

glory in the face of Jesus Christ—
and him crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles
but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the
power of God and the wisdom of God.

(I Cor 1: 23 - 24).

And after all, but for being *called*, who has ever overcome the
stumbling block or brooked the folly?

Kingsley Amis: in search of the Simple Life¹

Bernard McCabe

A delicate shift of tone occurs at that point in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* when Pope abandons the lethal wit of his "Bill of Attainder" against London society, fashionable, professional, literary, and turns to the other business of the poem, the quiet praise of his father, a simple man who only knew "the language of the Heart". It is a triumph of Horatian satire, a telling move from the essentially comic to a sustaining solemnity. All good comic writers, whatever genre they choose, ultimately want to be able to do something like this, they want their comic perceptions of life's complexities to issue in simple visions of serious truth. Novelists, who depend so much on establishing a reliable "voice", have special problems when their natural mode is comic. When the habitual expression is a grin or a grimace that all-important modulation is far from easy to carry off. An interesting case is the contemporary comic novelist Kingsley Amis. Modern British comedy is notably off-hand and sardonic in tone, and the sought-for shift from hard-bitten cerebration to the large simplicities of the language of the heart is correspondingly hard to make.

But Amis clearly wants to make it. "Serio-comic", he has said of himself,² and if in his quirky, variegated oeuvre, social novels, sex novels, mystery novels, love stories, science fiction, plain verse and plain man's criticism the comic is everywhere, the simply serious tries hard to be there too. One novel, *The Anti-Death League*, generally comic in tone like all his other novels, seems a suitable starting-point for taking a general look at Amis, but especially suitable for taking a look at serious Amis:

"What do you think about death?"

"Death, sir?"

"Yes, death. What do you think about it?"

"I never think about it, sir."

"Never?"

"No, sir."

"Right. Next. What do you think about death?"

"It's nothing to do with me, sir."

1 This essay appears in a different form in *Old Lines, New Forces*. Ed. Robert K. Morris. (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press 1977).

2 Kingsley Amis, "My Kind of Comedy," *The Twentieth Century*, July, 1961, p. 46.

That grotesque interrogation continues, and apart from being what it's about, goes on sounding like any ordinary army confrontation between an officer and private soldier. And in this it is typical of Amis's strange novel. *The Anti-Death League* keeps shifting us disturbingly from the matter of fact to the mysterious and back again. These soldiers are doing what a lot of people in *The Anti-Death League* do, they are not "coming clean about death," and that is what the novel implicitly claims to be doing; its large and serious subject is the problem of evil.

Amis comes at the problem from many angles. "The steering failed to respond" is the last sentence of the book, and in a small accident a lonely man's old dog is run down. But by then we have already seen a young soldier killed in a similarly pointless way, another young man dies suddenly of meningitis, we contemplate a third who is living a vegetable life of "total withdrawal". And there is the young and beautiful Catherine, who in a difficult life seems at last to have moved on to a new plane of love and happiness, to have found "a signal, a guarantee that the real joyful life existed somewhere". Then she discovers that she has cancer of the breast. "Out of a clear sky. Act of God you might say."

Act of God. In Amis novels friends and enemies are usually very quickly identified and established as such. And in *The Anti-Death League* Amis as usual provides a choice group of human malevolents, "pro-death" people. But then in a sudden shift of focus we are pushed beyond the here and now to find that the ultimate enemy is God. In *The Anti-Death League* God gets the sort of treatment that Professor Welch gets in *Lucky Jim*, or that the newspaper editor, Harold Meers, gets in *Girl, 20*, a sustained offensive. In a poem, "To a Baby Born Without Limbs", written by Max Hunter, the novel's central character (the latest variation of Jim Dixon, now alcoholic and homosexual) God as source of human misery is made to say:

. . . but just a word in your ear, if you've got one.
Mind you DO take this in the right spirit,
And keep a civil tongue in your head about ME.
Because if you don't,
I've got plenty of other stuff up MY sleeve,
Such as Leukaemia and Polio,
(Which incidentally, you're welcome to, any time,
Whatever spirit you take this in.)
I've given you one love-pat, right?
You don't want another.
So watch it, Jack.³

³ The illiteracies are deliberate, for complicated plot reasons. The whole poem is near-Amis in style, could almost have come out of his last collection, *A Look Around the Estate*. Compare the sardonic poem "New Approach Needed" addressed to Christ on the cross: "Come off it / And get some service in / Jack, long before you start / Laying down the old law..."

