter dicta* reported in the newspapers, have focused in a very precise way a number of attitudes which a great many middle-class intellectuals of the post-war period find useful for the purposes of self-definition.⁵

Written in 1966, Lodge's words testify to the significance of Kingsley Amis as a voice of a certain generation, which he defines using Stephen Spender's term 'contemporary'⁶. According to Lodge, the English novel is dominated by 'contemporaries' who 'engage in a direct, prosaic way with their social and political circumstances'⁷, rather than the 'modern' writers who 'distrust and detest those circumstances'⁸. The main difference between the two groups, however, is in their use of language, and the shift from the 'modern' to the 'contemporary' Lodge describes in terms of loss. He illustrates his evaluation with a comparison of James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (a 'vastly more important'⁹ book) and John Braine's *Room at the Top* ('looser and thinner in texture'). On the scale of

⁵ David Lodge, 'The Modern, The Contemporary, and the Importance of being Amis', *Language of Fiction. Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p.249.

⁶ Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963).

⁷ David Lodge, op.cit. p. 245.

⁸ Ibid. p. 246.

‘ambitious’¹⁰ use of language Lodge puts Joyce at the top and John Braine at the bottom. In between the two writers he places Kingsley Amis who, according to Lodge, writes ‘less ambitiously and with less consistent success’¹¹. Identifying with Amis’s position, Lodge emphasises Amis’s critique of pretentiousness: ‘His books had taught me that trick of turning a humorous irony simultaneously upon my own pretensions and the pretensions of language itself’¹².

This very attack on pretensions can be linked with Amis’s anti-intellectualism on which Lindsay Anderson commented in *Declaration*: ‘Amis would “rather pose as a Philistine rather than run the risk of being despised as an intellectual”¹³.

John McDermott begins his introduction to *The Amis Collection*¹⁴ with the question of Amis’s alleged “philistinism”. The main reason why Amis earned himself this label is the fact that he wrote ‘within the main English language tradition’, which McDermott defines as ‘trying to tell interesting stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style, no tricks, no experimental tomfoolery’¹⁵.

Amis’s writing on literature lends more weight to the argument that he was more than an uncultured philistine with commonplace interests. As well as opposing current literary orthodoxy he also criticised writers who, instead of producing enjoyable novels, wrote for the intellectual elite. From the earliest reviews in *Essays in Criticism*, through his articles in *The Spectator*, *The Observer*, *The New Statesman*

⁹ Ibid. p. 249.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 249.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 249.

¹² Ibid. p. 249.

¹³ Lindsay Anderson in Tom Maschler, *Declaration*, (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), p. 166.

¹⁴ John McDermott, ‘Introduction’ [in] Kingsley Amis, *The Amis Collection* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) p. xi.

to *The Amis Collection* (published in 1990), Amis maintained his, sometimes controversial, position of a critic primarily opposed to snobbery and pretentiousness rather than high art per se.

Amis was branded a philistine by extension of the philistinism of his characters. As Harry Ritchie says, Amis's character Jim Dixon 'prefers beer to madrigals [...] mocks anything that smacks of snooty highbrowism [...] and protests his rejection of any kind of arty-fartiness ("I can't sing, I can't act, I can hardly read and thank God I can't read music")'¹⁶. Because a few parallels could be drawn between Jim Dixon and Amis, the character's views were transferred onto the author. Both Amis and Jim shared the same lower middle class origin; both worked at provincial universities and ridiculed the intellectual pretensions of the academics. Amis and Jim did not appreciate music when it was forced upon them by 'a squadron of bores and artistic pretenders'¹⁷. Amis denied any autobiographical connections – he came from London, not Lancashire; he taught English, not history; and unlike Jim, he was married, and admired Mozart.

Expressing his views, Amis set himself in opposition to two traditions: the Bloomsbury group and the post war literary Establishment called by McDermott 'descendants of the Bloomsbury Group',¹⁸.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. xii.

¹⁶ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories. Literature and Media in England, 1950-1959*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.102.

¹⁷ Richard Bradford, *Kingsley Amis: A Biography*, (yet unpublished).

¹⁸ John McDermott quotes Philip Toynbee who called the group 'younger members of, or immediate and grateful heirs to, the Bloomsbury Group', ibid. p. xii.

Critique of Modernism

Amis was explicit in his dislike for Modernism but he was not alone in expressing such opinions. C.P. Snow presented his anti-Bloomsbury programme in the *Sunday Times*; ‘Middlebrow spokesmen’,¹⁹ such as J.B. Priestley, Angus Wilson and Pamela Hansford Johnson, promoted more traditional, realist forms of fiction and denounced the experimentation of Woolf and Joyce. In July 1956 Amis published an article commenting on a symposium entitled ‘The Craft of Letters’ organised in London by John Lehmann²⁰. In his review he talks about the underestimated role of universities and about the exaggerated significance of the Bloomsbury group. He also denounces the Modern style and sees a positive side to the fact that ‘the literary giant has passed from our midst’²¹. He disputes John Wyndham’s statement that the disappearance of the Modern writers means a loss for British literature. Amis expresses his opinion about them disrespectfully, denying their individuality:

The one unifying characteristic of our giants – the Jameses, the Woolfs, the Lawrences – was that immense seriousness with which they took themselves. Indefatigable writers of prefaces to their own work, unflinchingly pretentious about themselves in their letters to friends, inflexibly determined to regard themselves at the highest possible artistic valuation throughout their huge egomaniacal journals, they grew to be giants partly (yes, all right, not wholly) because of their readiness to explain their qualifications for the name in interestingly unusual language²².

Later in the same article Amis adds that the amount of attention ‘the Bloomsbury lot’ are given at conferences is definitely undeserved. However, it was

¹⁹ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit., p.10.

²⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Art and Craft’, a review of *The Craft of Letters in England. A Symposium* edited by John Lehman in *The Spectator*, 13 July 1956, p. 68.

²¹ Ibid. p.68.

not only the Bloomsbury group that Amis disliked, but the whole notion of Modernism. Paul Fussell in his book *Anti-Egotist: Kingsley Amis Man of Letters*²³ says that Amis was perhaps ‘the first intelligent British critic’ to oppose ‘the critical orthodoxy of Modernism’²⁴. Fussell goes on to define what it was in Modernism that Amis was attempting to undermine. One of Amis’s criticisms was of the Modernists’ denunciation of the realism of Victorian and Georgian writing on the basis of its proximity to life. It stressed its ‘difference by stylization, conspicuous artifice, abstraction, leanings towards geometrical, and moral uselessness’²⁵. Another point of contention between Amis and the Modernists, according to Fussell, lies in their attitudes to ordinary people. What characterizes Modern writing (Fussell gives examples of Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Jose Ortega y Gasset) is ‘crude anger’ and hatred of ordinary people. Their preoccupation with aesthetic enjoyment stands in opposition to Amis’s concern with the human condition. Eric Jacobs summarises Amis’s attitude to the Modern idea of art:

Any group that tried to seize hold of art for itself and defend it against the hordes of plain people was just as offensive to him. The upper class marked itself off from the herd by its money, speech, clubs, schools, and so forth. A literary upper class might achieve the same effect by obscurity, complexity and other bars to common understanding which fenced off their literary property from ordinary readers. This, to Amis, was simply snobbery by other means²⁶.

Before taking part in a BBC programme on the Bloomsbury Group, Amis explained his stance: ‘a) I am against Bloomsbury, though not (I hope) violently or

²² ibid. p. 68.

²³ Paul Fussell *Anti-Egotist: Kingsley Amis Man of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁴ Ibid. p. 66.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 67.

crusadingly so, b) I know most about, and most dislike, Virginia Woolf of the Bloomsbury set... I promise to be reasonable about her, though hostile'²⁷. Harry Ritchie argues that part of the reason for Amis's rejection of Woolf was that for him she personified an upper class dominance in the literary world²⁸.

Reviewing D.H. Lawrence's *Selected Literary Criticism*, Amis again points at Lawrence's claim to superiority and its negative effect:

Much more unpleasant and damaging is his recommendation, apparently as a practical measure, of the kind of theocracy, or hierocracy, in which the 'mass' (those who can't distinguish between property and life) bow down to the 'elect' (who can, and are 'natural lords' anyway).²⁹

In one of his reviews Amis said: 'I have a notion that the artist is a man much like other men'³⁰ and such a view is echoed in his objections to "hierocracy". Those who are superior are very few ('some are born to sweet delight'³¹) and Amis puts himself among the masses. Later, Amis calls Lawrence 'one of the great denouncers, the great missionaries the English send to themselves to tell them they are crass, gross, lost, dead, mad and addicted to unnatural vice'³² but, he adds, behind this denunciation there is a lot of 'egomania, fatuity and the gimcrack theorising'. Here again Amis disclaims the theoretical approach to literary studies. He concludes that it

²⁶ Eric Jacobs. *Kingsley Amis. A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995) p.181.

²⁷ Eric Jacobs, op.cit. p. 169.

²⁸ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p.105.

²⁹ Kingsley Amis, 'Phoenix Too Frequent', review of D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal, *The Spectator*, 3 February 1956, p. 156.

³⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'Mr Maugham's Notions', review of Richard Cordell, *Somerset Maugham: A Biographical and Critical Study, The Amis Collection*, p. 63.

³¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Phoenix Too Frequent', op.cit. p. 156.

³² Ibid. p. 157.

would be better ‘to leave Lawrence on his pinnacle, inspiring, unapproachable and unread’.

Critique of the Establishment

The key essay in which Amis defined his resentment of the Establishment was the 1955 review of John Lehmann’s *Autobiography*.³³ Amis discusses the Mandarins, the writers of the 1930s:

In the households which produced them, it might well be that the reading or even the writing of books were regarded as normal adult pursuits, that artists of various kinds would come to stay, some of them all the way from abroad, and that abroad itself would be visited early and repeatedly. Should some or all of these conditions be lacking, self-improvement was likely to be available through the medium of talking to father’s friends, reading his books, looking at all those hand-done pictures, wandering into the servants’ hall, being at Eton, at Trinity, finally in London, where tea with Virginia Woolf was apparently necessary³⁴.

Alongside the description of the upper class Thirties intellectual, Amis juxtaposes the lower class Fifties intellectual:

He met his first butler on visiting the Master for tea in company with a couple of dozen other freshmen. He would have arrived on that threshold from a grammar school, or from the sort of public school where people are always reminding each other that it is a public school. His non-literary interests, if he has any, are less liable to be presided over by the shade of Durer or of Monteverdi than by the sinister living figure of Mr Louis Armstrong. [...] To the charge of holding defiant, dour, scholarship-boy views on culture, he may retort, rather uneasily perhaps, that anyway he is thereby rescued from the ‘real’ Philistinism of the dilettante.³⁵

³³ Kingsley Amis, Editor’s Notes, review of John Lehmann, *The Whispering Gallery: Autobiography I*, *The Spectator*, 7 October 1955, pp. 459-460.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 459.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 459.

Amis's opposition is not only literary; in his review it becomes clear that his resentment has a foundation in class context. Amis addresses issues of class inequality with the same strength as he does the literary programme. He speaks on behalf of his generation of 'scholarship-boys', rejects the pretentiousness of highbrow art and declares a preference for mass culture. In his closing sentence Amis specifies the target of his criticism – the 'real Philistinism of the dilettante'; the phrase has ironic undertones, because Amis himself was considered a philistine for his disrespect of the arts.

In his review of 'The Craft of Letters' Amis talks about the underestimated role of universities and the exaggerated significance of the Bloomsbury group, ending his article with a note about contemporary poets and their audience, a motif recurrent in his writing since the day of his B.Litt. thesis. Amis agrees with the opinion that broadcasting has become a medium for poets to help them to reach the audience. What is more, broadcasting encourages poets to aim at clarity:

The spoken word requires clarity. If a poet these days is interested in having his work read or heard, as distinct from having his name noticed, he must not only be clear after inspection, he must be clear instantaneously, on the superficial reading³⁶.

The remark shifts the focus from the issues of Modernism to the post-Bloomsbury group, which was another focus of Amis's attacks. In the journalistic circles the group consisted of critics whom Harry Ritchie calls 'the gentlemen-of-

³⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'Art and Craft', op.cit. p.69.

letters of literary London – the Mandarins³⁷. He enumerates those who occupied the high ground of literary influence: Cyril Connolly and Raymond Mortimer (*Sunday Times* reviewers), John Lehmann (editor of *London Magazine*), Stephen Spender (co-editor of *Encounter*), Philip Toynbee (principal reviewer of the *Observer*), Peter Quennell (ex-editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*) and Alan Pryce-Jones (editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*)³⁸.

In the Fifties critics began to address the cultural role of the upper class intelligentsia. Noel Annan³⁹, Edward Shils⁴⁰ and Henry Fairlie⁴¹ perceived a dominance of the established authorities. The intellectuals' upper class origin, their family associations, old university education and attachment to London were the very things against which people like Amis were protesting. To describe the group Henry Fairlie rediscovered another term – the 'Establishment':

What I call the 'Establishment' in this country is today more powerful than ever before. By the 'Establishment' I do not mean only the centres of official power – though they are certainly part of it – but rather the whole matrix of official and social relations within which power is exercised. [...] The 'Establishment' can be seen at work in the activities of, not only the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Earl Marshal, but of such lesser mortals as the chairman of the Arts Council, the Director-General of the BBC, and even the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*.⁴²

Such a view was echoed in an article of Amis's published two weeks after Fairlie's. Amis talks there about the fans of Thirties' literature who are a 'dying breed

³⁷ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p.106.

³⁸ John McDermott, 'Introduction' op.cit. p. xii

³⁹ N.G.Annan, 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', in J.H. Plumb (ed.), *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan* (London, Longmans, 1955), pp.241-87.

⁴⁰ Edward Shils, 'The Intellectuals: Great Britain', *Encounter*, April 1955, pp. 5-16.

⁴¹ Henry Fairlie, 'Political Commentary', *The Spectator*, 23 September 1955, pp.379-381.

who see its author as a sort of spider of the Ivy, organising, with the aid of Mr Stephen Spender and the head of the Third Programme, the metropolitan literary rocket'⁴³. By this metaphor, Amis specifies his place on the dual intellectual scene of the Fifties, distancing himself from the intellectuals gathered around the *Encounter* and elitist London literary circles.

For Amis, rejection of the Establishment took place on two different levels: the political, protesting against people who have power in the institutions, and the literary, expressing disapproval of the Modernist tradition continued by the upper class intellectuals of the 1950s.

As regards his attitude to literature, Amis was objecting to the avant-garde movement and its inaccessibility to the reader, not to highbrow culture as such. So it was not a Jim Dixon versus "Phoney Artistic Bertram"⁴⁴ distinction, but 'the plain man against the mandarin'⁴⁵. Amis expressed his disapproval in an attack on the pretentiousness of literary criticism (his review of *The Outsider*), snobbery and an outmoded interest in some works of English literature canon (*Beowulf*, 'The Owl and the Nightingale', *The Faerie Queene*).

It was not only Amis who rejected the Mandarins – and the whole post-Bloomsbury tradition. In literary debates in *The Spectator* such as 'Is the Travel-Book Dead' and 'Critic Between the Lines' other intellectuals were to be heard taking Amis's line: John Davenport, Robert Conquest, Anthony Hartley, Elizabeth Jennings and John Wain.

⁴² Ibid. p. 380.

⁴³ Kingsley Amis, Editor's Notes, review of John Lehmann, *The Whispering Gallery: Autobiography I*, *The Spectator*, 7 October 1955, p. 460.

⁴⁴ Colin Wilson 'Quip Counter Quip', a review of Kingsley Amis, *Girl, 20*, *The Spectator*, 30 October 1971, p.623.

Harry Ritchie argues that Amis never declared war against the Mandarins, though his reviews provide many references to the Mandarins and their style. In his *Spectator* review of the collected works of Scott Fitzgerald⁴⁶, Amis draws a comparison: ‘The construction of the book is thus hopelessly awry and now seems affected, as does the heavy mandarin style with its periodic lurches into a translation-from-the-French-idiom’⁴⁷.

If Amis was not openly attacking the Establishment, he was clearly critical of it. His opposition seemed to arise from the fact that his approach always ran contrary to that of the post-Bloomsbury group⁴⁸. Ritchie sums up Amis’s objections by saying that the Mandarins were of upper class social origin, ‘feminine’ or homosexual in image, based in London and writing about London and fascinated with foreign culture. The Amis type of intellectual was of lower middle class, ‘steadily heterosexual’, using provincial settings for his novels and despising abroad⁴⁹. This was his ‘literary identity’, not his personal identity. It is important to remember that these labels were applicable to Amis only in the context of the Mandarins, namely in his opposition to them. Objectively, out of a literary context, Amis’s writing was not provincial (he was born and lived most of his life in London); he was not a rebel against the upper classes (he was friends with and admired some of them, e.g. Anthony Powell) and although he enjoyed living in Britain, he did not despise abroad. Similarly, his protest against the ‘Oxbridge’ regime was not caused by his fascination with provincial academic centres but by his antagonism towards the

⁴⁵ John McDermott, ‘Introduction’ op.cit. p. xii

⁴⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Crack-Up’, review of *The Bodley Head Scott Fitzgerald*, vol. II., *The Spectator*, 20 November 1959, p. 910.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 910.

⁴⁸ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p.107.

Establishment. When John Lehmann discusses ‘a suspicious or even hostile’ attitude to provincial universities, Amis, who at that time taught in Swansea responds by defending them as places where still ‘a good number of staff and students can read and write, where academicism in the bad sense is hated just as much, and sometimes from a rather better-informed standpoint’⁵⁰. Ritchie says that Amis’s ‘academic’ criticism was considered appropriately lower class in contrast with ‘the *belle-lettres* of the Mandarins’ who were conspicuously upper class.⁵¹

Amis is particularly critical of the establishment in a *New Statesman* article published in December 1963:

Paid-up membership of the cultural Establishment, London literary racketeering, engagement in literary journalism (unlike all the rest of us, eh?), book-foisting, propaganda activities on behalf of abroad and its inhabitants, persistent dilettantism, capital lack of ‘rigour’ and ‘moral preoccupation’ – one can write out the charge-sheet with one’s eyes shut.⁵²

Rarely in his reviews does Amis use the first person plural pronoun; he tends to express his own opinions and communicate with the reader rather than speak for a generation or a literary group. In the review of Connolly, however, Amis abandons his individualist approach and speaks for his ‘contemporaries’; an exception to his ‘fanatical desire to dissociate’⁵³. He predicts the unfavourable reception of the book ‘because of that savagery with which we punish our mentors when they have been

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 108.

⁵⁰ Kingsley Amis, Editor’s Notes, review of John Lehmann, *The Whispering Gallery: Autobiography I*, *The Spectator*, op.cit. p. 460.

⁵¹ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p. 110.

⁵² Kingsley Amis, ‘Connolly in Court’, review of Cyril Connolly, *Previous Convictions*, *The Spectator*, 6 December 1963, pp. 837-838.

⁵³ Richard Bradford, *Kingsley Amis: A Biography*, (yet unpublished).

replaced in our esteem, or discreditably to us, have become casualties from the shifts of fashion'. The 'we' with which Amis identifies refers to the new intellectuals who are young (as opposed to 'the defendant's lack of youth'), have a fresh outlook on the world (as opposed to 'defendant's blemished record'), and do not read the *Horizon* ('the stuff is too old')⁵⁴.

In a discussion of the cultural situation in the Fifties, Francis Mulhern writes about a 'new cultural hegemony'⁵⁵ which would replace 'the trophies of the aristocracy and the Empire'. Alongside the name of one hero of the hegemony – F.R. Leavis – the critic mentions the name of Kingsley Amis. Other critics too have detected the influence of Leavis on Amis's criticism. The Third Programme radio series *First Reading* spoke out against conventional assumptions. John Wain, Amis's old friend from St. John's College, Oxford, in his first inaugural broadcast (26 April 1953) made it clear that he was going to promote young writers who wrote in a more traditional form and opted for 'consolidation after experiment'⁵⁶. The author who was most representative of the younger generation of writers was Kingsley Amis and it was a fragment from *Lucky Jim* that Wain chose to read on the first night. Wain's ambition to define and group new writers was successful in that when Stephen Spender was preparing his first edition of the *Encounter*, he decided not to publish the younger contributors to *First Reading*. Ritchie claims that the main motive behind the decision was 'the dark hand of F.R. Leavis manipulating puppets'⁵⁷. Similarly,

⁵⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'Connolly in Court', op.cit. p. 837.

⁵⁵ Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny*, (London: NLB, 1979), p.321.

⁵⁶ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p. 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 11.

Walter Allen in his *New Statesman* article⁵⁸ debates the origins of the Jim Dixon character and points at George Orwell, Dr Leavis and the Logical Positivists.

Mulhern in his book *The Moment of ‘Scrutiny’* refers to the opinion that: ‘Leavis represented sanity and vigour and masculinity and Britishness’. [...] He was intensely and integrally British. Not Europeanized, not of the intelligentsia, not of the upper classes, not of Bloomsbury, not of any group or set.⁵⁹ These characteristics can be applied to Amis as well – he was pragmatic in criticism, lower middle class, proud of being English (not British though), he hated Bloomsbury and dissociated himself from the Fifties’ literary groups.

