

**Beyond realism and postmodernism:**  
**towards a post-Christian morality in the**  
**works of Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and**  
**Martin Amis.**

**Thomas Edward Francis Chatfield**

St. John's College

University of Oxford

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## Abstract

### “Beyond realism and postmodernism: towards a post-Christian morality in the works of Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis.”

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This thesis evaluates and re-evaluates the relationship between the works of Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis through a detailed examination of their published works, and attempts to locate this relationship in the context of the central moral uncertainties of post-1945 British fiction.

Most previous critical studies of these authors have tended to discuss the relationship between Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis in terms of an opposition between the father's realism and the son's postmodernism, and have debated Philip Larkin's influence upon Martin Amis only tangentially. Against this trend, this thesis argues that these three authors share a commitment to literature as a public, moral act, and, in particular, that their works share the intention of articulating a number of closely related secular 'human values' which map out a potential post-Christian morality in British society.

The thesis also examines a common tension within their *oeuvres* inimical to such hopes – the fear that the possibilities of rational self-scrutiny and of becoming 'less deceived' have been discredited by the history of the twentieth century, and that this history instead evidences the dominance of irrational and self-destructive tendencies in the human. These fears, it is further claimed, are implicated in the

works of all three authors in a tendency towards the construction of Edenic myths, deterministic simplifications, and despairing devaluations of the value of human life.

Overall, this thesis makes the case for the significance of the common concerns of Martin Amis, Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin's works in the context of contemporary literary studies: their efforts to create in art an unpretentiously 'public space' for the address of burning moral and existential issues, and their unresolved struggles with the question of what it might mean to live a good life in a society which no longer possesses religion as a common moral language.

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Standard abbreviations are used throughout this thesis – page & pages (p. & pp.), line & lines (l. & ll.), compare (cf.), volume (vol.), chapter (ch.), editor (ed.), from the same text as previously cited (ibid)

## Introduction

### i. Critical background

Discussions of the relationship between the writings of Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis – by critics, reviewers and fellow-authors alike – tend to be framed in terms of an opposition between the realism of the father and the postmodernism of the son. David Hawkes, for example, writing for Scribner's *British Writers: Supplement IV* in 1997, argues this dichotomy through a comparison between Kingsley's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and Martin's *The Rachel Papers* (1973), claiming that:

. . . while Jim Dixon [*Lucky Jim*] is a realistic character, Charles Highway [*The Rachel Papers*] is a postmodern character . . . <sup>1</sup>

Eric Jacobs – Kingsley's official biographer, and participant in a notably acrimonious dispute with Martin after Kingsley's death<sup>2</sup> – sketches a similar divide, presenting Martin as its chief source:

The difference between their novels was something of a puzzle to Amis senior, since their methods seemed to have so much in common . . . Martin was inclined to think that the novel had simply moved on into postmodern forms, leaving his father behind stuck in-old fashioned realism. Any suggestions of that kind were apt to rouse snorts of derision from his father.<sup>3</sup>

Julie Burchill's review of Kingsley's selected letters<sup>4</sup> in *The Guardian* is typical of many media accounts, meanwhile, and shows the degree to which questions of personality have infiltrated those of literature in these comparisons:

Even in his grave the old devil leads the way, with his human, all too human, self-exposé; the son still seems a pale, posturing shadow, with one eye on the mirror and the other on posterity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Hawkes, 'Martin Amis (1949-)', from George Stade and Carol Howard eds. *British Writers: Supplement IV* (New York, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Martin Amis, *Experience* (London, 2001), pp. 373-377 &n. As Martin Amis notes, the editorship of his father's collected letters passed to Zachary Leader from Eric Jacobs following Jacobs's decision to offer his diary of the last year of Kingsley's life to two Sunday newspapers just three days after Kingsley's death, and without consultation with his family.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Jacobs, *Kingsley Amis, A Biography*, (London, 1995) p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* ed. Zachary Leader (London, 2000).

Even the most lengthy investigation of Kingsley and Martin's relationship so far published – Gavin Keulks's *Father and Son: Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, and the British Novel since 1950* (2003) – leaves this oppositional stance largely intact, presenting Amis father and son as a paradigm of 'the twentieth-century's war over mimesis'<sup>6</sup> via several extended comparisons between novels. In a chapter titled 'The Amises on Realism and Postmodernism', Keulks argues that *Stanley and the Women* (1984) and *Money* (1984) exemplify this conflict:

A novel that intentionally scoffs at fantasy and fabulation, *Stanley and the Women* asserts the primacy of conventional realistic norms. A forum for Martin's postmodern precepts, *Money* directly confronts Kingsley's realistic and paternal critique.<sup>7</sup>

James Diedrick is one of the few major commentators to have diverged from this position, opening the second edition of his monograph *Understanding Martin Amis* with the acknowledgement that:

It is no exaggeration to claim that every aspect of [Martin] Amis's career – his hard-edged persona, his stylistic virtuosity, his patriarchal assumptions, his compulsively expressed devotion to the work of Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow – is grounded in his uniquely charged relationship to his father.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this claim, however, Diedrick does not seriously challenge the 'anxiety of influence' model espoused by Keulks and others, and his account remains governed by the gulf between:

Kingsley, whose fiction conforms to the mode of 'classic' (as opposed to modernist) realism . . . [in which] The author seeks to fade into the background as the reader is immersed in narrative detail . . .<sup>9</sup>

and Martin, who is:

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<sup>5</sup> Julie Burchill, 'The Old Devil', review of *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, from *The Guardian*, 20 May 2000, online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>6</sup> Gavin Keulks, *Father and Son: Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, and the British Novel since 1950* (Wisconsin, 2003), p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 183-4.

<sup>8</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, second edition (Columbia: South Carolina, 2004), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

. . . in many ways a postmodern Jonathan Swift, wielding the weapon of what Northrop Frye has called ‘militant irony’ with the same controlled, merciless precision as Swift himself.<sup>10</sup>

All of these commentators’ observations are rooted in fact. A war of techniques and ideas has indeed been waged between much of Martin and Kingsley Amis’s writing, and has been acknowledged and analysed by both parties – as is effectively demonstrated by the battery of quotations included in Diedrick’s ‘Introduction’. This thesis, however, will argue the importance of a radically different emphasis in analysis of the Amises’ relationships both with each other and with twentieth century literature: an emphasis on their common literary objectives, fears and ambivalences, and on their shared commitment to literature as a public, moral act in a post-Christian society.

In particular, the works of Philip Larkin – often discussed alongside Kingsley’s work but usually mentioned only in passing in discussions of Martin’s – can hugely extend our sense of the common ground between Amis father and son. Despite some vitriolic critical assaults in the last decade<sup>11</sup>, Larkin belongs to the pantheons both of great and of enduringly popular twentieth-century writers. His famously self-isolating lifestyle and the disarming lucidity of his poetry often, however, leave the question of his influence on others rather muted. Andrew Motion’s mammoth biography is typical, praising Larkin’s work precisely because it seems to exist outside of ‘literature’ itself:

It is part of his [Larkin’s] poems’ strength to speak directly to most people who come across them. He makes each of us feel he is ‘our’ poet, in a way that Eliot, for instance, does not – and each of us creates a highly personal version of his character to accompany his work.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Exemplified by Tom Paulin’s letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* of 6 November 1992; discussed in part VI of my first chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* (London, 1993), p. xx.

Motion's language sharply traces the limits of his discussion. The question of how work this 'direct' and 'personal' might have impacted upon the British literary landscape is left unasked, let alone answered. This is probably how Larkin, who devoted most of his career to reaching the reading public with as little participation in the establishment as possible, would have wanted it. The problems with Larkin as 'our' poet are manifold, however – and, since his death in 1985, the details that have emerged about his life have frequently been seized upon as explanations of his poetry with a dangerous literal-mindedness. As Richard Bradford puts it in his 2005 biography, *First Boredom, Then Fear: the life of Philip Larkin*:

Larkin is one of the most superbly talented practitioners of English verse. Moreover he is a traditionalist who undermines the long-standing preoccupation of the literary and academic establishment that without innovation writing is hidebound . . . Academics hate him because he is not self-indulgent. He makes language work for him and the reader, not for them . . . For other creative writers he is regarded with a mixture of respect and contempt: to acknowledge quite how good he is would invite comparisons with their own work – so better to dismiss him as, at worst, a racist and, at best, a pitiable eccentric.<sup>13</sup>

The Larkin addressed in this thesis is very much this 'superbly talented practitioner of English verse': a poet who grappled with the deepest issues of his times in terms both of literature and society, and who was profoundly committed to literature in a manner quite distinct from his distrust of academia. I will argue, furthermore, that for both Kingsley and Martin Amis, Larkin's demands for precision, self-awareness and honesty have served as an inspiration and a kind of literary conscience – and that these, along with Larkin's person, have constituted a defining component in their negotiations with ideas of audience, art and value in the second half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear: the life of Philip Larkin* (London, 2005), p. 19.

## **ii. Historical and theoretical background**

The tendency to polarize the Amises' works is symptomatic of a larger tendency to discuss postmodern literature – discussions dominated in Britain by authors such as Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie – as a complete departure from all that came before. There are good reasons for this. Real and radical changes have occurred in both British literature and society during the last half-century, and many authors' works (Martin Amis's included) have themselves emphasized these. Radical change, equally, is a convenient trope for articles and theses; and it is always easier to discuss stylistic idiosyncrasies than to explore the more elusive gradations of attitude behind them. More generally, too, there exists – among authors, critics and the general public alike – an endemic and understandable tendency to represent the twentieth century's history via watersheds and polarities, of which the divide between realism and postmodernism is but one.

In the case of this thesis, the profound and rapid changes that took place in British society following the end of the Second World War are especially significant. Churchill's Conservatives were defeated in July 1945 by Attlee's Labour Party with a landslide majority. War-weariness and a great hunger for reconstruction had dominated voting, and Labour introduced three key acts to make good on its social promises: the 1946 National Insurance Act, which implemented Beveridge's scheme for social security, the National Health Service Act of 1946, and the 1948 National Assistance Act, which abolished the Poor Law and established an alternative national welfare service. Coming into force on the same day, 7 June 1948, together these constituted the core of a new 'Welfare State': a paradigm for the relationship between government and society, in terms of both pragmatic and moral obligations, which to this day dominates British domestic politics.

Labour held power until 1951, when they were narrowly ousted by the Conservatives – who would hold power for thirteen years, despite the Suez crisis of 1956 and the seal it set on Britain's decline as an imperial power. The 1951 election itself had been fought in a climate of economic disillusion, but as the 1950s progressed a new social mobility and prosperity began to be felt through the miasma of post-war austerity, culminating in electoral victory for Macmillan in 1959 under the slogan 'you've never had it so good'<sup>14</sup>. Macmillan had tapped into a popular culture of growing consumption and confidence, and his ebullient campaign foreshadowed the decade that would come to define the greatest divide in twentieth century British cultural history: the 1960s.

In the 1960s, social and technological changes, engendered over the previous fifteen years, fed each other at an unprecedented rate. Britain's economy was weak in global terms, and concerns of economic stagnation were reflected in the election of Wilson's Labour government in 1964, yet consumption and lifestyles were steadily shifting in what Wilson dubbed in 1963 the 'white heat of technology'<sup>15</sup>. The radical shocks of modernity with which the twentieth century had begun were becoming ubiquitous: structures of class, of public morality and of religious practice were making decisive shifts towards the liberalism of the present. Milestones included the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, decriminalising homosexual practices above the age of consent; the 1967 Abortion Act, legalising abortion; and the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, which facilitated divorces. Popular consumer culture, unleashed by the increasing affordability of consumer products like the LP, transistor radio, wireless, and even television, raced alongside these advances.

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase was coined by Macmillan at a Conservative party rally at Bedford, 20 July 1957, and was subsequently adopted as his campaign slogan.

<sup>15</sup> This would be a central phrase in his successful election campaign of 1964.

As Eric Hobsbawm observes in his study of the ‘short twentieth century’, *Age of Extremes* (1994), by the end of the 1960s such change was beginning to be characterised on the global scale by a sense of entry into an unprecedented phase of modernity, and an unprecedented intensification of all that was known to be ‘modern’

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When people face what nothing in their past has prepared them for they grope for words to name the unknown, even when they can neither define nor understand it. Some time in the third quarter of the century . . . The world, or its relevant aspects, became post-industrial, post-imperial, post-modern, post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-Gutenberg, or whatever. Like funerals, these prefixes took official recognition of death without implying any consensus or indeed certainty about the nature of life after death. In this way the greatest and most dramatic, rapid and universal social transformation in human history entered the consciousness of reflective minds who lived through it.<sup>16</sup>

Such a sense of transformation easily shifts into a mythology of fracture, and the 1960s continue in Britain to dominate our present sense of when ‘living’ culture began. That which came after is felt to be implicated in the ongoing life of the present moment: that which came before is merely history, of acknowledged importance yet distant from present concerns.

As Hobsbawm’s gloss of the rise of ‘post-’ terminologies suggests, the idea of postmodernism – which embraces so many of these other terms – is both hugely important and hugely problematic in discussions of this ‘fracture’ in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Charles Jencks suggests some of the complexities of its use in the introduction to his 1986 study *What is Post-Modernism?*,

The growth of Post-Modernism has followed a sinuous, even torturous path. Twisting to the left and then to the right, branching down the middle, it resembles the natural form of a spreading root, or a meandering river that divides, changes course, doubles back on itself and takes off in a new

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London, 1994), pp. 287-8.

direction. Its meaning is still in dispute not only because of this change, but also because it signifies two quite different traditions to writers, philosophers and artists.<sup>17</sup>

Both Jencks, in this volume, and Ihab Hassan, in *From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: the Local/Global Context*<sup>18</sup>, point out that the term itself was first used by Federico de Onis ('postmodernismo') in 1934 to signify a reaction against the experimentalism of modernist poetry. Postmodern art in the modern sense did not emerge, however, until the 1960s, when works such as Andy Warhol's 'Campbell's Tomato Soup' (1968) or Roy Lichtenstein's 'Masterpiece' (1962) began to treat the radical ideals of modernism as a substrate, to be played against by a more worldly and democratic generation of artists. This was a view of art typified by the American architect Robert Venturi's 1972 pronouncement that 'Disney is nearer to what people really want than anything architects have ever given them'<sup>19</sup> – initially counter-cultural, and yet rapidly highly commercial; its works self-consciously playful, vernacular and devoid of a lofty sense of mission, seeking legitimacy not in age-old concerns but in the increasingly rampant fact of consumer culture.

The inherently self-conscious, parodic character of postmodern art and its roots in reaction and comment suggest perhaps its greatest inherent tension: between its populist, anti-modernist roots and its increasingly elaborate interest in discourses and layers of reference. At the heart of such tensions lies what Jencks terms 'deconstructive postmodernism'. Deconstructive postmodernism came to the fore as the works of the French post-structuralists Lyotard, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault and Baudrillard gained international acceptance in the 1970s, although much of their work was written during the 1950s and 1960s and was contemporaneous with the growth of

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (London, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Variants of this essay have appeared in: *Artspace* (21 August 2000), Critical Issues Series No. 3 (2000) and *Philosophy and Literature* 25, 1 (Spring 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves* (Boulder: Colorado, 1992), p. 200.

post-war France. Theirs was a discourse rooted in textual criticism and the violently clashing layers of meaning to be found within any text; but its greatest impact lay in its universalising force, claiming for 'high' discussion the realm of 'low', popular culture and indeed the 'texts' of most of Western thought and society. One well-known essay in Barthes's *Mythologies*, 'The World of Wrestling' (1952), offers a semiological account of wrestling, inspired by Saussure, in which an extended analogy is drawn between amateur wrestling and classical tragedy:

This function of grandiloquence is indeed the same as that of the ancient theatre, whose principle, language and props (masks and buskins) concurred in the exaggeratedly visible explanation of a Necessity. The gesture of the vanquished wrestler signifying to the world a defeat which, far from disgusting, he emphasizes and holds like a pause in music, corresponds to the mask of antiquity meant to signify the tragic mode of the spectacle. In wrestling, as on the stage in antiquity, one is not ashamed of one's suffering, one knows how to cry, one has a liking for tears.<sup>20</sup>

The effect of writing such as Barthes's is to proclaim an almost boundlessly inclusive mode for analysing human culture and society, noting along the way the 'death of the author'<sup>21</sup> and the permeability of all cultural boundaries – embodied for many in Derrida's pronouncement 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'<sup>22</sup>, ('There is nothing outside the text' or, perhaps more properly, 'There is no outside-the-text'<sup>23</sup>).

Deconstructivism's successes were instrumental in creating the academic edifice now known as Theory. Valentine Cunningham, in his study *Reading After*

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling', *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), in Susan Sontag ed., *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London, 2000), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> The title of a seminal essay published by Barthes in 1968, which argues that the idea of texts possessing a fixed, intended authorial meaning must be overthrown and replaced by awareness of their construction by readers: 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations to dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author . . . a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.', from K. M. Newton ed., *Twentieth-century Literary Theory* (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore, 1976), p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> This alternative translation is suggested by Derek Attridge, among others, to emphasize the point of Derrida's original argument – that all things are textual, in that they are invariably understood via existing codes. cf. Valentine Cunningham's discussion in *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History* (Oxford, 1994), p. 25, where he quotes Derrida's later insistence that this 'concept of text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history'.

*Theory* (2002), usefully summarizes the centrality of Theory in contemporary notions of the postmodern:

[Theory is] for many analysts the very essence of ‘postmodernity’ . . . with its espousal of multivalence and multiculturalism and its suspicions of canons, and evaluation, and, in effect, truth-claims.<sup>24</sup>

It is Theory which has most eloquently proclaimed postmodernity to be a state of contemporary society as much as of art, and its terminologies and principles underpin much of the last thirty years of Western academic writing: principles centred, in the best free-market tradition, on replacing a monolithic canon of texts and interpretations with a diverse and competing spectrum of perspectives.

In terms of its impact, the intellectual and moral insights offered by Theory – which in many ways codify the protests of postmodern art against modernism – are not to be sniffed at. While modernist aspirations towards totality and explanation have become associated with many of the twentieth century’s least savoury political movements, Theory’s insistence that boundaries must be broken down and multiple discourses brought to bear on any field represents a large emancipatory power. A key text in this debate is Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which presents modernism as the heir to an Enlightened tradition of reason inexorably tainted by impulses towards oppression and mastery –

Justified in the guise of brutal facts as something eternally immune to intervention, the social injustice from which those facts arise is as sacrosanct today as the medicine man once was . . . the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind . . . The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behaviour on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Oxford, 2002), p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 2002), p. 21.

In the case of literature, Theory has addressed and attempted to smash the over-rigid structures of much existing thought and explanation with many notable successes.

Our contemporary sense of literature has been expanded beyond measure by the interrogations of feminism, psychoanalysis, new historicism, neo-Marxism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, and numerous connected fields. As Cunningham notes, it is hugely to the good that today we enjoy:

. . . so many once occluded, repressed and lost voices . . . the freedom to read what once you could not because it was not there to be read, and the freedom to read in ways formerly blocked off by once current assumptions and practice.<sup>26</sup>

Equally, however, the very success and institutionalisation of such developments can subvert their achievements, pressing the rhetoric of permission into service as a front for larger disengagement. As Cunningham goes on to note, the emancipatory and humanistic impulses of the best Theory have often tipped over into an effacement of texts as dispositions upon human life and society; and have, moreover, fostered a state in which Theory becomes the self-referential preserve of the academy, remote from (and removing the discussion of literature from) those ordinary readers for whose interests it claims to speak:

Theory [has] blotted out the once standard assumption that literature was about human behaviour and preoccupied with questions of how to live, [that books constitute] presentations which inevitably provide mirrors for the real living of their readers.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, as Hal Foster notes in the 'Preface' to his 1985 anthology *Postmodern Culture*, increasingly spurious strands of postmodernism have sprung up within Theory's citadel, amplifying its impulses towards political disengagement and paralysing pluralism:

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<sup>26</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 149-150.

. . . postmodernism is not pluralism – the quixotic notion that all positions in culture and politics are now open and equal. This apocalyptic belief that anything goes, that the ‘end of ideology’ is here, is simply the inverse of the fatalistic belief that nothing works, that we live under a ‘total system’ without hope of redress – the very acquiescence that Ernest Mandel calls the ‘ideology of late capitalism’.<sup>28</sup>

Just as, in an art which entirely embraces its own and its society’s commodification, there is a tendency to consider artistic values only in terms of price and consumer taste, so in postmodern thought there is a dangerous tendency towards treating value as a question only of preference within a ‘total system’. For Foster, as for Cunningham, it is crucial to engage rigorously with postmodernism’s political and moral implications if it is not to become a fatalistic submission to unexamined present trends and, in particular, if it is not to become a lazily amoral brand of self-indulgence.