God, apparently benevolent (“100% loving”), is the root of evil, and he is relentlessly attacked. Or more precisely he is attacked as he exists in the minds and mouths of his admirers. Hunter’s attack on Death and God is an attack on the ways people find to evade the problems of evil and of death. Amis, again as usual, is pursuing the dishonesties of thought, word and deed that surround these topics. He gives them the shock treatment, in *Lucky Jim’s* iconoclastic “filthy Mozart” style. “God giveth and by Christ God taketh away”, or, as the disasters pile up, “God’s having a whale of a time”.

The truculence is familiar, as is the exasperation and the impatience, an impatience that keeps well clear of righteous indignation—one of Amis’s regular targets. His protagonists, from *Lucky Jim* onwards, have been characteristically violent and compulsive. Caught in worlds of frustration, they have something of the feverish urgency for instant gratification that we associate with the deprived child. Lucky Jim swallowing down great pints of bitter at high speed, or bolting whole at breakfast-time a finger-held fried egg, sets the pattern. If you are hungry, grab the food. If you want a girl, get her drunk, as does the hero of *Take A Girl Like You*, or assault her, as does his *One Fat English-man*, or, more nastily, exploit her fears, in the aptly titled *I Want It Now*. If a man is a fool, laugh at him and hurt him. Bash your way through the niggling or the sentimental or the socially constricting barriers to the truths of the will. Do what you want and don’t do what you don’t want (a fresh message for pawky post-war England that receives a complex, much-modified re-statement in the more recent *Girl, 20*). Amis, needless to say, is not *prescribing* such conduct, but his novels contemplate the possibilities of anger and violence as a quick and effective way out of the cramping conventions, gentilities, and cultural orthodoxies of contemporary life.

Bullied by the world, the Amis protagonist quickly bullies back. Find the enemy and get him. In *Lucky Jim*, Dixon knocks down Bertram, his nice girl’s awful intruding arty fiance, and in his famous drunken lecture on medieval history he sends up the groves of academe by knocking them about a bit. In *The Anti-Death League*, Max Hunter behaves in the same way when he literally “sends up” St Jerome’s Priory, using a small atomic weapon. He is making a frontal attack on the home of “God the Father Almighty”.

A specialist in a sort of controlled but peppery irritation, Amis invites the reader in his plain commonsense speech to recognize the enemy. The enemy, largely, is mean-spiritedness in its many manifestations, in cultural, social, sexual situations. In human terms the smallest touches are enough. Anger at the man who keeps his change carefully in a small leather purse, or who wears a bow tie, or a furry gray-blue waistcoat, or wears dark sun-glasses on a dull day, or who talks affectedly about art or music or wine, or who works at “trendiness” in speech or point of view, or who . . . the versions

multiply. In these only apparently arbitrary notations Amis asks us quite seriously to assent (often, but not always with amusement) to his recognitions of moral stinginess, of the evil forces that work against—well, against what? Nothing more complex or un-simple than good people loving one another. . . .

Amis seems recently to have become interested in rendering evil as some form of positive presence. It is one of the ways in which he works to get new dimensions into his comedy, which by its very nature risks limiting itself to satiric social comment.⁴ Finding it hard to move anywhere from the jocular and sardonic, he explores the grotesque as a possible route (the reader's problem here is a sense that these excursions sometimes offer no more than a respite from the pressures of his satirical intelligence). In a later novel, *The Green Man*, still characteristically Amis but also eccentric and experimental, he goes further, exploring the supernatural survival of past evils in the natural present. In *The Anti-Death League* the apprehension of evil is reinforced by a curious metaphor that runs in the mind of a young officer, James Churchill (Catherine's lover). As the novel opens, in some strikingly foreboding pages, Churchill begins to feel that he is moving into a concentration of evil, a feeling that grows when the young army despatch-rider is suddenly killed under a lorry. Speaking of this impression he says to a brother officer:

You probably have heard of these things they call lethal nodes. You don't have battles any more, you have small lethal areas it's death to enter. Well, we're in a lethal node now, only it's one that works in time instead of space. A bit of life it's death to enter.

The military, or pseudo-military, metaphor is apposite, because the principal setting of the novel is a military camp. In this setting we become involved in a spy-mystery story, in which the interactions between the evil camp and an evil mental hospital next door are articulated in terms of assumed identities, disguise, incriminating documents, a pursuit, even a big shoot-up in the end. Rather tiresome terms, on the whole, silly with something of the silliness, or childishness, of *The Egyptologists*, the spoof-novel Amis wrote in collaboration with Robert Conquest. Yet, as some children's writers can, Amis does achieve an extraordinary intensity in his evocation of evil as an all-embracing presence.