Simon Raven in his *London Magazine* article claimed that the reason for the cultivation of Leavisite criticism on the part of 1950s intellectuals, was not literary or intellectual but purely social. His description of the Leavisites is consistent with Amis’s background and perspective:

Dr Leavis’s adherents are largely state-aided young men who cannot afford a claret and a Peacock approach to literature. They come from poor homes where books are luxury and must be taken seriously. They come from a naturally puritanical caste: they cannot accept pleasure without first justifying themselves, and in Dr Leavis’s system of criticism they find a literary Purgatory.⁶⁰

Amis’s lower class image fitted the Leavisite approach, so did his opposition to the Mandarins. Incidentally, Amis also distanced himself from Peacock’s type of literature, which he described as ‘autodidactic’, ‘fatally injured by whimsy and

⁵⁸ Walter Allen, *New Statesman*, 30 January 1954, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of ‘Scrutiny’*, (London: NLB, 1979), p.322. Mulhern mentions Peter Green as an author of this statement.

⁶⁰ Simon Raven, ‘Correspondence’, *The London Magazine*, October 1955, p.68.

quaintness, by cumbersome ironising on modern life⁶¹. Peacock's satirizing on the modern world and his fascination with classical thought and manners contrasted with the realistic present-day interests of the 1950s intellectuals. It was the 'contemporary' world they were writing about, not the ancient civilizations Peacock praised⁶².

Shortly before his death Amis hinted at some connection between his career path and Leavis. In his *Memoirs*, looking retrospectively at the early 60s when he got a job in Cambridge Amis says: 'It was a whole flight of steps up the academic hierarchy from Swansea [...] and it had Dr F.R. Leavis in it'⁶³. However, as regards Leavis's criticism, Amis is more denunciatory: 'With some patches of exception like his *Othello* lecture/essay⁶⁴, he now seems to me to have done more harm than good to literature, but few scales had time to fall from my eyes in the short time I was at Cambridge'⁶⁵. Later on in the *Memoirs* Amis admits that his disrespect for Leavis's achievement was reciprocated: Leavis was often quoted as having called Amis a "pornographer".

A discussion of literary or cultural criticism gives Amis room to express his views on critical approaches to literature and it is not only Leavis of whom he disapproves. W.P. Ker's lectures⁶⁶, which Amis reviews in the *Spectator*, are an

⁶¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Laugh When You Can', review of Thomas Love Peacock, *Maid Marian; Crotchet Castle*, *The Spectator*, 1 April 1955, p. 402.

⁶² Lionel Madden, *Literature in Perspective: Thomas Love Peacock*, (London: Evans Brothers Publishers, 1967), p. 33.

⁶³ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 217.

⁶⁴ F.R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: or the Sentimentalist's *Othello*', in *The Common Pursuit*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972 [1952]) pp.136-159.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 217.

⁶⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'The Scholar as Critic', review of W.P. Ker, *On Modern Literature. Lectures and Addresses*, *The Spectator*, 4 November 1955, pp. 594-5.

example of what Amis calls ‘pseudo-criticism’ produced by ‘an old-fashioned scholar’⁶⁷:

There is a tendency to use learning as a means of wriggling away from the issue. [...] Then there is the practice of using literature as a jumping-off ground into something else. With Ker this something else is commonly the writer’s mind, with contemporary academics it may be the history of ideas or some religiose conception of moral health. And there is the habitual dodging of the hard question, the complacent uttering of what might be called the how-do-you-mean reagent, whereby ‘the art of the ode’ and so-and-so’s ‘classical strain’ and the ‘natural growth’ of Elizabethan drama are left echoing in the void – although it would be hard to demonstrate how much better off we are today with ‘objective correlative’ or ‘dissociation of sensibility’, sonorous as these are.⁶⁸

Amis disapproves of Ker’s criticism for its ‘jumping off into something else’, extra-textual comments and generalisations. Such technique will not appeal to ‘the generation nourished on the ideal of close reading’,⁶⁹ with which Amis identifies. For him, literature is a closed system and criticism should be based on the text rather than on the history of ideas. Amis opts for such a common sense approach to literary criticism, hence his objections to literary theory and expressions incomprehensible to the ‘general reader’. At the same time he disapproves of the philological approach and ‘biographical chit-chat’⁷⁰.

Another academic whose approach Amis rejects is Arthur Quiller-Couch, the founder of the English School at Cambridge. Quiller-Couch is at fault, Amis claims,

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 594.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.594.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 595.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 595.

for his criticism, being the ‘acme of orthodoxy’, is full of ‘pious generalities’⁷¹. Amis compares him with Leavis:

Now that the Leavis regime itself has passed into history, it is tempting to conclude that although any kind of academic study of indigenous literature is probably harmful, the Leavis kind did more general damage than the Q [Quiller-Couch] kind⁷².

Rubin Rabinovitz in his book *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960* mentions three sources of influence on the fifties’ intellectuals: the philosophy of logical positivism, the writing of F.R. Leavis and the criticism of William Empson. The logical positivism was based on Hume’s insistence on empirical evidence in determining rational meanings and on Bertrand Russell’s logical analysis of proposition. Its philosophers who taught in Cambridge and Oxford at that time, Ludwig Wittgenstein and A. J. Ayer, influenced many young writers and as Kenneth Tynan put it: ‘taught them to talk sense’⁷³. Rabinovitz claims that by advocating rationalism and logical analysis, positivism provided an alternative to voluntarism, existentialism or other antiprogressive, individualistic philosophies. Logical positivism took the form of the cult of scientific progress (C.P. Snow), interest in the analytic aspect of language (Amis) and a rejection of Joycean antiprogressive cyclical philosophy (Emyr Humphreys).

Leavis’s critical method appealed to the younger writers on account of its quarrel with the Bloomsbury writers and its emphasis on morality in literature. The

⁷¹ Kingsley Amis, ‘Where Q Stands Now’, review of A.L. Rowse, *Quiller-Couch: a Portrait of ‘Q’*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 48.

⁷² Ibid. p. 48.

Scrutiny critics initiated a debate on the social function of literature; in textual analysis they redrew the map of English poetry by attacking Romanticism and its Victorian aftermath and by glorifying the early seventeenth century poetry; what mostly attracted the 1950s intellectuals, Leavisites praised as ‘free, unspecialised intelligence’⁷⁴. However, the ‘contemporary’ writers who started their careers after the Second World War disagreed with the *Scrutiny* creed on several points: its elitism, the refusal to engage in dialogue with other disciplines and, most importantly, its rejection of mass culture. It was the cult of mass culture that led the postwar intellectuals to create the discipline of cultural studies and write books such as Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* and Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*.

The third source of influence Rabinovitz mentions, the criticism of William Empson had significance because of the stress it put on the close word study of poems and the lack of interest in symbolism. Empson advocated poetry as argument (‘argufying in poetry’), as logical discourse, and provided a critical method which supplemented the ideas of logical positivism. Amis in his review of Empson’s *Argufying* does not subscribe to his analytical criticism unconditionally. For him, Empson’s criticism has no sense or direction, it does not result in ‘making up minds’ but is aimed at holding the reader’s attention ‘and giving off a vague but creditable air of concern’⁷⁵.

⁷³ Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967).

⁷⁴ Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margolies, Carole Snee (eds.), *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), p. 38.

⁷⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘Bare Choirs?’, review of William Empson, *Argufying*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 52.

Amis's positivism is reflected in the language he uses, both in his novels and in his reviews. It avoids the metaphysical and esoteric; it uses common sense in presenting arguments and appeals to the 'intelligent reader'. Such language forms the style of Amis's writing. At a time 'when poor Beowulf has found critics to be more potent monsters than Grendel or his dam'⁷⁶ Amis offered his own form of criticism.

The Style of the Reviews

Because the Mandarins were mainly literary journalists, not writers themselves, Amis's most effective weapon against them was his own literary criticism. In his reviews he avoids critical terminology, uses colloquial phrases and often appeals to the reader's common sense. In defining the type of criticism Kingsley Amis practised, Paul Fussell uses Morris Dickstein's term 'genuine criticism', as opposed to 'literary criticism':

1. Criticism is *writing*, and writing in language that is itself worth attending to, that itself becomes part of the pleasure of explanation or valuation. "Its first goal is to interest and hold its readers". This is, in an aesthetic act, like literature, but unlike "scholarship" or conveyance of information.
2. Criticism is "personal or it is nothing". Which seems to imply a third characteristic,
3. "Like art, it is a social activity". It "seeks subtly to change the world, starting with the mind of the reader"⁷⁷.

Amis's criticism reveals a lot about him as a person, as a writer and as an intellectual. He does not pretend to be presenting objective truths; he often lets his

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 595.

⁷⁷ Paul Fussell *Anti-Egotist*, *op.cit.* p. 65.

personal likes and dislikes enter the reviews. The form of a review, on principle, is meant to ‘change the world’, which here means to influence the reader. However, Amis’s attempts to influence the reader do not always extend to imposing his own opinion on them. On the contrary, Amis’s reviews often aim at provoking the reader to respond. In *Lucky Jim*, he poked fun at the class issues of the 1950s, and succeeded in provoking a reaction. This success led to the creation of a new anti-hero and set a pattern for novel development. *Stanley and the Women*, through its attack on gender relations, was another attempt to provoke a violent reaction, but this time it failed in terms of setting new patterns for the novel. The question arises – to what extent were Amis’s reviews intended as provocation, and to what extent was the provocation part of Amis’s plan to ‘change the world’.

As regards the first point – ‘writing in language that is itself worth attending to’ – Amis’s language is in the first place colloquial and persuasive, opting for a low register rather than sophistication. The style and the language Amis uses play an important role in the creation of his critical image.

Amis objects to the biographical interpretation of his novels, however, the question arises as to the extent to which a writer’s views should be reflected in literary criticism. A review, on principle, must contain a personal opinion, as it is signed with a critic’s name. Amis’s reviews are personal and he creates his own image, an image of a critic, in them. He states this argument in the review of D.H. Lawrence: ‘It may be objected that I have confused an account of Lawrence’s extraneous beliefs with an account of his criticism. They are really inseparable:

certainly they were for Lawrence,⁷⁸. A question arises, however, as to the extent to which his own opinions constituted a part of his criticism. Amis creates the persona of a critic in his reviews and to a certain extent Amis the critic is as much of a created figure as the characters of the novel itself. The critic in Amis's reviews pretends to be modest, undermines his literary training, professes his ignorance of the English literature canon and addresses his readers like their "pal". The last device is possible only with the assumption that the reader is not a high brow academic.

Amis's anti-intellectualism, or as Kenneth Allsop calls it 'insistent lowbrowism',⁷⁹ is reflected in the way he often opposes literary snobbery and admits that he does not know or has not read some of the writers praised by highbrow critics. *The Outsider*, in Amis's review, overwhelms the reader with 'its author's erudition'⁸⁰ because it mentions a number of names that a man like Amis (meaning 'a plain reader') has never read or never heard of: Barbusse, Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Hesse, Hemingway, Van Gogh, Nijinsky, Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, George Fox, Blake, Sri Ramakrishna, Gurdjieff and Hulme. Gilbert Phelps says that Amis was always prone to 'exaggeration in the heat of the moment'⁸¹ and faking ignorance was one of his extravagancies. Having graduated from English Literature in St. John's College in Oxford and lectured on literature in Swansea for many years, Amis was not at all ignorant of such writers but alleged ignorance seems to form a part of his reviewing style.

⁷⁸ Kingsley Amis, 'Phoenix Too Frequent', review of D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal, *The Spectator*, 3 February 1956, p. 156.

⁷⁹ Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Decade*, (London: Peter Owen, 1958) p. 55.

⁸⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'The Legion of the Lost', review of Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*, *The Spectator*, 15 June 1956, pp. 830-831.

⁸¹ Gilbert Phelps, 'The "Awfulness" of Kingsley Amis', *Kingsley Amis in Life and Letters*, ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.67.

Eric Jacobs in Amis's biography rejects the idea of the author's philistine dislike for literature; he simply did not like to talk about literature, even though he knew a lot about it⁸². Jacobs claims that 'jeering' was a pose for Amis who thought that 'it was quite wrong to inflict this seriousness on other people by behaving like a writer in public'⁸³. Amis 'bashed his way through his reading list': Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Marvell, Herbert, Dryden 'and the rest, though leaving out John Donne'⁸⁴. Jacobs says: 'You might catch a glimpse of just how much he knew what he was talking about by challenging him with a quotation or a rare word, in which case you were likely to be overwhelmed by the comprehensiveness of his answer'⁸⁵. Similarly, Martin Amis in *Experience* talks about his father's knowledge of English literature: 'When the two of us were up late at night I would sometimes think, 'My God. He knows *all English poetry*.' Ten lines here, twenty lines there, of Shakespeare, Milton, Marvell, Rochester, Pope, Gray, Keats, Wordswoth, Byron, Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, Housman, Owen, Kipling, Auden, Graves, and of course Larkin'⁸⁶. Rubin Rabinovitz calls the device 'a cultivated Philistinism'⁸⁷ as it questions the author's sincerity.

In his review of Harold Nicolson's book, Amis undermines his own capabilities: 'As I read through the list of 'the specific components of the English sense of humour' (for about the eighth time, since I am not as quick at these things as

⁸² Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis: A Biography*, op.cit. p. 77.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 78.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 118.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 77.

⁸⁶ Martin Amis, *Experience*, op.cit. p. 335.

⁸⁷ Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, op.cit, p. 52.

some of my colleagues)...’⁸⁸, implying other critics’ – the Mandarins’ – superiority. Similarly, in *The Spectator* review of Arnold Wesker’s plays, Amis admits proudly that he has never seen any of these plays performed partly because Wesker is unable to write good dialogue. As a critic Amis opts for the literary theory of drama; provokingly, he calls himself ‘a non-theatre-goer who can read’⁸⁹ thus undermining the quality of contemporary English theatre. The conviction that ‘the recent renaissance of the English stage is to him a closed book, closed theatre, rather’⁹⁰ is a source of ‘legitimate pride’ and a reason itself for avoiding it. A statement like this could be interpreted as Amis’s preference for the literary approach to play writing; however, it is more likely that it is aimed at provoking a reaction from other critics and his readers. Such self-satisfied ignorance, whether faked or genuine, resulted in some angry letters in the following two *Spectator* issues. In ‘Letters to the Editor’ one of the readers asked: ‘Can it be that Mr Amis is going the way of his professors in *Lucky Jim*?’ and says that ignorance of plays like *Look Back in Anger* (even though Amis does not mention this one) is ‘a gap in the education of a man of letters of which he should not be proud’⁹¹. Two weeks later, another reader commented on Amis’s pomposity: ‘It is incredible enough to admit publicly to not having seen the plays performed which one is reviewing, but to accord oneself a sense of pride on that account is an insult to both playwright and readers alike’⁹². The respondent points at

⁸⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘No Laughing Matter’, review of Harold Nicolson, *The English sense of Humour*, *The Spectator*, 4 May 1956, pp. 625-626.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 190.

⁹⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Not Talking About Jerusalem’, a review of Arnold Wesker, *Chips with Everything. The Kitchen. The Wesker Trilogy*, *The Spectator*, 10 August 1962, p. 190.

⁹¹ ‘Letters to the Editor’, *The Spectator*, 17 August, 1962, p. 216.

⁹² ‘Letters to the Editor’, *The Spectator*, 24 August 1962, p. 268.

Amis's shortcomings as a reviewer: 'Never heard of Brecht or Pirandello, Mr Amis?

Ever read any modern poetry, Mr Amis?'⁹³,

Richard Bradford justifies Amis's attack on the theatre by citing his dislike for the hierarchical culture of the society; theatre going was seen to be a middle class activity. In Amis's literary biography he says:

Amis loathed the kind of inclusive, hierarchical culture of the theatre-going crowd, particularly the way in which the play was treated as a part of the middle class social fabric; less a literary text, more a social gathering. [...] Amis's anti-theatrical stance was perhaps something of a personal eccentricity but it is nonetheless consistent with his general aversion to the notion of culture as a collective enterprise in which the parts are subservient to the whole.⁹⁴

Amis fakes ignorance in his review of John O'Hara's *Sweet and Sour*⁹⁵, and claims the book is full of gossip about American writers – many of them unknown even by name to the average British reader – 'plus a great deal of whimsical chit-chat'. Self-confessed ignorance, although not as strong as in his review of *The Outsider*, here fulfils a similar function – asserting that there is nothing shameful about not knowing the writers because even a critic who lectures on literature does not know them.

Fake modesty as a critical technique played a similar role in Amis's review of a critical text on D.H. Lawrence, with ironic comparisons to other critics: 'Some authorial slips are so evident that even I, with my modest training in textual criticism,

⁹³ Ibid. p. 268.

⁹⁴ Richard Bradford, *Kingsley Amis: A Biography*, (yet unpublished).

⁹⁵ Kingsley Amis, 'Stale and Flat', review of John O'Hara, *Sweet and Sour*, *The Spectator*, 10 February 1956, pp. 193-194.

could proffer a plausible conjecture'⁹⁶. But, at the same time, Amis speaks with great confidence and passes authoritative judgements. When he opposes the Modern writers' superiority Amis puts himself on a par with 'a plain man'⁹⁷: 'And what are we to do, all the rest of us, the mass? Can we become superior too?' Hardly, because it's all a matter of feeling, you see.'⁹⁸

Another feature of Amis's style emerges in this appeal – the use of colloquial language. The informal 'you see' strengthens the appeal to the reader and makes the style of the review more colloquial. At another point he calls Lawrence's critical opinions 'stuff': 'And this was the stuff, I suppose, on which Dr Leavis based his assessment of Lawrence as the finest literary critic of our time' and adds as colloquially: 'thank Heaven that is untrue'⁹⁹. Apart from disrespect for Lawrence's works, the use of the word 'stuff' implies Amis's opinion about their bombastic quality. He calls Lawrence and other Modern writers 'chaps' and adds that 'it is a good thing that these chaps continue to roll up'¹⁰⁰. To stress his point Amis goes quite far in his informality with the use of the emphatic 'bloody'. Reading other critics' praise of *Brideshead Revisited* 'that the whole thing looks ravishing', Amis replies: 'Well yes, but so it bloody should'¹⁰¹.

⁹⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'Phoenix Too Frequent', review of D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal, *The Spectator*, 3 February 1956, pp.156-157.

⁹⁷ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p. 109.

⁹⁸ Kingsley Amis, 'Phoenix Too Frequent', op.cit. p. 156.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p.156.

¹⁰⁰ ibid. p. 157.

¹⁰¹ Kingsley Amis, 'How I Lived in a Very Big House and Found God', review of TV series *Brideshead Revisited*, The Amis Collection, p. 85.

Informally Amis calls a novel that he is reviewing ‘not my cup of tea’,¹⁰² and uses phrases such as ‘can just about stomach the idea...’, ‘adroitness of scene-shifting and the rest of how-d’ye-do’. As informally, in a review of Peacock, Amis says: ‘*Maid Marian* may not be everybody’s cup of tea and *Melincourt* drags here and there, the whole thing is much of a muchness’¹⁰³. Amis’s style was once defined by Norman Macleod as ‘linguistic temperament’¹⁰⁴, which allowed him the use of ‘one fellow’,¹⁰⁵ in relation to a literary critic with whom he did not agree. Referring to another critic, he calls him an expert on ‘psychology and new stuff like that’¹⁰⁶ and criticising Somerset Maugham for the inability to develop a convincing love theme he says: ‘here again the ‘passion’ stuff is botched’¹⁰⁷.

Amis adopts a very informal tone in the *New Statesman* article on mass culture, where he objects to classifying culture into high and low. Jazz, TV and cinema cannot be classified as good or bad only because they are perceived belonging to mass culture; just like painting and literature they have to be valued on the grounds of their own merit. Amis expresses his idea in a very informal manner: ‘It does almost look as if we shall have to judge all this stuff on its merits – just like literature and painting and that type of thing’¹⁰⁸. In this context, an informal tone is a part of the message, Amis uses low register to praise low culture. In discussing W.P. Ker’s

¹⁰² Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, review of Veronica Henriques, *Love for a Convict*, *The Spectator*, 18 February 1955, p.199.

¹⁰³ Kingsley Amis, ‘Laugh When You Can’, review of Thomas Love Peacock, *Maid Marian; Crotchet Castle*, *The Spectator*, 1 April, 1955, p. 402.

¹⁰⁴ Norman Macleod, ‘The Language of Kingsley Amis’, *Kingsley Amis in Life and Letters*, ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.105.

¹⁰⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Coventry Chaucer’, review of *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: a Tribute*, ed. by George Hartley, *The Amis Collection*, p. 218

¹⁰⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘Bare Choirs?’, review of William Empson, *Argufying*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁷ Kingsley Amis, ‘Mr Maugham’s Notions’, review of Richard Cordell, *Somerset Maugham: A Biographical and Critical Study*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 66.

lectures he uses expressions like: ‘atitude game, the deep-love-of-nature, finest-elegy-in-our-language stuff’¹⁰⁹.