Today, the ‘condition of postmodernity’ has more potent political and social connotations than ever, and never more so than when claims of moral and political disengagement are being made. With its near-universal range of applications, its tone of perpetual belatedness and its potential imprecision, postmodernism has for many become synonymous with the economics of ‘late capitalism’ and the systems of power currently shaping developed societies. Among our most notable commentators on (and critics of) on this trend are Fredric Jameson and David Harvey. Harvey’s seminal study *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) describes the current global situation as an evolution rather than a revolution, driven by the increasing dominance and scope of patterns of ‘capitalist accumulation’ that have existed since the very beginnings of non-feudal economics in Europe. Yet, as his introductory ‘argument’ puts it, the world since the Second World War has seen:

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<sup>28</sup> Hal Foster, ‘Preface’ to Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture* (London, 1985), p. ix.

. . . the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time . . . strong a priori grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism . . . But these changes, when set against the basic rules of capitalistic accumulation, appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society.<sup>29</sup>

Harvey places a determined rejection of many of the implications of Theory and its antecedents at the centre of his analysis, assaulting both Lyotard and Derrida as exemplars of the way in which :

. . . even the most resolute of postmodernists is faced at the end with either making some universalising gesture (like Lyotard’s appeal to some pristine concept of justice) or lapsing, like Derrida, into total political silence. Meta-theory cannot be dispensed with. The postmodernists simply push it underground where it continues to function as a ‘now unconscious effectivity’<sup>30</sup> [.]

Fredric Jameson, similarly, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) uses Lacan’s descriptions of schizophrenia to describe the tendency of individuals in a postmodern society towards:

a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material – or better still, the literal – signifier in isolation. This present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect . . .<sup>31</sup>

Historicity, here, begins to be abolished, along with the potential for any meta-analysis. There is, instead, only the irreducible and undeniable present, its artistic and intellectual reflections become a series of euphoric, hallucinatory and self-dividing moments. As Jameson observes in a later chapter, we are paradoxically being brought towards actuality as we lose meaningful ways of describing and systematising it:

with the extinction of the sacred and the “spiritual”, the deep underlying materiality of all things has finally risen dripping and compulsive into the light

<sup>29</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 2001), p. vii.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1992), p. 27.

of day . . . This has, however, also been a historical lesson: it is because culture has *become* material that we are now in a position to understand that it always *was* material, or materialistic, in its structures and functions.<sup>32</sup>

Such a ‘historical lesson’ is often more paralysing than empowering, and it threatens what Harvey terms ‘resignation to bottomless fragmentation and ephemerality’<sup>33</sup>. It is a condition for which Jameson offers both a useful formulation and an important analytical warning:

The postmodern is . . . the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses must make their way. If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the very ubiquity of this condition must be a spur to the rigorous analysis of how cultural impulses and individuals operate, and must inspire a discourse able to escape that ‘mysterious charge of affect’ threatening to consume all attempts at comprehension and representation.

Along these lines, Edward Said, in his 1982 essay ‘Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community’, accuses both the ‘New’ Criticism of Leavis and the ‘New New’ criticism of Derrida of complicity with a process of compartmentalisation and canonisation within literature. Said argues that academics have increasingly created a rift between literature and society, turning literary criticism into a discipline incapable of political engagement, and literature itself – whatever it might purport to say – into a politically and socially neuter entity, the province of a private self-serving world of expertise:

Above all it seems to me that it goes directly against the grain of reading and writing to erect barriers between texts or to create monuments out of texts . . . Hidden beneath the pieties surrounding the canonical monuments is a guild solidarity that dangerously resembles a religious consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 59.

<sup>34</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 6.

Said invokes religion as an anachronistic and deceiving dead-end, but his discussion is equally scathing about international humanism's ineffectiveness. In each case, he deplores gross imprecisions of thought and language, and the failure to escape abstraction for a perspective faithful to the experiences of individual human lives:

Our political discourse is now choked with enormous, thought-stopping abstractions, from terrorism, Communism, Islamic fundamentalism, and instability, to moderation, freedom, stability and strategic alliances, all of them as unclear as they are both potent and unrefined in their appeal.<sup>36</sup>

Said's charge against the academic and literary establishments – that their members have become 'unknowing (many ironies here) partners in commodity production and marketing'<sup>37</sup> – is above all a plea for the reconsideration of an artist's obligations towards their audience, and for a critical sensibility conditioned not by embracing the present as at once historically unique and immune to judgement, but by a sense of what is lasting and underlying in the human. There must be, Said declares,

. . . *interference*, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make.<sup>38</sup>

along with:

. . . a more open sense of community as something to be won and of audiences as human beings to be addressed.<sup>39</sup>

These are demands which closely echo some of the most central tenets in Amis, Amis and Larkin's work, and which suggest the starting point of my analysis: their shared commitment to the 'human' as literature's most crucial criterion, and their shared belief in 'audiences as human beings to be addressed'.

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community' (*Critical Inquiry* 9, September 1982), in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, p. 150.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

### iii. The 'human' in literature

Prefiguring Said's essay, it is useful to frame Kingsley Amis and Larkin's early literary aims within the context of the Movement, a loose group of writers with which both were associated in the 1950s, and which garnered them some useful publicity, although they were swift to disown it from the late 1950s onwards. At its heart were the nine writers collected in Robert Conquest's *New Lines* anthology of poetry in 1956: Conquest himself, Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, John Wain, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn and D.J. Enright. Blake Morrison, in his study, *The Movement* (1980), highlights their shared sense that modernist writers had 'ignored the value to poetry of scepticism and empiricism'<sup>40</sup>. The need, they argued, was for a clear, public tone, matching the responsible mood of post-war politics, and for an avoidance of rhetoric and self-dramatising postures:

To be small was to be both beautiful and humane. Irony, modesty, humour, sensitivity, attention to the "ordinary" and domestic . . . these, it was thought, were more likely to be found in "minor" than in "major" literature.<sup>41</sup>

This 'humane' tone was both a powerful and a partial idea. It sought to articulate 'irony, modesty, humour, sensitivity' as vivifying, individualising forces against the tumults of twentieth century history and the Second World War; and it in part sought to exclude the chaos of human irrationalities and desires that this history so strongly evidenced. As John Wain, looking back on the achievements of the Movement in 1972, put it

'The Movement' . . . was the result of [an] impulse away from vagueness, from the impressive-sounding language that merely gestured *towards* something instead of defining it, and towards a style that would be precise: so long, of course, as 'precise' was not defined as restrictively as it would be in a court of law. Historically, it was not so much a new style as a style which made a deliberate selection from styles previously available in English literature.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement* (Oxford, 1980), p. 220.

These were writers who, rather than proclaiming their own times to be unique, sought continuity, and sought it in the human capacity for ‘precision’: for refining thought and observation towards a more accurate view of the world. For Movement authors, works such as Pope’s *Windsor Forest* (1713) offered in their disciplined subjects and forms a pleasing contrast to Romantic suggestions of the wild, as well as a lineage for English poetry resistant to modernist ideas of crisis and fracture, and Movement poets were soon termed ‘New Augustans’<sup>43</sup> by critics. They were writers opposed to the ideological formulae and the fervent collaborations of more traditional literary movements – but who, although only indirectly related to the media notion of ‘Angry Young Men’ (a phrase coined in the press release for John Osborne’s 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*), were often impatient of what they saw as the anachronisms of the intellectual mainstream.

By the end of the 1950s their careers had largely diverged. The Movement ‘tone’, however, would never leave Larkin and Amis’s work, in whom it had found its most committed if least proselytising practitioners. At once conservative, sceptical, dryly comic and determinedly reasonable, in their hands its ‘humane’ aspirations constituted an increasingly serious attempt to discuss constant human traits and experiences within a society whose social, artistic and spiritual practices seemed bent on representing humanity as ceaseless change. In 1960, writing on Larkin’s work, Amis crystallised many of his concerns into the assertion that:

Any decent writer sees his first concern as the rendering of what he takes to be permanent in human nature.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 217.

<sup>42</sup> John Wain (ed.), ‘Introduction’ to *Interpretations: Essays on Twelve English Poems* (Second edition) (London, 1972), pp. vii-viii.

<sup>43</sup> Especially on the basis of John Wain’s article ‘The Strategy of Victorian Poetry’, (*Twentieth Century*, May 1953), which uses the eighteenth-century audience as an ideal.

<sup>44</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Lone Voices’ (1960), in *What Became of Jane Austen? and Other Questions* (London, 1970), p. 167.

To be fully ‘human’ in art meant, for both Larkin and Amis, to articulate those constants binding one person to another and the past to the present: mortality, birth, love, fear, and perhaps most crucially, doubt and free enquiry.

In many ways, Martin Amis’s is the other face of the Movement’s Augustan sensibility: a *Dunciad* to its *Windsor Forest*, giving full vent to the furies the other sought to contain. Explicit where his father’s and Larkin’s writings are implicit, his work treats postmodernism (a word their writings scrupulously avoid) as a dominant trend in the present day, but one that is also unrepresentative of the ‘permanently’ human. If satire is the comedy of disappointment, then much of Martin Amis’s disgust is with postmodern models of society and humanity, and with the human consequences of postmodern cultural forms. As he observed in conversation with Will Self in 1993:

What people are up to now is post-modernist, in the sense that they are loose beings in search of a form. And the art that they bring to this now, to shape their lives, is TV . . . what seems to be happening now is a kind of punk notion, that there’s no future. And another notion that there’s no past . . . There is a new breed of people who are absolutely concentrated in the present and have a kind of contextless view. This seems to liberate them from any kind of morality. They are fixed in time, with no present and no future.<sup>45</sup>

The particular looseness and vulnerability of contemporary lives and the banality of the artistic forms they turn to are all, for Amis, mired in cliché and amnesiac tendencies, as blameworthy in their way as the hidebound platitudes his father deplored in the 1950s. As Amis admiringly argues in a review of Elmore Leonard’s *Riding the Rap*, while the genius of Leonard’s style lies in its ability to get to the heart of postmodern lives –

He [Leonard] understands the post-modern world – the world of wised-up rabble and zero authenticity. His characters are not equipped with obligingly suggestive childhoods or case-histories, but with a cranial jukebox of situation

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Martin Amis in conversation with Will Self’, in Will Self, *Junk Mail* (London, 1996), pp. 381-2.

comedies and talk shows and advertising jingles, their dreams and dreads all mediated and secondhand. They are not lost souls or dead souls. Terrible and pitiable . . . they are simply junk souls: quarter-pounders, with cheese.<sup>46</sup>

– his own admiration for Leonard is sealed by the evocation of something outside of this; something authentic, something more fully ‘human’:

Raylan [the detective in *Riding the Rap*] isn’t post-modern; he is an anachronism from out of town. And he is fascinating, because he shows you what Mr Leonard actually holds dear – the values he can summon in a different kind of prose, in different American rhythms, those of Robert Frost, or even Mark Twain . . .<sup>47</sup>

‘Anachronism’, here, is good – a restoration of permanent values and a rejection of ‘junk’ – and we glimpse alongside it one of the most central tensions in Martin Amis’s work: that gulf between what is authentically ‘common’ and what is most commonly thought and said. Similarly, few have evoked postmodern culture more memorably than Martin Amis, and yet the most important artistic sustenance his work draws from his father’s and Larkin’s examples is the sense that nothing is inevitable about any era – and that literary art must attempt to bring to present lives a richer sense of what being ‘human’ means than is offered by any of-the-moment discourse.

It is in this sense that this thesis is concerned with the morality of literature: the belief, shared by Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and Martin Amis, that literature must be underpinned by human values more fundamental than any particular mode of discourse or style; and that such values can be articulated only by an unrelenting commitment to rational self-scrutiny. The specifically post-Christian nature of their work is crucial, in that – despite a shared abhorrence of religious faith – the Christian tradition inexorably remains their greatest example of what these permanent values might look like; and their oeuvres are all touched by the fear that the metaphysical

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<sup>46</sup> Martin Amis, on *Riding the Rap* by Elmore Leonard (*New York Times Book Review*, May 1995), in Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché* (London, 2002), p. 226.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 227.

ground lost with the removal of the faith and institutions of Christianity from the heart of British society may be too great an absence to be redressed by literature. Each has in their own way, however, fought a war on what they consider to be the amoral, the deceiving, and the uncritical – and it has been a struggle predicated upon the human capacities for compassion, self-knowledge, and laughter.

## Chapter One: Philip Larkin

### 1.i. Joy and Night

One of the most notable writers to discuss Philip Larkin in a broad literary context has been Seamus Heaney, who first addressed Larkin in his 1976 lecture on 'Englands of the Mind':

His [Larkin's] tongue moves hesitantly, precisely, honestly, among ironies and negatives. He is the poet of rational light, a light that has its own luminous beauty but which has also the effect of exposing clearly the truths which it touches. Larkin speaks neither a dialect nor a pulpit language . . . What we hear is a stripped standard English voice, a voice that leads back neither to the thumping beat of Anglo-Saxon nor to the Gregorian chant of the Middle Ages. Its ancestry begins, in fact, when the Middle Ages are turning secular . . .<sup>1</sup>

Heaney traces Larkin's place within a poetic tradition stretching from Everyman through Sidney and Gray to Hardy, noting with admiration his achievement of a voice both luminous and deeply-rooted in the English tradition of secular self-scrutiny. There are also, however, reservations in Heaney's praise of this 'stripped standard' voice with its 'ironies and negatives' – most obvious in the alternative model of Ted Hughes's language of 'blood and gland and grass and water'<sup>2</sup> offered at the start of the lecture. Heaney is at once impressed and discomforted by Larkin's rejection of spirituality for 'rational light'.

Writing on Larkin again, in his 1982 essay 'The Main of Light', Heaney expanded on this tension between spirituality and rationality with the acknowledgement that, although the 'best lines' in Larkin's verse may be given to an 'anti-heroic, chastening, humanist voice', nevertheless, 'the rebukes it delivers cannot altogether banish the Yeatsian need for a flow of sweetness'<sup>3</sup>. It was not until *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind' (The Beckman Lecture, given at the University of California, Berkeley, May 1976), in Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York, 1995), pp. 164-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Main of Light', in *The Government of the Tongue* (New York, 1990), p. 16.

*Redress of Poetry* (1995), however, that Heaney addressed his deepest reservations concerning Larkin's poetry in detail. This volume includes an extended comparison between Larkin's 'Aubade' and Yeats's 'The Cold Heaven', under the title 'Joy or Night', and these poems serve Heaney as emblems of a dichotomy in twentieth century British literature: between the 'joy' of Yeats's Romanticism and the 'night' of Larkin's more pessimistic vision. Larkin's 1977 poem is offered as:

. . . the definitive post-Christian English poem, one that abolishes the soul's traditional pretension to immortality and denies the Deity's immemorial attribute of infinite personal concern.<sup>4</sup>

Heaney argues that in its uncompromising dismantling of all hopes of transcendence – the 'vast moth-eaten musical brocade' that is religion, the courage that 'is no good'<sup>5</sup> – 'Aubade' betrays literature's primary function of 'redress'. In the essay that gives his collection its title, Heaney explains this concept:

This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, Larkin is found guilty of submission to the pressures of his times: to a 'post-Christian' loss of faith in art's ability to console, as well as to a more specific loss of faith in poetry itself as a medium of inspiration and revelation. In the religiously-charged terminology of a passage which Heaney quotes from Czeslaw Milosz, Larkin 'went over to the side of the adversary'<sup>7</sup>, where the 'adversary' is the ratiocination of 'science and science-inspired philosophy'<sup>8</sup>. Larkin's betrayal is to put the modern image of man as nothing more than a bundle of perceptions, an

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<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', in Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, (London, 1995), p. 156.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Aubade', in Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1990), pp. 209-9, ll. 23 & 37.

<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Redress of Poetry', in *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night', in *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

‘interchangeable statistical unit’<sup>9</sup>, at the centre of his poem. Yeats’s poem, by contrast,

... gives credence to the idea that courage is *some* good; it shows how the wilful and unabashed activity of poetry itself is a manifestation of ‘joy’ and a redressal, in so far as it fortifies the spirit against assaults from outside and temptations from within – temptations such as the one contained in Larkin’s attractively defeatist proposition that ‘Death is no different whined at than withstood.’<sup>10</sup>

Heaney partly concedes the injustice of aligning Larkin’s ‘Aubade’ with the dark forces of science, allowing that:

Still, when a poem rhymes, when a form generates itself, when a metre provokes consciousness into new postures, it is already on the side of life.<sup>11</sup>

More needs to be said along these lines, however. Although ‘Aubade’ may refuse the idea of literature as a revolt against mortality, there is nothing facile in Larkin’s terror. Moreover, Heaney’s case against it as a model for future writing ignores the quietly revolutionary achievement of Larkin’s language, which captures profound metaphysical despair with brutal directness, presenting life as godless, uncertain and often comfortless, yet comprehensible in lucid and entirely recognizable terms. ‘Redress’ is, in ‘Aubade’, a luxury which literature dare only sparingly invoke – far more crucial are its tasks of communication and of awakening sensibilities to a more rigorous apprehension of contemporary experience.

Heaney’s polarisation of the rational and the irrational in these poems is also problematic. While Yeats is explicitly mystical in his vision of ‘the ghost . . . naked on the roads’<sup>12</sup>, Larkin’s contempt for the ‘specious stuff that says *No rational being /*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Joy or Night’, in *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘The Cold Heaven’ (1912), in W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, (London, 1994), ed. Daniel Albright, p. 176, ll. 9 & 11.

*Can fear a thing it will not feel*<sup>13</sup> should alert us to the contempt for the inadequacy of so much so-called rationalism which charges his poem – his rage that religion’s decay has left no language adequate to the instinctive horror of contemplating death. Moreover, while Yeats and Heaney demand from poetry a consolatory vision, Larkin is hardly driven by the desire to reduce life to its particulars. Rather, in ‘Aubade’, his determination to escape the safely ‘poetic’ dictions of art and of the academy is rational in the best sense: offering a bluntly, sanely communicative account which seems faithful to personal experience. Heaney advocates an art motivated by intimations of the eternal, but Larkin points us towards a sociable and unrestricted literature, ruled by concerns for a common reality comprehensible in common terms.

In the case of ‘Aubade’, it is interesting to both examine its public impact and the circumstances of its composition. Richard Bradford offers an excellent account of the effect on the British public when, in September 1978,

[Larkin] was informed that the BBC planned to record that embodiment of mirth Harold Pinter reading ‘Aubade’. The reading was screened on BBC2 on 30 October and prompted a flurry of letters to Larkin on its subject, death. The event had unlocked a cabinet of nationwide fascination, gainsaying the general belief that death was something only feared, lamented or bravely encountered – it now seemed impossible to stop people writing about it.<sup>14</sup>

As the decision to broadcast ‘Aubade’ and the subsequent public response suggest, Larkin’s poem spoke in a way few contemporary poems could, presenting uncertainties and fears which others seemed eager to sidestep as a common creative ground. This was more, moreover, than a case of a particular poem for a particular year: the continuing popularity of ‘Aubade’ was emphasised in October 2003 when it was chosen in a Poetry Book Survey as one of the nation’s top ten favourite poems of

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<sup>13</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Aubade’ (1977), in *Collected Poems* (London, 1988), ed. & intro. Anthony Thwaite, p. 208, ll. 25-26.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear. The Life of Philip Larkin* (London, 2005), p. 257.

the last fifty years, coming in at number seven<sup>15</sup> ('The Whitsun Weddings' was at number one, while Larkin's collection of the same title was selected as the readers' favourite. Larkin was himself selected as the favourite poet of the last fifty years). Of course, as Heaney must have been well-aware, 'Aubade' was written by a man deeply and, by 1977, paralytically obsessed with his own mortality. 'Aubade' anticipated the death of Larkin's poetry as much as it reflected on his own and others' deaths: it was almost his last significant work, and a glance at the *Collected Poems* reveals that only sixteen poems represent the years 1975 to 1985, only five of which come after 1980. In the context of this decline, it can be difficult not to see something slightly appalling in 'Aubade' – in what it heralded, in what its author was experiencing – and Bradford draws the inevitable conclusion:

. . . if every attempt to form an imaginative, finely crafted structure out of your own thoughts and experiences drags you magnetically and inexorably to the topic of death, then quite soon there really is 'nothing to be said' . . . he [Larkin] had run out of things to say about it [death], at least in poetry, but it seemed to be pursuing him with a vengeful assiduousness.<sup>16</sup>

Neither this nor Heaney's rejection of poetic 'night' should be the last word, however. Unlike biography, literary criticism must always end with the art – and as a poem 'Aubade' is a triumph; a reminder that, no matter how much we might wish its author's life had been longer or happier, great literature transcends its circumstances. Indeed, 'Aubade's' fusion of fear and uncertainty into enduring art is an appropriate emblem of many of Larkin's greatest successes, and of the ways in which his work has continued to delight audiences while exceeding and confounding both critics and biographers.

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<sup>15</sup> John Ezard, "Poets' poll crowns Larkin king of verse" (*The Guardian*, 15 October 2003), online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>16</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, pp. 255-7.