The camp is at the heart of the novel. In it a group of mostly young officers live semi-isolated in sybaritic luxury. All the compulsive appetites that are typically frustrated in earlier Amis novels are quickly gratified. The food is princely, whiskey and wine flow like water, and down the road in a sort of "Rapunzel's castle" the

⁴ David Lodge makes this point in the interesting section on Amis in his *The Language of Fiction* (New York, Columbia U.P.), pp. 243-67.

charming Lady Hazell practises “promiscuous polyandry” with no questions asked. Lucky Jim’s early dreams come true—except that the military establishment has a dark secret: the soldiers are there for training in the use of a particularly terrible total-war weapon, a form of plague that is to be used against the communist Chinese. There are spies and counterspies, doubts and fears, nervous collisions of personalities and temperaments; it is a world of “boredom, depression and weariness”, peopled by men like the biological-war expert, Venables, a self-sufficient, indifferent scientist and impatient rejecter of the irrelevancies of social discourse and friendship—“I depend on nobody”—and the expert intelligence officer, Ross-Donaldson, coldly professional—“Not my field, what people suffer from”—and clearly identified—“It’s our job to be pro-death.” The prison-like mental home is dominated by wicked Dr Best, manipulator and exploiter of troubled psyches, discoverer of hostilities and aggressions in all apparently natural impulses:

“. . . as I’ve warned you several times before, whenever we go down at all deep we’re virtually certain to find something rather unpleasant waiting for us. Do you follow? Something that must be pretty shocking or it wouldn’t be hid away from us like that.” . . . Dr Best chuckled.

Ranged against this accumulated evil are the forces of “human intelligence and decency,” equally recognisable: James Churchill, who rescues Catherine from the hands of Dr Best, Catherine herself, the bountiful Lady Hazell, and Max Hunter, kindly orgiast, who mounts his secret campaign against death and against God, his one-man Anti-Death League, as “a way of voicing some sort of objection.” The simplicities of human affection—“I love you.” “I know.”—“and the simplicities of protest—“I’ve got it in for God” are the only armour against the arbitrary attacks of accidental death, disease, and general malevolence, human or divine. Goodness wins out, as usually happens in Kingsley Amis’s moral fables. The lovers, James Churchill and Catherine, stay together, Max Hunter finds it possible at one blow to settle accounts with both God and Dr Best, and the Army’s plan to use its death-dealing biological weapon is abandoned. But, as in *That Uncertain Feeling*, the victory is tenuous, Catherine and James’s love idyll lies under the cloud of her sickness, Max Hunter’s “campaign” has an edge of desperation.

A simple moral fable:

Churchill went back into the bedroom and started dressing. Lady Hazell had apparently fallen asleep. He wished that those men had not been in the house when he arrived, and that he had come on his own. At this stage it was clear to him that he would not be making another visit here. If he did, he would probably like it less. Or he might like it more, in which case he would mind about the other men more. Or, possibly, he might find himself eventually minding about them less. That was an unpleasant idea.

Young James Churchill, emerging from a session with Lady Hazell, is working out his moral position, and he does it in a way that the Amis-reader will immediately recognise. At various points in the novel other sympathetic people—Max Hunter, the Indian officer Naidu, Lady Hazell herself—will think or speak with the same tone and diction, as sympathetic people do in all Amis's novels, and as the narrator does. The deliberate simplicity, almost ingenuousness, almost naiveté, almost innocence of this language intends to and succeeds in suggesting clarity of mind, an honest and decent moral perception, untrammelled by false sophistications, self-deceptions, pretentious abstractions, the philosophical or ethical or cultural jargon that gets in the way of seeing things as they really are. Like Wordsworth in his *Preface*, the sympathetic figure in an Amis novel endeavours to look steadily at the subject and convey his deepest feelings and judgments on morals and manners in "simple and unelaborated expressions". The subject is often himself, as in this case, for it is an essential part of the Amis strategy that the protagonist be on the alert for and seize on evidence of mean-spiritedness in himself as much as in others. The fairly loud applause that we are invited to accord the protagonist of *Lucky Jim* is occasionally muted even there, and it requires frequent modulation in succeeding novels, where the centres of virtue and vision engage in more complex self-confrontations. For this simple painstaking language, which is Amis's distinctive invention (and the effect of which is enhanced by our awareness of the sophisticated intelligence behind it— becomes a weapon used with much skill and subtlety. This skill, together with the sharp ear for the pompous cliché, the quick seizing on verbal slips that reveal self-importance, self-deception, or mental laziness, and the trick of catching and turning and twisting the ordinary words of the enemy, gives Amis his strength as a satirist. And of course he is brilliantly and delightfully funny. Amis, like Evelyn Waugh, has that special gift; he can always surprise us into laughter.