In his reviews Amis takes on a rationalist point of view at the same time assuming that this is the reader’s attitude as well. He starts his article on *Heaven and Hell*¹¹⁰ by ridiculing Aldous Huxley’s fascination with the mescalin-induced experience of ‘the Absolute’. To emphasize the strangeness of this approach, Amis explains technically what mescalin is, and by this implies that the reader will most probably share Amis’s ignorance in the subject rather than Huxley’s expertise. The review ridicules people like Huxley who share his ‘visionary hell’ (schizophrenics, Goya, Kafka, Charles Williams)¹¹¹. Amis mocks a belief in deep hypnosis and yoga, and laughs at the use of phrases like ‘the mind’s Antipodes’ and ‘inner vision’. He claims that ‘the general reader’ will no doubt reject them as well through the need for rationality in life: ‘I wonder what would happen to a mescalin-eater who had been thinking about new housing estates instead of about Blake’, ‘A visionary bus-driver, a chef aware of immanent otherness, are unlikely as well as undesirable figures’,¹¹². The disclaimer of drugs becomes very strong in the course of the review, and again, taking a tone of a concerned friend, Amis says: ‘There must be plenty of chaps to whom it would appeal as an escape from personal difficulties. I should be sorry to see anybody I like buying himself mescalin’.¹¹³.

¹⁰⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘Definitions of Culture’, review of Richard Wollheim, *Socialism and Culture*, *New Statesman*, 2 June 1961, p.880.

¹⁰⁹ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Scholar as Critic’, review of W.P. Ker, *On Modern Literature. Lectures and Addresses*, *The Spectator*, 4 November 1955, p. 595.

¹¹⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Dreams of a Spirit-Seer’, review of Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell*, *The Spectator*, 16 March 1956, pp.338-340.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 339.

¹¹² Ibid. 340.

¹¹³ Ibid. 340.

Although there are ‘chaps’ who believe in the mystical experience, the review is supposed to appeal to ‘the general reader’, who relies on rational judgement:

The general reader, even if he resists the urge to call in his neighbourhood logical analyst...

[...]

In spite of Mr Huxley’s denial, the general reader will suspect that he is listening to the utterances of mysticism...¹¹⁴

Amis concludes with an address to the reader:

[Huxley] proposed that mescalin be forcibly fed to those rendered confidently insolent by excessive reliance on systematic reasoning. That means you and me, reader. Shall we have a drink together before Mr Huxley calls time?¹¹⁵

‘The general reader’, to whom the reviews are addressed is a non-specialist in literature (‘most university students and many general readers’¹¹⁶ – meaning non-academics), has a rational attitude to life and shares Amis’s common-sense view of the world. The ‘general reader’ does not understand terms like ‘moral realism’, ‘rhetorical power’ and ‘comic artistry’ (terms ‘which are being thrown about as if everybody knew what they meant and what they could be applied to’¹¹⁷).

To prove that his criticism was not so unintelligent or uninformed Amis occasionally deigns to show off his learning. In most of his reviews he cultivated an informal tone; however, a certain pattern in his formality can be drawn. The more

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 339.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p.340.

¹¹⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘Laugh When You Can’, review of Thomas Love Peacock, *Maid Marian; Crotchet Castle*, *The Spectator*, 1 April, 1955, p. 402.

¹¹⁷ Kingsley Amis, ‘Torrents of Thoughts’, review of Ricardo Quintana, *Swift: An Introduction*, *The Spectator*, 15 April 1955, p. 474.

critical Amis becomes, the more colloquial becomes the style of his reviews. When he respects the subject, he becomes more formal and polite ('At the Jazz Band Ball',¹¹⁸, 'The Road to Airstrip One'¹¹⁹). While he wants to ridicule the writer, he becomes very informal: 'Time and time again I had the suspicion that I was reading some fiendishly far-out satirist of sentimental sub-intellectual liberalism. If I'm right, don't throw off the mask, Wesker'¹²⁰. Such an informality of style gives an impression of confidence on the part of the critic, consequently, makes the criticism more self-assured.

The Non-Biographical Approach

Many times throughout his career Amis emphasised the importance of the separation of the writer from his or her characters in the interpretation of fiction. Amis's concern may well have resulted from the ways in which the characters in his novels were interpreted. In the mid-Fifties readers tended to interpret Amis's characters as representations of his own personality. Hence Amis was said to hate highbrow arts (like Jim Dixon in *Lucky Jim*), to indulge in adultery (like John Lewis in *That Uncertain Feeling*) and to hate abroad (like Garnet Bowen in *I Like It Here*). John McDermott traces allegations of philistinism to rigidly biographical interpretations of the characters in his early novels¹²¹. Later on, his heroes (or anti-heroes) were said to be direct reflections of the author's misogyny (Stanley Duke in

¹¹⁸ Kingsley Amis, 'At the Jazz Band Ball', *The Spectator*, 28 September 1956, pp. 409-411.

¹¹⁹ Kingsley Amis, 'The Road to Airstrip One', review of Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*, *The Spectator*, 31 August 1956, pp. 292- 293.

¹²⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'Not Talking About Jerusalem', a review of Arnold Wesker, *Chips with Everything. The Kitchen. The Wesker Trilogy*, *The Spectator*, 10 August 1962, p. 190.

Stanley and the Women) or his alcohol problem (Maurice Allington in *The Green Man*).

Amis comes back to this argument in a more personal context in 1973 in an article published in *The Times Literary Supplement*¹²². He says:

I make things up, make my characters up. [...] Real people are interesting enough, but everybody is what he does, and to portray a man doing what he actually did do means holding up a show while he does it. But what is either a paradox or truism, the closer the likeness of the real interesting person, the less interesting he will be in the novel¹²³.

In defence of his ‘non-autobiographical claims’ Amis says of *Lucky Jim*: ‘the whole situation of that novel was clear in my mind before I ever thought of teaching at a university, let alone started to do so’¹²⁴. However, he stresses ‘the bond’ between him and his characters:

All my heroes, and other principal figures, have a great deal of me in them. [...] All my heroes start from me and in a sense stay with me, even when there are half a dozen of them occupying the same book [...] This bond is at least as strong when the protagonist is unpleasant [...] And it is doubly hard to dislike one’s child.¹²⁵

Amis certainly does not deny the phenomenon of biographical writing per se, and roughly classifies writers into biographical and non-biographical. Biographical writers, in his opinion, are ‘not doing enough’. Although non-biographical writing

¹²¹ John McDermott, *Introduction* to Kingsley Amis, *The Amis Collection* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.xii.

¹²² Kingsley Amis, ‘Real and Made-up People’ reprinted in *The Amis Collection*, pp. 3-7.

¹²³ Ibid. p. 4.

¹²⁴ ibid. p.5.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p.6.

seems illusory (writer's experience being the source of ideas) and has limitations (demands of the plot), Amis claims he belongs to that group.

Amis criticizes the auto-biographical approach to literature in his review of Robert Graves's biography, when he says that the moment the biographer 'connects a given poem at all closely with an incident or limited period in his life he cannot help damaging the poem'¹²⁶. Amis admits that 'poems are particularly vulnerable to the kind of reductive, de-universalising, anecdote-hatching process'¹²⁷ but he objects to it. Amis also defends his novels from biographical interpretation saying that 'novels are made of sterner stuff; they easily recover from that amazing treatment in which literary journalists and other unliterary people speculate about which real person this or that fictitious character is based on'¹²⁸.

Richard Bradford refuses to accept Amis at face value and attempts to disclose the autobiographical thread in the novels, by concentrating on the relationship between what Amis 'did, thought, experienced' and what he wrote:

I shall treat Amis's fiction as one of the most entertaining and thought-provoking autobiographies ever produced. [...] In most [novels] there is self portrait, sometimes accompanied by a confession, a projection of what might have been or, less frequently, an act of revenge or self-justification. He will alter experience but not only to disguise it and not quite beyond recognition for those who knew him, but also to allow himself space for conjecture, as a means of exploring his thoughts about life.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'Against the Current', review of Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work; In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1946*, The Amis Collection, pp. 201-203.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 201.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 201.

¹²⁹ Richard Bradford, *Kingsley Amis: A Biography*, (yet unpublished)

Bradford detects autobiographical traces in all Amis's novels and poems despite the author's protests and frequent affirmation that his fiction was not based on his life.

Amis objected to a biographical interpretation of literature not only as a writer, when his own works were being discussed, but also as a critic when he was discussing the works of others. Reviewing Ricardo Quintana's *Introduction to Swift*¹³⁰ Amis expresses his objections to applying 'ideologies instead of texts', says that the book consists mostly of biographical facts and abandons any attempt to 'treat Swift's works as literature'¹³¹. He observes that very often in criticism of Swift the literary qualities of his books are 'ignored in favour of their qualities as documentation of his biographical fact'¹³² and as a critic he disagrees with this approach: 'No doubt it was good fun for the boys at the time, who knew the people involved, but we can at best only know about them.'¹³³ He concludes his review by subscribing to Robert Graves's opinion that what he meant by poetry was poetry, not 'Byron's collars and Shelley's girl-friends and Keats's first editions'.¹³⁴.

Such an approach is reflected in Amis's review of a collection of essays by Cyril Connolly. Amis criticizes Connolly for focusing on extra-textual information about the author and ignoring the reviewed text. Amis objects to two things in Connolly's writing: 'the stylish style'¹³⁵ and too much biographical information in his essays. The former point, 'the stylish style', Amis defines as concentrating on 'literary or artistic matters' – making far-fetched comparisons with other literary

¹³⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'Torrents of Thoughts', a review of Ricardo Quintana, *Swift: An Introduction*, *The Spectator*, 15 April, 1955, p. 474.

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 474.

¹³² Ibid. p. 474.

¹³³ Kingsley Amis, 'Torrents of Thoughts', op.cit. p. 474.

¹³⁴ Ibid. p. 475.

works and merely alluding to his “evidence” for such comparisons. The latter part illustrates Amis’s disapproval of ‘the slack method of potted biography’, anecdote and gossip about writers:

For it is less their works that interest Mr Connolly here than themselves and their friends and the places they lived. The letters of Lawrence and Joyce, a biography of Gertrude Stein, a symposium on Dylan Thomas are his texts, not their verse or prose.¹³⁵

This leads to a further element of Amis’s criticism (with which Connolly does not agree) – ‘talking about, rather than around, the books he was reviewing’¹³⁷. In his review of Swift, Amis undermines the kind of literary criticism, that starts ‘at the wrong end, with ideologies instead of texts’¹³⁸. However, looking retrospectively at his writing, in his *Memoirs* Amis admits that there is ‘truth in writing’ (*‘scribendo veritas’*) and however fictitious his novels are, they contain elements of the writer’s personality:

I have already written an account of myself in twenty or more volumes, most of them called novels. Novels they fully are, too, and those who know both them and me will also know they are firmly unautobiographical, but at the same time every word of them says something about the kind of person I am. *In vino veritas* – I don’t know,’ Anthony Powell once said to me, ‘but *in scribendo veritas* – a certainty’.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘Connolly in Court’, review of Cyril Connolly, *Previous Convictions*, *The Spectator*, 6 December 1963, p. 837.

¹³⁶ Ibid. p. 837.

¹³⁷ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p. 109.

¹³⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘Torrents of Thoughts’, op.cit. p. 474.

¹³⁹ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, p. xvi.

Popular Cultures

From *The Spectator* reviews one can infer Amis's attitude to the emergence of the discipline of cultural studies in the form of books such as *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart¹⁴⁰ and *Britain in the Sixties: Communications* by Raymond Williams¹⁴¹. Amis starts his review of *The Uses of Literacy* by making fun of the middle class, from which he originates, and then moves on to criticize the working class. However credible and moving, Hoggart's perspective on the working class is romanticized. The middle stratum of society in his account is bound to seem drab and gloomy compared with the lower class who know how to enjoy themselves and are not afraid to show up as 'neurotic, unreal and selfregarding'. Although Amis himself comes from the middle class, which he ridicules at the beginning of his review, he claims to know more about working class life than Hoggart. What Hoggart fails to see, and Amis is quick to observe, is the vice of complacency that characterizes people of lower class origin. In terms of expertise in the field, Amis emphasizes the author's ignorance of things like mass publication, entertainment, songs, television programmes and popular fiction. Here again Amis shows his greater suitability for such a study – he considers himself a fan, and an expert, of popular culture in general. He says at the end: 'One might well [...] go to one's grave in happy ignorance of all the things I have mentioned; but not if one is going to write a whole book about popular culture'¹⁴². Patronising towards both middle and working classes, Amis implies that how much one knows about their cultural background should not depend

¹⁴⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'From Aspidistra to Jude-Box', a review of Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, *The Spectator*, 1 March 1957, p. 285.

¹⁴¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Martians Bearing Bursaries', a review of Raymond Williams, *Britain in the Sixties: Communications*, *The Spectator*, 27 April 1962, p. 554.

on one's origin. Three years later Amis repeats his criticism of cultural studies in an essay 'Lone Voices'¹⁴³. He says he opts for mass culture in preference to its analysis: 'almost any television programme turns out to be a duet between what the producers imagined they were up to and what Mr Richard Hoggart [...] explains they are really up to'¹⁴⁴.

Amis generally agreed with Raymond Williams in his view that high culture suffered by having been made the preserve of a social class or the expression of class attitude. Williams perceived the role of the media as fundamental to this process, a reflection of Amis's remark about the role of broadcasting which had been expressed a few years earlier in *The Spectator*¹⁴⁵. Amis disapproves of cultural studies publications, Williams's *Communications* included, because they talk about the most obvious aspects of mass culture and aspire to be profoundly revealing. He says: 'I can think of no field of cultural activity in which the expert seems to start off with so much less information than the ordinary citizen'¹⁴⁶. Those who claim to be theoreticians of culture turn out to know least about it; Amis considers himself a practitioner.

Amis refutes the notion that popular culture and high brow culture should be treated differently. He says that 'under welfare capitalism' 'the fusion of the two is on

¹⁴² Kingsley Amis, 'From Aspidistra to Jude-Box', op.cit. p. 285.

¹⁴³ Kingsley Amis, *What Became of Jane Austen and Other Questions*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) pp.157-171.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p.158.

¹⁴⁵ Kingsley Amis, 'Art and Craft', a review of *The Craft of Letters in England. A Symposium* edited by John Lehman in *The Spectator*, 13 July 1956, p. 68.

¹⁴⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'Martians Bearing Bursaries', op.cit. p. 554.

the way to becoming an accomplished fact'¹⁴⁷. Amis rejects the generalisation about mass culture being of low quality:

The moment you descend to particulars, you see unmistakably that there is no monolithic ‘it’; that all these ‘artifacts’ vary enormously in merit, at least as widely as those of high culture; [...] The best of mass culture is very much better than the worst of high culture.¹⁴⁸

Not everything can be classified in terms of its high/low profile. To prove this, Amis uses the example of jazz which ‘clearly isn’t all high culture’ but at the same time ‘is far from making the Top Twenty’. Mass culture products, TV and cinema, similarly, defy the classification and one can only apply value judgement on the basis of their merit: ‘We shall have to judge all this stuff on its merits – just like literature and painting and that type of thing’,¹⁴⁹.

Mass culture is not something with which one is ‘confronted’ but something that everybody should ‘experience’. Amis criticises Wollheim’s detachment from it:

If he has ever watched *77 Sunset Strip*, seen *Oklahoma!*, listened to a Connie Francis record, looked through a selection of keen neckties at the local outfitter’s – and I mean as a *participant*, not as one confronted by anything, in search of material about cultural trends in anything, diagnosing anything – he evidently feels this is to be irrelevant to his task, perhaps even a bit shameful,¹⁵⁰.

By stating his position with regard to mass culture, Amis returns to the point he made earlier in the review of Raymond Williams’s *Communications* that to talk

¹⁴⁷ Kingsley Amis, ‘Definitions of Culture’, comment on Richard Wollheim, *Socialism and Culture*, *New Statesman*, 2 June 1961, pp. 880-881.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 880.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 880.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 880.

about popular culture, one has to know it first. In contrast to both critics, Wollheim and Williams, who consider themselves experts, Amis knows popular culture because he experiences it as a participant. On another occasion, he uses the same argument in the context of jazz: ‘If you are going to use phrases like ‘mass culture’ or ‘dance-hall civilisation’ you ought to be able to distinguish between the Mereysippi Jazz Band and Mr Geraldo’¹⁵¹. In an article ‘From Basin Street to Bermondsey’,¹⁵² Amis again protests against intellectual snobbery and defends jazz: ‘The intellectual who is moved [by jazz] falls under the suspicion, not always unjust, of irresponsible faddism [...] of enjoying thinking how much he hates Mozart while tapping his foot to the music of Mr Ken Coyer’¹⁵³. For many years Amis wrote about jazz¹⁵⁴ and his enthusiasm for jazz soared owing to his friendship with Philip Larkin. In his *Memoirs* Amis admits that it was Larkin who introduced him to jazz, the passion that they shared to the end of their lives¹⁵⁵.

Amis wrote a great deal about popular culture and treated it as a ‘middlebrow’ alternative for highbrow culture. In 1961 he published a study of science fiction literature – *New Maps of Hell*¹⁵⁶. In 1965 he wrote *The James Bond Dossier*¹⁵⁷ where he presented a critical analysis of James Bond novels. Three years later he wrote his

¹⁵¹ Kingsley Amis, ‘From Basin Street to Bermondsey’, review of *Jazzbook* ed. by Albert J. McCarthy; *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya* ed. by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *The Spectator*, 18 November 1955, pp. 668-670.

¹⁵² Kingsley Amis, ‘From Basin Street to Bermondsey’, review of *Jazzbook* ed. by Albert J. McCarthy; *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya* ed. by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *The Spectator*, 18 November 1955, pp. 668-670.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 668.

¹⁵⁴ Amis’s articles on jazz were published in *The Spectator*, *The Observer*. A few of them can be found in *The Amis Collection*, pp. 377- 389.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Larkin admits that it was in Oxford where his education in jazz grew and where he had met people he ‘could even parallel his ecstasies with their own’, in Philip Larkin, *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1971*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) p. 47.

¹⁵⁶ Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960).

own imitation of Ian Fleming's stories about Agent 007. Expressing his interest in James Bond novels, science fiction books and films and jazz Amis opposed intellectual prejudice against mass culture.

Amis as a critic set as his aim clarity of ideas and clarity of language, and having achieved this, he became the voice of a generation of 'middle brow intellectuals'. As 'the extremely intelligent entertainer'¹⁵⁸ among the critics, he carried literature and literary criticism to a lower, non-academic level. David Lodge describes Amis's role:

I constantly experience a strange community of feeling with him, and find that he speaks to me in a way that great novelists do not, in an idiom, a tone of voice, to which I respond with immediate understanding and pleasure and without any conscious exertion of the kind required by critical reading.¹⁵⁹

Lodge's words were written in 1966 and that fact in itself is significant – analysing a few novels Amis published after *Lucky Jim*, he shifts from 'the importance of being Amis' to 'the difficulty of being Amis'. The principles of realism are more reliable but 'drabber' than the principles of Modern art – Lodge concludes. William Laskowski quotes one of Amis's obituaries: 'We don't want a new Amis. We had our doubts about the old one.'¹⁶⁰ If Amis was a voice of a certain generation, it was the generation of the fifties and sixties and in the context of these years one can

¹⁵⁷ Kingsley Amis, *The James Bond Dossier*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965).

¹⁵⁸ Richard Bradford, *Kingsley Amis*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p.8.

¹⁵⁹ David Lodge, 'The Modern, The Contemporary, and the Importance of being Amis', op.cit. p. 249.

¹⁶⁰ William Laskowski, *Kingsley Amis*, (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1998), p. 142.

evaluate his importance. His criticism should be understood as a product of a certain social, political and historical situation.

Chapter 2

Amis on the Novel

A great part of Amis's criticism focuses upon discussion of the novel as a form. His politics of writing are to a great extent reflected in what Amis considers a 'good' novel and what he criticises as bad. The most important feature of a novel for Amis is action. In his review of *The Mather Story* by John Prebble he says that the virtue of the novel is that it is about 'what people do, not what goes on inside them'¹⁶¹. In his opinion the book is well written because its construction is sound and its narrative flow accelerating. Reviewing *A Man in His Prime* by Gilbert Phelps¹⁶², Amis stresses the importance of narration which, rather than description, should be the method of characterization. He criticizes the novel for its lack of pressure: 'all that really happens is that a middle-aged man has an affair and then returns to his wife' and says that the characters self-examine themselves too much. Reviewing Dawn Powell's novel *The Wicked Pavilion*¹⁶³, Amis asks ironically, 'don't they [the characters] perhaps talk too much and too articulately?' He implies that a surplus of words in characterization muffles the action and that if characters are to engage

¹⁶¹ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of John Prebble, *The Mather Story*, *The Spectator*, 5 Feb 1954, p.160

¹⁶² Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of Gilbert Phelps, *A Man in His Prime*, *The Spectator*, 11 March 1955.

¹⁶³ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of Dawn Powell, *The Wicked Pavilion*, *The Spectator*, 18 February 1955, pp.198-199.

attention they must be ‘given enough to do’,¹⁶⁴ Amis criticizes Doris Lessing’s novel *A Proper Marriage*¹⁶⁵ for its lack of action and says that ‘the novel is puffed up into a piece of stodge as long as two novels’:

Now it is always hard to summarise a story without seeming to be offensively implying that nothing happens, especially when, as here, almost nothing happens. Any one with so little to narrate should, I feel, make more concessions to her readers than Mrs. Lessing does with her preference for description and *oratio obliqua* as against scene-drawing and *oratio recta*, her thousand-word paragraphs, and her tissues of abstract commentary doing duty for characterisation: character, I also feel, is what people do, not what they think or in what terms they can be generalised about.¹⁶⁶

Too much description, according to Amis, spoils *The Crooked Wall*, a novel by Faith Compton Mackenzie¹⁶⁷. His criticism is that in the novel ‘everything of possible significance takes place at a distance, is muffled by long descriptions of gardens, clothes, places in Italy, houses, horses and dogs’. Amis suggests that the worth of a novel can be directly linked to ‘its reader’s willingness to turn over each successive page’,¹⁶⁸ and action, above all, can ensure that. He observed, with regard to, *The Feast of July* by H.E. Bates:

The trouble with *The Feast of July* [...] is just that not enough happens most of the time, and if human relations are to be investigated they had better manifest

¹⁶⁴ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Francois Mauriac, *Flesh and Blood*, *The Spectator*, 10 December 1954, p.764.