### **1.ii. The role of complaint**

In 1956, Larkin wrote a brief 'Statement' for D. J. Enright's anthology *Poets of the 1950s* which set out some of the ideas at the root of his poetry:

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets.<sup>17</sup>

Part of the intent here was to distance himself from earlier major poets of the twentieth century; from Yeats's grand mythology, from Eliot's sense of tradition as an active component of every poem. But this statement is also an important assertion of certain beliefs about the nature of human existence. In specifically singling out notions of 'tradition' and of a 'myth-kitty' for attack, Larkin rejects the claims of those proposing these as models for life as well as for art: their claims that something universal and underlying in the human may be both called forth and analysed via the tools of myth and tradition. Instead, his statement suggests, human truth is to be found in a recognition of limitation and isolation as fundamental aspects of the individual life. It was a position that remained constant throughout his career. As he remarked in 1979:

I think that a point does come in life when you realize that there's a limit to what you can get from other people and there's a limit to what your own personality is in itself.<sup>18</sup>

Larkin's writings consistently argue that modern poets must avoid invoking universals abstracted from the individual life, just as they must avoid privileging art or the artistic sensibility as examples of how life ought to be perceived: to do otherwise is not only to lapse from originality, but also to falsify human experience. Instead, freshness, comprehensibility and pleasure are the duties of his art, and it aims to speak to as large a public as possible –

[I]t seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people . . . As for whom you write, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen.<sup>19</sup>

It follows naturally enough that Larkin's most reiterated criticism of modern poetry is that 'The reader . . . seems no longer present in the poet's mind as he used to be, as someone who must understand and enjoy the finished product'<sup>20</sup>. Larkin saw the 'Men of 1914' at the root of many of the twentieth century's literary ills, driving poetry away from the public and into the classroom, and his work's resistance to the apparatus of myth and tradition is closely related to a determination to dismantle barriers between the writer and the reading public. This reference to what 'used to be' present in the poet's mind also leaves no doubt that his model for progress in art was as much one of recovery as it was of innovation.

Larkin's own sense of duty to a contemporary audience was bound up integrally with the 'pessimism' that Heaney criticises –

I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any – after all most people *are* unhappy, don't you think?<sup>21</sup>

This clearly expresses a sense of the importance of the kind of life lived by the majority, by *most* people; along with the conviction that such a life is mostly a discontented one. As early as 1940, W. H. Auden's *New Year Letter* presented the greatest problem facing a modern artist as the unredeemed mediocrity and unhappiness of 'most people's lives:

The average of the average man  
Becomes the dread Leviathan [.]<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Statement' (1955), in Philip Larkin, *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, (London, 1983), p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Observer*' (1979), in *Required Writing*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Paris Review*' (1982), in *Required Writing*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Pleasure Principle' (1957), in *Required Writing*, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Observer*', in *Required Writing*, p. 47.

For Auden, it was the industrial rampancy of this Godless 'average' that most threatened contemporary attempts to establish anything meaningful through art.

Larkin echoed Auden's sense of the state of society in general being a troubling and discontented one, but where Auden came to see the existence of a Christian God as the only possible way 'to redeem / From insignificance' the 'Time Being',<sup>23</sup> (much as T.S. Eliot had done) Larkin refused to accept that religious faith was necessary to the fruitful representation of the world. Instead, rejecting attempts to re-spiritualise the twentieth century environment as wishful anachronism, his attitude to contemporary lives was dominated by a sense of their fragility and incompleteness, a sentiment perhaps most tenderly expressed in the closing lines of his late poem 'The Mower' (1979):

. . . we should be careful  
Of each other, we should be kind  
While there is still time.<sup>24</sup>

Much of Larkin's work actively embraces the very themes that Heaney commands art to resist: those of extinction, limit, failure and fear. Where Auden came to see a world without God as artistically incomprehensible, Larkin's poetry attempts to argue that only the undeceived comprehension of this world can yield a decent future. It was not a perspective which he himself found entirely bleak.

People say I'm very negative, and I suppose I am, but the impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> W.H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, in W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1991), p. 234, III, ll. 533-4.

<sup>23</sup> W.H. Auden, 'The Flight into Egypt' from *For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 400, III, ll. 46-7.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Mower', in *Collected Poems*, p. 214, ll. 9-11.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Larkin, 'A Conversation with Neil Powell' (1967), in Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements. Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews 1952-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 2002), p. 31.

This is a highly qualified positivity – but, as Larkin emphasises, it is also the only kind of optimism that can hope to approach truth, in that it can speak directly to the circumstances of an ordinary life:

I always try to write the truth . . . In a sense that means you have to build in quite a lot of things to correct any impression of over-optimism or over-commitment . . . I think that one of the great criticisms of poets of the past is that they said one thing and did another, a false relation between art and life. I always try to avoid this.<sup>26</sup>

The sacrifice that is being made is one of faith and idealism: Larkin's is the literature of a fallen society, in that his hopes are not for 'redress' but for kindness within the limits of an individual life.

Against the threats of 'over-optimism or over commitment', complaint is a central feature of Larkin's work, and his poetry repeatedly expresses horror at the lack of deeper purposes to be found in 'the uncaring / Intricate rented world'<sup>27</sup>. In this, again, he echoes Auden's fears in works such as *New Year Letter*, which struggles against

An earth made common by the means  
Of hunger, money, and machines,<sup>28</sup>

and describes the condition of a mankind cramped by urban and economic development into patterns of life that involve little choice or insight:

The choice of patterns is made clear  
Which the machine imposes, what  
Is possible and what is not [.]<sup>29</sup>

Larkin's late poem 'The Life with a Hole in it' (1974) describes existence in terms very close to Auden's: governed by something outside of and far more powerful than choice or desire,

The unbeatable slow machine

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Larkin, 'A Conversation with Ian Hamilton' (1964), in *Further Requirements*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Aubade', in *Collected Poems*, p. 209, ll. 46-7.

<sup>28</sup> W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 229, III, ll. 325-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 238, III, ll. 727-9.

That brings what you'll get.<sup>30</sup>

No longer located within firm social, ethical or existential structures, it seems that individual lives must resign themselves to the control of blind and irresistible circumstances. The implications of this poem are very different from those of Auden's, however. Where Auden attempts a large and explicit analysis of his society's economic, social and political ills, Larkin writes a brief and extremely personal work which eschews theoretical questions. *New Year Letter* itself he dismissed as a 'rambling intellectual stew'<sup>31</sup>, and his central objection to the later Auden was that the latter has 'become a reader rather than a writer'<sup>32</sup>, replacing experience with literature as his subject. Despite its crushing conclusions, 'The Life with a Hole in it' is a resolutely individual, engaged perspective. Rather than Auden's pseudo-thesis an intensely personal account is offered, of which the most ferociously-made point is Larkin's attack on the vanity of secular ambitions. Fear and horror become spurs to self-knowledge, and instead of the poet as hero or potential redeemer we are offered a commitment to communication and to truth; the writer is a man like any other, moving through the years of 'havings-to, fear, faces'<sup>33</sup>. The phantom literary life that 'The Life with a Hole in it' envisages is thus an actively destructive alternative to its brutal sanity, a self-indulgent destabilization of that life which the poem's speaker does have (and perhaps a dig at the rather more booze-and-birds lifestyle Kingsley Amis had enjoyed):

. . . the shit in the shuttered chateau  
 Who does his five hundred words  
 Then parts out the rest of the day  
 Between bathing and booze and birds[.]<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Life with a Hole in it' (Christmas 1974), in *Collected Poems*, p. 202, ll. 20-1.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Larkin, 'What's Become of Wystan?' (1960), in *Required Writing*, p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125.

<sup>33</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Life with a Hole in it', in *Collected Poems*, p. 202, l. 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 202, ll. 9-12.

Contempt, here, is both a bitter comment on the paths Larkin's temperament had led him down and a ward against the dangers of fantasy.

The moral significance of such a commitment to self-knowledge should not be underestimated. Asked by John Haffenden about the 'defeatism' of his work, Larkin's retort was that 'I don't find anything defeatist about being sane, do you?'<sup>35</sup>, and it is clear that he identified all forms of self-deception, all sacrifices of 'sanity', with the doing of harm. Only, it seems, through an unblinking sensitivity to both the limits and the illusions surrounding the individual life can the kindness and care that 'The Mower' pleads for become possible; and it is in precisely this sense that 'the most negative poem in the world' becomes a positive force. As Larkin observed when discussing Thomas Hardy,

The more sensitive you are to suffering the nicer person you are and the more accurate notion of life you have . . . As I tried to say in 'Deceptions', the inflicter of suffering may be fooled, but the sufferer never is.<sup>36</sup>

Awareness rather than action is paramount, here. As 'The life with a Hole in it' suggests, moral good – if it is to be found at all – is identified with the integrity of a life rather than with its particular course. It was the humanism of a man who was 'not someone who's lost faith: I never had it'<sup>37</sup>, and whose sense of the complexities of attempting right action was almost unbearably acute.

Where Auden's later poetry constantly gestures towards a perspective and a set of values entirely independent from those of the mundane world, Larkin's poetry works from within the conviction that escape from the self, conflicted and limited as it may be, is a self-indulgent and a dangerous dream. Yet again, however, Auden's *New Year Letter* suggestively prefigures one of Larkin's most famous poems on the subject of work, 'Toads' (1954). Auden is in 'literary' mode when he describes how

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<sup>35</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with John Haffenden' (1981), in *Further Requirements*, p. 53.

. . . the heart,  
 As ZOLA said, must always start  
 The day by swallowing its toad  
 Of failure and disgust.<sup>38</sup>

Whereas Larkin opens on the same metaphor with a typically self-deprecating question,

Why should I let the toad *work*  
 Squat on my life?<sup>39</sup>

before confessing, six stanzas later, that

. . . something sufficiently toad-like  
 Squats in me, too [.]<sup>40</sup>

The movement of Larkin's poem is typical: from wry observation to an insight at once personal and persuasively general, inviting the reader to progress similarly from discontent to an acknowledgement that ultimate responsibility must rest with the self. For both the reader and the poem's narrator, anger becomes tempered by 'sanity' and precision replaces a problematically vague questioning.

As so often in Larkin's verse, this voice's very reasonableness and lack of literary pretension are also extremely coercive. To pick one of Auden's most central preoccupations, this is a tone which speaks *for* as well as *to* its audience; which claims to be gradually expounding a truth to which all reasonable readers will consent.

Larkin commented of the ending to 'Dockery and Son' that

It's a bit simplified, I suppose, but I think it's all perfectly true. I can't see how anyone could possibly deny it, any of it . . .<sup>41</sup>

and his ability to address contemporary life so bluntly cannot be divided from a potentially dangerous elision between the individual 'truth' approached by

<sup>36</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with John Haffenden', in *Further Requirements*, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 214, III, ll. 832-5.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Toads', in *Collected Poems*, p. 89, ll. 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 28-9.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Larkin, *An interview with John Haffenden*, in *Further Requirements*, p. 53.

dismantling illusions and the far more troubling invocation of a general, absolute ‘truth’. As Blake Morrison notes,

Larkin’s poetry minimizes the interpretative process by including it within the text . . . the reader is “helped” . . . but he is also restricted’<sup>42</sup>.

This underpins many of Heaney’s objections to ‘Aubade’. Within the space of a few lines, ‘Aubade’ appears to unwrite art and civilization’s aspirations to be something larger than the dying individual, pronouncing that there is ‘nothing more terrible, nothing more true’<sup>43</sup> than death. From Heaney’s perspective, Larkin is unacceptably conflating all human achievements into the fact of individual extinction; he denies that human culture’s richness and continuation in despite of mortality are an assertion of values over which death has no dominion, and wilfully disregards the argument that death is essentially neutral, that it is only in life that truth and value can be located.

Interestingly, however, turning to Larkin’s earliest verse, it soon becomes apparent that an excess of emotion rather than of rationality represented his strongest early inclination. As A.T. Tolley notes in his Introduction to the *Early Poems and Juvenilia* (2005), the huge early influence of Auden’s *Look Stranger!* was for much of the 1940s pushed aside by ‘the marked and poorly absorbed influence of Yeats’<sup>44</sup>.

Larkin himself noted in his 1966 ‘Introduction’ to the reissue of *The North Ship*,

Looking back, I find in the poems [of *The North Ship*] not one abandoned self but several – the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to ‘old-fashioned’ poetry; the undergraduate, whose work a friend affably characterised as ‘Dylan Thomas, but you’ve a sentimentality that’s all your own’; and the immediately post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls’ school.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Aubade’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 208, l. 20.

<sup>44</sup> A.T. Tolley (ed.), ‘Introduction’ to *Philip Larkin: Early Poems and Juvenilia* (London, 2005), p. xx.

<sup>45</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Introduction’ to *The North Ship* (London, 1966), p. 8.

Within *The North Ship*, many poems are deadlocked into states of fear, longing, nostalgia and regret, offering second-hand images which lack the transforming energy of Yeats's own work: 'I see a girl dragged by the wrists' (1944), for example, closes with a vision of:

The beast most innocent  
That is so fabulous it never sleeps;  
If I can keep against all argument  
Such image of a snow-white unicorn,  
Then as I pray it may for sanctuary  
Descend at last to me,  
And put into my hand its golden horn.<sup>46</sup>

The combination of yearning and paralysis that this poem dramatises would never leave Larkin, but its misty, Celtic technique soon would.

As Larkin's 'Introduction' goes on to acknowledge, it was in the poetry of Hardy that he found his strongest model for an alternative to the self-absorbed imprecision of *The North Ship*. Andrew Motion comments of Hardy's impact that:

Instead of Symbolism there was fidelity to familiar fact; instead of grand music there was the sound of a fastidious mind thinking aloud; instead of high rhetoric there was modest watchfulness; instead of a longing to transcend there was total immersion in everyday things.<sup>47</sup>

While Hardy's precise explorations of conflict and imperfection struck an immediate chord in the young poet, it was his fidelity to *emotional* truth that Larkin most valued – precision and honesty were above all a method by which the texture of emotional life, in all of its limits and contradictions, could be captured. This is made clear in Larkin's later discussions of Hardy,

All those wonderful *dicta* about poetry: 'the poet should touch our hearts by showing his own', 'the poet takes note of nothing that he cannot feel', 'the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own' – Hardy knew what it was all about.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Philip Larkin, 'I see a girl dragged by the wrists', in *Collected Poems*, p. 279, ll. 50-56.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin, A Writer's Life* (London, 1993), p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with *Paris Review*', in *Required Writing*, p. 67.

It is in this context that the language of ‘rationalism’ was taken up. This was the ‘rational content’ of a purposeful public object, and of the language demanded by the ‘thought of his own’ era: the terminology of the only metaphysics it could credit without apology. Poetry should be, Larkin argued, ‘an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are’<sup>49</sup>, and he attempted to offer an art which could not be dismissed or argued away in post-Christian England; which was not boxed into a private diction or fixed upon epiphanies meaningless to most lives.

In this sense, Larkin’s appeals to ‘sanity’, to ‘truth’ and to ‘common sense’ are above all attempts to compel readers to take his words seriously as a commentary on real experiences and feelings. Similarly, his conversational tone makes a virtue of qualifications and uncertainties, and of those modern ‘circumstances’ Heaney most wishes to transcend. Meditating on the stars, in ‘Far Out’ (1959), for example, Larkin turns a contemporary sense of the absence of universal meanings and values into a poem whose concurrence with popular, science-inspired opinion is integral to its success:

. . . such evasive dust  
Can make so little clear:  
Much less is known than not,  
More far than near.<sup>50</sup>

Addressed thus, the potentially valueless and threatening inhumanity of the night sky is comprehended in earthly, public terms – imperfect, limited, but permitting the mastery of otherwise inchoate and dangerous emotions. Whereas a modern audience might well answer the closing question of Yeats’s ‘The Cold Heaven’ with a resounding *no*:

. . . when the ghost begins to quicken,  
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent

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<sup>49</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Big Victims: Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare’, in *Required Writing*, p. 197.

<sup>50</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Far Out’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 120, ll. 9-12.

Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken  
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?<sup>51</sup>

the same pseudo-rational dismissal cannot be made of 'Far Out'; and it is difficult not to read several of Yeats's other poems' questions as both culpable and evasive<sup>52</sup>.

Heaney, it seems, has a selective ear for rhetoric: Yeats's is to be tolerated because it is 'on the side of life', but Larkin's is not – at least in the case of 'Aubade'. Yet Larkin's 'submission' to his times, achieving a genuinely public voice with the power to deliver emotional shocks to even the most jaded contemporary, is surely a cause for celebration. The space and role Larkin attempted to create for art was one largely defined by criticism and lament – by appeals to the universality of doubt and aloneness – yet through these he was able to offer an eloquence, and an account of our most basic moral obligations towards one another, which does not ring hollow in the face of modern life.

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<sup>51</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Cold Heaven', ll. 9-12, in Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night', in *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 148.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Man and the Echo', for example, which asks 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?', not quite making the uncomfortable confession that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* did indeed set out to do exactly that.

### 1.iii. Poetry as public space

Central to the communicative power of Larkin's poetry is its willingness to display deep emotional ambivalences, and to privilege the honest confession of his attitudes – however out of kilter with received academic or political wisdoms – over a pleasingly cohesive philosophy of art. Among all such ambivalences, the decline of Christianity, tossed aside in 'Aubade' as a 'mouldy, moth-eaten brocade', recurs as one of the most complex and troubling subjects in Larkin's work, connecting at different times to both the freedoms which might be found in a society unencumbered by religious dogma and to a social and metaphysical void it seemed almost impossible to fill. 'Church Going' (1954), one of Larkin's most revealing poems, articulates something of all these yearnings – and especially for a time when faith could still unify people, and could strengthen them in facing life's most fundamental events. The poem's speaker, standing within an empty church, imagines a future visitor

. . . tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these [.]<sup>53</sup>

In conversation with Ian Hamilton, Larkin went to some lengths to point out that this was not a religious poem. His sense of loss was, he claimed, a secular one, and his central concern was that without this 'union of the important stages of human life . . . life will become thinner in consequence'<sup>54</sup>. It is a union which, in a limited way, his writing attempts to reconstruct.

In *The Movement*, Blake Morrison compares 'Church Going' to George Orwell's 1935 novel *A Clergyman's Daughter*, which 'shows Dorothy rebelling against her clergyman-father, but eventually coming to accept church on the

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<sup>53</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Church Going', in *Collected Poems*, p. 98, ll. 47-51.

recognisably Orwellian grounds of its “decency”<sup>55</sup>. The passage Morrison refers to anticipates a tone often struck by Larkin’s work in its attempt to present a secular, democratic and pragmatic case for the utility of churches in a society prone to ‘rootless freedom’,

For she perceived that in all that happens in church, however absurd and cowardly its supposed purpose may be, there is something – it is hard to define, but something of decency, of spiritual comeliness – that is not easily found in the world outside. It seemed to her that even though you no longer believe, it is better to go to church than not; better to follow the ancient ways than to drift in rootless freedom.<sup>56</sup>

The differences between Larkin’s and Orwell’s accounts of church in a ‘post-Christian society’ are telling, however, and run deeper than Morrison’s account suggests. Precision is Larkin’s virtue: where Orwell’s Dorothy offers an only semi-articulate longing for ‘something of decency, of spiritual comeliness’, ‘Church Going’ provides an exact account of what church once offered to society – the unity of now-divided stages in life, a means by which ‘our compulsions’ may be ‘recognised’ and meditated upon with a seriousness not conditional upon faith. In identifying those positive social forces of church-going that are rooted in fully-examined individual lives as well as in religious hopes of transcendence, Larkin’s poem offers an implicit hope: at least the potential for such unity remains, and is not abolished along with God. Where Dorothy has nothing to suggest beyond allegiance to a moribund institution, Larkin’s narrator addresses the human needs behind it.

‘Church Going’ itself can, as Morrison notes, be read as a ‘building’ serving much the same function as a church, in that it holds up for serious contemplation the subjects of ‘marriage, and birth, / And death’. Perhaps unwittingly, Morrison’s

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<sup>54</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘A Conversation with Ian Hamilton’, in *Required Writing*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Blake Morrison, *The Movement* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 234-5.

<sup>56</sup> George Orwell, *A Clergyman’s daughter* (1935), in *George Orwell: Animal Farm, Burmese Days, A Clergyman’s Daughter, Coming up for Air, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 1976), ch. 4, V, p. 398.

observation echoes a note from the second volume of Thomas Hardy's third-person autobiography, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892-1928* (1930), in which Hardy draws explicit parallels between poetry and architecture, drawing attention to

the analogy of architecture, between which art and that of poetry he [i.e. Hardy] had discovered, to use his own words, that there existed a close and curious parallel, both arts, unlike some others, having to carry a rational content inside their artistic form.<sup>57</sup>

Hardy goes on to use the particular example of 'one of our cathedrals'. Although the context is different to that of Larkin's poem, there is a significant common emphasis on that 'rational content' which both poem and building are obliged to contain. Hardy does not invoke the rational in order to prescribe an impulse towards scientific truth; rather, he is declaring that poetry must be public and intelligible as well as aesthetically pleasing. The interrelatedness of building and poem in each poet's mind speaks volumes about their attitude to writing: that it entails an effort to produce works as well-made, as functional and as pleasing as any good building – and, especially, as purposeful and as beautiful as a church.