Fools are put down smartly: the professor in *Lucky Jim*, the novelist-critic in *I Like It Here*, the psycho-analyst Dr Best in *The Anti-Death League*. Yet satire can be a dangerous weapon that backfires. Dr Best is effectively realised as a representative of evil, a monster who exploits his patients and abuses their psyches for his own delectation. He is also a delightfully monstrous figure of fun: "I've always thought there was a certain amount to be said for Bach, though his hysterical emotionalism is a grave limitation," or: "A deeply anxious mind, that of Mozart"—(someone answers, "Yes. Good in other ways, too") but the principal joke about Dr Best is that he goes about labelling lovers as aggressors, "Pulling them apart . . . asking them whether they thought they were going the right way about bringing their repressed hatred of each other out into the open," and that he finds repressed homosexua-

ality everywhere, even amongst practising homosexuals. This seems rather elementary satire on psychiatry, undergraduate humour. More unsatisfactory still, Dr Best, as often happens to Amis villains, is the victim of a huge practical joke, engineered in this case by Max Hunter, who has him arrested as a spy. Schoolboyish. But the result for Dr Best is a sudden and complete breakdown, and the articulate, excessively coherent psychiatrist jabbars away about his delusions of power (“‘Best,’ said the chief, ‘the world is in danger of destruction by death-rays.’ Best knew he was the only one who could save them”) and about his homosexual fantasies. The bully is discomfited, as in Billy Bunter stories, but it is not a very funny joke. We have stopped laughing at lunatics. In situations like this Amis’s poise sometimes leaves him, we get a “tough” act, and the anger emerges as the raspy edge of vulgarity.⁵ “There is no more exhilarating experience,” Amis himself has said, “than to read comic writing where you feel that the writer is being perfectly fair to those involved.”⁶ But Dr Best hardly gets the prescribed treatment, and neither of course does God. Having it in for God, who doesn’t wear dark glasses or a woolly waistcoat, and who presumably can see *all* the funny faces that Amis pulls, seems in the end rather small-boyish, or even, much more dangerously from an Amis standpoint, rather pretentious.

However, these excesses stem from Amis’s seriousness. For the amusing Amis has always been a serious novelist. It is worthwhile making the solemn affirmation because he has been too easily accepted or dismissed as a mere railer, a twentieth-century Ther-sites. Q. D. Leavis, drawing in her serious skirts in the excellent Leavis book on Dickens, treats him simply as an irresponsible:

“Our only bastions against barbarism . . . are the consistent objects of Amis’s animus: in turn his fictions have taken as targets for denigration the university lecturer, the librarian, the grammar school master, the learned societies, the social worker. . .”

and she warns that he will be attacking the parson next, as indeed he does to some degree in *The Green Man*.⁷ Apart from the most un-Leavis-like implicit attack on satire as such (where does such a catalogue of protected professions leave Pope, for example?) Q. D. Leavis’s comment ignores or denies the evidently serious moral concerns in these novels.⁸ Although there are tensions and

⁵ Vulgarity lurks in the come-now-no-nonsense stance of Amis’s controversial journalism and criticism; most palpably in the tenor of his hawkish pronouncements on the war in Vietnam.

⁶ “My Kind of Comedy” p. 51.

⁷ F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London, 1970), p. 141.

⁸ Is there a Parson, much be-mus’d in Beer,
A maudlin Poetess, a rhyming Peer,
A Clerk . . . ?

Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot

The spectacle of a Leavis springing to the defense of the “clerisy” in this indiscriminate

sometimes ambiguities in the shift between knockabout manner and fundamental intention, Amis is seeking honesty and clarity about life as it is lived. All the fury about “culture-talk” in his novels, and especially about religious, ethical and psychiatric talk in *The Anti-Death League*, is not simply nihilistic, any more than is Stephen Dedalus’s attempt to shake off the “nightmare of history” in *Ulysses*. And one can say this while recognising that consummate skill carries its own dangers with it, and that seeking for the simple formulation *can* lead to simple-mindedness.