¹⁶⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Doris Lessing, *A Proper Marriage*, *The Spectator*, 8 October 1954, p.450.

¹⁶⁶ ibid. p. 450.

¹⁶⁷ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, review of Faith Compton Mackenzie, *The Crooked Wall*, *The Spectator*, 5 February 1954, p.160

¹⁶⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, review of Bernard Ferg, *The Rare Adventure*, *The Spectator*, 29 October 1954, p.532.

themselves in what happens between characters.¹⁶⁹

The main reason why Amis considers Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* a failure is that 'nothing of importance is found for Gerald to do, he is left hanging about brooding for 400 pages, too inert for sympathy'¹⁷⁰. In his opinion, Wilson's sentences are too long, situations are presented rather than developed, relationships emerge rather than alter, and characters, instead of events, are the author's main interest. Amis says there are too many characters and it takes Wilson half the book to draw them before starting the narration.

Amis puts a lot of emphasis on the action being the element that defines a character. In his article 'Real and Made-up People'¹⁷¹ he says:

For me, the novel works on the character, at any rate rough-hews the character. It is not the case that a fully formed hero goes stalking about in search of situations in which he can be effectively arrogant or incompetent or spiteful or pathetic or even decent, though he may very likely fall as if by chance into a couple of such in the course of being written about. The central situation comes first in every sense.¹⁷²

Another feature of a good novel, which Amis lauds in his reviews, is that it is short. Discussing *The Stranger at My Side* by Gwyn Thomas, Amis says it is 'a mere exercise in that vein of irresponsible logorrhoea which has ruined more than one

¹⁶⁹ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', review of H.E. Bates, *The Feast of July*, *The Spectator*, 29 October 1954, p.532.

¹⁷⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'Dodos Less Darling', review of Angus Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, *The Spectator*, 1 June 1956, p.764.

¹⁷¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Real and Made-up People' reprinted in *The Amis Collection*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 3-7.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* p.5.

Welsh talent,¹⁷³. He concludes that prolixity and repetition ruined Swift's prose¹⁷⁴ as well as diminished the effect of D.H. Lawrence's books¹⁷⁵. Amis says that *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow is a very good book but its drawback is that it is too long and 'parts of it could be omitted without leaving a hole'¹⁷⁶. He says that 'it takes about 150 pages to get into its stride, a lot of time [is] wasted from the narrative point of view'¹⁷⁷. Excessive length is a fault identified by Amis in many reviews, as in the discussion of Igor Gouzenko's *The Fall of Titan* in which, he says, 'there are too many explanations of the abundantly clear'¹⁷⁸. About *A Summer Night* by Alan Moorehead Amis says: 'the flow of incidents is too slack for the length of the story', again emphasising the need for balance between the number of pages and the amount of action¹⁷⁹.

While at Oxford Amis was interested in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and the topic of his B.Litt. thesis¹⁸⁰ was to reflect this interest - 'English Non-Dramatic Poetry, 1850-1900, and the Victorian Reading Public'¹⁸¹. However, it also reflected his concern for

¹⁷³ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', review of Gwyn Thomas, *The Stranger At My Side*, *The Spectator*, 23 July 1954, p.126.

¹⁷⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'Torrents of Thoughts', review of *Swift: An Introduction* by Ricardo Quintana in *The Spectator*, 15 April 1955, p.474.

¹⁷⁵ Kingsley Amis, 'Phoenix Too Frequent', review of D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*. ed. by Anthony Beal in *The Spectator*, 3 February 1956, p.156.

¹⁷⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, *The Spectator*, 21 May 1954, p.626.

¹⁷⁷ ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of Igor Gouzenko, *The Fall of Titan*, *The Spectator*, 2 July 1954, p.42.

¹⁷⁹ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of Alan Moorehead, *A Summer Night*, *The Spectator*, 29 October 1954, p.532.

¹⁸⁰ According to Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis. A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), Amis's B.Litt. thesis was failed by Lord David Cecil, the chairman of the examining board and Amis's ex-supervisor. In November 1950 at the oral examination Lord David Cecil apparently took offence at the implication that he had not read the thesis properly. Amis never re-wrote the thesis thinking he had been unfairly treated.

¹⁸¹ Kingsey Amis abbreviated part of his B.Litt. thesis for publication in *Essays in Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954) under the title 'Communication and the Victorian Poet' ed. By F.W. Bateson (who had supervised the thesis).

the relationship between artist and audience. His argument was that only writers who wrote with the reader in mind and consulted their friends for approval before publication were able to communicate with their readers. Amis was always concerned with the marketability of literature and its accessibility to the reader. Such views resulted in his interest in popular culture: jazz, film, science fiction and popular detective fiction. The ‘reader’s willingness to turn over each successive page’, Amis’s main concern, seems to determine his approach to style. In his review of *The Hidden Heart* by Jane Gillespie he says that ‘what we ought to get [...] if the poet is any good as a poet, is more sense and less sensibility than usual, more coherence, more and finer irony, and an absence of inane gushes of style’¹⁸². Amis objects to the use of the word ‘poetic’ which, as he says in the review of Gwyn Thomas’s novel, ‘in most contexts [...] has become little more than a mere hurrah-word, and when used of novels implies, roughly, a dearth of action and a leisurely oddity of style’¹⁸³. A similar comment reappears in an article about *The Soldier* by Karl Ludwig Opitz, where Amis praises the novel because any ‘poetic guff [in it] is eschewed’¹⁸⁴. In turn, he criticises Gilbert Phelps’s novel *A Man in His Prime*¹⁸⁵ for an excessive use of inverted commas, italics, dashes and exclamation marks. With irony Amis says that

¹⁸² Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Jane Gillespie, *The Hidden Heart*, *The Spectator*, 19 March 1954, p.336.

¹⁸³ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, review of Gwyn Thomas, *The Stranger At My Side*, *The Spectator*, 23 July, 1954, p.126.

¹⁸⁴ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Karl Ludwig Opitz, *The Soldier*, *The Spectator*, 8 October 1954, p.450.

¹⁸⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Gilbert Phelps, *A Man in His Pride*, *The Spectator*, 11 March 1955.

such ‘graces of style’,¹⁸⁶ so much appreciated by a ‘sophisticated reader’, are justified only if the author has something to say.

What may distress his more sophisticated readers is a lack of the graces of style and an excessive, and excessively emotional, commentary [...] I like the graces of style fine myself, [...] as long as the writer has something to say.¹⁸⁷

A writer who uses poetic style and still ‘has something to say’ is Chesterton, whom Amis greatly admires. Despite his oft-stated disdain for poeticality in prose, what Amis values in Chesterton is ‘the setting sunset’, or as he later explains ‘descriptions of skies and the effects of light on them’.¹⁸⁸ Chesterton’s prose has ‘an irresistible power of suggestion that the extraordinary is, if not the most ordinary thing in the world, [...] then at least almost literally round the corner’.

Chesterton, however, is an exception in Amis’s reading list. Of his generation of anti-experimental writers in postwar Britain, Amis most disliked an excess of rhetoric or style in fiction. He expressed such an attitude explicitly in his review of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, a review that was later described by Martin Amis as ‘wilfully philistine’.¹⁸⁹ What Kingsley Amis criticises *Lolita* for is not its obscenity but the praise it gets as a ‘masterpiece’ of style. Amis quotes a passage from the novel and ridicules the use of stylistic devices: ‘din of pun, allusion, neologism, alliteration,

¹⁸⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of T.A.G. Hungerford, *Sowers of the Wind*, *The Spectator*, 18 February 1955, p. 199.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 199.

¹⁸⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Poet and the Lunatics’, review of G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 43.

¹⁸⁹ Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 121.

cynghanedd, apostrophe, parenthesis, rhetorical question, French, Latin,¹⁹⁰. Only when the character Humbert abandons ‘the old-scrambler’ and manages to speak in clear English, does the book become better. Amis ridicules the use of lofty expressions in Nabokov’s description of Humbert: ‘decadently sophisticated and tortuously imaginative and self-regardingly detached’¹⁹¹ and makes a more general objection about the novel’s style:

Style, a personal style, a distinguished style, usually turns out in practice to mean a high idiosyncratic noise-level in the writing, with plenty of rumble and wow from imagery, syntax and diction: Donne, Pater, Virginia Woolf. There is, however, a good deal of nostalgia for style nowadays [...] it shows in snorting accusations of gracelessness levelled against some younger novelists and merges into hankering for ‘experiment’ that still dies hard.¹⁹²

Amis detests an excess of style in fiction as much as he dislikes the experimental. Such an attitude was characteristic of the novelists of the 1950s who complained that the experimental novelists like Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* and Woolf in *The Waves* baffled ordinary readers to such an extent that they had stopped reading altogether¹⁹³. Pamela Hansford Johnson urged a return to the novel which told a story, William Cooper advocated concentrating on “Man-in-Society” rather than on “Man-alone” and John Wain criticised examples of experimental techniques in narrative. Rabinovitz describes the style of the new novelists:

¹⁹⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘She was a Child and I Was a Child’, review of Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, *The Spectator*, 6 November 1959, p. 635.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. p.635.

¹⁹² Ibid. p. 635.

¹⁹³ Rubin Rabinovitz, *Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960*, op.cit. p. 5.

Their styles are plain, their time sequences are chronological, and they make no use of myth, symbolism, or stream-of-consciousness inner narratives. Their prose is realistic, documentary and journalistic. [...] There are no attempts at poetic novels or effusive style. Elaborate descriptions, sensitivity, and plotless novels are avoided.¹⁹⁴

Amis the writer is among the writers to whom Rabinovitz refers, but Amis the critic assumed a similar anti-poetic stance. He expressed his view on experiment in fiction in his review of novels by Edgar Mittelholzer and V.S. Naipaul: ‘The idea about experiment being the life-blood of the English novel is one that dies hard. ‘Experiment’, in this context, boils down pretty regularly to ‘obtruded oddity’, whether in construction – multiple viewpoints and such – or in style¹⁹⁵.

Commenting on experimental writing Pamela Hansford Johnson says that in the nineteenth century the ordinary reader was ‘happy’ because the great writers such as Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray and George Eliot wrote for him. Today’s reader is ‘seriously worried’ because what he reads is ‘arid, unenjoyable, and not infrequently incomprehensible’¹⁹⁶. The aim of novel writing, according to Hansford Johnson, is that the novel is to be read voluntarily. Amis expresses a similar opinion in his passage about Fielding in *I Like It Here*:

Perhaps it was worth dying in your forties if two hundred years later you were the only non-contemporary novelist who could be read with unaffected and wholehearted interest, the only one who never had to be apologized for or excused on the grounds of changing taste.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

¹⁹⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘Fresh Winds from the West’, review of Jan Carew, *Black Midas*; Edgar Mittelholzer, *Children of Kaywana*, *A Morning at the Office*, *The Weather in Middenshot*; V.S. Reid, *The Leopard*; V.S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*; Samuel Selvon, *Ways of Sunlight*, *The Spectator*, 2 May 1958, p. 565.

¹⁹⁶ Pamela Hansford Johnson in Rubin Rabinovitz, *Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel*, 1950-1960, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 5.

¹⁹⁷ Kingsley Amis, *I Like It Here*, (London: Penguin Books, 1958) p. 167.

Many of Amis's own novels are an example of 'changing taste' and can be valued only as a product of the times in which they were written. They are a record of times and a certain mentality – the views of an Anglo-Saxon, lower-middle-class male. Misogyny, chauvinism, provinciality – these are labels attached to the writers of his generation and only as such should they be treated today. Going by Amis's own approach to interpretation and treating his works on the basis of their literary qualities, one might be forgiven today for rejecting them on grounds of political correctness. The same applies to his criticism, which should be understood as a product of the 1950s, with the opinions expressed there relevant primarily in the literary context of that era.

In December 1954 Kingsley Amis sums up the first year of his published reviews with 'a few disconnected observations'¹⁹⁸ about the novel as a genre. The image of the contemporary English novel, in his opinion, is in general quite encouraging. Amis divides the genre into two classes: the 'ambitious', written by mostly by men and the 'unambitious' written by women. The former is more concerned with style and is original in subject matter. However, it lacks good plot, natural dialogue, irony and humour and tends to over-indulge in 'poetry'. The ambitious writer aspires to experiment, to make a contribution to literature and to pursue 'the grand theme'. The 'unambitious' novel deals with everyday problems of married life, children, class and money, contains a good story and a convincing dialogue. Its faults are that it is trivial, full of clichés, and that it is trying to be

‘agreeable’. Amis is critical of both; yet, he sees a better future for the ‘unambitious’ novel. Although it constitutes only ‘reading matter’, it is in no danger of decrying intelligence, unlike the ambitious novel whose author by ‘defending his integrity of vision is suspicious of competence’,¹⁹⁹.

Having presented those “moderate and impartial” remarks he ends his summary of the year with a list of “literary crimes” that should be banned for an experimental period of five hundred years:

1. All novels about children, peasants or madmen.
2. All recourse to diaries, journals or letters. (The last-named admissible if not exceeding half a page.)
3. All travel-books with a novel superimposed. (‘That afternoon they visited the Palazzo. It...’)
4. All use of allegory, symbol, or other mystification capable of inducing a sober blurb-writer or reviewer to invoke the name of Kafka.
5. All use of the historic present, the single word sentence (and *a fortiori* paragraph), neologism either plain (‘the curtains were susurrant with grief’) or in compounds (‘her tear-strengthened gaze’), and the word ‘Oh’ spelt ‘O’.
6. All novels with a title containing the word ‘heart’
7. All girls who say things like ‘I’m sorry, Peter, I can’t come away with you. Yesterday was different. Yesterday as I lay in your arms I saw the world rebuilt into an azure and crystalline loveliness touched with fragile poetry, a rhapsody tinged with birdsong and veined with golden laughter, immune from the toothed wind of grief, my dearest. But today...’

One peculiarity of Amis’s comparisons is, however, the name of Franz Kafka. Amis ridicules the contemporary tendency to look for traces of Kafka in every work of literature. The name of the Prague writer is invoked even in critical works on Dickens; in his review of *Dickens and his Readers*²⁰⁰ Amis ridicules the fashion of

¹⁹⁸ Kingsley Amis ‘New Novels and Some Observation’ in *The Spectator*, 19 November 1954, p. 643.
¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 643.

²⁰⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Cockney’s Homer’, a review of *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism since 1836* by George H. Ford in *The Spectator*, 6 January 1956, pp.22-23.

comparing *Bleak House* with *The Trial*: ‘To impute Dickensian lineage to Dostoevsky is no longer the thing; he has been turned out by Kafka’²⁰¹. Another element of Amis’s criticism of references to Kafka is that the name became a mere cliché for the grimness of life and the incomprehensibility of existence (‘a key reminiscent of Kafka’ in one of the reviews²⁰²). Kafka’s name also stands for traumatic experience, which Amis ironically mentions in his discussion of Hans Christian Andersen’s autobiography: ‘A Modern Andersen, presumably, would have outdone Kafka [...] Few literary childhoods can have been such a forcing-frame for neurosis, so rich in trauma’²⁰³.

Amis expresses his dislike for Kafka’s writing in a letter to Philip Larkin written in June 1950; of *The Great Wall of China*, a collection of Kafka’s short stories, he says:

Now there’s another man who can’t tell a story, who’s incapable of illustrating the slightest thing, or the most important thing by action. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many abstract nouns in a SUPPOSEDLY narrative writer before²⁰⁴.

Amis’s prejudice against the writer may be a result of his more general criticism of the Modern mode of writing to which Kafka came close with his dehumanized fictional world.

²⁰¹ ibid. p. 22.

²⁰² Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Amos Tutuola in *The Spectator*, 26 February 1954, p. 244.

²⁰³ Kingsley Amis, ‘Stork, Stork, Long-Legged Stork’, reviews of *The Mermaid Man: The Autobiography of Hans Christian Andersen*; Rumer Godden, *Hans Christian Andersen*, *The Spectator*, 6 May 1955, p.590.

²⁰⁴ *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* edited by Zachary Leader (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), letter to Philip Larkin, 12 June 1950, p. 232.

Travel Writing

Amis was hostile to travel writing. In June 1955 he wrote an article ‘Is the Travel-Book Dead’,²⁰⁵ in which he lists two reasons why people still write travelogues: ‘poeticality’ and escapism, both of which seem to Amis to underlie Laurie Lee’s novel *A Rose for Winter*. As regards escapism, Amis rejects it as an example of ‘the other fellow’s grass is greener’ attitude that reflects a desire for a ‘simpler, more elemental existence’. In terms of poeticality, however, Amis criticises Lee’s style for its ‘leaning towards the more elaborate and unfashionable graces of prose’. He draws attention to features such as the lack of a verb in the first sentence, ‘empty and indecent poeticality’, clichéd and meaningless similes and the ‘incessant din of adjectives’. This, for Amis, qualifies as a ‘highbrow’ way of writing and makes the novel ‘a string of failed poems’. Unlike Lee’s ‘vulgar and sensational little book’, Peter Mayne’s book, *The Narrow Smile*, is ‘agreeably unliterary’ and contains sober straightforward reporting on the political situation in Pakistan. Still, Amis questions the sense of giving the reader so much information. The situation of the Pathans (“who, in case you don’t know, live on either side of West Pakistan’s border”) has no relation to the reader, who, Amis adds, is ‘given more information on the subject than [he] cared to have’. Amis sums up his criticism:

The main weakness of his book lies in its form, which as you will have gathered by now, is that of a travelogue. This means that the encounters he describes are for the most part indecisive, and the factual thread on which he strings them is inadequate to bear their weight; there is no principle of selection or emphasis. Short of epic or sonnet-sequence, the only way of introducing such a principle, of imposing order on the discursive, is to write the thing as a novel. [...] It may be

enough to rely on a bare mention of *A Passage to India* in order to propose that fiction is the mode in which the kind of issues that interest Mr Mayne – and Mr Lee – can be best worked out.²⁰⁶

Being a novelist himself, Amis considers the novel to be the superior method of ‘imposing order on the discursive’, an attitude that evoked a reaction from John Davenport. A week after the publication of Amis’s review, Davenport protests saying that only ‘a vanity of a novelist’ could suggest replacing the travel book with a novel. He calls for common sense: ‘Let us have more good books, by all means, but not restricted to one genre’. To wrap up the debate Amis defends his observations about the novel’s significance: ‘Biographers, essayists, editors and the like have been in at the death of the novel for so long that I thought it time for a shot or two in the other direction’,²⁰⁷.

John Davenport’s generally identifies himself with Amis’s anti-Establishment stance: ‘most of us dislike the sub-Paterian writing of the bastard-Mandarin, and would sympathise with his chastisement of an empty, indecent poeticism’. On the subject of travel writing, he defends Laurie Lee’s book and explains Amis’s violent reaction by his ignorance of the subject and his grumpiness: ‘Wholesome common sense [...] can degenerate into a morbid distrust of all that is not flat, as irrational as Dutchman’s disapproval of the Alps’²⁰⁸.

Incidentally, in 1955 Amis won the Somerset Maugham Award, the terms of which required him to spend not less than three months on travel and residence

²⁰⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘Is the Travel Book Dead’, review of Laurie Lee, *A Rose for Winter*, Peter Mayne, *The Narrow Smile*, *The Spectator*, 17 June 1955, pp. 774-775.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 774.

²⁰⁷ Letters to the Editor, *The Spectator*, 8 July 1955, p. 47.

²⁰⁸ Letters to the Editor, *The Spectator*, 24 June 1955, p. 799.

abroad. Although Amis himself expressed his mixed reaction to the prize²⁰⁹, it was quite ironic that while *The Spectator* debate was going on, he was travelling around Portugal intending to write a novel about his travel. Davenport sarcastically remarked that Amis might come back prepared to write a travel book.

If Amis's criticism was designed to evoke a (violent) reaction, it succeeded by provoking replies from his readers. One respondent, Peter Green, referred to Amis's personal characteristics, called him a 'prince of provincial bores' in the 'tasteless urbanism of the Nordic sector' and accused him of 'priggish urban puritanism'²¹⁰. However, in the next issue Robert Conquest subscribed to Amis's point of 'giving hell to poetic prose'²¹¹ and claimed that he prefers to read Amis to Laurie Lee.

Although Amis continued the subject of travel writing in his correspondence with Robert Conquest, he did not want to treat it seriously in the public domain. Eric Jacobs says in Amis's biography:

Amis seemed to shy away from these arguments as if, by taking such literary questions too seriously, he might himself fall into the trap of pretentiousness, might even become the sort of self-conscious literary person who poeticises his prose, mistakes colourful foreigners for heroic souls and thinks abroad is mystically fine.²¹²

Jacobs claims that Amis's aim in this debate was to debunk 'the bogusness of the travel mystique' and show that writers like Lee and Mayne were guilty of

²⁰⁹ Zachary Leader quotes fragments of Amis's letter to Philip Larkin on the 28 March 1955: 'The whole prospect fills me with alarm and depression. If it weren't for her [Hilary], and the fact that it would look too eccentric to turn it down... Ah, soul. What a sodding waste of time it'll be. A great honour, though, of course'. *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, op cit p. 425.