Morrison might have done better to compare Larkin's attitude to churches with that of his contemporary, Iris Murdoch<sup>58</sup>. Murdoch's late work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) offers a similar thesis to 'Church Going', insisting on the continuing human reality of those impulses that once found expression in the conception and worship of a deity, arguing that

God does not and cannot exist. But what led us to conceive of him does exist and is constantly experienced and pictured. That is it is real as an idea, and

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London, 1984), p. 323. The *Life* was originally released in two volumes, in 1928 and 1930, and presented as a biography written by Florence Emily Hardy, Hardy's second wife, who did not write it but who did make editorial changes. Millgate's edition presents as a single volume something closer to Hardy's original words, but the passage quoted above is in any case the same in every edition of the *Life*.

<sup>58</sup> Whose books Larkin did not admire: Larkin and Monica Jones systematically defaced a copy of *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956) as a private game, turning it into a scatological epic entitled *The Shite from the Non-Enchanter*. cf. Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 193 and Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, pp. 319-320.

also incarnate in knowledge and work and love.<sup>59</sup>

Murdoch's novels are themselves frequently fascinated by vacant churches and chapels. The narrator of *The Black Prince* (1973), for example, describes a deserted church with a mixture of reverence and incomprehension, as a place wonderfully removed from the banality of ordinary life –

The church in the flat land was like a great ruined ship or ark, or perhaps like the skeleton of an enormous animal, under whose gaunt ribs one moved with awe and pity . . . the cold damp stone was like the touch of death or truth.<sup>60</sup>

This church is an immense relic, awakening in its visitors a hunger for similar fundamentals to those of Larkin's poem: 'awe . . . pity . . . death . . . truth'. In the novel, moreover, this visit immediately precedes the 'love-making' (in Murdoch's phrase) between Bradley, the narrator, and Julian, a younger woman – a secular act which was, for Murdoch, potentially as sublime and as revelatory of our impulse towards the eternal as any religious experience.

Similarly, at almost the very end of Murdoch's *A Word Child* (1975), our narrator – the 'word child' of the title, Hilary Burde – visits St. Stephen's church in London and experiences a kind of epiphany:

There was . . . a memorial tablet which asked me to pray for the repose of the soul of Thomas Stearns Eliot. How is it now with you, old friend, the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings being over? Alas, I could not pray for your soul any more than I could for Clifford's [whose death Burde is mourning]. You had both vanished from the catalogue of being. But I could feel a lively gratitude for words, even for words whose sense I could scarcely understand. If all time is eternally present all time is unredeemable. What might have been is an abstraction, remaining a perpetual possibility only in a world of speculation.<sup>61</sup>

Hilary is a cynical, Godless man who after the tragedies of a great passion has chosen a life stripped of all impulses beyond the routine; he is, in the fullest sense of Larkin's phrase, 'less deceived'. Yet he is also a 'word child', a man gifted not by a creative

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<sup>59</sup> Irish Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London, 2003), p. 508.

relationship with words but by an incredible capacity for languages and recall. For Burde, the otherness of language and the necessarily temporary, incomplete nature of words map out the impossibility of absolute goodness:

Nothing humbles human pride more than the inability to understand a language. It's a perfect image of spiritual limitation . . . [God] wanted us to see that goodness is a foreign language.<sup>62</sup>

In St. Stephen's church and in his recollection of T.S. Eliot's words, however, (Burde quotes 'East Coker' and 'Burnt Norton', from the *Four Quartets*), Burde begins to become grateful for words in a new way, finding in them an impulse towards hope as well as despair. Unable to pray or to proclaim faith in absolutes, his struggle is nevertheless brought into a new sense of possibility by this place, and by his sense that our impulses towards comprehension and communication are not necessarily hollow because they are imperfect. As the novel ends, on Christmas day, we see Burde finally beginning to break some of the spiritual and emotional deadlocks of his life – giving his sister away into the marriage she has craved for years, and (as, at least, it seems likely) consenting to marry his own girlfriend, Thomasina. For Murdoch and for Burde, St. Stephen's church and Eliot's words are monuments to the adequacy of human struggle, permanently available to those able to take 'a lively gratitude' from 'the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings'.

Typically, Murdoch's characters take action while Larkin's narrators detail trains of thought which others – but never quite themselves – may act upon; but in each case the spiritual absences of the present are at once addressed and 'redressed', albeit not as Heaney intended. Indeed, despite his deep suspicion of love as an escape from the limits of the self, the juxtapositioning of church, time and love was a combination which Larkin also achieved in the poem 'An Arundel Tomb' (1956). Its

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<sup>60</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London, 1999), pp. 315-6.

closing verse could not be more qualified, more careful to restrain idealism – yet it moves towards one of the most famous and moving of all Larkin’s closing lines; a delicate celebration of life and language and feeling. From a tomb in an ‘unarmorial age’, there seems to swell an instinct not only of awe, but also of love:

. . . The stone fidelity  
 They hardly meant has come to be  
 Their final blazon, and to prove  
 Our almost-instinct almost true:  
 What will survive of us is love.<sup>63</sup>

Several commentators have argued that, as Richard Bradford puts it, the speaker remains ‘robustly unpersuaded by everything that he apprehends’<sup>64</sup> – a criticism which is both accurate and incomplete. The poem’s narrator is indeed ‘unpersuaded’, in that to ‘prove’ the survival of love or anything else after death is impossible in any rational sense. This is not, however, to say that ‘An Arundel Tomb’ dismisses the ‘almost-instinct’ to think of love as lasting as without value. Rather, as in ‘Church Going’, the transforming power of the poem’s language itself echoes this instinct, and pays qualified tribute to its value, even in the absence of religious faith. Like the observer’s imagination, which transforms actuality into ‘untruth’ by finding one set of meanings and values where others were intended, ‘An Arundel Tomb’ celebrates the human ability to forge connections with the past and with one another in the absence of certainties. Only death may be true in the absolute sense: but, as ‘An Arundel Tomb’ shows, it remains possible to celebrate love and creation in a world where these can no longer be taken as divinely inspired.

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<sup>61</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Word Child* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 383-4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>63</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘An Arundel Tomb’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 111, ll. 38-42.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 152.

#### 1.iv. Modernism and modernity

Bradford's comments on 'An Arundel Tomb' usefully highlight the difference between faith and hope – a divide similar in character to that between a church and a poem about a church. Larkin's work hopes for kindness and even for love in human affairs; but, in the absence of any certain divine source, they are necessarily viewed as fragile and difficult achievements, attained only through struggle and self-mastery. In the absence of religion, moreover, the burden of assisting man in this struggle is shifted to other areas of culture and society – and alongside the exacting secularism of 'Church Going' and 'An Arundel Tomb' there lies the fear that, in comparison with past spiritual and moral conditions, institutions and patterns of behaviour able to promote fundamental considerations have become marginal in modern lives. Against the significance and beauty of tombs and churches in Larkin's verse, contemporary architecture largely appears devoid of any vivifying or humanising function – the 'lucent comb'<sup>65</sup> of the hospital in 'The Building'; the 'large cool store'<sup>66</sup> from the poem of that title, where 'synthetic, new, / And natureless'<sup>67</sup> products match customer's lives; the ugly commercialism of the 'M1 café'<sup>68</sup>. Moreover, for all of Larkin's commitment to an unpretentious, communicative and secular art, his faith in individuals' abilities to use art as one might a fine public building – for serious thought, for rest, for pleasure – is often a matter of grave doubt.

Larkin's concerns over the public role of poetry embody this conflict. Poetry, his work insists, must not be an academic discipline of set positions and hypotheses. 'Toads', once again, mounts a sustained assault on the 'blarney' of those 'who live on

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<sup>65</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Building' (9 February 1972), in *Collected Poems*, p. 191, l. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Large Cool Store' (18 June 1961), in *Collected Poems*, p. 135, l. 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135, ll. 19-20.

<sup>68</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Going, Going', in *Collected Poems*, p. 190, l. 22.

their wits'<sup>69</sup> and suggests the self-serving routines art is reduced to when it becomes grist to the mill of one's own employment as a professional opinioniser and explicator:

Lecturers, lispers,  
Losels, loblolly-men, louts –  
They don't end as paupers[.]<sup>70</sup>

This is evidenced elsewhere in Larkin's attitude to those (including several of his Movement contemporaries) who chose to live as poet-academic-personalities. Trying to be as tactful as possible in his 1976 speech of acceptance for the Shakespeare Prize, he nevertheless included a heartfelt attack on the subsidizing and the institutionalising of poetry –

The basic danger in subsidizing poetry is that . . . the poet is paid to write, and the audience is paid to listen. Something vital goes out of their relation, and I am afraid that something vital goes out of poetry too.<sup>71</sup>

Larkin assaults that tendency criticised so vehemently by Edward Said:

compartmentalisation, in which poetry accepts its irrelevance to the public sphere and concentrates instead on a cosily private market, while direct cultural engagement is left to television, novels and other arts whose 'popular' nature (an art which pleases) can be divided from the 'high' version (which makes intellectual and moral demands).

It is a sundering of Sidney's ideal of art's twin functions, and is a trend which in his

'Introduction' to *All What Jazz* Larkin expands upon with particular reference to

'modernism' in the arts:

. . . the term 'modern', when applied to art, has a more than chronological meaning: it denotes a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century, known sometimes as modernism<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Toads', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 89-90, ll. 29 & 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 89, ll. 10-12.

<sup>71</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Subsidizing Poetry' (1976), in *Required Writing*, p. 92.

<sup>72</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Introduction' to *All What Jazz, A Record Diary 1961-1971* (London, 1985), p. 23.

Without offering a specific sense of cause and effect, Larkin nevertheless suggests that a crisis in art has occurred in the twentieth century, closely linked to a fracture in relations between artist and audience: popular culture has descended towards the lowest common denominator, while serious art has retreated into a ghetto of obscurity, self-serving expertise, and commercialisation –

. . . the artist . . . in isolation, has busied himself with the two principal themes of modernism, mystification and outrage. Piqued at being neglected, he has painted portraits with both eyes on the same side of the nose, or smothered a model with paint and rolled her over a blank canvass . . . the message is: Don't trust your eyes, or ears, or understanding. They'll tell you this is ridiculous, or ugly, or meaningless. Don't believe them. You've got to work at this . . . And so on, and so forth. Keep the suckers spending.<sup>73</sup>

We must be careful not to let the more rhetorical aspects of Larkin's stance obscure his arguments. His editing of the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* shows his taste to have been catholic as well as idiosyncratic<sup>74</sup>; the actual reviews of *All What Jazz* are quite willing to find merits outside of the 'Introduction's strictures; and his prose readily acknowledges the importance of the modernists<sup>75</sup> as well as the impossibility of prescribing any set course for poetry. Rather than a vindictive dislike of particular artists or works, Larkin's central accusation is that the conscious difficulty of 'modern' art is often a swindle; a duplication of the 'keep the suckers spending' culture to which it ostensibly offers an alternative. He does not so much dislike T.S. Eliot as loathe the numerous imitators and critics profiting from the regurgitation of his ideas – and, he argues, it is only in escaping from this culture of twinned expertise and mystification that society and art might achieve a full, unmediated relationship.

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<sup>73</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Introduction' to *All What Jazz*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>74</sup> Larkin included no less than 207 different authors in his anthology's 625 pages of poetry: compare Keith Tuma's 2001 OUP *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, which fits just 126 poets into 934 pages.

<sup>75</sup> 'It was Eliot and Yeats, and perhaps even Pound, who sharpened up the language' – Philip Larkin, 'On the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*' (1973), in *Further Requirements*, p. 96.

As well as its relationship with the ‘humane’ aims of the Movement, Larkin’s use of the word ‘human’ signifies what he takes to be the most precious quality of art – its faithfulness to the complexity of life rather than to the short-cutting of abstractions. In this, it is useful to recall Auden once again, and especially early poems such as ‘Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm’ – a hymn to love celebrating limits and even infidelities as the most precious of attributes:

Let the living creature lie,  
Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.<sup>76</sup>

Auden was in part writing against the facelessly ‘human’ masses which haunt many high modernist poems – the ‘human voices’ that might ‘drown’ T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock<sup>77</sup>, the ‘human kind’ that ‘cannot bear very much reality’ in ‘Burnt Norton’,<sup>78</sup> even the faery-cry of ‘Come away, O human child!’ that cannot be resisted in Yeats’s ‘The Stolen Child’<sup>79</sup> – and Larkin’s dislike of ‘modern’ art is closely related to many of Auden’s criticisms of the modernists. As he argues:

[I object to the] irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it. This is my essential critique of modernism, whether perpetuated by Parker, Pound or Picasso<sup>80</sup>: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure . . . it has no lasting power . . . let’s get it over, the sooner the better, in the hope that human values will then be free to reassert themselves.<sup>81</sup>

These are the ‘human values’ of sanity, honesty and truth, and Larkin’s essays assert them through a vocabulary rooted in the tangible and the everyday, deploring all hints of abstraction and illusion. In a formulation borrowed from Kingsley Amis’s Jim

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<sup>76</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘Lullaby’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 157, ll. 1-2 & 8-10.

<sup>77</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1975), p. 17, l. 132.

<sup>78</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’, from the *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 172, ll. 44-45.

<sup>79</sup> W.B. Yeats, ‘The Stolen Child’ in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems* (London, 1994), ed. Daniel Albright, pp. 44-45, ll. 12, 24 & 38.

<sup>80</sup> Larkin appends a note here: ‘The reader will have guessed by now that I am using these pleasantly alliterative names to represent not only their rightful owners but every practitioner who might be said to have succeeded them’.

<sup>81</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Introduction’ to *All What Jazz*, p. 27.

Dixon<sup>82</sup>, he sums up this position as a preference for ‘nice noises rather than nasty ones’<sup>83</sup> – an appeal to the notion of common sense, and to a taste upon which all ‘reasonable’ people would agree. Implicit behind all of this is that point Larkin found most central to Hardy’s genius: that self-deception is an active evil which, if it cannot be abolished, we must struggle incrementally to reduce.

Once again, however, the ‘Introduction’ to *All What Jazz* shows Larkin’s objections to didacticism and to modernism tending themselves towards a dangerous kind of simplification: towards a great anger not just at modern art, but at modernity itself, and towards an apparently paradoxical endorsement of human complexity that is highly reductive. It is a trend especially evident in his attitude towards the history of the twentieth century. Tellingly, at no point does Larkin’s poetry invoke the Second World War as a watershed either for art or for society. Of all his works, only *Jill* (1946), his first novel, explores this most central of recent events in any detail, and its rawness and unease – the partly autobiographical account of return to a bombed-out Coventry, the underlying fear that Oxford and indeed all of England could be ravaged beyond recognition – are not reproduced. Aside from the nostalgic ‘Poem about Oxford’<sup>84</sup>, *A Girl in Winter* (1947), marks the only other appearance of the Second World War in his work. Replacing *Jill*’s detailed sense of life in the shadow of conflict with a sideways reference to a series of ‘apparently meaningless disasters’<sup>85</sup>, it focuses on characters determined only to survive an era they cannot understand, and on the paralysing unease this fosters. Coventry itself, as ‘I

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<sup>82</sup> Who takes pride in the effectiveness of ‘his theory that nice things are nicer than nasty ones’ – Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 140.

<sup>83</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘An Interview with *Paris Review*’, in *Required Writing*, p. 72.

<sup>84</sup> This is the only mature poem in which Larkin directly mentions the Second World War: written for Monica Jones around 1970, its tone is entirely personal, closing with a reference to John Donne’s poem ‘The Fleae’ which contrasts private intimacy with the senselessness of larger conflict – ‘It holds us, like that *Fleae* we read about / In the depths of the Second World War’, *Collected Poems*, p. 179, ll. 23-4.

<sup>85</sup> Philip Larkin, *A Girl in Winter* (London, 1947), p. 185.

Remember, I Remember' (1954) disingenuously claims, was soon to be concealed behind the image of an 'unspent'<sup>86</sup> childhood.

Even before the writing of *Jill*, Larkin's letters from war-time Oxford showed a notable unwillingness to engage intellectually with the war. In them, the significance of current events is often found to be too large, too complex and too damaging to accurately weigh; it is presented as mess and a horror which Larkin wants nothing to do with:

Perhaps you think I'm being a bit selfish but I just don't want to go into the Army. I want to pretend it isn't there: that there's no war on.<sup>87</sup>

Strongly mixed – and wholly understandable – feelings of fear and guilt lie behind such denials, a point Larkin himself proclaims rather than evades:

I feel everything is in a mess . . . Admittedly I know bugger all about politics & am anyway guilty of all these sins of lassitude, but the awakening will be frightful – that I apocalyptically feel . . . And I agree we don't deserve to win<sup>88</sup>

This 'mess' and its reflections upon human nature are too painful to contemplate, and the prospect of a forced 'awakening' into contact with them is similarly unbearable, translating instead to an apocalyptic sense of dread and a refusal to identify with hopes of victory.

In place of the history he himself lived through, perhaps the single most important event recalled by Larkin's poetry is the Great War of 1914–18: an event experienced not by his generation, but by his father's (although Sydney Larkin did not experience it directly, spending the Great War working as Assistant Borough Accountant in Doncaster). In Larkin's writing, 1914 takes on mythical status: as a marker of the death of the old Europe of rigid social and spiritual values, and also as

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<sup>86</sup> Philip Larkin, 'I Remember, I Remember', in *Collected Poems*, p. 81, l. 14.

<sup>87</sup> To James Ballard Sutton – 20 November 1941, in Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, p. 68.

<sup>88</sup> To Norman Iles – 7 April 1942, from Anthony Thwaite (ed.), in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, (London, 1992), p. 34.

an approximate date for the coming of those ‘modern’ artists whom he attacks with such venom: Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Picasso, Braque. One of his most famous engagements with this theme is the poem ‘MCMXIV’. The Roman numerals of the title anticipate a departure from plain realism, and Larkin’s method through much of the poem is ekphrasis: evoking his subject through the evocation of other forms of art. We are given the imagery of photographs, advertisements, stories – an imagery already second-hand during Larkin’s own childhood, doubly separating the contemporary reader from this subject –

The crowns of hats, the sun  
On moustached archaic faces  
Grinning as if it were all  
An August Bank Holiday lark [.]<sup>89</sup>

The pain of loss dominates. While the poem is partly a tribute to the dead of the Great War, it is not a historical work in any literal sense. Instead, it laments all those things that have become impossible for the contemporary world, its language dominated by a sense of class and those old orderings now dismantled:

. . . the countryside not caring:  
The place-names all hazed over  
With flowering grasses, and fields  
Shadowing Domesday lines  
Under wheat’s restless silence;  
The differently-dressed servants  
With tiny rooms in huge houses,  
The dust behind limousines [.]<sup>90</sup>

Despite its many successes, ‘MCMXIV’ suggests one of the real dead-ends in Larkin’s oeuvre: created not by submission to a scientific zeitgeist, but rather by the impulse to retreat from many aspects of present society – its ‘modernism’, its social mobility, its recent traumas, its lack of spiritual certainties – into an Edenic myth of absolute loss and fracture. The poem’s concluding stanza, although poignant, spells

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<sup>89</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘MCMXIV’ (1960), in *Collected Poems*, p. 127, ll. 5-8.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 127, ll. 17-24.

out a position of defeat with none of ‘Aubade’s emotional precision and sensitivity to self-deception:

Never such innocence,  
 Never before or since,  
 As changed itself to past  
 Without a word . . .  
 . . . .  
 Never such innocence again.<sup>91</sup>

Within this beautifully poised nostalgia we see one of the most dangerous aspects of a programme of disillusion and dismantling – that it tends to become anachronistic and insular; and that, alongside the pragmatic advocacy of ‘sanity’ and mundane detail, there runs a consistent and problematic refusal to link a poetry of contemporary life to the events of contemporary history.

Barbara Everett, in her 1982 essay ‘Larkin’s Edens’, is especially adept at articulating the relationship between Larkin’s technique of qualified assertion and his Edenic yearnings. As she puts it,

All Larkin’s poems . . . pursue a faithfulness that will make them in some sense “like a heaven”: but this heaven is essentially a fallen Eden, a dwindling Paradise glimpsed always from the outside and through a vision of limits . . . In terms of myth we know Eden by the closed gate and the sword of the angel. The formal proprieties of Larkin’s poems have force . . . because of the opposing strength of what they form and control.<sup>92</sup>

This encapsulates the triumphant balance of so many of Larkin’s poems – those exact, colloquial forms whose greatest strength is the overmastering yearnings they make a common, articulate ground. In the case of ‘MCMXIV’, however, there is no hard, contemporary setting through which paradise is glimpsed: despite its title, the poem somehow remains both placeless and timeless, and at an insoluble remove from the present. As Everett, discussing Larkin’s later poem ‘Show Saturday’, goes on to explain,

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<sup>91</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘MCMXIV’ in *Collected Poems*, pp. 127-8, ll. 25-28 & 32.

The very *unreality* of the poetic world, its beautiful hollowness and the severe limits to the kind of reassurance it can give, are really the solid terms which give poet and readers a meeting-place . . . <sup>93</sup>

In 'MCMXIV', we see this exactly configured 'meeting-place' overflowing its boundaries in a present whose only articulate emotion is bottomless loss – giving us an exile from Eden that is at once beautiful and profoundly unreassuring.