Amis at times has insisted on his own seriousness. Probably his most self-revealing novel is *I Like It Here*, which has a hero, Bowen, who is a novelist himself, and who may be taken, with appropriate caution, as a self-portrait. Amis’s own eighteenth-century favourite is not Pope but Fielding, and Bowen in this novel makes the following comment on him:

Bowen thought about Fielding. 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 whole-hearted interest, the only one who never had to be apologized for or excused on grounds of changing taste. And how enviable to live in the world of his novels, where duty was plain, evil arose out of malevolence and a starving wayfarer could be invited indoors without hesitation and without fear. Did that make for a simplified world? Perhaps, but that hardly mattered beside the existence of a moral seriousness that could be made apparent without evangelical puffing and blowing.

No doubt a vulnerable piece of literary criticism; its perhaps unfair, but I can’t help hearing here a romanticising travesty of the real eighteenth century, surely *not* one of the best centuries to be a starving wayfarer in (if there has been a good one, yet), and other things sound wrong, too, the question-begging behind that “unaffected and whole-hearted interest,” for example. But it is most interesting as a view of the world Amis hearkens back to, or can imagine hearkening back to—“How enviable to live in the world . . . where duty was plain”—, a world where simplicity and moral seriousness go hand in hand (as do the romping and buffoonery and practical joking). The fact that Hunter’s attack on the problem of evil is very simply stated does not mean that the problem is not real, or not acutely realised in sufficiently disturbing ways, in this serious novel.

Amis likes to invoke Fielding, but surely he is the immediate heir of twentieth-century England’s major comic-satirical novelist,

way has its own sad ironies, and seems doubly unfair to Amis who, rightly or wrongly, has got himself a notably reactionary reputation as defender of “traditional” educational values. His Philistine pose has always been a game with the public, asking to be recognized as such. Even the anti-academic *Lucky Jim* was a very “literary” book, full of disguised quotations in fact.

Evelyn Waugh. When Amis reviewed one of Waugh's army-life books, *Officers and Gentlemen*, in *The Spectator* he spoke of the latter's "disconcerting blend of the funny and the horrific," a blend that *The Anti-Death League* has quite exactly re-mixed and re-used. (Remember that interrogation about death, and its context, for instance.) Amis's writing, his technique, often recalls Evelyn Waugh. In its economy, the self-damning phrase simply left to stand there without comment (Dr Best on Bach recalls Waugh's treatment of Hooper in *Officers and Gentlemen*, or of Fr. Rothschild in *Vile Bodies*) or the quick, loaded exchanges where one voice appropriates the other's phrase and underlines its folly. They are temperamentally akin, too; it is not irrelevant that Amis has assumed the same testy, letters-to-the-editor role that Waugh played so hard in the last years of his life—brief, caustic, expertly phrased communications to *The Times* and *The New Statesman*, complaints from the Right about sloppy punctuation and sloppy politics.⁹

Waugh and Amis are both interested in and like to write about "good living." *The Anti-Death League* has almost as much about wine-and-foodery (though it is more ironically presented) as *Brideshead Revisited*. Both enjoy schoolboy japes almost as much as sophisticated wit: skylarking in the Officers' Mess is an approved feature of *The Anti-Death League* as well as of *Officers and Gentlemen*. Amis's *Ending Up* concludes in a riot of deadly practical jokes. Waugh's Basil Seal, whether he is painting a ginger moustache on the masterpiece of Poppet Green, the avant garde (and superbly silly) artist in *Put Out More Flags*, or eating his mistress in a stew in *Black Mischief*, must have been an Amis Ur-hero. The conservative Waugh obviously delighted in Basil Seal's flouting of the accepted moral and social order, his liberating anarchy. Amis shares Waugh's paradoxical attachment to conservative ideas and immediate imaginative sympathy with the anarchic.

But this is always an escape-hatched anarchy. Martin Green, a critic who has paid frequent attention to Kingsley Amis, recently placed him beside Norman Mailer, the U.S.A.'s self-styled "Left Conservative," as a writer who has moved beyond the liberal, humane traditional culture—"antiliberal, antigenteel, antimoralist"—into a Faustian search for the forbidden.¹⁰ The parallel is suggestive, and could lead in many directions, but I would like to pursue it with some reservations. It is true that Amis, like Mailer, sees anger and violence as underlying psychic truths of contemporary life and like Mailer uses anger and violence as a way out of its frustrations. But the essence of Amis's wit and intelligence and the nature of

⁹ Politically of course they have been depressingly akin. One cannot avoid comparing Waugh's ugly enthusiasm about Italian fascism in North Africa in the thirties with Amis's even uglier championship of American imperialism in Vietnam in the sixties.