²¹⁰ Letters to the Editor, *The Spectator*, 24 June 1955, p. 799.

²¹¹ Letters to the Editor, *The Spectator*, 1 July 1955, p. 14.

²¹² Eric Jacobs, op.cit. p. 210.

'confusing mere enjoyable escapism with profound spiritual pilgrimage'. In his opinion Amis was calling for: 'a new kind of travel book [...] which would avoid the double pitfalls of overdoing the enchantments of abroad and overblowing the prose'. What the debate primarily reveals about Amis is his contempt for poetry in fiction and his reluctance to theorise about it; issues which are addressed in most of his criticism.

The Outsider

Amis presented his own attitude to new tendencies in literature, the Movement and Angry Young Men in his *Spectator* review of *The Outsider* by Colin Wilson²¹³. For him the book is 'the prime indication of the sickness of mankind in the mid-twentieth century' and serves as an outlet for the author's egoism. Amis says: 'Hypertrophy of self and self-regard is the real sickness of the Outsider' and adds that the most annoying element of Wilson's character is his supposed monopoly on depth and sensitivity. Amis rejects the notion of 'Outsiderism' as an ideological stance and attributes it to the state of mind of people in their youth. In this respect, he says, 'there are great many Outsiders about [...] even more ex-Outsiders'. In defence of reason and rationality, which, he argues, *The Outsider* defies, Amis ends his discussion with a call for the demobilization of Wilson's Legion of the Lost. He recommends to potential future Outsiders 'ordering up another bottle, attending a jam session, or getting introduced to young lady'²¹⁴. By this advice Amis distances himself from the stereotype of the Angry Young Man, non-conformist and detached from reality, and

²¹³ Kingsley Amis, 'The Legion of the Lost', op.cit. p.830.

opts instead for 'too much reason rather than no reason at all'; his rationalism and anti-metaphysical attitude run parallel to the ideas of logical positivism.²¹⁵

It was only fifteen years later that Colin Wilson took his chance to respond to Amis's comment. In 1971 in the October issue of *The Spectator*²¹⁶ Wilson published a review of *Girl, 20* by Kingsley Amis. Wilson sees the novel as Amis's first attempt to break away from the sharp contrast between the Amisian "Decent Chap"²¹⁷, a development of Jim Dixon in *Lucky Jim*, and his counterpart – "Phoney Artistic Bertram"²¹⁸. However, Wilson claims that Amis fails to escape 'the cul-de-sac that threatened him in *One Fat Englishman* and *I Want It Now*'.²¹⁹ He says:

In practice it is extremely difficult to create a Decent Chap who also possesses intensity, sensitivity, insight, etc, and for a long time, Mr Amis simply ducked the problem by creating extremely unpleasant heroes – in *Take a Girl Like You*, *One Fat Englishman*, *I Want It Now*. It is equally difficult to create a real *Outsider* drop-out, because, as Mr Amis often points out, the army of long-haired left-wingers are distinguished by conformity rather than real independence of mind. In *Girl, 20*, he has finally accepted the challenge he laid down for himself in 1956; but alas, the narrator is already half way to being a Wilsonian Outsider.²²⁰

Unlike Amis's style of criticism, Wilson's review is constructive. The style of language in Wilson's review is technical and formal, Amis's style is derisory, colloquial and very informal. Amis creates his critic's persona as an allegedly

²¹⁴ Ibid. p. 831.

²¹⁵ Ibid. p.831.

²¹⁶ Colin Wilson 'Quip counter quip', a review of Kigsley Amis, *Girl, 20*, *The Spectator*, 30 October 1971, p.623.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 623.

²¹⁸ Ibid. p. 623.

²¹⁹ Ibid. p. 623.

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 624.

ignorant rational layman, whereas Wilson presents himself as an objective, well-read critic.

On Novelists

Amis was very critical of British writers and he was notorious for his attempts to discredit most of them. When asked what writers his father liked to read, Martin Amis replied – ‘pathetically few’²²¹. Despite his all too frequent derisory tone in reviews, Amis made a list of his favourite writers: W.H. Auden, John Betjeman, Lawrence Durrell, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Alfred Baron Tennyson, William Wordsworth, W.B. Yeats, Robert Graves, John Dickinson Carr, Cyril Connolly, Graham Greene, Julian Hall, Christopher Isherwood, James Joyce [not *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*], Henry Montherlant, Flann O’Brien, Anthony Powell, Cyril Connolly, William Empson, Graham Greene, Arthur Hutchings, Q.D. Leavis and Stephen Potter²²²

Amis’s biographer, Eric Jacobs, says that the only writers Amis used to read before going to bed were George Macdonald Fraser (journalist and scriptwriter), Evelyn Waugh, Christopher Isherwood, C.S. Forester, Elizabeth Taylor and Anthony Powell²²³. Martin Amis narrows the list further, claiming that Kingsley ‘would not read anyone except for Anthony Powell’²²⁴.

²²¹ Conversation with the author.

²²² Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis*, op.cit. p. 182.

²²³ Ibid. p. 16

²²⁴ ibid. p. 24.

Powell's name appears in most books of criticism by Amis and most books on Amis's life and literature: *The Amis Collection*²²⁵ contains three essays about Powell's novels; a whole chapter of Amis's *Memoirs*²²⁶ is devoted to this writer; and a great part of *The Letters*²²⁷ is made up of correspondence with Powell and reflections on Powell's fiction, as presented in the letters to Philip Larkin and Robert Conquest. Furthermore, Fussell²²⁸ and Martin Amis²²⁹ mention Anthony Powell's name in conjunction with Kingsley's literary tastes and in the context of the two writers' friendship.

Amis admired Powell not only as a writer but also as a representative of the upper classes. Although he had read Powell's books since the mid 1940s, it was only in 1950s that they met. In his first review in *The Spectator* in 1953²³⁰ Amis praised the writer of *A Dance to the Music of Time* saying that he was 'a serious writer who was also funny'²³¹. Powell, intrigued by the review, wrote a letter inviting Amis for lunch and a few months later, in March 1954 they met in London. Many years later, writing an obituary after Amis's death, Powell expressed his pride that their first meeting took place before *Lucky Jim* was published and brought Amis fame²³². Despite Amis's reservations about Powell's upper class background the meeting turned out to be successful. Recounting the lunch in a letter to Larkin, Amis said that

²²⁵ Kingsley Amis, *The Amis Collection* (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

²²⁶ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* (London: Penguin Books, 1991)

²²⁷ *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* edited by Zachary Leader (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000)

²²⁸ Paul Fussel, *The Anti-Egotist. Kingsley Amis Man of Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)

²²⁹ Martin Amis *Experience* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000)

²³⁰ Amis in his *Memoirs* claims that the review appeared in *The Spectator*. Anthony Powell, however, in his essay 'Amis Country' (in *Kingsley Amis. In Life and Letters* ed. By Dale Salwak, London: Macmillan, 1990, p.6) claims the review appeared in *The New Statesman*.

²³¹ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, op.cit. p.150.

²³² Anthony Powell, 'Memories of a Great Novelist', *The Spectator*, 28 October 1995, p.27.

Powell was ‘the nicest man he had met’²³³. On the first visit to Powells’ house at The Ivy both Kingsley and Hilly felt that the place was grand in style but ‘contained no butlers or analogous persons’ and Lady Violet was to their relief ‘as unswanky a Lady as can be imagined’²³⁴. The house was visited by many people either with aristocratic titles or significant positions in the literary world (Amis sarcastically describes a Lord Weymouth in his letter²³⁵) but the hosts were ‘hardly aristocratic at all’²³⁶. This gave Amis confidence to invite the writer friend to his ‘far from grand’²³⁷ house in Swansea. Although Amis and Powell were good friends, others perceived them as representatives of different social backgrounds – lower-middle class and upper class – and expected them to have opposing views on everything. In 1955 both of them were invited to a literary debate on the radio and, according to Amis, the producer’s expectation was to confront ‘a lower-class malcontent’ (Angry Young Men type – Amis) with ‘an upper-class git’²³⁸ (Powell). Both writers disappointed the producer by showing friendliness towards each other. However, Amis himself admitted afterwards that what impressed him then was the way Powell reprimanded the BBC staff for trying to manipulate the debate; he made a very definite statement but delivered it placidly. ‘That’s the upper classes’, Amis summed up with respect for Powell.

²³³ A letter to Philip Larkin, 14 March 1954 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* edited by Zachary Leader (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000) p.377.

²³⁴ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p.150.

²³⁵ A letter to Philip Larkin, 24 May 1958 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p.535

²³⁶ A letter to Philip Larkin, 24 May 1958 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit. p.535

²³⁷ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* op.cit. p.150.

²³⁸ ibid. p.151.

From the mid 60s onwards Amis and Powell used to meet regularly for, what Amis calls in his *Memoirs*, ‘Fascist’,²³⁹ lunches at Bertorelli’s Restaurant in Charlotte Street in London. With other guests (Robert Conquest, Anthony Hartley, Tibor Szamuely, John Braine, Donald Watt and Russell Lewis) they discussed politics and history. In 1992, to mark their friendship, Powell dedicated to Amis his collection of criticism *Under Review*. Amis said he felt flattered by this gesture especially as he considered it an ‘immensely readable book’,²⁴⁰ and agreed with the views expressed there. (‘Since you are unlikely to extol the works of Anthony Burgess or John Fowles I guess I can go along with more or less any views you may express’.²⁴¹) On another occasion where Powell praised Amis and his ‘attack on [...] civilised cultural values’ in *Lucky Jim*, he makes it clear that he does ‘not by any means subscribe to every statement uttered by Jim Dixon (nor to many of the literary judgements of his creator)’,²⁴².

The chapter on Powell in *Memoirs* is generally meant as a tribute to the novelist and a postscript to the complimentary reviews of his novels published in *The Spectator* and *The Observer*. The first novel by Anthony Powell to have been reviewed by Amis was *The Acceptance World* in May 1955²⁴³. The book, according to the review, ‘proceeds along the lines already established, in five long episodes or sequences, each tending to be continuous in action’,²⁴⁴ but unlike the earlier novels it avoids the excessive use of visual arts. Amis says: ‘There is a departure from the

²³⁹ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 147.

²⁴⁰ A letter to Anthony Powell, 9 March 1992 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit. p. 1114.

²⁴¹ A letter to Anthony Powell, 21 November 1990 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit. p. 1100.

²⁴² Anthony Powell ‘Amis Country’, in *Kingsley Amis In Life and Letters* ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1990) p. 8.

²⁴³ Kingsley Amis, ‘Afternoon World’ a review of Anthony Powell, *The Acceptance World* in *The Spectator*, 13 May 1955, p.619.

earlier practice whereby all manner of paintings and sculptures got brought in to provide decoration and imagery,²⁴⁵ Amis praises the sharpness of characters' feelings and the less discursive method of narration than that of previous novels. What he particularly likes about *The Acceptance World*, however, is that its characters come from the "restricted world" of the upper classes. This remark echoes Amis's admiration for Powell as an upper class writer. An elitist approach to characterisation distinguishes Powell from working class novelists ('committed in other directions') whom Amis criticises for their preoccupation with social problems:

This is certainly true of Mr Powell's characters, who all belong to – well, 'the ruling class' sounds a bit snappish, and not much in the way of ruling evidently gets done; while 'society' sounds a bit something else, and 'the rich' may have the effect, to be avoided if possible, of recalling Miss Nancy Mitford or Miss Angela Thirkell. Anyway, it was unerringly pointed out recently that we find nothing of the working classes in *The Music of Time* [sic.], and in addition politics are not taken very seriously – this is in the 1930s. Mr Powell is not 'committed', in fact – except to an interest in human behaviour and to the duty of irony and scepticism which confronts every chronicler of an exclusive group. A glance at some contemporary talents 'committed' in other directions will not show that Mr Powell has chosen wrongly.²⁴⁶

The absence of the working class and politics in his work, according to Amis, gives Powell superiority over other novelists of the time concerned with social problems. What Amis fails to recognize, however, is that Anthony Powell is concerned with social mobility and cultural shifts, the only difference being that he does this from an upper class vantage point.

²⁴⁴ ibid. p. 57

²⁴⁵ ibid. p.57.

Instead, Amis says, Powell returns to ‘the theme of human dance’ which here takes the form of a ‘generalisation about power’²⁴⁷. Several times before in *The Spectator*²⁴⁸ Amis had stressed the importance of human relations in novels and these seem to be at the centre of Powell’s interest. In the novel there are numerous relatives, family friends, acquaintances and hundreds of marginal figures that meet casually and move the action forward. It reflects Amis’s opinion expressed a year earlier in his review of *The Mather Story* by John Prebble that the virtue of the novel is that it is about ‘what people do, not what goes on inside them’²⁴⁹. Powell, whom Amis calls the ‘chronicler of an exclusive group’, is primarily devoted to the human condition. Amis ends the article saying that he ‘would rather read Mr Powell than any other English novelist now writing’²⁵⁰.

The review of the fifth volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time – Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*²⁵¹ is equally complimentary. The novel shows, according to Amis ‘how much more there is in Mr Powell than the urbanely detached (and inexhaustibly witty) chronicler of aristocratic and bohemian cavortings’²⁵². The review highlights Powell’s ability to mix humour with elements of the sinister in the creation of Widmerpool as well as in the minor characters of the novel. ‘The genuinely comic

²⁴⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘Afternoon World’ a review of Anthony Powell, *The Acceptance World*, op.cit. p. 619.

²⁴⁷ ibid. p.58.

²⁴⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of John Prebble, *The Mather Story*, *The Spectator*, 5 February, 1954, p.160

Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Gilbert Phelps, *A Man in His Prime*, *The Spectator*, 11 March, 1955.

Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of Dawn Powell *The Wicked Pavilion*, *The Spectator*, 18 February 1955, p 198.

²⁴⁹ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of *The Mather Story* by John Prebble op.cit. p. 160.

²⁵⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Afternoon World’ a review of Anthony Powell, *The Acceptance World* in *The Spectator*, 13 May 1955, p.620.

²⁵¹ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Powell Country’, a review of Anthony Powell, *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* in *The Amis Collection* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) pp. 59-61.

writer must be capable of taking everything seriously,²⁵³, Amis echoes his previous opinion that ‘in America they go in for funny writers [...] while over here we seem to produce serious writers who are also funny, like Mr Anthony Powell’²⁵⁴. Being a comic writer himself, Amis appreciated a sense of humour in the novels he reviewed. ‘The Powell Country’ article ends with praise for *A Dance to the Music of Time* as the last great English novel of its kind ‘as our society – not merely its upper crust – breaks up into something too compartmented to allow the breath of scope’²⁵⁵.

Amis did not alter his good opinion of *A Dance to the Music of Time* when its last instalment was published fifteen years later. In his *Observer* review²⁵⁶ of *Hearing Secret Harmonies* Amis declares that it is a worthy conclusion to the sequence and claims, finally, that ‘it is like sadness that descends when the last chord of a great symphony fades into silence’²⁵⁷. In *The Observer’s Books of the Year* survey, Amis nominated *Hearing Secret Harmonies* as the best novel of 1975²⁵⁸.

Despite praising his novels in reviews, in his private letters Amis also occasionally expressed critical opinions about Powell. As early as in 1951 Amis wrote to Larkin that *A Question of Upbringing* was ‘the most inconclusive book’ reading as if somebody ‘has torn the last quarter out’²⁵⁹. Many years later in a letter to Robert Conquest, Amis points out the increasing number of solecisms in Powell’s

²⁵² Ibid. p. 60

²⁵³ ibid. p. 61.

²⁵⁴ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p.150

²⁵⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Powell Country’, op.cit. p. 61.

²⁵⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘The Final Cadence’, a review of Anthony Powell, *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, *The Observer Review*, 7 September, 1975, p. 21.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. p.21.

²⁵⁸ ‘Books of the Year’, *The Observer Review*, 14 December 1975, p. 19.

²⁵⁹ A letter to Philip Larkin, 29 April 1951 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit. p.256.

novels²⁶⁰. In 1983, again in a letter to Larkin, he says about *O, How the Wheel Becomes It!*: ‘It is no good, you see. I thought it was good and really funny, though a bit slow and wordy, while he was setting everything up, then when he’s done that it all completely goes to pot’,²⁶¹.

However, Amis’s praise for Powell’s writing outweighs his criticism. The presence of negative elements in his assessments, however, can perhaps be explained by Amis’s general rule of including some critical remarks even in the most complimentary review. Concluding his memoir on Powell, Amis criticises the writer’s sensitivity to adverse criticism and adds with self-irony ‘But again that is probably just me being lower-middle-class’.²⁶².

Of all the writers that Amis reviewed, the two who attracted most of his attention were Anthony Powell for his prose and Philip Larkin for his poetry. He praised them for their writing and, incidentally, both of them happened to be his close friends. However, Amis discussed, admired and criticised other writers as well; one of them was William Somerset Maugham.

In Maugham’s fiction Amis deems inadequate the handling of love and passion. He says that the writer has a ‘predilection for odd or exotic attitudes to sex’ and although the word ‘passion’ is frequently used, the ‘thing itself is usually absent’.²⁶³ He also disapproves of some aspects of the writer’s style with its ‘sudden forays into imagery, perhaps recalling the fact that their author grew up in the

²⁶⁰ A letter to Rober Conquest, 20 September 1977 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit. p. 838.

²⁶¹ A letter to Philip Larkin, 9 March 1983 in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit. p. 960.

²⁶² Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* op.cit. p.154.

²⁶³ Kingsley Amis, ‘Mr Maugham’s Notions’, review of Richard Cordell, *Somerset Maugham: A Biographical and Critical Study, The Amis Collection*, p. 65.

1890s,²⁶⁴ However, Amis praises some of Maugham's fiction. He observes that *Cakes and Ale* has a 'brilliant construction, the exact sense of timing, the unobtrusive logic of the transition, the accumulation of dramatic irony'²⁶⁵; but his finest achievement, Amis argues, is *Of Human Bondage*. Despite its faulty construction ('theme and coherence have departed by three-quarters of the way through, at the latest'²⁶⁶), Amis praises the novel for its invigorating treatment of human emotions. Although Maugham fails to tell tales and put stories down 'in black and white', generally Amis seems to admire his fiction. He says that Maugham's world is 'more than the narrow corner it so often seems to be'²⁶⁷ and that he has found a place for himself in the history of British literature.

Judging by the amount of attention Amis devoted to Evelyn Waugh's novels, he must have considered them important in the history of British literature as well. What he finds notable in his works is the extent to which non-literary matters can weaken a literary text. *A Handful of Dust* and *Decline and Fall* are, according to Amis²⁶⁸, Waugh's best novels; *Brideshead Revisited* is his worst. *Officers and Gentlemen* is a 'discursive and episodic' book, its intended comedy is not funny, and the characters are 'models of cardboard and paste'²⁶⁹. The weakest point of the novel is its satire of army life – doomed to be unsuccessful because of Waugh's serious attitude to the army itself. The characters treat the army with reverence because they are 'at odds with the modern world', longing for 'certainties of a past age'. In *Officers*

²⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 65.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. p.66.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 66.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 67.

²⁶⁸ Letter to Philip Larkin, 8 February 1984, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 970.

²⁶⁹ Kingsley Amis, 'There is Something about a Soldier', review of Evelyn Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 74.

and Gentlemen the army is a combination of the atmosphere of a public school and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Since the publication of *Decline and Fall*, Amis perceived Waugh's writing to be in radical decline, by offering the reader only 'a universal grudge and invocations of a fanciful past'²⁷⁰. This nostalgia for times past contributes to the snobbery Waugh displayed, Amis argues, and contrary to Waugh's biographer Christopher Sykes²⁷¹, he believes that the writer's reverence for the 'old and good Catholic families' was connected with his attitude to religion. Emphasising the social aspect of his critique, Amis speaks as a man brought up in 'a non-old and non-good Protestant family'²⁷². This distance from Waugh's social and religious background allows Amis to see more clearly the elements of 'baronial Popery' in some of Waugh's novels. His criticism is social rather than literary; what Amis dislikes about Waugh is his snobbery and upper-class ignorance, and *Brideshead Revisited* being full of both, he considers it to be Waugh's worst novel.

In the review of the TV series based on the novel²⁷³, Amis gives vent to his hatred of upper class snobbery. The main reason for the novel's success is that it is a 'whacking, heavily romantic book about nobs'²⁷⁴. Amis disapproves of Waugh's preoccupation with wealth, rank, Roman Catholicism and beauty and says that all these have resulted in a novel full of bores 'who hang about, idle, rich in an extra sense, given too little to do'²⁷⁵. Waugh's characters although treated by the author with 'cringing respect' are not interesting: Lady Marchmain's role is not specified;

²⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 72.

²⁷¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Waugh Warts', review of Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: a Biography, The Amis Collection*, op.cit. pp. 79-81.

²⁷² Ibid. p. 72.

²⁷³ Kingsley Amis, 'How I Lived in a Very Big House and Found God', review of a TV series based on *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada TV), pp.83-87.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 84.

the reasons for Sebastian's alcoholism are unclear; and Cordelia is boring and officious. The series has an advantage over the novel because the viewers 'are spared that shaming Langour-of-Youth stuff, also the noble wine stuff and most of the sniffy stuff about the awful people who are taking over the world'²⁷⁶. Amis's strategy of using increasingly informal language the more emphatically to express his contempt is evident here, which in his reviews often goes together with irony: hence the title – 'How I Lived in a Very Big House and Found God'.