As his letters suggest, there was a strong tendency in Larkin to disengage from the most irrational and brutal aspects of human behaviour, refusing to accept that to describe a 'fully human' being might be to describe these. It is a problem inherent in his criticisms of modernism – which, rather than addressing the complex issue of why the 'modern' position was taken up in the first place (in the aftermath of the Great War's slaughters and old Europe's collapse) imply that modernism represents little more than the self-indulgent misrepresentation of an essentially stable and coherent human nature. Larkin was shooting the messenger – and his attitudes to modernism and to twentieth century history point us towards the most fundamental conflicts within his work, and its most bitterly self-cancelling lurches into fantasy and evasion.

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<sup>92</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Larkin's Edens', in Barbara Everett, *Poets in their time* (London, 1986), p. 250.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 255.

### 1.v. Politics and sex

Larkin's two most explicitly political poems, 'Homage to a Government' (1969) and the couplet 'When the Russian tanks roll westward' (1969), show just how crass and reactionary he could be when attempting overt political engagement. While the latter is nothing more than a sub-Auden squib at the expense of student protestors from the University of Essex and at the London School of Economics –

When the Russian tanks roll westward, what defence for you and me?  
Colonel Sloman's Essex Rifles? The Light Horse of L.S.E.?<sup>94</sup>

– the former is more serious. It attacks the government's closing of a British base in Aden, due to 'lack of money', and sneeringly skirts around any precise or telling investigation of this event, preferring to sloganise –

Next year we shall be living in a country  
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money  
...  
Our children will not know it's a different country.  
All we can hope to leave them now is money.<sup>95</sup>

'Homage to a Government' was uneasily addressed during an interview with the *Observer* of 1979, in which Larkin retreated from the full implications of his words with the gloss that:

I don't mind troops being brought home if we'd decided this was the best thing all round, but to bring them home simply because we couldn't afford to keep them there seemed a dreadful humiliation. I've always been right-wing. It's difficult to say why, but not being a political thinker I suppose I identify the Right with certain virtues and the Left with certain vices. All very unfair, no doubt.<sup>96</sup>

Here, the confession of uncertainty is defensive and complacent ('all very unfair, no doubt') rather than empowering, and the poem itself objectionably narrow and occasional. Nothing is doubted, challenged or created, and the tone is public in the

<sup>94</sup> Philip Larkin, 'When the Russian tanks roll westward', in *Collected Poems*, p. 172, ll. 1-2.

<sup>95</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Homage to a Government', in *Collected Poems*, p. 171, ll. 13-14 & 17-18.

<sup>96</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Interview with the *Observer*', in *Required Writing*, p. 52.

most banal sense – personality is suppressed, the abstractions of pride and humiliation dominate. The withdrawal of these soldiers is, for Larkin, an easy symbol of the decline which ‘modern’ times embody; yet the poem’s tone is expressly designed to repress those individual, unabstracted aspects of mind that might offer alternatives to such a decline. The ‘virtues of the right’, Larkin goes on to explain, are those of:

thrift, hard work, reverence, desire to preserve . . . and on the other hand [i.e. the political left] idleness, greed and treason.<sup>97</sup>

While much of Larkin’s work elsewhere extols the desirability of aloneness, the suspicion of abstractions and a carefully individualised sympathy for others, it is made clear here that certain aspects of the individual are to be feared and resisted – embodied in the ‘vices of the left’ and in the actions of those whose lack of ‘reverence’ and ‘thrift’ and a ‘desire to preserve’ presage a future in which all we can hope to leave our children ‘is money’.

Several of Larkin’s other, better poems point towards similarly uncomfortable conflicts. ‘Reasons for Attendance’ (1953), for example, draws a familiar contrast between the speaker, standing outside of a hall, and couples dancing ‘in there’. Our narrator presents his isolation as the necessity of a higher calling,

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell  
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound  
Insists I too am individual.  
It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well [.]<sup>98</sup>

Yet the final stanza dispenses with such certainty, subverting the poem’s dichotomy with a strong suggestion of error, or at least great inaccuracy, on both sides of the glass,

. . . Therefore I stay outside,  
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,  
Believing that; and both are satisfied,

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<sup>97</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Interview with the *Observer*’, in *Required Writing*, p. 52.

<sup>98</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Reasons for Attendance’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 80, ll. 12-15.

If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.<sup>99</sup>

In the last line and its stick-in-the-throat closing rhyme there comes the acknowledgement that illusions and deceptions, although their source may be projected onto others and onto 'modernism' or 'society', remain uncomfortably rooted in the very individual whose integrity and uniqueness is to be set against the destructiveness of disorder. This is the flip-side of the self-knowledge presented as stoical and sane at the end of 'Toads', and it lies beneath many of those threats most vehemently identified and assaulted in Larkin's work: the evils of the 'left', the irresponsibilities of 'modernism', the tendencies embodied in the 'mess' of twentieth century history.

It is in this sense that Larkin's preoccupation with death is a misleading target for analysts, in that it is not the presence and certainty of death which most threatens the value of life in his poems. Even a poem as ferociously morbid as 'Aubade' asserts, through articulate fear and rage, the horror of individual extinction and thus the value of individual life. It is, rather, the fear that individuality and selfhood are themselves illusions which most undermines Larkin's project of human values. The twist at the close of works such as 'Reasons for Attendance' presents the possibility that individuality is not to be trusted; an idea feeding on Larkin's fears that twentieth century history and society alike evidenced the essentially unknowable, incoherent nature of individual lives. In the world of rampant 'modernism' sketched in parts of his prose, the triumphs of desire and excess seem all too real; and such writings contemplate a world in which 'sanity' and 'human values' are the true illusions, consigned to history along with religion, while the apocalyptic mess of the Second World War becomes our closest model of life's underlying nature.

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<sup>99</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Reasons for Attendance', in *Collected Poems*, p. 80, ll. 17-20.

On this theme, ‘Going, Going’ (1972), Larkin’s only poem to extend his unhappiness at the shifting English landscape into the realm of the ecological, is a brilliant work of depressing impotence and resignation. It depicts the dividedness of the present from the past as a descent into chaos:

It [change] seems, just now,  
To be happening so very fast;  
Despite all the land left free  
For the first time I feel somehow  
That it isn’t going to last,

. . . . .

Most things are never meant.  
This won’t be, most likely: but greeds  
And garbage are too thick-strewn  
To be swept up now, or invent  
Excuses that make them all needs.  
I just think it will happen, soon.<sup>100</sup>

Even the nostalgic vitality of ‘MCMXIV’ is lacking. The individual as a potentially self-knowing entity is lost. Instead, we are presented with a blighted landscape bearing witness to a population dominated by the basest of urges:

. . . The crowd  
Is young in the M1 café;  
Their kids are screaming for more –  
More houses, more parking allowed,  
More caravan sites, more pay.<sup>101</sup>

Larkin’s horror of children takes on a particularly sinister dimension in this verse. These selfish, bawling mouths are the future – and they, it seems, will never grow beyond a state of raw avarice. The removal of constraints, equivocally celebrated elsewhere in works such as ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (1967), is treated here as the unveiling of a terrible truth – that infantile lusting is the most potent aspect of our nature, unleashed beyond control by technology and the collapse of old institutions; and that

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<sup>100</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Going, Going’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 190, ll. 33-37 & 50-55.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189, ll. 19-23.

the positive values Larkin elsewhere hoped to affirm are no more than feeble anachronism, consigned to the past as absolutely as the ‘England’ he loved –

And that will be England gone,  
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,  
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.  
There’ll be books; it will linger on  
In galleries; but all that remains  
For us will be concrete and tyres.<sup>102</sup>

The image of actions motivated by infantile need rather than by adult consideration dates back in Larkin’s work to ‘Faith Healing’ (1960), which imagines a ‘kind of dumb / And idiot child’<sup>103</sup> within its subjects. Beneath this lies the suspicion that this ‘idiot’ represents the most powerful part of the self – unconscious, driven by primitive needs and desires, desperate to be deceived. Similarly, the ‘something hidden from us’<sup>104</sup> which chooses the path a life takes in ‘Dockery and Son’ (1963) is as much internal as it is external, a force negating individual choice and the possibility of elevated human values.

Perhaps most telling of all is Larkin’s attitude to sex and to sexual relationships. From the start of his adult life, sex was an area which Larkin only half-jokingly wished to make as simple and exact as a financial transaction, and around which his self-dramatising diatribes and postures became a complex series of masks. The early letters to Kingsley Amis mine this serio-comic vein repeatedly:

I personally think that going out with women is not worth it . . . If there were a straightforward social code that copulation could be indulged in after a couple of drinks (one of which the woman stood) then I should be more enthusiastic<sup>105</sup>

Don’t you think it’s ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the women afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING. It makes me ANGRY . . . It’s all a fucking balls up. It might have been planned by the army, or the

<sup>102</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Going, Going’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 190, ll. 44-49.

<sup>103</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Faith Healing’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 126, ll. 14-5.

<sup>104</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Dockery and Son’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 153, l. 47.

<sup>105</sup> Philip Larkin, letter to Kingsley Amis, 8 October 1943, in Andrew Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, p. 118.

Ministry of Food.<sup>106</sup>

It was a note he continued to strike and refine in later life:

Sex is so difficult. You ought to be able to get it and pay for it monthly like the laundry bill. I'm pissed off with the effort that has to be put in for so little return.<sup>107</sup>

Getting sex for money has never been, of course, an especially rare or difficult act, but Larkin restricted his practical sex-purchasing to pornography, which he vigorously and unashamedly enjoyed in both words and pictures throughout his life (and which he liked to discuss and exchange with certain friends, especially Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis). The directness, even the unpretentiousness, of pornography was certainly part of its appeal – here was a literature which honestly set about gratifying its audience in a world where sex was most often veiled, denied or deployed as a commercial tool. ‘Sunny Prestatyn’ (1962) hints at Larkin’s contempt for such indirection in its image of a laughing poster-girl ‘in tautened white satin’<sup>108</sup>, whose subtext is vigorously exposed by the addition of ‘A tuberous cock and balls’<sup>109</sup>. As Richard Bradford notes, the advertisement’s image has been ‘visited by what it provoked, aggressive male sexuality’<sup>110</sup>: an appropriately blunt retort to disingenuous soft pornography. Yet this response ultimately proves as unsettling as it does satisfying. The fantastical image of a woman ‘too good for this life’<sup>111</sup> is potent in a way mere reality is not, and it unleashes a correspondingly anarchic violence:

Someone had used a knife  
Or something to stab right through  
The moustached lips of her smile.  
...  
Very soon, a great transverse tear

<sup>106</sup> Philip Larkin, letter to Kingsley Amis, 1946, in Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, p. 143.

<sup>107</sup> A remark of Larkin’s reported by Jean Hartley, in Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and me* (London, 1993), p.99.

<sup>108</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Sunny Prestatyn’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 149, l. 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p. 149, l. 16.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, Then Fear*, p. 19.

<sup>111</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Sunny Prestatyn’, *Collected Poems*, p. 149, l. 21.

Left only a hand and some blue.<sup>112</sup>

Although pornography represented a certain kind of honesty, it was also for Larkin a fascinatingly double-edged testament to the force of human needs, fantasies and desires.

In Larkin's work, sex is the region in which both the self and others seem to become most strange. 'Talking in Bed' (1960), for example, presents sexual relations and honest communication as polarities, one inexplicably excluding the other:

. . . Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.<sup>113</sup>

To open oneself fully to another at this most basic of levels is, apparently, to dissolve the crucial uniqueness and integrity of the self, losing the fragile, sane space in which the 'rough-tongued bell' of art might sound. There lurks in this the suspicion that the irrational is stronger than the rational mind: sex unleashes the dangerous 'child' within, and even in apparently positive poems such as 'Annus Mirabilis' (1967) is equated with those tempting, impossible illusions 'Toads' is so quick to assault – 'A brilliant breaking of the bank, / A quite unlosable game'<sup>114</sup>.

Larkin was aware of both the power and the importance of fantasy, but unsure of what it signified in terms of the human. Through pornography, he could gratefully take refuge from the disturbing complexities of the actual, and could relish the energies of his desire in a way which productions such as *Trouble at Willow Gables* suggest was hugely enabling creatively. Yet, as he wrote in a letter of 1963 to Monica

<sup>112</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Sunny Prestatyn', in *Collected Poems*, p. 149, ll. 18-20 & 21-22.

<sup>113</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Talking in Bed', in *Collected Poems*, p. 129, ll. 8-12.

<sup>114</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis', in *Collected Poems*, p. 167, ll. 14-15.

Jones (who took a similar pleasure in titillating talk and images over her years with Larkin), the real world was always in danger of being relegated to second place:

. . . in one sense there's nothing I'd like more than photographs of you in your private clothes, or in no clothes at all, but I can't feel it's right when it seems more exciting than the reality.<sup>115</sup>

In much of Larkin's work, desire and actuality seem inexorably to work against each other. John Kemp is the prototype, with a fantasy-life which not only compensates for the failures of his 'real' life, but which also sabotages his capacity for effective action; it is as if desire undermines love, and indeed all our moral relations with others, asking us to withdraw from an actual other into the more certain excitement of words, images and provoked fantasy.

Larkin himself made love to, and loved, several women during his lifetime – most notably Monica Jones, Maeve Brennan and Betty Mackereth – but he never seemed to find, or to be especially interested in finding, a stable balance between love and desire in either his work or his life. Constant tension and shifting layers of self-presentation became, instead, the desired – or at least the necessary – conditions. Even in works such as 'High Windows' (1967), the overwhelming pressure is one of unsatisfied desire; of appetites evaded, and inflamed by this evasion, rather than mastered:

When I see a couple of kids  
And guess he's fucking her and she's  
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
I know this is paradise [.]<sup>116</sup>

The unashamedly erotic experience of watching is celebrated here, as is the freedom of this young couple, but the abstract imagery of the poem's epiphany shows just how great a problem the irrational, sexual self continued to present in Larkin's work.

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<sup>115</sup> Philip Larkin, letter to Monica Jones, 17 August 1963, in Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, p. 339.

<sup>116</sup> Philip Larkin, 'High Windows', in *Collected Poems*, p. 165, ll. 1-4.

Turning back to himself from thoughts of others, its speaker can find a vision only of absence and unreality:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:  
The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.<sup>117</sup>

The poem's balance is achieved by complete withdrawal from the world of 'kids' and 'fucking'. It is beautiful in the way that the early poem 'Absences' (1950) is beautiful, longing for places entirely elsewhere –

Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,  
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:  
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!<sup>118</sup>

– and yet 'High Windows' is quite unable to contemplate a similar beauty in synthesis, or to bring together in one image the worlds of 'fucking' and of 'sun-comprehending glass'. It shows us a world in which, as Larkin wrote remembering his time in Belfast in 'The Importance of Elsewhere' (1955), 'no elsewhere underwrites my existence'<sup>119</sup> – where values and identity have no guarantees beyond immediate experience.

Perhaps the last word on such dividedness is spoken by W.H. Auden's Airman in *The Orators* (1931) as he comes to the realisation that the 'enemy' he has been campaigning against is in fact an aspect of himself – those tendencies, as he sees it, inherited on his mother's side from his dangerously anarchic uncle. His solution is suicide:

1. The power of the enemy is a function of our resistance, therefore

<sup>117</sup> Philip Larkin, 'High Windows', in *Collected Poems*, p. 165, ll. 17-20.

<sup>118</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Absences', in *Collected Poems*, p. 49, ll. 6-10.

<sup>119</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Importance of Elsewhere', in *Collected Poems*, p. 104, l. 12.

2. The only efficient way to destroy it – self destruction, the sacrifice of all resistance, reducing him to the state of a man trying to walk on a frictionless surface.<sup>120</sup>

In this we see the potentially fatal consequences of labelling one aspect of the self an ‘enemy’: the only answer to such a formulation is self-destruction. Similarly, ‘High Windows’ recalls ‘Church Going’’s yearning for union – physicality, love, mutability and transcendence are all present – but its components remain exclusive, divided between those ‘kids’ who are able to act, and our narrator, able only to watch.

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<sup>120</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘Book II: Journal of an Airman’ from *The Orators*, in W.H. Auden, *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1986), p. 93.

### 1.vi. Comedy and sanity

Larkin's talent was fuelled by awareness of the contradictions within his attitudes and life: those appetites which denial only inflamed, the public eloquence demanded by intense private feeling. He made little effort at theoretical syntheses, finding the academic aim of a scrupulously balanced tone to be artistically trivial, and his struggle to speak honestly and exactly cannot be judged on the basis of its failures, excesses and exceptions. Above all, his poetry should not be read in defiance of the wit and self-mockery that governed all but the most crass of its sentiments. The comedy of Larkin's work is often treated as tangential to its main concerns. In fact, its candid confession of contradictions and absurdities is central to its aims of humanity and sanity, and its privileging of honesty over transformation. Where this stoic humour falters, as in 'Homage to a Government', the poetry also falters. Where it is most bitterly evident, as at the opening of 'This Be The Verse' (1971), Larkin is also at his most serious:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you.<sup>121</sup>

It must also be borne in mind – as Martin Amis has noted in his essay 'Don Juan in Hull' – that much of what we now know about Larkin's political and social ideas derives from poems and letters explicitly not chosen for publication in his lifetime. These are works which create, Amis argues,

a looser and more promiscuous corpus [than that of the works he did choose to publish], containing squibs and snippets, rambling failures later abandoned, lecherous doggerel, and confessional curiosities [.]<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Philip Larkin, 'This Be The Verse', in *Collected Poems*, p. 180, ll. 1-4.

<sup>122</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Ending: Don Juan in Hell', in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 154.

This posthumous corpus of both letters and poems is a rich and legitimate source in efforts to understand Larkin more fully as an artist and as a man; but it is useless as a verdict on his moral intentions, except in the context of what he chose to exclude. To accusations of conservatism, political naivety and a lack of interest in ‘issues’, Larkin himself pleaded guilty. As early as 1958, he explained that

If I avoid abstractions such as are found in politics and religion it’s because they have never affected me strongly enough to become part of my personal life, and so to cease being abstractions.<sup>123</sup>

This is disingenuous, and something of a licence for self-indulgence. But to call Larkin racist, woman-hating and quasi-fascist – as Tom Paulin did in a letter of 6 November 1992 to the *Times Literary Supplement* – encourages an unhelpfully indiscriminate conflation of the various unpleasing tendencies of a private man (who was born in 1922) with his work, and asks us to ignore the principle of extreme selectivity and self-mockery that governed Larkin as a public, publishing artist. There are important lapses and failures in Larkin’s published work, but their significance is poorly served by dwelling on ‘the sewer under the national monument Larkin became’<sup>124</sup>. In connection with this, Martin Amis goes on to highlight the anachronism of Andrew Motion’s frustration at his subject’s refusals of ‘personal growth’, parodying the biographer’s impatience with the dead man:

Not only is he [Larkin] not well adjusted; he *doesn’t want to do anything about it*. There are no serious shots at self-improvement, at personal growth . . . Even when he spots the difficulty, he ‘gives little sign of wanting to make analysis part of a process of change’ . . . Motion is extremely irritated by Larkin’s extreme irritability; he is always complaining that Larkin is always complaining.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘How or why I write poetry’ (BBC Overseas Service, 20 August 1958), in *Further Requirements*, p. 78.

<sup>124</sup> Tom Paulin, letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1992.

<sup>125</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Don Juan in Hull’, in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 166.

Larkin is by no means entitled to uncritical sympathy. But these examples highlight the inadequacy of beginning discussions with judgements about the life rather than with readings of the art.

One of the most telling events – or series of linked events – in Larkin's life was the abandonment of his career as a novelist. Andrew Motion offers a suggestive (if slightly portentous) analysis of this failure,

It was his [Larkin's] hope that [a] third novel would follow *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* with an assertion of recovery and fulfilment. In fact the fragment offers little of this. Its three drafts give a picture of sexual indifference, disgust, and/or violence towards women. They show a deep and insoluble fear of marriage; they are snagged in family relations which are resentful and resented . . . Larkin gave up *A New World Symphony* because none of the endings he could envisage allowed him to write about the regeneration he longed for . . . The ruined stump of his novel was more than a reproach; it was also a warning.<sup>126</sup>

Although useful, Motion's bold commentary proves problematic when compared to James Booth's edition of *Trouble at Willow Gables and other fictions* (a collection of Larkin's unpublished prose fiction), and we may do well to be cautioned by the parallels between Motion's own abandoned career as a novelist and this period in Larkin's life. Booth notes in his introduction that Motion 'by an understandable mistake'<sup>127</sup> has confused the work he takes to be *A New World Symphony* with a distinct earlier work from 1947-8 (which Booth titles *No For An Answer*, and which Motion is referring to in the above extract.). Motion is thus writing about Larkin's penultimate attempt at fiction, rather than his last, and it is interesting to note that in the actual *New World Symphony* both 'violence towards women' and 'sexual indifference' are largely absent. 'Snagging', however, is plentiful. The completed sections of the novel fail to make any narrative progress beyond the opening few scenes, in which Augusta (an assistant lecturer) introduces her mother to her Head of

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<sup>126</sup> Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, p. 229.