¹⁰ Cf. Martin Green, *Cities of Light and Sons of the Morning*, Little, Brown (Boston, 1973), pp. 78-81.

the appeal he makes keep him well within a traditional, an accepted and sufficiently indicated set of middle class social norms. His appeal is to an anticipated assent, whereas Mailer is a truly radical novelist who seeks, as deeply original writers sometimes do, to reforge his audience and make it anew: "I will settle [says Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself*] for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time." Amis, with his "Watch it, Jack," knows he has an audience ready-made who will quickly pick up his allusive wit, who are ready to be delighted, diverted, even instructed, but not to be saved.

Mailer knows about the deprived child, as well as Amis (see his essay on *The White Negro* for example) and one might, for the purposes of comparison, place Marion Faye, from his *The Deer Park*, beside Max Hunter of *The Anti-Death League*. Marion Faye, pimp, diabolist, murderer, homosexual, saint, "philosophical psychopath," the White Negro fictionalised: Max Hunter, whiskey-swiller, self-deprecator, yearner for love, homosexual, would-be seducer of nice young men, practical-joke-player—next to Mailer's apocalyptic heights and depths we can easily measure the precisely understood domestic liberal limits of Amis's range. Mailer describes his political novel, *Barbary Shore*, quite accurately, like this:

It had in its high fevers a kind of insane insight into the psychic mysteries of Stalinists, secret policemen, narcissists, children, Lesbians, hysterics, revolutionaries,—it has an air which for me is the air of our time, authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow of this century.

Amis simply does not want to deal in such intensities. The anarchic Max Hunter is no Stephen Rojack (though he might have found some sharp things to say about the hero of *An American Dream* on the lines of the Amis poem, "Outpatient"—"Right, then, mine's a lobotomy"). Amis in the end prefers the world of Tennyson's Telemachus, "Decent not to fail/In offices of tenderness..." to that of his Ulysses, "Life piled on life/Were all too little..." Mailer's romanticism is no doubt tradition-based also; his radical urgency finds energies in the hallowed impulse to come to terms with the American Savage as much as with the American City. But Amis, despite his forays into irrational and supernatural in *The Anti-Death League* and *The Green Man*, is not interested in exploring Mailer's radical worlds of alienation, contradiction and disorder. He does not see much point in straying far from the quick wisdom that the City of London provides. When we switch from Mailer's apocalyptic New York to the England that Amis wants, the contrast can be striking. Here is Max Hunter in *The Anti-Death League* urging the pressing need for positive action when faced with the problem of evil:

"Sometimes you've got to be impractical and illogical and a little bit useless, because the only alternative is to do nothing at all, and that would simply be offensive. You can't just let things like this go sliding past without any kind of remark, as if nobody noticed or cared."

How sane and sensible this seems next to dangerous Mailer; it is what we all should want to hear. Yet there *is* a touch of school-masterly pipe-in-hand uplift about this kind of thing (reminiscent of a similar matronly tone that Iris Murdoch can slip into). Apparently it is a risk that Amis runs in the service of a final simplicity. But Pope does much better with the language of the heart. Yet Amis is in a very English comic tradition after all. Once the satiric mask falls away, we can see romantic smiles, even a little sentimentality. Sharp comedy alternating with indulgent sentiment moves us back to the grand master Dickens (who grew up on Fielding). One recalls Dicken's marvellous ear for the revealing turn of phrase, his irrepressible buoyancy and inventiveness, his eye for the mean and hypocritical, his world of good folks and bad, his streak of vindictiveness (he too liked to deal out smart punishments for crimes), his ready sentimentality, the basic conservatism, and above all the confident simplicity that emerges in a wonderful complexity of observation and incident. It helps (nothing more nor less than that) when reading Amis to keep Dickens in mind. Amis is one of those novelists whose presence is quite palpable behind every page that he writes. Of course, Dickens is another; Orwell once remarked that when reading him he was always aware of a particular face behind the page, "laughing, with a touch of anger behind the laughing . . . the face of a man generously angry." That description fits Amis sometimes too.

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