The attack on Waugh's upper-class snobbery is particularly evident when he equates nobs with snobs:

Nobs, of course, are in themselves not at all bad people to write or read about, to take the small and inevitable step from nobs to snobs, they too are perfectly harmless as such. [...] We may infer that a given novelist is a snob and still wish him well, though we will perhaps feel a little different if he brandishes the fact in our faces.²⁷⁷

Amis gives the film a kinder treatment; the production is professional, 'the period stuff is fun to look at' but the mistake was in 'picking the book in the first place'. The trouble with *Brideshead Revisited* according to Amis, is that 'snobbery corrupts judgement'²⁷⁸.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 84.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 86.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 84.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 84.

The Moronic Inferno

Amis's attitude to the new generation of writers is best exemplified by his views of Martin Amis's novels. Eric Jacobs comments on the literary tastes of father and son:

It isn't that Amis is jealous in the ordinary sense. He is extremely fond of his children and does not resent other writers' success so long as it is deserved. The trouble is, it so often isn't. But you can't really say that to your son. [...] Martin of course knows pretty much what his dad thinks of him. But how can he tell his dad that the novel has moved on since his time, that the son's brand of postmodernism has taken over from the father's brand of realism?²⁷⁹

Having advocated a return to realism in the fifties and having abandoned anti-experimental modes of writing, Kingsley Amis rejected postmodern techniques. After the publication of Martin's *Money*, Kingsley comments: 'I hated its way of constantly reminded me [sic.] of Nabokov. But of course I'm very old-fashioned, what?'²⁸⁰. *Other People*, is for him 'tough going'²⁸¹ and lacking in coherence. Martin Amis admits that his father, who claimed to have liked his first novel *Rachel Papers*, said he 'couldn't get on' with his second. Martin adds: 'I knew him to be incapable of equivocation or euphemism on any literary question. [...] And he didn't like Nabokov either, or anybody else, except for Anthony Powell'²⁸².

²⁷⁹ Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis. A Biography*, op.cit. p. 16.

²⁸⁰ Letter to Philip Larkin, 18 December 1984, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 989.

²⁸¹ Letter to Robert Conquest, 9 March 1981, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 915.

²⁸² Martin Amis, *Experience*, op.cit.p. 24.

The main point of contention between Kingsley and Martin lay in their attitudes to American literature. Kingsley often expressed his dislike for American writers whereas Martin Amis often declared his fascination with them, especially Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow. Kingsley criticises²⁸³ them for their negative influence on British writers ('fools, [...] including my little Martin'); and the main charge against them is that 'neither of them writes English'. Nabokov, having abandoned his natural Russian idiom, developed what Amis calls '*émigré's* euphuism'²⁸⁴. Saul Bellow, a Ukrainian-Canadian, is 'trying to pick his way between the unidiomatic on the one hand and the affected on the other'. Both writers were favourites of Martin. In *Experience*, Martin Amis recounts the discussion he had with his father about Kingsley's hostile review of *Lolita* published in 1959. Martin perceived a serious contradiction in his father's direct equation of the author with the narrator. Kingsley, who often disclaimed any link between the two, says about the narrator; 'Humbert/Nabokov: alliterative to the last'. Martin describes Kingsley's 'oblique stroke' as 'the slash of a vandal'²⁸⁵ and defends Nabokov's style: 'Style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It's not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality makes itself felt'²⁸⁶. Martin adds: 'to Kingsley, though, sustained euphony automatically became euphuism: always'. Kingsley disliked the anti-traditional narratives in American literature: 'I can bear

²⁸³ Letter to Philip Larkin, 22 March 1982, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 939.

²⁸⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'She was a Child and I Was a Child', review of Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, *The Spectator*, 6 November 1959, p. 635.

²⁸⁵ Martin Amis *Experience*, p. 121.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 121.

anything, even stream of consciousness, better than realising there's a narrator here whom I can't trust'²⁸⁷.

Kingsley Amis is hostile to American literature because of its lack of coherent tradition – ‘without a tradition any writer is adrift, nervously self-assertive, an individualist lost in a crowd of individualists’²⁸⁸. With an air of superiority Amis claims that the first American writers (Cooper, Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman), were the most successful because they did not try to be different from their British contemporaries. Later mock-Gothic writers, like Poe and Melville, pursued their own individual styles, universal scope and the desire to create a profound masterpiece, the three qualities Amis criticised in the Modernist tradition. Amis stresses European superiority again when he describes failed attempts of American writers to imitate the writers of the Old World in the nineteenth century. Henry James adopted ‘fuss about social position, art-snobbery, high-flown circuitous talk’; Ezra Pound ‘acquired global culture from a one-volume encyclopedia’; Melville got himself accepted as ‘great’ by ‘striving to be called so’; and Hemingway ‘treated outdoor matters in an indoor – salon or café style’²⁸⁹. The only American writer who deserved his place in European culture, according to Amis, was T.S. Eliot – he had ‘the talent, the intelligence and the nerve’. Subsequently, ‘the still surviving British connection’ was replaced with American nationalism practised by writers such as Scott Fitzgerald, Norman Mailer, J.D. Salinger.

The two main lines of development critics find in American literature – the sentimental strain and the gothic strain – Amis also ascribes to the English influence.

²⁸⁷ Letter to Philip Larkin, 22 March 1982, *Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 939.

²⁸⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘Sacred Cows’, *The Amis Collection*, p. 17.

Child figures in Poe or Nabokov are modelled on Lewis Carroll and white – non-white relations on the stories of Kipling²⁹⁰. Reviewing *Love and Death in the American Novel*, a book of literary criticism, enables Amis to exert British superiority in the field of critical approaches. He says that a book like this, in America considered to be on a ‘high level of scholarship and intelligence’ in Britain ‘even if innocent of all polo-sweateredness, would have to be middlebrow, journalistic, popularising’,²⁹¹. Middlebrow criticism is Amis’s domain, the difference is that Amis does not have pretensions to ‘scholarship and intelligence’.

Instead of following the paths of literature already indicated by Europeans, American writers struggled to create their own style. This resulted in provincialism, ruralism, regionalism, Southernism, and ‘taking the will for the deed’. Once again Amis ends on an “I-like-it-here” note: ‘Our own lot are bad enough; *they* are a bloody sight worse’ but he adds – ‘there are exceptions’²⁹².

Amis was not always critical of the contemporary novel. Since the 1950s, when his first reviews were published, he was an avowed fan of popular literature: science fiction, detective stories, espionage fiction, horror and ghost stories, thrillers and Westerns. To distinguish between such popular literature and the mainstream novel, William Laskowski uses the term ‘genre fiction’²⁹³. Amis’s belief in the value of genre fiction may be rooted in the primacy that he gives to the audience, including those readers who wanted accessible and understandable novels. Dale Salwak claims

²⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 18.

²⁹⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Men Without Women’, review of Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, *The Spectator*, 13 January 1961, pp. 47-48.

²⁹¹ Ibid. p. 47.

²⁹² Ibid. p. 19.

that ‘the likelihood of readers shutting books or even throwing them aside in boredom and frustration is an ever-present dread underlying many of Amis’s critical observations’²⁹⁴. Amis not only praised popular novels in his reviews, he also attempted to write a few himself. He tried to imitate popular genres: the detective story in *The Crime of the Century* and *The Riverside Villas Murder*; the spy novel in *Colonel Sun*, and the horror story in *The Green Man*. Although studies of popular fiction were not treated seriously in most universities, Amis often flaunted his thorough knowledge of the subject, which led to the publication of some surveys of science fiction: *New Maps of Hell* and *The Golden Age of Science Fiction*. In addition he revealed a detailed and considered reading of Ian Fleming’s books in *The James Bond Dossier*.

By the end of his life in the 1990s Amis had stopped reading new books altogether. The only exceptions were thrillers because they had what he felt was missing from so called serious literature – plots, characters and action. Eric Jacobs says that Amis would not pick up a novel which did not begin along the lines: ‘A shot rang out...’²⁹⁵

²⁹³ William Laskowski, *Kingsley Amis*, op.cit. p. 47.

²⁹⁴ Dale Salwak, *Kingsley Amis: Modern Novelist*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 35.

²⁹⁵ Eric Jacobs, op.cit. p. 357.

Chapter 3

Amis on Poetry

Better, of course, if images were plain,
Warnings clearly said, shapes put down quite still
Within the fingers' reach, or else nowhere;
But complexities crowd the simplest thing,
And flaw the surface that they cannot break.

Kingsley Amis, 'Against Romanticism'²⁹⁶

In his poem 'Against Romanticism' Amis clearly expresses his distaste for the use of complicated language in poetry and presents himself as an anti-experimental, anti-Romantic and anti-Modern writer. Not only can his views on literature be inferred from his novels or poems, he expressed them more explicitly in his literary criticism: reviews of poems, literary debates in the magazines and editorial texts in anthologies.

Little Mr Tomkins

One of the debates which reflected the divisions in the intellectual scene in the fifties took place on the pages of *The Spectator*. In January 1954 the magazine published Anthony Hartley's review of Edith Sitwell's poetry volume *Gardeners and Astronomers*²⁹⁷. Sitwell, a poet known for her stylistic artifices and her emphasis on

²⁹⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'Against Romanticism', in *Collected Poems 1944-1979*, (London: Hutchinson of London, 1979), p. 35.

²⁹⁷ Anthony Hartley, 'Critic Between the Lines', a review of Edith Sitwell, *Gardeners and Astronomers* and Richard Eberhart *Undercliff*, *The Spectator*, 15 January 1954, p.47.

the value of sound in poetry, was a member of a distinguished aristocratic family, and her works display a ‘predilection for the splendour of a lost aristocratic age’²⁹⁸. Both her imagery and her upper class origin distinguished her from (the ‘new’) intellectuals such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, John Wain and others. Hartley began his review, which marked the start of a debate that was to run for some considerable time, by noting this distinction, arguing for the existence of two separate lines of development in twentieth century poetry. One stemmed from the early Eliot and the poets of the thirties (Auden and Empson), and ended with the young academic poets, whom Hartley referred to as ‘University Wits’ or ‘the more or less metaphysicals’ (Kingsley Amis and Donald Davie). The other started with Yeats, Pound, accepted ‘a good deal of outside help from the French symbolists and Rilke’ and finished with the ‘Neo-Symbolists’ (poets such as Kathleen Raine). Hartley’s attempt at a definition of the groups, not to speak of the choice of adjectives used in their description, clearly reveals his personal opinion about them.

Metaphysicals call themselves *ironic, intellectual, rigorous, witty*. They are called by others *cynical, clever, arid* and *facetious*. Neo-Symbolists are said (by themselves) to be *rich, passionate, noble, incantatory*, but let them get into the hands of a New Critic and they become *lush, exhibitionistic, pompous* and *meaningless*²⁹⁹.

The critic is clearly sympathetic to ‘the University Wits’ and defends them:

It is often said that the thought of the young academic poets is complex, but the opposite is the case. It is the simplicity of the thought which (given their background) is surprising and which gives much of their poetry its peculiar, rather medieval flavour (strict form and simple content). To separate them from their Neo-

²⁹⁸ “Sitwell, Dame Edith” Encyclopaedia Britannica Online.

²⁹⁹ Kingsley Amis, ‘Critic Between the Lines’, p.47.

Symbolist opposite numbers we must look at their use of imagery. They will subordinate it very strictly to the superficial prose meaning of the poem, whereas anyone bitten by Symbolism will trust themselves to create the poem³⁰⁰.

Edith Sitwell, however, in Hartley's opinion, used a baroque style of imagery, where images were 'piled on in decorative heaps that conceal rather than define the form of a poem'. He criticises her use of similes such as 'the sap like peridots and beryls', arguing their incomprehensibility to 'the general reader'. Hartley says that 'richness of imagery is in itself a good thing, but where it is not controlled, it degenerates into decoration which, in its turn, obscures both meaning and form'³⁰¹.

Amis remained closer to 'the University Wits' in respect to his language, which contains ideas as well as form³⁰². Though simplifying his language, Amis remained conscious of it and used it as a means of character drawing. Paul Fussell notes that Amis hated describing his characters and preferred to let them describe themselves by what they say³⁰³. 'Differentiation by mode of speech'³⁰⁴ is undoubtedly a feature of Amis's fiction, however, Fussell seems to extend his praise for Amis's language to the whole body of his writing. In one of the chapters in *The Anti-Egotist: Kingsley Amis, the Man of Letters* entitled 'Custodian of Language', Fussell discusses Amis's devotion to language, his 'extraordinarily high respect for it'³⁰⁵ and his 'elevated standards of eloquence'³⁰⁶: 'In nearly forty years of

³⁰⁰ 'Critic Between the Lines', p.47.

³⁰¹ Ibid. p.47.

³⁰² Kingsley Amis 'New Novels', a review of T.A.G. Hungerford, *Sowers of the Wind*, *The Spectator*, 18 February 1955, p. 199.

³⁰³ Paul Fussel, *The Anti-Egotist*, op.cit. p. 101.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. p.101.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 96.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 97.

acquaintanceship, I have never heard him come close to misusing a word or failing to catch a solecism, or even a bad rhythm, in writing or speaking,³⁰⁷.

Opposed to ‘graces of style’³⁰⁸ himself, Amis supported Anthony Hartley’s review of *Gardeners and Astronomers*. One week after the review appeared in *The Spectator*, Edith Sitwell replied in a letter from Hollywood that her poems were in part adaptations from John Donne and that it might have been wiser for the ‘reviewer, before being quite so impertinent, to have read more widely’³⁰⁹:

I shall, no doubt, be told that little Mr Tomkins (or whatever his name may be), this week’s new great poet, does not incorporate in his work, phrases from the past, giving them a twist, and importing new meaning. That is so. But more than one great poet does. And it is useless to deny it³¹⁰.

And as a postscript Sitwell added: ‘Please have Anthony Hartley stuffed and placed in a glass case with moth balls at my expense. Finest specimen in your collection. My reasons will soon be divulged to the whole world.’³¹¹

In the following week’s issue of *The Spectator*³¹², a number of new voices joined the debate. John Wain criticised Sitwell for her ‘persistent refusal to give precise references’ when ‘adapting’ John Donne. Elizabeth Jennings called for poetry’s return to life and argued that it should construct a language which would be ‘tough enough to deal with anything that takes place in the contemporary world’.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 97.

³⁰⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘New Novels’, a review of T.A.G. Hungeford *Sowers of the Wind*, op.cit. p. 199.

³⁰⁹ ‘Letters to the Editor’, a letter by Edith Sitwell, *The Spectator*, January 22, 1954, p. 96.

³¹⁰ Ibid. p.96.

³¹¹ Ibid. p.96.

³¹² ‘Letters to the Editor’, letters by John Wain, Little Mr Tomkins, Elizabeth Jennings and Allan M. Laing in *The Spectator*, 29 January 1954, p. 123.

Allan M. Laing responded with a humorous poem about Edith Sitwell's 'ruder stuff'³¹³.

Among these letters appeared a short one written by Kingsley Amis, 'last week's new great poet'³¹⁴. He ridiculed Sitwell's ambition to be considered on a par with writers like Shakespeare and Donne and then placed himself among them saying: 'it is just how we great poets differ'. He mocked her attitude to 'twisting the meanings' of old literature and her view that 'it's okay for great poets to copy bits out of dead writers'. He signed the letter Little Mr Tomkins.

Edith Sitwell did not find it appropriate to respond to the letters written by 'anonymous semi-literates who can neither understand what they read [...] nor express themselves in educated English'³¹⁵. Ironically in the same letter she adds that she and Hartley have one thing in common – an admiration for Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. Feeling grateful for such 'generous praise', Amis admits in the next *Spectator*, that he in fact was 'Little Mr Tomkins'. According to Amis's biography³¹⁶, the Dame forgave Amis the anonymous attack and invited him for lunch, which, in Amis's words, 'was rather on the dull side'³¹⁷.

Nine years later, again on speaking terms with Edith Sitwell, Amis reiterated his criticism of her poetry. In his review of *Previous Convictions* by Cyril Connolly

³¹³ Allan M. Lang wrote:

Let Gilbert Harding bear in mind:
With more harsh phrases he must hit well,
Or shortly he will be left behind
By ruder stuff from Edith Sitwell.

³¹⁴ Amis ironically calls himself that starting his letter: 'As last week's new great poet...' ibid. 123.

³¹⁵ 'Letters to the Editor', a letter by Edith Sitwell in *The Spectator*, 19 February 1954, p. 203.

³¹⁶ Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis. A Biography*, op.cit.p. 164.

published in the *New Statesman*, Amis says: ‘In this country we take the gravest possible view of people who go round saying that Edith Sitwell is a great poet without even being able to substantiate the allegation’³¹⁸. In an ironic dialogue Amis argues with Cyril Connolly who praises Edith Sitwell for her use of language, the sound of her verse and her aim to write ‘a poetry that is the light of the Great Morning...’³¹⁹

The debate between the new ‘great poets’ and the older generation ‘Neo-Symbolists’ marked the emergence of those new intellectuals who started writing after the war. The former group fought for their place in literary culture whereas the latter, here represented by Edith Sitwell, clung to the pre-war symbolism and sophisticated language of the previous era. Sitwell believed in the significance of her poetry and said: ‘We must leave it to the future to decide whose opinions on the subject of poetry are of the most value – Mr Hartley’s, Mr John Wain’s, and Mr Moor’s – or mine’³²⁰. She ends the debate:

And now, Sir [*The Spectator* Editor], as I have work to do, I will leave your little pets to their high place on Mount Olympus, and, with my final congratulations on the magnificent success of Mr Hartley’s snoring technique, (crawling on my hands and knees) I will return to my obscure place in what a very famous writer described as “the sub-shrub of literary London”³²¹.

Sitwell’s aristocratic roots, her attachment to ‘literary London’ and constant references to the ‘great poets’ of the past distinguish her from those Amis’s

³¹⁷ Ibid. p.164.

³¹⁸ Kingsley Amis, ‘Connolly in Court’, a review of Cyril Connolly, *Previous Convictions*, *New Statesman*, 6 December 1963, p.837.

³¹⁹ ibid. p.837.

³²⁰ ‘Letters to the Editor’, a letter by Edith Sitwell in *The Spectator*, 12 March 1954, p.290.

generation – intellectuals of lower middle class origin, working at provincial universities (Amis lectured in Swansea at the time) who were not above taking an interest in popular culture. The debate reveals certain characteristics of ‘the University Wits’ on one side and of Edith Sitwell on the other. Hartley’s review and letters to the editor in its support (Amis’s contribution included) show a great feeling for irony and a sense of humour. Edith Sitwell’s response is full of malice and self-absorption. Although it would be dangerous to attempt the imposition of these characteristics onto more general trends in literature, it is clear that the new group was becoming more and more independent and gaining its own identity. A need arose for a definition of this new generation of writers, a gap which was filled by J.D.Scott in his *Spectator* article entitled ‘In the Movement’³²². Although it was the first time that the emerging group was ‘given the luxury of a definite article and capital letters’³²³, the writers themselves tended to reject the attempts made at collectivising them³²⁴.

Blake Morrison treats Amis as one of the most important writers in the Movement. Amis’s name was also mentioned in J.D. Scott’s article, and the two anthologies of 1950s poetry: D.J. Enright’s *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) and Robert Conquest’s *New Lines* (1956). Amis, however, was the most vociferous in disclaiming the Movement. In his article ‘Lone Voices’³²⁵ published in 1960 he sums up the Fifties and his place in its literary scene saying that he had small cause for

³²¹ Ibid. p. 290.

³²² ‘In the Movement’, an anonymous article in *The Spectator*, 1 October 1954, p.399. Blake Morrison in *The Movement. English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) says it was only in 1977 that J.D. Scott admitted having written the article himself.

³²³ Blake Morrison, op.cit. p. 2.

³²⁴ Ibid. p.4.

complaint. Despite the famous ‘London literary racket’, his ‘non-affluent and non-Etonian’ origin and being ‘without acquaintances in that world’ he ‘found it surprisingly easy to move about in’³²⁶. He comments on both the Movement and the Angry Young Men:

The less appealing side of the Angry Young Men business was that it embodied and encouraged a Philistine, paraphrasing, digest-compiling attitude to literature, one which was favoured not only outside the ‘phantom’ movement (on the dailies’ book pages) but inside it as well (in the works of Colin Wilson and others)³²⁷.

Amis’s attempted to distance himself from the Movement in a letter to Philip Larkin saying that the new name is ‘useful up to a point, but the point is nearly here’³²⁸. In that same month he wrote to Robert Graves:

Don’t take that ‘movement’ stuff in the *Spectator* too seriously. I don’t think that people mentioned are a movement at all, just a lot of writers, and movements are a bad thing these days anyway. We ought to either write all the same or all differently.³²⁹

Many years later, Amis corresponded with Blake Morrison who in was working on a book *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the Fifties*. Amis commented on the physical distance between the writers who were supposed to form a single literary group:

³²⁵ Kingsley Amis, ‘Lone Voices’ in *What Became of Jane Austen? And Other Questions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) pp. 157-171.

³²⁶ Ibid. p.166.

³²⁷ Ibid. p. 167.

³²⁸ letter to Philip Larkin 18 October, 1 November 1954, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* ed. by Zachary Leader (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), p. 405.