Department, Dr Butterfield. Instead, and despite the detailed notes Larkin continued to make as late as November 1953<sup>128</sup>, the four fragments we possess are devoted to Augusta's past and her family, and focus on a curious absence and indeterminacy at the heart of her character: 'What prompted this attitude [Augusta's tendency to play certain 'roles']? . . . partly – perhaps mostly – it was a guard, a mask, hiding an enormous vacancy.'<sup>129</sup> Although closely based on Monica Jones in both looks and habits, Augusta is very much a product of Larkin's sensibility in that she is a fantasist, inclined to passivity, in thrall to her mother's worn-out impressions of gentility.

When she tries to imagine the future, Augusta

saw herself reading widely, pointlessly, fantastically, trailing through eighteenth-century libraries, lounging in embrasures with folios, one hand turning a globe.<sup>130</sup>

She has no concrete hopes, no desires she can bring into contact with reality. Motion, even with his skewed chronology, is correct to suppose that Larkin was attempting to find something beyond the initial vacancy and self-mistrust of his characters: the notes for *A New World Symphony* more than bear this out. But procrastination and uncertainty dominate, and Larkin was quite unable to turn the dynamic ideas contained in these notes – for Butterfield's death, for the collapse of Augusta's mother's power and her own emigration – into a progressing narrative.

Typically self-deprecating, Larkin himself suggested in 1979 that the reason he stopped writing novels was that they were

just too hard for me. I've said somewhere that novels are about other people and poems are about yourself. I think that was the trouble, really. I didn't know enough about other people, I didn't like them enough.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> James Booth (ed.), 'Introduction' to Philip Larkin, *Trouble at Willow Gables and other fictions* (London, 2002), p. xxxiii n.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xliii.

<sup>129</sup> Philip Larkin, *A New World Symphony*, from *Trouble at Willow Gables and other fictions*, fragment 2, p. 399.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, fragment 3, p. 419.

As my next chapter will argue, comparisons with Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) are a useful index of the truth of this statement, and of the undoubtedly large impact of Amis's sudden success as a novelist. Amis was a natural at 'other people', brilliant at embodying his concerns and his comedy into others' voices and characters, while Larkin's was the wit of control and wry irony: he knew only too well the limits of his willingness to enter into others – perhaps because, outside of the controlled arena of poetry, the weaknesses and contradictions to be laid open were intolerably incompatible with artistic honesty. Without exception, his fictional creations remain bounded by circumstances they have no real hope of mastering – John Kemp's efforts to live out his fantasies end in drunken failure, Katherine's relationship with Robin fades into indifference, and Augusta never begins to overcome her central 'vacancy'. As in 'High Windows', action and knowledge are exclusive; hope is a paradoxically passive virtue, to be found by embracing the constraints of life and personality, and by celebrating at least the prospect of an 'elsewhere' in which others might find happiness.

While the novels dried up, however, these conflicts and exclusions grew into something remarkable within the mordant wit of Larkin's verse. As Kingsley Amis put it in his address at Larkin's funeral in December 1985:

If he [Larkin] regarded the world severely or astringently, it was a jovial astringency. He could be at his funniest when uttering those same painful truths about life as those he made so devastating in his poetry . . . His honesty extended to himself; again, nobody was ever more totally or acutely aware of his limitations. He took life seriously, he took poetry seriously, but not himself – nobody who said he looked like a bald salmon could do that. No solemnity about himself as a poet, either; when he'd written a poem he felt pleased, as if he'd laid an egg . . . [His poems] offer comfort, and not cold comfort either. They are not dismal or pessimistic, but invigorating; they know that for all its shortcomings life must be got on with. And now we must get on with ours, a little better equipped to do so with the help of those fragments of poignancy and humour in everyday things, those moments of

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<sup>131</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Observer*', in *Required Writing*, p. 49.

illumination and beauty we should never have seen or known but for Philip.<sup>132</sup>

‘Sad Steps’ (1968) is a wonderful example of this art, its ‘painful truths’ at once public and personal, its melancholy alive to the adequacy of human words and struggle:

One shivers slightly, looking up there [at the moon].  
The hardness and the brightness and the plain  
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain  
Of being young; that it can’t come again,  
But is for others undiminished somewhere.<sup>133</sup>

This is precisely the ‘glimpsed alternative’ that Heaney demands of poetry, found in the undeceived contemplation of a recognisably common reality rather than in an imaginative leap into alternative worlds. There were many things on which Larkin did not and could not write – especially in himself – and such exclusions constitute perhaps the most powerful case against his work, both as literature and as a model for literature. But the stoical wit and sanity of his best poems remain a remarkable resource and inspiration, addressing questions which are as difficult and urgent today as they have ever been. ‘Sad Steps’ has the ring of felt truth and, like all of Larkin’s best verse, it commands assent in the most positive sense: in our recognition of the rightness of this celebration of youth’s ‘strength and pain’, its perpetual passing, and the sufficient hope to be taken from its perpetual recurrence.

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<sup>132</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Funeral Address for Philip Larkin’, APPENDIX F to *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, pp. 1152-3.

<sup>133</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘Sad Steps’ (1968), in *Collected Poems*, p. 169, ll. 13-18.

## Chapter Two: Kingsley Amis

### 2.i. Lucky Jim and Philip Larkin

Philip Larkin's letters can read as an alternative to his poetry, complementing its terse mastery with a more expansive and unguarded style – above all in those written to Kingsley Amis, which are frank in an entirely different tone to the works he published in his lifetime:

I am tired of being here, and seeing those I do not love, and doing that I do not care about, and being paid too little money for doing it. I should like to get back to the halcyon days of the suppers in Nick's rooms [Nick Russel, at St. John's]. Et ego in Arcadia vixi or whatever it is. And I want to see books with my name printed down on the spine, and hear people saying how clever I am to write them, and giving me money.<sup>1</sup>

This is Larkin at his most exposed, confessing the yearning for recognition that lay behind much of his early career. In most of Larkin's letters to Amis, however, there is also an element of play which conceals as much as it reveals, and which fully addresses few of the issues of the poetry of his maturity. Something always remains unsaid, and resolutely private.

In contrast to this, many parts of Kingsley Amis's novels can seem almost a direct extension of the tone of his intense, voluminous correspondence, and especially of his early correspondence with Larkin. While Larkin's development was at root self-driven, it was largely in writing for the 'ideal reader' he found in Larkin that Amis developed the literary voice which would form the basis of his career. As he explained to Larkin in a letter of 27 August 1950,

Also, dear man, I have to thank you for *stopping me from being a shit* and *encouraging me to be funny* in the light way and *getting me interested in modern po* [sic] . . . To-day, you are my 'inner audience', my watcher in Spanish [a phrase taken from Chapter 2 of Christopher Isherwood's *Lions and*

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin to Kingsley Amis, 9 July 1945, in *Collected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 103.

*Shadows*], the reader over my shoulder, my often-mentioned Jack, and a good deal more!<sup>2</sup>

Amis, the extrovert and role-player, guarded this 'inner audience' jealously. It was a pattern of intense reliance upon others which would recur throughout his life, and is obliquely explored in the (failed) B.Litt. thesis he wrote between 1947 and 1950, 'English Non-Dramatic Poetry, 1850-1900, And The Victorian Reading Public'. It begins:

Like all other artistic endeavours, the writing of poetry is a social act, a communication between one man and another . . . a poet writes his poetry originally for a small circle of intimate friends, keeping before him as he writes their probable response, and afterwards soliciting their opinion.<sup>3</sup>

The thesis is highly revealing in terms of Amis's literary aims. Its central argument is that an author's work should be most strongly influenced by his closest personal relationships, and that failure to experience such intimate literary relationships will undermine both his work's quality and its subsequent ability to reach a wider public:

A poet thus has a threefold audience, and for convenience' [sic] sake its three constituents have been labelled the inner, intermediate and outer audiences. This process is taken to be the norm. When the norm is not followed, by an omission of one of the three stages, by an over-hasty or delayed transition from one to another, or by reason of the poet's ceasing to write for his inner audience, his work, as well as his fame, will suffer.<sup>4</sup>

Amis's interest is in 'fame' as much as quality as an index of literary success, and he suggests a delicately symbiotic relationship between the artist and his gradually expanding circumference of readers. If all is well and he pays sufficient attention to those close to him, acclaim and quality will follow: if anything in this balance is upset or omitted, failure will occur in some form. James Thomson (1834-1882) is offered as one example of such a dire fate:

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<sup>2</sup> Kingsley Amis to Philip Larkin, 27 August 1950, in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, pp. 246-7.

<sup>3</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Introduction' to 'English Non-Dramatic Poetry, 1850-1900, And the Victorian Reading Public', (held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

The history of this unfortunate poet [Thomson] is a classic example of the blighted career . . . Thomson's ruin can be viewed as the product not only of melancholia with bad luck, but of a talent frustrated and almost nullified by the lack of any proper audience.<sup>5</sup>

George Meredith (1828-1909) is an only slightly less sorry study:

Partly through not coming into contact with suitable literary companions in youth, partly through early disappointment with the reception of his work and partly, perhaps because of a peculiar temperament, Meredith soon formed the habit of making his verse-writing an entirely private matter . . . When Meredith at last found an audience for his verse his attitude was too firmly fixed to allow of any change, even of any belief in the existence of an audience.<sup>6</sup>

Readership, then, was to be taken very seriously indeed; and we see in Amis's early correspondence an author for whom being read, understood and enjoyed was synonymous with producing an enduring art.

Amis's first literary success, *Lucky Jim* (1954), was in many ways a more perfect embodiment of his thesis than any Victorian work. The direct offspring of his correspondence with Larkin, it was sustained by Larkin's advice and encouragement, dedicated to him, shaped by his criticisms in a way no later work would be; and it proved a tremendous popular success. Yet *Lucky Jim* was also to signal a lifelong shift in their friendship. As Richard Bradford puts it,

Prior to the planning and writing of *Lucky Jim* Larkin had been Amis's mentor regarding the attempted production of verse and fiction, in that Amis never seriously considered his talent for satire and anarchic farce as part of his literary potential. Then suddenly Amis had become a popular and controversial writer by drawing upon the interchanges that both had previously regarded as a private sub-literary pastime.<sup>7</sup>

Bradford is perhaps over-zealous in presenting *Lucky Jim* as a betrayal of intimacy (Larkin had, after all, scrutinized the manuscript several times before it got anywhere near a publisher), but it was certainly a rejection of the more constrained 'literary'

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<sup>5</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'English Non-Dramatic Poetry, 1850-1900', p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 57-58.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bradford, *Lucky Jim: The Life of Kingsley Amis* (London, 2001), p. 44.

mode in which Amis had initially attempted to emulate Larkin's own successes, and it signalled an end to the freedom with which the friends had shared their frustrations at a world largely deaf to their talents.

Above all, *Lucky Jim* emphasised Amis and Larkin's differing senses of how far art's fidelity to 'human truth' could permit the wishful re-writing of personal experience. The novel marked Amis's emergence from Larkin's shadow, and it also marked a transposition. The literary concerns so central to their early letters – centring on the vigorous debunking of pretensions, obscurities and the insipid traditional canon – were not discarded. They were instead embodied in a cast of grotesquely flawed academics and artists, who are duly defeated by a 'shabby little provincial bore'<sup>8</sup> embodying the razor-edged pragmatism Larkin and Amis had privately deployed against the inadequacies of the establishment. As Bradford observes, Larkin's *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* belonged to an established genre of socially realistic novels, epitomised by Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) or, later, the works of John Wain, John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, Angus Wilson and others. *Lucky Jim* was different. A wish-fulfilling book in every sense, its hero triumphed over authority while its success transformed its author's previously impecunious life as a lecturer<sup>9</sup>. Instantly recognizable as English life yet not dourly insistent on paralysis or discontent, it instead presents wit and pleasure as achievements sufficient in themselves:

Jim embodies nothing in particular – for him people with 'ideas' about class and social inequality are as pretentious and boring as their privileged, disinterested counterparts. Jim, assisted by his narrator, uses comedy as a triumphant act of revenge against the people who annoy him and frustrate his ambitions. Jim's anarchic, dismissive attitude to his world seems to prefigure,

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<sup>8</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, (London, 1961), p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Amis in fact remained a lecturer in English at Swansea until 1961, and then at Peterhouse, Cambridge until 1963, but his parallel career as an author and celebrity provided an income and opportunities far beyond those which would otherwise have been available.

even justify, his successful escape from it.<sup>10</sup>

The novel's superficial concerns with social injustice – 'If one man's got ten buns and another's got two, and a bun has got to be given up by one of them, then surely you take it from the man with ten buns'<sup>11</sup> – do not trouble Jim Dixon's 'lucky' progress from a parochial, lower-middle-class life and relationship to the glories of London, a job with Gore-Urquart and a relationship with the gorgeous Christine. Escape, both pragmatically and aesthetically, proves a winning strategy.

Despite his close contact with *Lucky Jim*'s development, Larkin remained convinced that the tensions it explored were poorly served by the simplicity of these resolutions. Writing to Patsy Strang immediately before publication, he commented

I do think that it is miraculously and intensely funny, with a kind of spontaneity that doesn't tire the reader at all. *Apart* from being funny, I think it is somewhat over-simple.<sup>12</sup>

While his praise of its 'miraculous' wit testifies to the essential rightness of *Lucky Jim*'s critical judgements, Larkin's implication is that the appealing directness and exuberant ranting at the heart of the novel's success had been achieved at the cost of artistic depth.

Larkin repeated this verdict only a few weeks later in less ambiguous terms: 'It's in the general thinness of imagination that he [Kingsley Amis, in the writing of *Lucky Jim*] falls down'<sup>13</sup>. By this stage, commercial success had also begun to come between Larkin and Amis, prefiguring the larger distance that would gradually open between them – a process elegantly summarised by Martin Amis in *Experience* (2000):

[Initially] It was love, unquestionably love, on my father's part. He wanted to be with Larkin *all the time*; that this was impossible continued to irk and

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bradford, *Lucky Him*, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Larkin to Patsy Strang (née Avis), 23 January 1954, in *Selected Letters*, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Larkin to Patsy Strang, 3 February 1954, in *Selected Letters*, p. 223.

puzzle him . . . Then life started to happen to Kingsley . . . And success happened too (it had the odd effect of calming him: success cooled him down). Meanwhile, life was happening to Larkin, but he had *no* talent for that, remaining, to the end, single, childless and site-tenacious. He did this quietly and heroically, as I now see it.<sup>14</sup>

They would grow closer again, as Martin notes, towards the ends of their lives, but there would never be the creative convergence that the early letters and such playful collaborations as ‘I Would Do Anything For You’<sup>15</sup> had seen.

‘Thinness of imagination’, in the sense of a failure to sustain an adequate complexity of characterisation and incident, is a recurring criticism of Kingsley’s novels by both Larkin and Martin Amis. Of *Take a Girl Like You* (1960), Larkin remarked that

I perused old K.’s book in Minehead, & found plenty to laugh at, but I disliked the hero & K.’s cosily indulgent attitude to him, & found it all remote from what I think of as reality.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his enjoyment of the book, Larkin also found *One Fat Englishman* (1963) distorted by Kingsley’s desire to administer comeuppances and to achieve resolutions:

[*One Fat Englishman*] reminded me more of LJ [*Lucky Jim*], where a nasty character (Bertram, Lady What’sit) has to be defeated, & a ludicrous scene has to be engineered for this purpose, quite unconvincing.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, commenting on *Jake’s Thing* (1978) and *Stanley and the Women* (1984), Martin Amis notes in *Experience* that ‘I can feel Dad’s thumb on the scales’<sup>18</sup>, referring to Kingsley’s lack of disinterest – in this case, ‘He was keeping score with love and women’<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience* (London, 2001), p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> A soft-pornographic tale of two beautiful lesbians penned by Larkin and Amis in early 1942; cf. Andrew Motion, *A Writer’s Life*, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Larkin to Judy Egerton, 21 October 1960, in *Collected Letters*, p. 321.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Larkin to Robert Conquest, 2 November 1968, in *Collected Letters*, p. 407.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

Martin Amis's comment closely, and presumably deliberately, echoes a passage from an essay by D.H. Lawrence on the morality of the novel:

Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb on the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality . . . . And of all the art forms, the novel most of all demands the trembling and oscillating of the balance.<sup>20</sup>

Prefiguring Larkin's criticism as much as Martin Amis's, Lawrence argues that writing is necessarily a moral act, but one whose success relies on the artist's respect for the 'trembling instability' of actuality. Merely literal truth, Lawrence goes on to suggest, has little to do with this achievement of artistic and moral honesty – it is, rather, a question of emotional 'relationships' and of the force with which these are demonstrated:

A thing isn't life just because somebody does it. This the artist ought to know perfectly well. The ordinary bank clerk buying himself a new straw hat isn't "life" at all: it is just existence, quite all right, like everyday dinners: but not "life."

By life we mean something that gleams, that has the fourth-dimensional quality. If the bank clerk feels really piquant about his hat, if he establishes a lively relation with it, and goes out of the shop with the new straw on his head a changed man, be-aureoled, then that is life . . . . If a novel reveals true and vivid relationships, it is a moral work, no matter what the relationships may consist in.<sup>21</sup>

Kingsley Amis's mistake in *Stanley and the Women* is, in these terms, allowing his sense of male/female relations to be infiltrated to an unacceptable degree by the more local details of his own bitterness and frustration – and it is interesting to note just how closely Lawrence's insistence on the moral force of revealing 'true and vivid relationships' echoes both Larkin's and Kingsley Amis's insistence on the 'human' quality of great literature.

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<sup>20</sup> D.H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel', in D.H. Lawrence, *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence* (London, 1936), pp. 528-29.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 529-30.

Writing in the *London Review of Books* in 2000, Ian Hamilton summed up the conventional view of Larkin and Amis's youthful relationship as it appeared, especially, from their early letters:

Larkin, it seems, was usefully enlivened by Amis's ebullient misanthropy. And Amis enjoyed putting on a show for his life-loathing, sex-starved chum.<sup>22</sup>

Even before the divisive success of *Lucky Jim*, however, Amis's increasing despair at Larkin's refusal to be pragmatic about the business of writing a sequel to *A Girl in Winter* had revealed both the limits of his role as 'enlivener' and of Larkin's as an arbiter of taste:

I must say that in your shoes . . . I would (? shd.) be willing to write any old nonsense and send it in. It wouldn't be *all* nonsense by any means in your case, however irremediably you might think that you'd crapped the bed, and then you would be able to do a slightly better one the next time, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

In this, as elsewhere, Larkin had little appetite for public experimentation, or for the prospect of knocking out works for the sake of profit, profile and praxis. Amis, however, soon came to thrive on writing as a daily task, treating it much as one would treat any other profession – to be done every day, as part of a fixed routine which would keep his work almost permanently in the public eye. It was a principle of 'writing out' which yielded no less than twenty-three novels, four volumes of poetry and innumerable essays, propelling Amis's career ever further away from Larkin's own trickle of production.

Pondering these differences in his *Memoirs* in 1991, Amis confessed the limits of his own early view of Larkin:

Philip was to outward view an almost aggressively normal undergraduate of the non-highbrow, non-sherry-sipping sort, hard-swearing, hard-belching, etc. . . . I have since thought that some of this was a little strained and overdone, as if to repel any attempt at intimacy. The solitary creature of later years, unable to get through the day without spending a good part of it by himself . . . was

<sup>22</sup> Ian Hamilton, 'Sorry to Go on Like This', on Kingsley Amis and *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, in *The London Review of Books*, vol. 22, no. 11, 1 June 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Kingsley Amis to Philip Larkin, 7 March 1950, in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 229.

invisible to me then; most likely I was not looking hard enough.<sup>24</sup>

This passage tacitly accepts Amis's as the greater need at that time, blinding him to those essentially solitary aspects of Larkin's personality which would not yield to pressure. Tellingly, in Andrew Motion's biography of Larkin, Ruth Bowman's (Larkin's first serious partner) greatest complaint against Amis is reported as the degree to which he attempted to claim Larkin as his own:

He wanted to make Philip a "love 'em and lose 'em" type . . . He was possessive of Philip and tried to keep me separate from him.<sup>25</sup>

It was, in Amis's case, more than a matter of simple friendship or selfishness. As Martin Amis notes in *Experience*, his father continued to *need* people throughout his life in a very immediate sense:

There were many things he [Kingsley] couldn't do alone. When he paid his visits to Swansea, my sister escorted him there and went back to fetch him. Once, stranded in Newcastle, he took a taxi to London. Most crucially, though, he couldn't be alone in a house after dark.<sup>26</sup>

Extroversion concealed an unusually deep well of irrationality in Kingsley Amis – and while solitude was a refuge for Larkin, and perhaps the only state in which he felt 'there cautiously / Unfolds, emerges, what I am'<sup>27</sup>, Amis's social and sexual habits were counterpointed by crushing fears of aloneness, 'depersonalisation'<sup>28</sup> and much else besides<sup>29</sup>. As Amis himself would have been acutely aware, it was weakness as much as strength that motivated his promiscuity, and the 'solitary creature' waiting within Larkin must have seemed to him as much heroic as pitiable.

<sup>24</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs* (Harmondsworth, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Motion, *A Writer's Life*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Best Society', in *Collected Poems*, p. 57, ll. 31-2.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 285.