³²⁹ letter to Robert Graves, 25 October 1954, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op. cit.

On the Movement lark, I could well have mentioned to you in our chat, because it was fresh in my mind at the time, the point about physical far-flungness of its supposed components when it started off: Larkin Belfast-Hull, Davie Dublin, Wain Reading, Jennings Oxford, Conquest admittedly London, me Swansea, Gunn California, Enright Japan. Not much chance of regular operational briefings.³³⁰

Despite Amis's disavowals of the Movement, Eric Jacobs writes that Amis identified himself more strongly with the Movement than with the Angry Young Men label³³¹. His belonging to the first group offered friendship and help in publishing, as well as providing him with useful advice from other writers. The 'Angries' were not Amis's friends (John Braine was the only one to become closest to him in the years to come³³²) especially after he gave some of them unfavourable reviews (Colin Wilson³³³ and Arnold Wesker³³⁴). In his article 'Lone Voices' Amis says that being labelled as one of the Angries led to 'simplifications and distortions inevitable in gossipy booksy journalism'³³⁵ but it also had an appealing side, namely, free publicity. Amis adds:

And if it was boring at times to be asked by new acquaintances what I was so angry about, I was amply repaid on other occasions by seeing people wondering whether I was going to set about breaking up their furniture straight away or would wait till I was drunk.³³⁶

³³⁰ letter to Blake Morrison 9 July, 1979, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* op.cit, p. 871.

³³¹ Eric Jacobs op.cit. p. 168.

³³² Eric Jacobs op.cit, p. 168.

³³³ Kingsley Amis, 'The Legion of the Lost', a review of Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*, *The Spectator*, 15 June 1956, p.830.

³³⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'Not Talking About Jerusalem', a review of Arnold Wesker, *Chips with Everything. The Kitchen. The Wesker Trilogy*, *The Spectator*, 10 August 1962, p. 190.

³³⁵ Kingsley Amis, 'Lone Voices' op.cit. p. 166.

³³⁶ Ibid. p.166.

In 1957 Tom Maschler published a collection of essays on the Angry Young Men entitled *Declaration*. Amis refused to contribute to the collection disapproving of the group's stress on emotion and artistic alienation from society³³⁷. Very explicitly he denounced 'the whole Angry Young Men nonsense'³³⁸, in a letter to the *Encounter* Editor in November 1968³³⁹. The literary phenomenon, in his opinion, had 'slipped into oblivion' and become a 'far-off episode'. He says: 'There was no anger, unless a mild, usually amused and very intermittent irritation can be called anger, in the characteristic works of the mid-1950s. [...] The Angry Young Men "movement" was a phantom creation of literary journalists'³⁴⁰. On another occasion, in a review of Arnold Wesker's plays³⁴¹ Amis again attributes the responsibility for the label to the 'journalistic tendency' in criticism and the need to generalise and write in a style 'suitable to the popular press'³⁴².

Anglo-Saxon Attitudes

Amis's war against the Mandarins was also reflected in his attitude to the English literature canon. 'Where the Mandarins gushed, Amis debunked'³⁴³, is how Harry Ritchie described Amis's criticism; and this is exactly what Amis does in his review of *Beowulf*. Opposing snobbery, Amis says that the total sum of Old English

³³⁷ *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, op.cit. p. 513.

³³⁸ letter to Mlle S.M. Haimart, 7 December 1972, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 745.

³³⁹ letter to The Editor, *Encounter*, November 1968, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 704.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 704.

³⁴¹ Kingsley Amis, 'Not Talking About Jerusalem', op.cit. p. 190.

³⁴² *Ibid.* p. 190.

³⁴³ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories*, op.cit. p.109.

literature is boredom³⁴⁴ and that it ‘aggravates instead of lightening the burden of a student’. He also doubts the theoretical reasons for studying the text of *Beowulf* and ‘going into all that stuff about the scribes and the transcripts and the relative frequency of the weak form of the adjective used without the article’. Before he begins a more detailed discussion of the reviewed text, Amis once again pronounces his disapproval of the old establishment academics:

But let this flash of science deceive nobody; I am not, thank heaven, an expert, and the merit I think I can glimpse in two or three Old English poems, and even here and there in *Beowulf* itself, is to that extent faint and far off. If I were an expert, no doubt I should be throwing imputations of greatness around with the best of them. Most scholars are men of foggy aesthetic sense, the ideal audience for their own propaganda.

Amis ridicules the fascination with Old English literature, at the same time criticising the poems themselves. He begins his ‘Anglo-Saxon Platitudes’³⁴⁵ with some ironic remarks about them:

Deciding which is the most boring long poem in English is, even given the existence of *Piers Plowman*, by no means an easy task³⁴⁶.

[...]

The *Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, in their different ways the two most ambitious poems in our language, are also among the most remote and frigid³⁴⁷.

[...]

Certificates of merit were drawn up for other Middle English poems of which it is tempting to say that nobody in full possession of his faculties could enjoy them: *Sir Gawain*

³⁴⁴ ‘Anglo-Saxon Platitudes’, a review of *Beowulf. A prose translation with an introduction* by David Wright in *The Spectator*, 5 April 1957, p.445.

³⁴⁵ ‘Anglo-Saxon Platitudes’, a review of *Beowulf. A prose translation with an introduction* by David Wright in *The Spectator*, 5 April 1957, p.445.

³⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 445.

³⁴⁷ Ibid. 445.

*and the Green Knight, Havelock the Dane, The Owl and the Nightingale*³⁴⁸.

In his opinion *Beowulf* was upgraded to a position of aesthetic importance to create employment for linguists and philologists who are sentimental about primitivism. The advantage of *Beowulf* is that it is an epic, it has a narrative, a hero and some action in it. However, Amis objects to saying that that it is a ‘good’ poem, as one has to verify it against other poems of that time, which is of course not possible here. The weakness of the poem, in Amis’s words, is the ‘poverty of human interest’ in that it deals with non-human matters.

Similarly, in another review Amis denounces *The Owl and The Nightingale* and objects to its inclusion in a discussion of humour in literature:

I should warn anyone who may dream of looking it up that *The Owl and the Nightingale* is the most boring of the Middle English poems [...] and is even perhaps the most boring poem in English – except *Beowulf*, of course³⁴⁹.

The discussion of *Beowulf* in the context of Amis’s criticism is much more than a review of the new translation. It is a statement against an academic establishment which bases its canon on ‘the most remote and frigid’ poems in the English language. The fact that Old English verse attracted so much attention in the Fifties resulted from the foundation of Old and Middle English Studies in the Oxford English School. At that time Anglo-Saxon literature formed a compulsory element in the Oxford English Degree. Amis comments on the politics of English universities:

³⁴⁸ ibid. p.445.

³⁴⁹ ‘A Sense of Humour’, a review of *Sense of Humour* by Stephen Potter in *The Spectator*, 25 June 1954, p.788.

It seems, however, as if a growing nervousness about the propriety of offering purely linguistic teaching to literature students – and within earshot of literary dons – led the language men at Oxford to look for other justification than the perfectly respectable view that English philology is, considered in itself, a fit subject to be studied at a university³⁵⁰.

Having elsewhere affected ignorance as a critical technique, in ‘Anglo-Saxon Platitudes’ he opts for demonstrating his knowledge. In the last part of the review, Amis provides his evaluation of the poem, and expresses an appreciation for *Beowulf*’s style. However, the translation is reminiscent of the efforts of an undergraduate:

The naïve concept of style as an ornament, lurking at the back of his mind, has led him to write far too often with the flat briskness, the explanatory paraphrasing and the all too neat syntactical subordination of a goodish sixth-former doing an unseen³⁵¹.

With an expert’s tone Amis quotes a verse from the text, paraphrases it and in doing so demonstrates the translator’s misinterpretation. The detailed analysis at the end of the review shifts the focus from the political to the literary. Amis assures us that his criticism does not stem from ignorance of his subject, but rather from a close analysis of the Old English text³⁵².

Eric Jacobs in Amis’s biography claims that with time the resentment he felt at having to read *The Fairie Queene* changed into gratitude: ‘He was glad that he had

³⁵⁰ ‘Anglo-Saxon Platitudes’, op.cit. p.445.

³⁵¹ ibid. p. 445.

³⁵² Eric Jacobs mentions Amis’s and Larkin’s ‘common dislike’ for the Old and Middle English literature. Larkin wrote: ‘At first I thought Troilus and Criseyde was the most boring poem in English.

read *The Fairie Queene*, even if only once and under duress, for he would be the poorer if he had never read it at all'³⁵³.

Mothballs

In the review of *Everyman's Book of Victorian Verse*, Amis declares himself as an admirer of Victorian poetry and tries to rescue it from neglect because 'it can actually be quite good, a bit patriotic, true, and privileged in outlook, and oversensitive here and there, but often self-revelatory and, of course, responsive to social cross-currents'³⁵⁴. What Amis particularly admires about the Victorian poetry, is its clarity:

It was a special strength of Victorian poetry that, along with a measureless hospitality to new or strange verse-forms and often under-regarded readiness to admit unauthorised, even dangerous subject-matter, there went a very firm set of assumptions about pre-eminence of technique, the poet's duty to be lucid as the occasion permitted and the perils of affectation and self-indulgence – and how mercilessly those who stepped out of line were ridiculed and parodied.³⁵⁵

These "wrong assumptions" about Victorian poetry – its pomposity, complacency and patriotism – are an effect of bad teaching. The reviewed anthology, Amis notes, also results from the editor having been badly taught, as he omits the most essential poems: Henley's 'Invictus', Francis Thompson's 'The Kingdom of

Then I thought Beowulf was. Then I thought Paradise Lost was. Now I know that Fairie Queene is the dullest thing out', Eric Jacobs, op.cit. p. 78.

³⁵³ Eric Jacobs, op.cit. 79.

³⁵⁴ 'Poets in Mothballs', review of *Everyman's Book of Victorian Verse*, ed. by J.R. Watson, *The Amis Collection*, p. 157.

³⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 158.

God', John Davidson's 'The Runable Stag', Alice Meynell's 'Renouncement' and Housman's '1887'.³⁵⁶

In his B.Litt. thesis³⁵⁷ Amis divided Victorian poets into two groups – those who sought the opinion of friends about their poetry ('normal practice') and those who ignored external opinions completely ('abnormal practice'). Rossetti needed encouragement for his writing and for that reason he was heavily reliant on the advice of others – Christina and William Rossetti and A.C. Swinburne. Hopkins, similarly, used to send his poems to a friend Bridges, but his problem was that Bridges was his only audience. Although Christina Rossetti did not consult anybody, her humility saved her from the 'trap of a solitary poet', which is the arrogance of dismissing the task of revision and clarification. James Thomson, George Meredith and William Morris are the writers whom Amis classifies as isolated. They lived in seclusion and kept their poetry secret till the moment of publication. Amis stresses Meredith's tendency to 'keep other people away from his verse'. William Morris read his poems to a 'ready-made audience' of his friends but the motive behind the reading was the act of performing, not receiving criticism. His concern was 'not to communicate but merely to write'. Swinburne, however, wrote too quickly to be able to "test" the poems on an audience; the only time one of Swinburne's poems was revised by friends resulted in one of his best works – 'Songs before Sunrise'.

Rossetti in his attempts to reach the reader paid a lot of attention to the physical form of the book, and so did Amis. In his review he often praised or

³⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 158.

³⁵⁷ Amis's edited his B.Litt. thesis ('English Non-Dramatic Poetry, 1850-1900, and the Victorian Reading Public') and published an excerpt as an article in 'Communication and the Victorian Poet', *Essays in Criticism*, vol.4, 1954, pp. 386-399.

criticised the cover, the author's photograph, the font and the format of the book. Another thing that Amis notes about Rossetti is that he remained in the centre of an artistic circle, consulted his friends and attracted devoted 'camp-followers'. Although Amis dissociated himself from literary groups and rejected the labels under which he was classified, he once admitted that being part of an 'artistic brotherhood' could help in finding communication with an audience. The practice of 'indifference to the problem of communication', more and more popular towards the end of the century, resulted in the appearance of writers like Oscar Wilde and the 'intention of working for [the artist's] own pleasure'. Amis clearly sympathises with Victorians concerned to write with the reader in mind. His criticism of the artistic detachment of the poets of the 1890s leads to an implied attack on Modernism and direct assault on Romanticism:

If even a slight general connection could be established between absence of concern to communicate and inability to produce a work of lasting interest and value, perhaps the modern practitioners of a chap-fallen Romanticism may give up exhibiting themselves before their readers and at last set about telling them something.³⁵⁸

The success of Victorian poetry, according to Amis, is its communication and 'self-confronting' with the reader. He states categorically that 'except in the short run, only those who write for an audience will reach one'³⁵⁹ – a message repeated frequently in Amis's reviews both of poetry and novels.

³⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 399.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. p.398.

A poet that Amis praises at length is Tennyson. In the ‘Introduction’ to *Tennyson*³⁶⁰, which Amis edited in 1973, he claims that in the context of European culture the poet can be compared to Mozart, giving as the grounds for this comparison the fact that they both were geniuses. The style of the ‘Introduction’ is dramatically different from articles on other poets. The language is far from colloquial; the text is full of lofty expressions, alleviated metaphors and words of praise, which suggests an ironic undertone. Rarely does Amis use such poetic expressions:

England notoriously had its doubts as well as its certainties, its neuroses as well as moral health, its fits of gloom and frustration and panic as well as complacency. Tennyson is the voice of those doubts and their accompaniments, and his genius enabled him to communicate them in such a way that we can understand them and feel them as our own³⁶¹.

The article is full of words of praise, more elaborate than simply the terms of appraisal, ‘good’ and ‘readable’ used elsewhere. Amis states that ‘Mariana’ ‘embodies to perfection that characteristically Tennysonian power’ and nobody could miss ‘the tremendous aural effects’³⁶² of the poem. Discussing ‘Morte d’Arthur’, Amis says that its ‘pictorial passages are splendid’³⁶³; writing about *In Memoriam* he uses the word “greatness”³⁶⁴ and calls ‘Milton’ a ‘magnificent piece, deeply

³⁶⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘On Tennyson’, *The Amis Collection*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 184-192 (all references in the text will be to the latter edition). First appeared as ‘Introduction’ to *Tennyson*, ed. by Kingsley Amis, (London: Penguin, 1973).

³⁶¹ Ibid. p. 192.

³⁶² Ibid. p. 187.

³⁶³ Ibid. p. 188.

³⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 190.

Romantic, unashamedly lyrical,³⁶⁵ Strangely, the style is more detached, there are no appeals to ‘the general reader’, which are overused in other reviews.

Amis attacks the ‘massive prejudice’ and hostility towards Tennyson. From a distance, Tennyson might appear as ‘an incarnation of Victorianism, pompous, unthinkingly patriotic, Poet Laureate (a crime by definition), the dutiful voice of the hierarchical system of the day’³⁶⁶ but no such charges can be proved by examples from his poetry. Amis posits a link between the reasons for Tennyson’s unpopularity in the twentieth century, and his own approach to literary criticism: ‘His verse has turned out to be resistant to modern techniques of literary criticism. It holds no interesting ambiguities, intentional or unintentional; there are no puzzles, no “levels of meaning”, within it, it just is’³⁶⁷. ‘Transparency’ and ‘plain symbolism’³⁶⁸ were the qualities of literature that Amis praised in his reviews. Richard Bradford (who calls Amis’s reviews of Tennyson ‘the Amis manifesto’³⁶⁹) defends the approach against the charge of simplistic ignorance of form and says that his technique was to merge ‘the form and content so skillfully that the intelligent reader will not require the professional critic to tell him how, and how well, the one supports the other’³⁷⁰. Despite Amis’s generalization about Tennyson’s poetry, the poet’s alleged ‘resistance to modern techniques’ might be the reason why he admired Tennyson so much.

³⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 190.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 184.

³⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 184.

³⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 184.

³⁶⁹ Richard Bradford, *Kingsley Amis*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p. 10.

³⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 10.

Although Amis thought highly of Victorian poetry, in general he was less enthusiastic about Algernon Charles Swinburne³⁷¹. For Amis the “sensible” approach to Swinburne is that of stressing the virtues of the scope of his writing whilst bearing in mind its faults. These faults are numerous – the style of his prose works, the length of his plays, the ‘sado-masochistic stuff’ in his poems, and most of all his ‘defective ear’. Amis quotes nine lines of Swinburne’s ‘Songs before Sunrise’ and, using his expertise in Victorian poetry, says he is able to find eight failures of euphony in them. The poems that Amis praises: ‘The Triumph of Time’ and ‘Ave atque Vale’, ‘are charged with a kind of incantatory energy unequalled in English’ and their iambic lines ‘seem to fall over one another in their eagerness to be heard’. In his personal anthology of English verse³⁷² Amis includes one poem by Swinburne – ‘The Garden of Proserpine’.

Here Amis seems to have abandoned his strategy of faked ignorance and demonstrates his knowledge of the subject, not his anti-poetic, “common sense” approach. He retains, however, the informality of his reviews; he ‘cannot really buy Swinburne as a novelist’, he ‘is left cold by [his] immense scholarship’, and ‘cannot much care if Swinburne influenced a lot of people’³⁷³.

As much as calling Tennyson a genius could be interpreted as sincere praise, his description of A.E. Housman as a ‘double genius’³⁷⁴ is definitely ironic. The irony is not very hostile, Amis goes on to identify both positive and negative features of Housman’s writing. Though disapproving of Housman’s criticism and his

³⁷¹ Kingsley Amis, ‘Brandy to Brown Ale’, review of Philip Henderson, *Swinburne, The Amis Collection*, pp. 192-194.

³⁷² *The Amis Anthology. A Personal Choice of English Verse*, (London: Arena, 1989).

³⁷³ Ibid. p.194.

'indifference to meaning as a constituent of poetry', he admires his attacks on the 'pretensions of literary critics'. However, when Amis moves on to analyse his poetry, he becomes very enthusiastic: 'Only the presence of Robert Graves doubtfully prevents Housman from being the last great lyric poet in the language'³⁷⁵. In his early reviews Amis had a 'general reader in mind', here he ascribes the poems' quality to the fact that they were written for a 'fit reader', meaning one who understands classical allusions. The question mark in the review's title, 'The Last Lyric Poet?', and a sad tone at the end provide a pessimistic prospect – there is no place for such poetry any more.

Linguistic Folly

As a poet himself, Amis often discusses the art of poetry in his reviews; but quite frequently he also expresses his opinions about poets. The ones, who qualify under 'the night-owl test' are: 'Housman, parts of Graves, Betjeman, the early Tennyson, the Macaulay of 'Horatius', the early R.S. Thomas, and Philip Larkin'³⁷⁶.

Shortly after Amis's attack on Laurie Lee's travel book, he was offered the chance to review *A Prospect of the Sea*³⁷⁷, a collection of Dylan Thomas's stories and essays. Having received a violent reaction to his assault on travelogue, Amis was worried that if he went on to criticise Dylan Thomas, he would be considered to have

³⁷⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'The Last Lyric Poet?', review of A.E. Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, *The Amis Collection*, pp. 196-194.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 197.

³⁷⁶ Kingsley Amis, 'A Poet of Our Time', review of Philip Larkin, *High Windows*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 212.

³⁷⁷ Kingsley Amis, 'Thomas the Rhymer', review of Dylan Thomas, *A Prospect of the Sea*, *The Spectator*, 12 August 1955, pp. 227-228.

gone ‘all sour’³⁷⁸. This apprehension, however, did not stop him from attacking Thomas whose stories, as Amis admits, ‘fortunately were mostly highly “poetic” so a backhanded assault on the verse became possible’³⁷⁹. Anti-poeticism, again, seems to be Amis’s attitude and a review of prose was able to become the medium for a criticism Thomas’s poetry.

Amis calls the poet ‘ranting, canting Thomas the Rhymer’³⁸⁰ and describes his style as ‘near- or quasi-surrealist’, ‘apocalyptic’ and a ‘blend of answerless riddle, outworn poeticism and careful linguistic folly’³⁸¹. Being hostile to poeticism in prose, Amis ridicules the poetic style of Thomas’s stories. He quotes a passage from *A Prospect of the Sea* and analyses it in detail undermining its logic and rationality. Amis defies the sense of a metaphor asking: ‘Under what circumstances can a going down be said to be circular?’ Any answers to questions like this, in Amis’s opinion, must be ‘highly fanciful or highly debatable’. He calls such a method of writing ‘multiple whimsy’, and discredits Thomas’s texts. He concludes his article by saying that Thomas’s works would only appeal to those who ‘hanker after something sublimer than thinking. That something Thomas wasted his talent and integrity in trying to provide’³⁸².

Amis realises that his criticism may not be popular with the admirers of ‘graces of style’³⁸³ but himself seems to be satisfied with his anti-poetic campaign nonetheless: ‘Of course, this line of attack, like all anti-Rhymer inquiries, lays itself

³⁷⁸ Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis. A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 209.

³⁷⁹ Letter to Robert Conquest, 31 July 1955, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, op.cit. p. 443.

³⁸⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Thomas the Rhymer’, review of Dylan Thomas, *A Prospect of the Sea*, *The Spectator*, 12 August 1955, pp. 227.

³⁸¹ Ibid. p. 227.

³⁸² Ibid. p. 227.

open to the charge of being purblind, cold, narrowly intellectual and even anti-poetic'³⁸⁴. In a letter to Robert Conquest he admits that provocation lay at the foot of the argument: 'You'll probably have to write in again and defend me from Louis MacNeice, Empson, Sitwell and the rest of the pals'³⁸⁵. If philistinism means being anti-poetic, he is proud to be considered as such, as he values rationality more than style.

As is usually the case with such provocative reviews, this too provoked a reaction. This time the debate took place in private correspondence between Amis, Conquest and Davenport. In a letter to Davenport, Amis admits that part of the motive behind the review was 'startling' but most of it was what he sincerely thought. He says:

I know he [Thomas] worked hard on his stuff. But that doesn't affect its merit in the least, nor does it stop what he finally wrote being miserable incoherent rubbish. That's what I was trying to get across with my '*careful* linguistic folly'. You can draft out nonsense as many times as you like, think hard and repeatedly about it, but it's still nonsense. I just cannot agree that more than a few of Thomas's poems are coherent. But it would take several thousand words to establish (which is one of the troubles with these review things, of course).³⁸⁶

In the same letter Amis compares Professor Snooks's provocative attack on Shakespeare with his own attack on Thomas, and concludes: 'I can't remember any "complex simplicity" in [Shakespeare]. Plenty of bad verse, of course, but never

³⁸³ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', a review of T.A.G. Hungeford, *Sowers of the Wind*, *The Spectator*, Feb 18, 1955, p. 199.

³⁸⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'Thomas the Rhymer', review of Dylan Thomas, *A Prospect of the Sea*, *The Spectator*, 12 August 1955, pp. 227.

³⁸⁵ Letter to Robert Conquest, 31 July 1955, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, op.cit. p. 443.

³⁸⁶ Letter to John Davenport, 31 August, 1955, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, pp. 448-9

anything below the level of common sense'³⁸⁷. The reference, in the context of Thomas's criticism, implies that this is what the Welsh poet lacks – common sense. In a review of Thomas's *Collected Letters*, Amis makes a general remark about Thomas's poetry: 'a poem cannot just be and not mean, exist entirely within itself, while it goes on using words at all'³⁸⁸. In the context of the meaninglessness of his poems, Amis compares Thomas with Stravinsky, and his 'musical emptiness'.

In a letter to Philip Larkin written after Thomas's death, Amis again attacks the Welsh poet: 'I don't grieve him as a voice forever silenced, in fact that part of it is very much all right with me. I think him a bad poet and a bad influence [...] a Bloomsburyite to his *dirty* fingernails, that was him'³⁸⁹. All through his criticism Amis makes references, direct and vague, to Dylan Thomas. Reviewing *The Stranger at My Side* by Gwyn Thomas, Amis says it is 'a mere exercise in that vein of irresponsible logorrhoea which has ruined more than one Welsh talent'³⁹⁰. In 1986 in *The Old Devils* Amis modelled his fictional Brydan on Dylan Thomas; the same year, however, despite his declared hostility towards Thomas, he became a trustee of the poet's Literary Estate³⁹¹.

As regards Wales in Thomas's poetry, Amis says the picture of the country he presented is 'false, sentimentalising, melodramatising, sensationalising,

³⁸⁷ ibid. p.450.

³⁸⁸ Kingsley Amis, 'On the Scrounge', review of *Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Paul Ferris, *The Amis Collection*, p. 209.

³⁸⁹ Letter to Philip Larkin 26 November 1953, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* ed. by Zachary Leader (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), pp. 344-345.

³⁹⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'New Novels', review of Gwyn Thomas, *The Stranger At My Side*, *The Spectator*, 23 July 1954, p.126.

³⁹¹ Zachary Leader talks about the circumstances of this controversial decision in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 1056.

ingratiating,³⁹² Amis called Thomas a ‘pernicious figure, one who has helped to get Wales and Welsh poetry a bad name and generally done a lasting harm to both’³⁹³. Thomas’s Welshness, Amis says, was only a part of a ‘self-created legend’ – that of ‘the bard in stained pullover and baggy trousers, the roaring boyo, the young dog, always breaking things, talking bawdy, womanising and of course boozing’³⁹⁴. In reality, he was brought up in the English language environment of Swansea, did not speak Welsh and lived in a decent middle class suburb. Amis comments ironically that he himself lived ‘within a stone’s throw of that Cwmdonkin Drive that Dylan Thomas had been the Rimbaud of’³⁹⁵, ‘which ought to give you some idea’³⁹⁶. Thomas’s emotional drive was, not to write poetry, but to be a poet and this ‘raffish persona’ should be, according to Amis, demythologised. Thomas’s very phrase ‘the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive’ Amis interprets not as the indication of the poet’s wildness, but of his young age – he wrote all his poem at the age of nineteen.

A personal attack on Dylan Thomas runs counter to Amis’s oft-stated rule to discuss a text in preference to discussing the author. However, Amis justifies his interpretation by Thomas’s self-created legend and by his consciously leading his life as that of a poet. Although Amis knew Philip Larkin more than he had ever known Thomas, in discussing Larkin, he concentrated on his poetry almost exclusively.

³⁹² Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, op.cit. p. 133.

³⁹³ Ibid. p. 134.

³⁹⁴ Kingsley Amis, ‘Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin’, review of Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas, The Amis Collection*, op.cit. p. 206.

³⁹⁵ Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, op.cit. p. 127.

³⁹⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin’, review of Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas, The Amis Collection*, op.cit. p. 206.

The review of Larkin's *High Windows* (1974) and the introduction to Tennyson's poetry (1973) share two common features³⁹⁷. One is praise for the poets and enthusiasm for their works; the other is the structure of the review, which in both cases starts from a common assumption about the poets' lack of recognition. One by one Amis outlines 'disgraceful' preconceptions about Larkin and Tennyson and then refutes them by explaining the attitudes from which they resulted. He defends Larkin saying that he writes little but 'bulk' is not a witness to poetical status; he lacks craftsmanship but such is the opinion of those who were 'left behind' the Fifties movement; his poetry is gloomy but only because of the seriousness with which Larkin treats the important things in life. According to Amis, Larkin has 'a keen eye and an exact ear' and should be accepted as one of 'the best three or four poets now writing in our language'³⁹⁸.

Amis is less enthusiastic about some of Larkin's poems in the review published after Larkin's death. Discussing the same volume, *High Windows*, which he praised for the 'details chosen with the minutest care'³⁹⁹, he now says that he cannot make sense of some of the images: 'I [...] can make almost nothing of the sense of falling and the arrow-shower at the end of 'The Whitsun Weddings'; 'Nobody seems to know quite what those high windows are doing in the poem of the title'⁴⁰⁰.

In the reviewed collection of papers about Larkin, Amis protests against academic interpretations of Larkin's poetry, as it 'poorly responds to close verbal

³⁹⁷ Kingsley Amis, The Last Lyric Poet?, review of A.E. Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, *The Amis Collection*, pp. 196-194.

³⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 212.

³⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 213.

analysis'. He respects Larkin's own opinion that 'when you've read a poem, that's it, it's all quite clear what it means'⁴⁰¹. Once again Amis gives vent to his hostility to literary theory:

One fellow announces ominously that he proposes to discuss 'the importance of difference' in a Larkin volume and hastens to explain that by 'difference' he does not mean 'différance – the Derridean term is too quickly interested in the general processes by which meaning is generated and "deferred" for it to help with the specific meanings of Larkin's texts'. Well, I should just about think so too, what?⁴⁰²

Ending his article 'Larkin Misinterpreted',⁴⁰³ Amis states again that Larkin is 'one of our finest metrists since Tennyson'.

Anthologies

In 1978 Kingsley Amis edited *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse*.

Germaine Greer in *The Spectator*⁴⁰⁴ review of this anthology wrote:

There is in each of us an anthology of light verse. The best reason for buying Mr Amis's version is an interest in Mr Amis himself. It may be disappointing to find in him such a blend of conservatism and vulgarity, but it is still interesting; if it is light verse you care about, you were better advised to collect your own.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'Collected Larkin', review of *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite, *The Amis Collection* p. 215.

⁴⁰¹ Kingsley Amis, 'The Coventry Chaucer', review of *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: a Tribute*, ed. by George Hartley, *The Amis Collection*, p. 217.

⁴⁰² Ibid. p. 218.

⁴⁰³ Kingsley Amis, 'Larkin Misinterpreted', review of Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, *The Amis Collection*, p. 219.

⁴⁰⁴ Germaine Greer, 'Heterosexual humour', a review of *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse* ed. by Kingsley Amis, *The Spectator*, 10 June, 1978, p.19.

⁴⁰⁵ ibid. p.20.

Greer's remark seems very appropriate both in the context of Amis's editing work and the choice of poems itself. The notes, references and introduction say a lot about Amis's tastes and views on literature, or even his personality, as Greer implies.

Amis admits that the whole of the volume is 'at the mercy of' his taste, which was the main principle for the selection. The choice of poems results from his taste rather than from any policy. When asked 'Why no Ogden Nash? Why no Dorothy Parker?', Amis answers 'Because I don't like Ogden Nash or Dorothy Parker'⁴⁰⁶. Germaine Greer criticizes Amis for sexism owing to the fact that only one female writer was included in the anthology. Amis answers: 'Why only one poet? Because I only found one. Ms Greer sadly failed to mention the names of the other sixty-two who would have supplied sexual parity and rescued me from what was presumably tokenism as well as sexism'⁴⁰⁷.

Amis in his 'Introduction' juxtaposes 'light verse' with high verse. The obvious opposite of 'high' is low, and it is often treated as 'offensive to decorum'. Its form is incompatible with seriousness – 'jogging rhythms, elaborate rhymes, stanzas that erect trip-wires for the unwary reader'; also its subject matter is low – things which are 'poetically or morally unsuitable for high consideration'⁴⁰⁸. The main feature of the light verse is impropriety reflected in the language: rustic, colloquial, obscene or vulgar. Despite its lack of artistic qualities, Amis still considers light verse

⁴⁰⁶ 'Anthologies', *The Amis Collection*, p.144.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 145.

⁴⁰⁸ Introduction, *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ed. by Kingsley Amis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. v-xxii.

worth studying. ‘Light’ also means cheerful, and so it does bring consolation, a ‘jolt to the gentler emotion’, and by this comes closer to the tone of ‘high’ verse.

Light verse makes more demands on the writer’s technique – a fault in rhyming could endanger the whole structure of the poem. Amis says that ‘a concert pianist is allowed a wrong note here and there; a juggler is not allowed to drop a plate’. Among the poems of his friends, Anthony Powell, Philip Larkin, D.J. Enright, Amis includes three of his own poems. His selection ends with writers of his generation, and the reason why he limited his choice of later verse is the fact that it is ‘not verse at all in any sense that makes sense’. When high verse aspires to abandon form, a mortal blow is done to light verse in which form is always important. In the 1970s, when the collection was published, Amis did not see any future for light verse.

Amis opposed the pretentiousness of high art and often professed a fascination for light literature, nonetheless he was very critical of Edward Lear’s nonsense verse. Amis considered limericks ‘a blot on our culture’, seeing them as an example of amateurishness⁴⁰⁹. In a review of *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse* Amis notes that ‘the trouble with nonsense is that any fool can write it’⁴¹⁰. Although entirely disapproving, Amis prefers ‘hard-core nonsense’ than ‘deviating into sense and out of it again’.

Despite Amis’s disdain for poets of the generations coming after his own⁴¹¹, his review of *The Young British Poets* does not contain much irony; he is envious of the poets’ age and success – prizes, awards, TV documentaries and their ‘photographs

⁴⁰⁹ Kingsley Amis, ‘Nasticreechia Krorliuppia?’, *The Amis Collection*, p. 195.

⁴¹⁰ Kingsley Amis, ‘Pobbleboskle Abblesquabs’, review of *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse*, ed. by Geoffrey Grigson, *The Amis Collection*, pp. 152-154.

[...] on the front jacket'. 'Nothing much of that sort ever came our way, I don't mind telling you' – Amis notes and adds with a relief two paragraphs later that the collection is 'not as bad as I expected, it is also not as good as I feared'⁴¹².

Complexity of style, intellectualism and linguistic experimentation – things that Amis criticized in literature – are nowhere to be found; concern for the reader – that which considered to be of primary importance – is shared by most of the poets included in the collection. Amis is pleasantly surprised as the poems match his own view of poetry: 'No shock tactics, no word salads, no obscenity, no trip-taking, very little mere showmanship or introspection. Instead, there is an overall concern to communicate, to render honestly scenes, events and people.'⁴¹³ Hugo Williams, Seamus Heaney and John Fuller are the poets that Amis praises most; the rest present 'lack of finish, lack of art – the oldest fault in the world'⁴¹⁴.

Summing up the first year of his work as a reviewer in *The Spectator*, Amis wrote a few 'disconnected observations' about the novel in general. In the same tone, stepping down as editor of *The Daily Mirror*'s poetry column in 1985, he made some general remarks about poetry. Firstly Amis observes that 'people enjoy modern poetry when they find they can respond to it'⁴¹⁵, hence (among *The Daily Mirror*'s readers) the most popular poet is James Fenton, the least popular poets are Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and John Ashbery. Secondly, Amis notices that the poets that are preferred by twentieth century readers were poets of the past and complains about the scarcity of recent poetry – 'public taste has been slow to change

⁴¹¹ For example Introduction, *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, op.cit. p.xxi.

⁴¹² Kingsley Amis, 'A Rueful Shrug at Life', review of *The Young British Poets*, ed. by Jeremy Robson, *The Amis Collection*, p. 166.

⁴¹³ Kingsley Amis, 'A Rueful Shrug at Life', op.cit. p. 166.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid. p. 167.

because nothing much has come along to change it'. To end his article (and his column in *The Daily Mirror*), Amis answers the question he asks at the beginning 'what sort of poetry is most read and liked'?

A poem must first of all be understandable, perhaps with the aid of information about the poet, the period, etc.

Poems read in school were remembered and liked; the schools are important here and are no longer doing their job.

Poetry is for everyone.

'Modern' poetry is disliked in general.⁴¹⁵

The observations were based on a questionnaire sent to *Daily Mirror* readers. The results, however, reflect Amis's own ideas of poetry expressed in his literary criticism. Throughout his career, he changed his views on many aspects of society, but not on poetry. After thirty years of reviewing, Amis repeats his call for poems "for the readers" and rejects Modernism.

⁴¹⁵ Kingsley Amis, 'Poetry in the Mirror', *The Amis Collection*, p. 170.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. p. 171.

Conclusion

Amis's criticism was best described by Rubin Rabinovitz in his book *Reaction Against Experiment*:

"Filthy Mozart!" says the hero of *Lucky Jim* and a great chunk of Western Culture falls overboard with a splash. One quickly discovers, however, that Amis is more interested in the splash than anything else. He is too obviously cultured to hate culture that much.⁴¹⁷

'Cultivated philistinism', 'outrageous views', 'insistent lowbrowism' and 'anti-intellectualism' are the effects of Amis's interest in the 'splash', provoking a reaction and startling the reader. Amis confirmed this by confessing once in a private conversation with Harry Ritchie: 'I enjoy annoying people'⁴¹⁸.

Gilbert Phelps in his essay on 'The "Awfulness" of Kingsley Amis'⁴¹⁹ ridicules attempts to interpret Amis's heroes as reflections of the author's hates and prejudices⁴²⁰. At the root of the awfulness of his characters, according to Phelps, lies 'a strategy to induce the kind of engaged response he wants'⁴²¹ and achieve the effect of 'provoking in the reader a sense of outrage'⁴²². Colin Wilson in his response to Amis's hostile review of *The Outsider* emphasizes its provocative aspect: 'Like any

⁴¹⁷ Rubin Rabinovitz, *Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, op.cit. p. 52.

⁴¹⁸ Harry Ritchie, 'An Outrageous Talent', *Kingsley Amis in Life and Letters*, ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 183. Ritchie quotes from his personal interview with Amis in *Success Stories*, p. 227.

⁴¹⁹ Gilbert Phelps, 'The "Awfulness" of Kingsley Amis', *Kingsley Amis in Life and Letters*, ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 65-75.

⁴²⁰ Gilbert Phelps says: 'Despite the fact that Amis often uses his characters as repositories for some of his own exasperations, it would be ludicrous to see any of them as self-portraits. The obvious point is worth making because there have been some more than usually crass identifications of Amis with some of his characters'. p. 66.

⁴²¹ Ibid. p. 65.

good TV performer, Mr Amis enjoys stirring things up, startling or irritating his audience into paying attention,⁴²³.

As his novels, *Lucky Jim* and *Stanley and the Women* were meant to provoke, so is his criticism. Amis uses provocation as his technique; most of his public pronouncements, including his criticism, were designed, using Phelps's words, to provoke 'a sense of outrage'. In a letter to John Davenport, Amis admits: 'I'm not really all that determined to startle, you know. If I do startle I take it as a bit of the compliment, and I'd never try not to...',⁴²⁴ In the same letter to Davenport Amis makes more general remarks about the nature of criticism. He protests against the application of value judgements to criticism:

'You mean, I suppose, that a person my size shouldn't throw mud at, or otherwise attack, somebody Thomas's size. But you must see surely, that Thomas's size is the very matter at issue. You think it was large; I think it was microscopic (in verse). Am I then to pretend I like Thomas so as to conform to other people's notions of our relative sizes? And even if Thomas were indisputably large, doesn't a critic enjoy the privilege of forgetting all that when he begins writing? Otherwise what will happen to criticism?'⁴²⁵

In the times when class hierarchy in a broader social context was under attack (descendants of Leavis, careers of 'lower-middle-brows'), Amis attacked hierarchy in the literary world. The commonly accepted greatness of a writer is not enough reason to praise him. Amis reserves the right to criticize anyone on the basis of his literary achievement and if he thinks that person is 'a lousy poet', he should be given the

⁴²² Ibid. p. 65.

⁴²³ Colin Wilson, 'Quip Counter Quip', op.cit. p. 623.

⁴²⁴ Letter to John Davenport, 31 August 1955, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 449.

⁴²⁵ Letter to John Davenport, 31 August 1955, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* ed. by Zachary Leader (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), p. 449.

opportunity to say it. If the reader then disagrees, they should ‘amass critical ammunition to demolish’ the critic. This seems to be the aim of Amis’s reviews – to provoke a reaction and incite people to come back with ‘critical ammunition’, not clichés about the writer’s greatness. This is also the message of a literary debate which took place on the pages of *The Spectator* in 1971⁴²⁶. Amis started the debate by publishing the article ‘Right of Reply’ where he explained his view on criticism and everybody’s right to respond. Criticising journalists, he accuses them of frequent misquoting, misinterpreting and misreporting his words⁴²⁷. Amis gives examples of articles where he was libeled and refused a right to reply. Everybody has a right to criticize but the subject of the criticism must have a right to respond.

Ritchie claims that in the 1950s Amis’s criticism (with its ‘colloquial tone and a critical rigour far removed from the *belletristic* approach’) set a new trend and had a profound effect on postwar English writing. Critics inspired by Amis (Ritchie names two: Clive James and John Carey) nowadays constitute ‘a new orthodoxy’,⁴²⁸ of criticism.

Amis believed in the sense of criticism, especially analytical criticism, whose task is to clarify the text ‘by glossing the hard words and explaining the references’. For him it is essential to keep close to the text (‘talking about the book, not around it’), and anyone who does more than that ‘does so at his and our own peril’. In one of his reviews, Amis cites C.S. Lewis: ‘It is always better to read Chaucer (or whoever

⁴²⁶ Kingsley Amis, ‘Right of Reply’, *The Spectator*, 30 January 1971, p. 156.

⁴²⁷ In a letter to the *Spectator* Editor in on 13 February 1971 Amis comments on one of the journalists: ‘Mr Roberts is so steeped in inaccuracy that he can misreport me twice over in the very act of defending his newspaper against charges arising out of having misreported me.’ p. 232.

Then in a letter on 6 March 1971 he says: ‘To misquote a man within quotation marks is a rather novel and appealingly simple method of distortion’, p. 328.

⁴²⁸ Harry Ritchie, ‘An Outrageous Talent’, op.cit. p. 186.

you please) again than to read a new criticism of him'. Amis does not seek to raise criticism to a status higher than that of literature: 'And a celebration of criticism as the supreme literary form of our time, with Dr Leavis as its supreme exponent, now that [...] D.H. Lawrence is dead. There I ... let us say dissent'⁴²⁹.

The main achievement of Amis's criticism was to bring literature closer to ordinary people, to break the paradigm of the exclusiveness of high brow literature and inaccessible academic criticism. Amis would 'discuss literature with anybody – provided he or she had read the book' not only with theoretically minded academics. Rubin Rabinovitz calls Amis's criticism 'iconoclastic' and says it is motivated by a 'desire to clear away the rubbish of outworn traditions so that newer forms and values can be considered'. His novels defied the 'poeticality' and obscurity of the Modernists and so did his reviews. Amis once aptly described the success of a reviewed novel: 'Half a century ago this month there appeared the first – what? Modern novel? Post-Great-War novel? Novel written for me, and not for some porcelain-collecting multilingual gourmet'⁴³⁰. These words seem effectively to sum up Amis's attitude to writing – it should be comprehensible, readable and accessible to 'the general reader' – a reader like him.

⁴²⁹ Kingsley Amis, 'Up to our Neck', a review of Ian Robinson, *The Survival of English: Essays in Criticism of Language*, *The Observer Review*, 5 August 1973, p. 27.

⁴³⁰ Kingsley Amis, 'Fit to Kill', review of Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*, *The Amis Collection*, pp.69-70.

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