<sup>29</sup> As Martin Amis puts it, '. . . for a while I thought I would inherit my father's lavish array of phobias: aerophobia (he flew once, as a child: a five-shilling 'flip' at the seaside. That did it), acrophobia (when he took his children to the top floor of the Empire State, in 1959, it was only our presence, he said, that stopped him from screaming), and nyctophobia, or fear of the night', *Experience*, p. 112.

Larkin and Amis's relationship, then, was from the beginning a mixture of deep similarities and deep differences. As writers, they shared and resolutely preached a belief in the centrality of the relationship between author and audience, and of the ways in which this relationship should underwrite art's duties of clarity, critical insight and pleasure. In temperament and tone, they diverged wildly, publicly, and sometimes with despairing incomprehension on each side. Yet, as this chapter will explore, perhaps the greatest tension within all of Kingsley Amis's writing was his struggle to master the spectres of irrationalism, incoherence and historical fracture, and what these seemed to imply of the human: a struggle identical in many ways, and deeply indebted, to Larkin's engagements with the 'mess' of the twentieth century and the seemingly amoral wants of the 'idiot child' within.

## 2.ii. Literary criticism and the public role of writing

Notwithstanding his sporadic ‘weightings of the balance’, Kingsley Amis made directness and honesty the watchwords of his literary criticism every bit as vigorously as Larkin. John McDermott’s introduction to *The Amis Collection*, a selection of Kingsley’s non-fiction from 1954 to 1990, quotes Amis’s summary of his aims in literature as:

‘writing novels within the main English-language tradition. That is, trying to tell interesting stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style, no tricks, no experimental tomfoolery.’<sup>30</sup>

This is the ideology of non-ideology, presenting the author’s job as an honest-as-possible assessment of what is ‘understandable’ and ‘straightforward’: a position reliant upon his possession of common sense and his ability to keep an honest check on his idiosyncrasies. Writing on Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, for example, Amis deplored what he saw as the very ‘American’ idea that literature has a duty to be something monumental and exceptional, that it can be willed into greatness:

[*Moby Dick*] shows the author’s will at work in places where it has no business to be: the style *shall* be individual, the scope *shall* be universal, the whole thing *shall* be profound, a masterpiece. The pursuit of the masterpiece has bedevilled American writers ever since, both ‘creative’ and critical.<sup>31</sup>

The article goes on to attack the works of two of Martin Amis’s greatest heroes – Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow – for precisely this crime:

The same desire to find and reward the ‘great’, and that characteristically innocent readiness to take the will for the deed if the will is signalled boldly enough, have elevated Nabokov and Bellow, neither of whom writes English.<sup>32</sup>

The accusation is of egotism and self-aggrandisement. For Amis, the very concept of a deliberate ‘masterpiece’ is inimical to art because it replaces an honest work

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<sup>30</sup> John McDermott, ‘Introduction’ to Kingsley Amis, *The Amis Collection: Selected Non-Fiction 1954-1990* (London, 1990), p. xii.

<sup>31</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Sacred Cows’, in *The Amis Collection*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

motivated by the desire to please an audience with a project of self-glorification.

Bellow and Nabokov, in his view, are isolated from real life by an excess of will, and this is evidenced by their failure to write 'English' at all.

Despite notable lapses<sup>33</sup>, Amis's writings on literature are rigorous as well as opinionated. While Larkin could tolerate some experimentation, however, Amis's tendency was towards the dogmatic, and for him conspicuous virtuosity was invariably suspect. As Martin Amis puts it, 'To Kingsley . . . sustained euphony automatically became euphuism: always'<sup>34</sup>. Writing to Larkin on 19 April 1956, for example, Amis criticised a poem by John Wain and a novel by Iris Murdoch along parallel lines to his later attack on Bellow and Nabokov:

Wasn't John's first poem [presumably, Zachary Leader notes, 'Usefulness of Light'] frightful? I wanted to take out my pencil and scrawl COULD OF TOLD YOU THAT SHITFACE across it. What I think about poetry is that is pis [sic] it has got to be *instantaneously comprehensible* if anyone at all is going to read it these days. No use this "difficult simplicity" lark; no use being clear after one reading. Got to be clear *line by line*, see? . . . Read the new Murdoch yet? [*The Flight from the Enchanter* – for which Larkin reserved his own special bile] All seems very *unreal* to me. I can't believe that the chaps in it are real or doing things that real people do, if you take my meaning. Course I haven't finished it yet. The characters all seem abnormal, somehow. Any moment I expect to come across one of them singing the only song he knows, or turning out to have been a dwarf all along . . .<sup>35</sup>

Amis's concern are closely related to that threat explored in his B.Litt., of an art cramped into self-indulgence and inferiority by its improperly developed relationship with various audiences. The contemporary public's attention must be won and held, he argues, and even a poem which becomes clear 'after one reading' is not good enough 'these days' (a daunting take on modern readers, and one indicative of the degree to which Amis feared for as much as valued his readership). Murdoch's novel and Wain's poem fail to be of what Amis considers public interest: he finds them

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Amis cites the example of his father's review of *Lolita* as an especially egregious case of 'indifference to literary truth'; *Experience*, p. 121n.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 121n.

contrived and literary rather than engaged with what ‘real people do’, and thus they fail to be complete artistic achievements.

Iain Hamilton (not Ian Hamilton), in contrast, is singled out in Amis’s essay ‘Caledonian Attitudes’ as an example of the correctly modest, ‘human’ way to write a book:

Mr Hamilton has the virtues of honesty, humility and – above all – complete absence of that affectation which bedevils so many autobiographies . . . Few subjects are worthier or more of our own day than a man’s love-affair with his native hearth, provided the man is a man, and not a cheapjack or a rhapsodist or a professional Celt – especially that. In the present case, these provisions hold. *Scotland the Brave* shows itself in every line to be the work of a genuine human being and a genuine writer.<sup>36</sup>

Here, the words ‘writer’ and ‘human’ become synonymous: to write well is to refuse simple roles, such as a ‘cheapjack or a rhapsodist or a professional Celt’, and is instead to embrace the complex stuff of life honestly and modestly. Similarly, reviewing his friend<sup>37</sup> Anthony Powell’s novel *The Acceptance World* in 1955, Amis begins by making the point that an author must not be divided from the world he mirrors by an allegiance to abstractions. Rather, the review argues, he or she must be connected to it by a sincere commitment to self-examination –

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.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Kingsley Amis, letter to Philip Larkin, 19 April 1956, in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, pp. 466-67.

<sup>36</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Caledonian Attitudes’ (*Spectator*, 15 November 1957), in *the Amis Collection*, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> Amis first met Powell in 1953. A useful potted history is offered in Stephen Holden’s ‘Anthony Powell and Kingsley Amis’, in ‘The Anthony Powell Society Newsletter’, no. 2, Spring 2001, p.3 – ‘Anthony Powell first became aware of Kingsley Amis in 1953 from a review (possibly of James Thurber’s writings) in which Amis, then an unknown writer having not yet published his first novel *Lucky Jim*, praised Powell’s novels. He wrote to Amis thanking him for the comment, and they subsequently met . . . Before they met Powell reviewed *Lucky Jim* for *Punch* . . . Powell was astute and open-minded enough to realise that, “far from being a professionally philistine book it is one that could only come from a writer who had thought a great deal about the arts.”’

<sup>38</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Afternoon World’, (*Spectator*, 13 May 1955), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 58.

As Amis's reviews make consistently clear, this duty of 'irony and scepticism' is crucial. Similarly to Bellow and Nabokov, Somerset Maugham is identified as a poor chronicler of the human condition through his inadequacies of style:

The connection between deficiencies of approach and poverty of language is clear enough . . . to narrate in all apparent seriousness that 'slumber fell upon their tired eyelids like the light rain of spring upon the freshly-turned earth', and to leave it uncanceled, is no mere local blemish. It charts the limits of Mr Maugham's celebrated sense of irony with uncomfortable precision.<sup>39</sup>

Amis's article uses 'irony' in its precise sense: words whose intended meaning is distinct from their literal meaning. As Amis sees it, Maugham's failure of irony is a failure of self-awareness: readers will note the triteness he had failed to 'cancel' in his own phrase, and will begin to dismiss his fiction as an exercise derived too much from 'will' and his role as a 'great author' and too little from his abilities as a 'genuine human being'.

These views are interestingly reformulated in some of Amis's comments on George Orwell. In defiance of popular taste, which has made *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1948) among the century's most lastingly popular novels, Amis's 1956 essay 'The Road to Airstrip One' attempts to establish the Orwell most worthy of lasting admiration as the author of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and the *Essays*. Dismissing the pessimism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) as an unjustifiable deviation from actuality, Amis argues that 'Not until his [Orwell's] fantasies have been exposed and discarded can we properly value the truths he told'<sup>40</sup>. Amis is attempting to warn his readers against what he sees as Orwell's seductive irrationalism and his temptingly gratuitous vision of evil:

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<sup>39</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Mr Maugham's Notions' on *Somerset Maugham: a Biographical and Critical Study* by Richard Cordell (*Spectator*, 7 July 1961), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 65.

<sup>40</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'The Road to Airstrip One' on *A Study of George Orwell* by Christopher Hollis (*Spectator*, 31 August 1956), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 98.

[The] real hero [of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*] is not the sapless Winston Smith but the inhuman O'Brien. 'If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.' It was Orwell's own picture, and being divorced from probability it was offered for its own sake.<sup>41</sup>

Orwell's 'fantasies' are, for Amis, offered in a spirit of unconscious gratification, albeit of a perverse kind, and subtly undermine the prospect of facing the existing world as it is. It is a criticism interestingly paralleled by one of the few mentions made of pornography in his writing, in a piece for *The Spectator* in 1986:

Pornography . . . has no analogy with the social act of talking to someone and its reader has no sense of an author; places, time, individuals and their motives and reactions vanish too. In this sense, as in others, it is dehumanizing. And it is no respecter of motives.<sup>42</sup>

This pornography is an 'art', like Orwell's, offered 'for its own sake', removing all obligations between its consumers and the world, and Amis brushes aside its 'dehumanizing' effects in a few terse sentences. Much as in Larkin's case, however, such a fantastical dismantling of motives and reactions was a possibility both more troubling and appealing to Amis than his essays suggest.

Between 1984 and 1985, Amis spent a year editing a poetry column for *The Mirror*, later collected as *The Pleasure of Poetry* (1990), and it was through this that he set out more directly than at any other time to gauge (and to inform) popular taste. As with both his failed thesis and his editing of *The Faber Popular Reciter* in 1978, Amis was interested in the ways in which literature, and poetry in particular, could still matter to the general public. Along these lines, Paul Fussell observes:

Part of the motive . . . [of the *Mirror* column was] to see how many people would respond to poetry that was understandable and that did not humiliate them . . . [in response to which Amis] received thousands of letters of encouragement and praise, and he must have felt that he'd done exactly what he'd aimed at when John Mortimer told him that three years after the poetry column closed down, a London taxi driver said he missed it.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'The Road to Airstrip One', in *The Amis Collection*, p. 98.

<sup>42</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Why Are You Telling Me This?', (*Spectator*, 23 August 1986), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 26.

Of all his writings, the article Amis wrote for *The Mirror* at the inception of this column provides perhaps his most concentrated summary of how and why he felt literature mattered – and, especially, of its central role in shouldering that burden of moral and metaphysical instruction once borne by religion:

Poetry is important. It is not a highbrow fad nor a youthful fun thing nor a tasteful amusement for old ladies.

Poetry shows the human race asking and trying to answer those basic questions that are also at the root of religion:

WHAT are we doing on this earth?

HOW are we to live our lives?

WHAT really matters?

IS there anything that will help us overcome or put up with the darker side of our natures and our lives?<sup>44</sup>

As well as publishing a poem a day with brief commentary, five days a week, Amis conducted through his column a survey in which he asked his readers to award marks out of ten for twenty selected poems circulated among the willing – a method echoing I. A. Richards's in *Practical Criticism* (1929) as well as that of the Mass-Observation Movement. He received six hundred and thirty-one replies, from which he drew the following general conclusions:

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.

. . . Now I step down unwillingly, because this is the most rewarding job I have ever had.<sup>45</sup>

Amis's central point is that, far from being an anachronistic hope, his desire for greater 'humanity' in writing and reading is one shared by many readers – but that this need is being addressed neither by the modern state nor by modern poets. As he replied to a Mr. Turner, who wrote to *The Mirror* in April 1984 complaining that

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Anti-Egotist: Kingsley Amis, Man of Letters* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 158 & 163.

<sup>44</sup> cf. Paul Fussell, *The Anti-Egotist*, p. 159.

Amis was using his column to reprint only well-anthologised and largely non-contemporary poets,

The poems published in the Daily Mirror may be well known to you but they are clearly not to many other readers. Of course you can look up lots of poems in anthologies, but to do so you first have to know that they exist. You say rightly, though perhaps rather obviously, that the poets cited in the Daily Mirror could not have survived without being published in their own time. Reflect that their work found a publisher who was not subsidized by the Arts Council or anyone else, which I bet is not true of any of the female nonentities you mention.<sup>46</sup>

On this theme, Amis's 1985 pseudo-dictionary 'Sod the Public: A Consumer's Guide' is a satire against the culture of subsidies and official art, and closely echoes both the tone and the content of Larkin's 'Introduction' to *All What Jazz*:

ARTS COUNCIL: Grants and bursaries from this detestable and destructive body in effect pay producers, painters, writers and such *in advance*. This is a straight invitation to them to sod the public, whose ticket money they are no longer obliged to attract, and to seek the more immediate approval of their colleagues and friends instead . . . The system encourages a habit of thought whereby 'creative people' can be divided into *artists*, who deliver serious, important, innovative, difficult stuff and so of course have to have financial help, and *entertainers*, whose work is easy to understand, enjoyable and therefore popular [.]<sup>47</sup>

Such satire is all very well but, much as in Larkin's strictures against 'modernism', the bullishness of Amis's tone is counterpointed by a deeper unease. As Amis must have been aware when replying to Mr Turner, the overwhelming bias in his column towards dead and long-dead poets sat uneasily against his preaching of poetry's ongoing importance.

As well as their character, Amis's fears for art here share their chronology with Larkin's. Nineteen-fourteen is the watershed and modernism the epitome of an

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<sup>45</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Poetry in the Mirror' (*Daily Mirror*, 18 March 1985), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> Kingsley Amis to Bill Turner, 24 April 1984, in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, pp. 972-3.

<sup>47</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Sod the Public: A Consumer's Guide' (*Spectator*, 19 October 1985), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 231.

intolerable fragmentation in society and art. Lecturing in 1980 on his edition of *The Faber Popular Reciter*, Amis noted:

I discovered incidentally, and not surprisingly, that the kind of verse in question [suitable for recitation] stopped being written soon after nineteen-fourteen. It wasn't just that the Great War made it difficult to go on being patriotic and devout in the old way; to write a poem like 'Horatius' [the most famous of Thomas Babbington Macaulay's 'Lays of Ancient Rome', detailing how the heroic Horatius held the bridge across the Tiber against invasion] you need confidence in your civilisation and its values, and the battle of the Somme put paid to that.<sup>48</sup>

Amis's reference to the Somme acknowledges something of the historical pressures which transformed Europe around 1914. It remains extremely unclear, however, where Amis stands on the issue of civilization's 'values', let alone what they might be: whether he feels they were an asset irrecoverably lost after the Great War, whether it was simply 'confidence' in them that was lost, or whether they were revealed as having always been illusory. His 'Introduction' to the *Reciter* itself offers some elucidation, but creates as many problems as it resolves:

Clarity, heavy rhythms, strong rhymes and the rest are the vehicles of confidence, of a kind of innocence, of shared faiths and other long-extinct states of mind. The two great themes of popular verse were the nation and the Church, neither of which, to say the least, confers much sense of community any longer. Minor themes, like admiration of or desire for a simple rustic existence, have just been forgotten.<sup>49</sup>

As in Larkin's 'MCMXIV', the pain of lost innocence – of a social and artistic Eden from which modernity is forever fallen – permeates this passage; and, as in 'Church Going', the fear that the present has been irreversibly impoverished by its irreligiousness and disunity provides a troubling subtext. The twentieth century itself is being labelled the problem and, despite their attempts at reasoned historical appraisal, both Amis's lecture and 'Introduction' leave his hopes of writing for a

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<sup>48</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Anthologies' (lecture, delivered in 1980), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 145.

<sup>49</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Introduction' to *The Faber Popular Reciter* (London, 1978), p. 18.

contemporary and 'common' sensibility looking ragged. Any reader coming to them fresh from the *Mirror* column in search of good, contemporary verse instead finds themselves returned (without much hope of a solution) to those crises which drove modernist poetry away from the old 'values' in the first place – to the hypocrisy and irrelevance which 'patriotic and devout' poetry seemed sick with in the face of events like the Somme – and to that idea so hotly disputed by Amis elsewhere, that there no longer exists a public place or desire for serious, intelligent, lucid literary art.

### 2.iii. The decline of Christianity

Writing in 1987, Amis termed himself ‘an unwilling unbeliever, one with a sense of deep and continuous attachment to the Christian religion’<sup>50</sup>, and argued that:

One principle I can accede to is that human beings without faith are the poorer for it in every part of their lives. But many of those in that condition are far from being entirely pauperised, indeed are decidedly rich compared to the truly godless, those who know and care nothing about God at all. To us who were brought up or partly brought up as Christians but who cannot believe, a world without religion in it would nevertheless be as sad and dreadful a place as a world in which art as we know it might become impossible to create [.]<sup>51</sup>

If anything, Amis was still more troubled than Larkin by the consequences of Christianity’s decline in England, lamenting the dissipation of religious faith as both a general impoverishment and an intense personal absence. Like Larkin, however, it was the institution of the Church rather than its God that Amis seemed to mourn – religious feeling he could admire, but the notion of divinity itself he was delighted to throw out. As he reported from a conversation with the Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko:

‘You atheist?’ he asked me in English.  
‘Well yes, but it’s more that I hate him.’<sup>52</sup>

Amis’s essay ‘On Christ’s Nature’ (1962) reinforces this rejection of the divine aspects of religion, summing up his position as ‘In rough proportion as he moves away from being divine Jesus invites approval and affection.’<sup>53</sup>. An equally unambiguous statement can be found at the heart of his 1966 novel *The Anti-Death League*, in the poem titled ‘To a Baby Born Without Limbs’. It begins:

This is just to show you whose boss around here.  
It’ll keep you on your toes, so to speak,  
Make you put your best foot forward, so to speak,

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<sup>50</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Godforsaken’ (*Spectator*, 18 April 1987), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 226.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 226.

<sup>52</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Kipling Good’ (1962), in *What Became of Jane Austen?*, p. 174.

<sup>53</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘On Christ’s Nature’ (1962), in *What Became of Jane Austen?*, p. 219.

And give you something to turn your hand to, so to speak.<sup>54</sup>

Amis's poem concisely illustrates the flip-side of 'Church Going's' case for the secular virtues of religious institutions, arguing that the very concept of an omnipotent deity is an evil and essentially anti-human one. Martin Amis, writing admiringly on 'To a Baby Born Without Limbs', highlights its connection of the inhuman possibility of absolute power and the all-too-human possibility of indifference to suffering –

Here we have the voice of omnipotent evil, but also the voice of atrocity, with its brutish facetiousness, its clunking puns. Here we have the 'murdering bastard' who can't even spell, who can't even parse, who can't even *write*[.]<sup>55</sup>

In other words, there has never been a better or more watertight excuse for the doing of harm than God. Yet, as Kingsley's confession of yearning for faith suggests, he often found it difficult to believe that words could be found which might exert a similarly unifying, and even beautiful, force as religion. The role Amis wanted some church-like institution or public art to take up was secular in theory – but both he and Larkin suspected this was a role the Church had been able to perform in the first place only because of its position as a repository of religious faith.

In 1970, attempting to link universities and the Church as twin points of access to those things 'permanent in human nature', Amis made a secular case similar to the thesis of 'Church Going' for the value of an unchanging Church within contemporary society:

Like the university, which she still resembles in several ways, the Church must shut her mind firmly against the needs of society . . . If she is to survive, the one thing she must not do is move with the times. She must pursue or regain her role as a force for order and continuity [.]<sup>56</sup>

Understandably, this was a position galling to many reformers trying to make their Church accessible for a new generation of believers. It is difficult, however, not to

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<sup>54</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Anti-Death League* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 132, ll. 1-4.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 188.

sympathise with Amis's argument that 'modernised' church texts and rituals lacked gravitas and beauty, and that many new claims of accessibility and freedom were morally and spiritually vacuous. By exchanging 'order and continuity' for short-term appeal, Amis felt, the church had allowed its message to fall woefully out of balance towards pleasing the present at the expense of the deeper human issues it had for centuries scrutinised. It was religion as art that Amis lamented, and religion as bad art was for him no religion at all.

Amis did in fact attempt to represent fictionally that world 'devoid of religious feeling' presaged by his essays, in the self-confessed 'melodrama' *Russian Hide and Seek* (1980). Martin Amis accuses this of being a 'bugbear novel: a fantasy that is also a "warning" '57, but it is also one of Kingsley Amis's most revealing works, opening wide many of the personal and emotive conflicts at the root of his criticisms of society, and showing how a critique of one kind of ideology (Communism) can begin tacitly to endorse another kind of ideology and myth (Christian ritual and a 'lost England'). In *Russian Hide and Seek*, we are presented with a future England which, under Soviet rule, has witnessed the forcible destruction of religious practice and also the dissipation of Marxist ideology, leaving a state of profound emptiness and ennui. In this setting, several of its principal characters – and above all the psychopathic Alexander – seem barely able to function as human beings. Colonel Nicholas Tabidze summarizes their state in conversation with his fellow officers:

. . . Marxism has ceased to exist. Its followers have died or fallen into cynicism or impotence. And what has replaced it? . . . What has replaced it is nothing, nothingness. No theory of social democracy, or liberalism, anything like that, nor even a non-political code of decency or compassion . . . Christianity had gone long since and none of the new religions and cults took hold . . . All our books are lies. So what do we live by? Self-interest isn't enough for most people, there are too many activities it doesn't enter into.

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<sup>56</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Postscript' (1970) to 'On Christ's Nature' (1962) in *What Became of Jane Austen?*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 178n.

Sensual enjoyment – even more limited. So we act [.]<sup>58</sup>

Amis's parallel universe has, here, begun to sound close to his worst impressions of the present – godless, formless, pointless, intellectually and morally hollow.

The characters in *Russian Hide-and-Seek* sense this spiritual vacancy and, like Amis himself, yearn for something more. Above all, and seemingly innately, they long for the comforts of religion and art. Alexander, entering a disused church in the process of restoration, experiences a strange combination of wonder and instinctive reverence:

. . . there had been something about what had been here, and in innumerable other such places, that men had been ready to die for – long ago . . . At the door he found to his mild surprise that he had taken his cap off; he could not remember having done so.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly to both Larkin and Iris Murdoch, Amis makes the empty church a resonant and fascinating image; an emblem of vast social and spiritual change, but also of something fundamental in the human that is serious and reverential as well as vicious and needy. *Russian Hide and Seek*, however, also sees Amis at his most sentimental and conservative – working into the heart of his novel a lament for the passing of England's proud history of democracy, liberty, justice, martial bravery, literature and religion which is both intellectually paralysing and simplistic. It is an old priest, Glover, who serves as the vehicle for these observations:

To take away our books was a crime as great as taking away our churches. Until the year before you came we were still free. We . . . [here he moves from speaking Russian to English] *we chose our rulers and dismissed them if they were unsatisfactory, within some limits we could say and write what we pleased, the courts were fair, we could come and go . . . And we had fought for our freedom, again and again . . . It won't be very long now before nobody knows how we stood alone against Hitler, how but for us and the Americans your own precious country would have been defeated.*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Russian Hide and Seek* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 104-5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 73.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 117-8.

This contains many acknowledgements of positive aspects of Amis's own times, and is accurate in outline, but the England it and the novel as a whole lament is more akin to that of Larkin's 'MCMXIV' than the compromised contemporary world Amis lambasted elsewhere.

Ultimately, *Russian Hide and Seek* is more anti-present than it is anti-Communist, its attacks on illiteracy, irreligiousness, neophilia and amorality echoing many of Amis's essays, but with few of their efforts at balance or specificity. Most tellingly of all, it is a strangely loveless book: its characters fabricate meaningless rebellions out of boredom and despair, but there is little in these that suggests the survival of any values other than power and fear. Indeed, there is nothing in the novel's main action to match the passion and poignancy of Glover's speeches, which include a sermon given in a restored English church:

*A world without purpose except that of survival is a miserable place . . . The freedom we once enjoyed is gone for good, and England will never be happy again. But there is one certain way of triumphing over whatever may be done to us . . . It is the one way to recover our pride as a nation and our sense of purpose as men and women. And God is the way. More than at any time before we need God, need him . . . as a drowning man needs air.<sup>61</sup>*

The novel's ultimate impact resembles the reaction of the Russian officer Joseph Wright to this service. Wright desperately hopes that the restoration of the church might be a transforming experience, a redemption. His disappointment is also the novel's, and speaks powerfully of the fragility of Amis's hopes for the present:

He [Joseph Wright] realized that he had begun to put a growing emotional stake on the service . . . And nothing had happened, so unequivocally and with such finality that the chance of any significant event, any change, was ruled out for ever. That was the day Wright finally despaired.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Russian Hide and Seek*, p. 175.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 176.

Despair is, according to Aquinas, the only unforgivable sin – the sin against hope by defect – and Wright’s despair is doubly bitter in that he has given up not only on God but also on man.

The conflicts within Amis’s attitudes to the decline of religion are equally evident in his other parallel-world novel, *The Alteration* (1976), which presents the supposed dystopia of an England gone entirely the opposite way to that of *Russian Hide and Seek* – ruled by a vastly powerful Catholic church as a semi-feudal state. The novel’s opening presents, in a parallel present, the funeral of England’s King Stephen III at the Cathedral Basilica of St. George at Coverley (Cowley). Despite his playful imaginings of the alternative life-histories of various artists and political figures (and an interesting prefiguring of his son’s parallel-monarchy novel, *Yellow Dog* (2005) ), Amis’s lovingly-detailed vision of this setting and its masterpieces reveals an intense longing for the spiritual and artistic collaborations of the great Medieval and Renaissance Cathedrals, and for their roles as centres of political, artistic, metaphysical and public life:

Apart from Wren’s magnificent dome, the most renowned of the sights to be seen was the vast Turner ceiling in commemoration of the Holy Victory, the fruit of four and a half years’ virtually uninterrupted work; there was nothing like it anywhere . . . Along the south wall ran Blake’s still-brilliant frescoes depicting St Augustine’s progress through England . . . only admiration had ever attended – to take a diverse selection – the William Morris spandrels on the transept arches, the unique chryselephantine pyx, the gift of an archbishop of Zululand, above the high altar, and Epstone’s massive marble Pieta.<sup>63</sup>

The building represents a utopian unity and continuity of English art, and a public role for such works, unmatched by actuality: Turner become the equal of Michelangelo in achieved ambition, Blake’s art located at the heart of a living canon, William Morris encompassed within that continuing tradition. This is an extreme, wish-fulfilling

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<sup>63</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Alteration* (London, 1976), pp. 7-8.

version of Larkin's sense of the church as a common, serious, beautiful ground – including the more private sub-text of an England centred on Oxford (Cowley) – and it sits uneasily against the novel's explorations of the hypocrisies and injustices of the Church in this other world. Consistently, the humanist message put across by a good priest, Lyall, and embodied in Hubert Anvil's efforts to escape the 'alteration' of the title – castration, which will preserve his wonderful soprano voice – is undermined by a palpable longing for the exquisite art and cultural cohesion permitted by the structures of this society.

This unease is most evident in the sudden plot development that removes the agency of choice from Hubert, acting as a *deus ex machina* to diffuse the tensions of the novel. Poised to escape England for the more liberal pastures of the United States, Hubert suddenly develops testicular torsion, leading to the unavoidable loss of his testes. Through this device, Amis evades having to confront the central fracture of the novel: between the evidence of its art – which is public, beautiful and profound – and its society, which is immoral, totalitarian and hypocritical. Equally importantly, Amis avoids having to describe the ethically superior liberalism of America, a land which might well have seemed banal in contrast to the riches of his England. Disturbingly for someone who elsewhere argues that art's role lies in accessibly presenting the 'human' and in assaulting the hypocritical and the self-serving, Amis in *The Alteration* suggests great art and a decent society as insolubly divergent. The morally squalid England of *The Alteration* not only fails to poison its own sense of beauty – as that of *Russian Hide and Seek* does – but actively nurtures the kind of seriousness and continuity which Amis's work elsewhere demands. Talking with Lyall half-way through, a worldly priest, Flackerty, offers an analysis of the situation which is

entirely cynical and yet to which neither Lyall nor the novel can offer any convincing riposte:

I feel nothing but wonder and gratitude when I look on so many centuries of patience, hope, content, trust, constancy, restraint and certitude, so much art, letters, music, learning, all founded upon one great lie . . . tyranny alone can let men be safe and serene.<sup>64</sup>

Amis evidently intended *The Alteration* as a study of the insidious links between power, patronage and the dressing of atrocity in beauty; as a ‘warning’ more psychologically realistic than novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Instead, there emerges from it the troubling implication that, because it is natural for people to be dominated by their fears and delusions, humanity’s best hope for continuity and contentedness lies in a controlling tyranny dressed in compelling illusions.

*The Alteration*’s final chapter reminds us of Hubert’s lost possibilities – his exclusion from love and family, the extinction of his gift for composition – and makes almost over-emphatically clear the moral repugnance of his society, detailing its Yorkshire-born Pope’s plans for mass exterminations via war and disease. *The Alteration*’s closing image is, however, like its opening, that of an exquisite piece of art – of Hubert singing, and of the rapture of his audience. Both reader and Hubert now know that the state within which these great cathedrals are built and these great arias performed is a rotten one; but Amis’s prose seems unable to reject either the works of art built upon these lies or the darker suspicion that such ends might in part justify their means. In its potent combination of authoritarian power, religion and high art, *The Alteration* offers the temptations of a coherence men seem too weak and distracted to achieve by more honest means. It is a coherence which, at several points, appears a more certain and tempting refuge from modernity than any amount

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<sup>64</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Alteration*, p. 100.

of post-Christian humanism.

#### **2.iv. Will and self-abandonment**

Faced by the conflicts between Amis's hopes and fears for the present, it is useful to return to the fraught relationship between his creative writing and his non-fiction.

Throughout Amis's essays, his strongest criticisms of other authors centre on the dangers of self-indulgence, wilfulness and role-playing, all of which he connected as failures of full 'humanity'. As he summarised in his review of Anthony Powell's *The Acceptance World* (1955):

. . . if effort is assertion of the will, and to assert the will is to indulge the desire for power, self-abandonment becomes their [Powell's characters'] only way of staying human. Whatever alternative may be salvaged by *The Music of Time* when complete, we can at least recognise meanwhile that it is better, in all situations, to submit like Jenkins than to climb like Widmerpool [.]<sup>65</sup>

Amis's message is clear: no matter what the situation, the exercise of will and the desire for greatness are corrupting. Coming from the author whose very first novel charted the pleasure-driven climb of Jim Dixon into metropolitan money, such a message may seem slightly paradoxical, and a closer look at Amis's fiction reveals a series of subtle – and often mobile – distinctions in operation.

Jim Dixon sets the pattern for many of Amis's most sympathetic characters. Content to take opportunities as they come, Jim cherishes no illusions of his own importance or destiny and perceives the absurdities of the social games in which he is involved. He appears to have no abstract ambitions, and is quick to confess his desires – he is a man seeking a comfortable, decent life, who is far too pragmatic and quick-witted to nurture any grand 'commitments'. Powell's Widmerpool, in contrast, puts his faith into roles and abstractions: he believes in social status as a certain good, and is in many ways both a 'cheapjack' and a 'rhapsodist'. Most significantly,

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<sup>65</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Afternoon World' on *The Acceptance World* by A. Powell (*Spectator*, 13 May 1955), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 59.

Widmerpool is an object of comedy and never its creator, remaining dourly and perpetually serious about his own actions: the speech he gives at a school reunion towards the end of *The Acceptance World*, ‘drunk with his own self-importance’<sup>66</sup>, is a comically immodest display. As Powell makes equally clear, however, ‘will’ has brought Widmerpool worldly success commensurate with his pomposity. He is a City man, modern and affluent, and the central motive for his speech is revenge on those contemporaries who hated and humiliated him at school –

he [Widmerpool] wanted to impress Le Bas’s Old Boys – those former schoolfellows who had so greatly disregarded him – with the fact that he was getting on in the world in spite of them; that he had already become a person to be reckoned with.<sup>67</sup>

In this sense, *Lucky Jim* straddles a central and extremely slippery divide in Amis’s work: between the negativity of egotistical ‘will’ and the business of making pragmatic decisions unencumbered by dogma and pretension. One character is admired and the other deplored, yet Dixon’s and Widmerpool’s successes are not dissimilar: each progresses into affluent London away from the snubs and snobbery of their former lives, and each represents a new and more mobile future. Dixon is an individualist and a debunker of pretensions where Widmerpool is a creature of profit and moneyed consensus; but the very existence of Widmerpool-types casts doubt on *Lucky Jim*’s unproblematic treatment of its character’s success, and highlights the evasiveness in Amis’s desire for harmony. As with many of Amis’s characters, if we did not warm so readily to this man’s wit and self-effacement, we might not actually like him.

Amis’s ambivalence towards Jim Dixon’s social rise is emphasised by the ending of his second novel, *That Uncertain Feeling* (1955), in which John Lewis –

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<sup>66</sup> Anthony Powell, *The Acceptance World* (London, 1991), p. 192.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 194.

chief protagonist and narrator – pointedly refuses to abandon his roots despite opportunities to ‘rise’ (and infidelities with upper-crust women). Having turned down the prospect of a career in London, Lewis ends the novel working for the local colliery in a Welsh village, happily committed to married life. The final paragraph describes him and his wife, escaped from a pretentious party and heading off together to the pub:

I took Jean’s arm and we moved across the square. The shift at the pit had just emerged and colliers in their neat suits and caps were walking past us or towards the pub. I waved to an overman I knew. An ancient bus half full of more colliers chuntered by. At the pub door we had to wait for a moment until the way cleared ahead of us. To anyone watching it might have looked as if Jean and I, too, were coming off shift.<sup>68</sup>

Both on its own and in comparison to *Lucky Jim*’s triumphant finale, this scene fails to satisfy. Its easy synthesis between Lewis and local workers – his cheery wave, the measured tone – wishfully idealises Welsh working-class communities; while Lewis’s wordless marital harmony, brushing aside all earlier dissatisfactions, is equally contrived. ‘Surrender’ may be preferable to ‘will’ in principle, but, as this scene suggests, the practical application of such a principle clashes with many aspects of the human nature exhibited even by such sympathetic everymen as Jim Dixon and John Lewis.

As Martin Amis notes in *Experience*, ‘My father had the innocence you need to be a novelist, and the greater innocence you need to be a poet’<sup>69</sup>. More intimate and confessional than much of his other work, Kingsley’s poetry – often ignored by contemporary critics – offers insights into conflicts and shades of meaning suppressed by his prose. The early poem, ‘Masters’, for example, provides an extended analysis of the fraught relationship between ‘will’ and ‘self-abandonment’, concluding:

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<sup>68</sup> Kingsley Amis, *That Uncertain Feeling* (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 254.

<sup>69</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 132 .

By yielding mastery the will is freed,  
 For it is by surrender that we live,  
 And we are taken if we wish to give,  
 Are needed if we need.<sup>70</sup>

The tone of early Auden dominates, and Amis's phrases sacrifice some sense for sound, but this stanza still points towards a more supple expansion of his comments on *The Acceptance World*: to be fully, sympathetically human is to surrender hopes of isolated 'mastery', and is instead to confess to the far more uncertain needs which motivate such hope.

Another of Amis's early poems, 'The Value of Suffering', attempts a more specific account than 'Masters' of the value of self-questioning individualism over conformity to abstract ideals:

What a shame that a regal house must founder,  
 Its menials die, its favourites undergo  
 Unheard-of rape, to emphasize a contrast,  
 To point one thing out to one person;  
 Especially since the person could have seen  
 What it was all about by watching faces  
 After his father's joke, instead of laughing,  
 By changing places with his groom,  
 By sixty seconds' thought.<sup>71</sup>

The sarcasm of the opening – 'What a shame' – targets the deserved decline of pig-headed privilege, but the point is a serious one: that blindly laughing along with the 'father's joke' is a failure with potentially appalling consequences. Violence has now been inflicted on innocent 'menials' as well as the more guilty 'favourites', stemming from the self-absorption of 'one person'. Yet, as the title spells out, there is benefit to be won. The eldest son, once a boorish sycophant, has become visionary:

<sup>70</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Masters', in Kingsley Amis, *A Case of Samples, Poems 1946-1956* (London, 1956), p. 17, ll. 21-24.

<sup>71</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'The Value of Suffering', in *A Case of Samples*, pp. 38-9, ll. 19-27.

He roams the crumbling courts and speaks to none;  
 But all crave blessing from his hand that clasps  
 A book, who never feared its pretty sword.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly to Larkin's insistence on mortality and human limitations as spurs to kindness, the 'book' with which the protagonist emerges from disaster proves of greater force than any 'pretty sword'. This is the value of suffering – forcing individuals towards insights which both worldly goods and 'will' keep from them. The 'sixty seconds' thought' that could have brought change is thus a wry meiosis – the possibility of a transformed understanding was a mere minute's thought away, but only intense suffering could break this man's self-absorption.

In part, 'The Value of Suffering' invokes this brutal education so that its audience can avoid such a possibility. Its protagonist's progress is a secular conversion, transforming him into a saintly figure; and he, like the poem itself, is now able to preach simply through his presence the benefits of 'sixty seconds' spent testing principles and boundaries. The poem's moral scheme also appears clear: ignorant conformity has received a comeuppance which self-questioning would have avoided. What remains unclear, however, is its larger take on human nature. Is this protagonist representative in his initial lack of imaginative sympathy? and could change have been effected without the trauma of extreme events? Tacitly, perhaps, the answers to these questions are *yes* and *no*. Yet this potential to see 'what it was all about' embodies one of the most positive themes in Amis's work: the ability and the desire to escape the constraints of a role, and to understand others in a manner conditional upon the confession of personal needs and uncertainties.

Such feeling is, in the poem 'Nocturne', seen as what makes us human rather than animal –

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<sup>72</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'The Value of Suffering', in *A Case of Samples*, p. 39, ll. 16-18.

What beast holds off its paw to gesture,  
Or gropes towards being understood?<sup>73</sup>

Our groping into language, here – the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings – sets us apart. Yet the very next poem in *A Case of Samples* suggests a troubling dominance of certain ‘animal’ tendencies in human nature:

Not to draw a knife  
Looks like an act of kindness,  
And is, acted to the life.<sup>74</sup>

‘Kindness’, here, is to refrain from a customary brutality. The norm, then, is violent and selfish – and once again Amis’s work wrestles with the fear that the beautiful lies of religion and the compulsions of authoritarianism might, like the infliction of suffering, be necessary evils in a society hoping to regulate man’s worst impulses.

Amis’s novels repeatedly return to the relationship between selfishness and kindness, and not always within the happy-ever-after trajectories of *Lucky Jim* or *That Uncertain Feeling*. One of his most eloquent heroes, Maurice Allington, is faced near the end of *The Green Man* (1969) with an opportunity to destroy the powers of an evil sorcerer, Underhill. Allington proves able to resist temptation and to go through with an exorcism. Analysing his own motives afterwards, however, he is entirely unable to divide the unselfish from the selfish, his empathy from his fears -

‘I’ll teach you peace of mind’ [Underhill tempts him]  
Now there was an offer . . . Then I thought of the Tyler girl and the Ditchfield girl [Underhill’s past victims] and Amy [his own daughter] and whoever might be next . . . but I have often wondered since whether what made up my mind for me was not the unacceptability of the offer as such, whether we are not all so firmly attached, in all senses, to what we are that any radical change, however unarguably for the better, is bound to seem a kind of self-destruction.<sup>75</sup>

Almost too intensely, Allington recognizes the need for self-confirmation implied by all feelings for others, and the fears that were implicit in all his generousities: to change

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<sup>73</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Nocturne’, in *A Case of Samples*, p. 45, ll. 14-15.

himself, even here, would have demanded the most violent of traumas and a kind of self-destruction. Similarly, when Allington acknowledges 'peace of mind' as the most tempting of all Underhill's propositions, he reveals just how easily and gratefully a path of complacent immobility might be taken.

Allington's victory over Underhill is a deeply equivocal one, and it embodies the ambivalence behind so much of the comedy of Amis's novels: that there can be no firm line drawn between wilful self-interest and enlightened decency. Instead, as in Larkin's work, there remains the more troublesome insistence that confession of vulnerability may permit kindness: a confession unable to erase the 'will' that makes 'not to draw a knife' an act of kindness, but perhaps able to refine it, subjecting it to a scrutiny akin to the shocks of suffering or of love.

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<sup>74</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Act of Kindness', in *A Case of Samples*, p. 46, ll. 17-19.

<sup>75</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Green Man* (Harmondsworth, 1988), pp. 167-8.

## 2.v. Sanity and comedy

Approvingly quoting Ian Robinson, a staunch fellow-opponent of prayer-book reform,

Kingsley Amis argued in an essay of 1973 that:

There is now a style in which it is impossible to discuss anything seriously. I have seldom seen . . . a phrase that better sums up the prevailing tone of newspaper comment than [Robinson's description of] 'a directionless irony that gives nothing but the writer's superiority to what he describes.'<sup>76</sup>

There are few tasks Amis's essays and novels seemed to relish more – or take more seriously – than assaulting such 'directionless', inadequate dictions. As he observed in 1960, the realm of advertising in particular was symptomatic of a threat of

. . . the extinction of unselfconsciousness . . . they [the advertisers] bash on with their fake consumer surveys, their pseudo-science, their publicity palmed off as fact, above all their high-grade imbecile notions of what is glamorous and exciting.<sup>77</sup>

Amis's contempt is in part driven by the suspicion that such 'high-grade imbecile notions' constitute opportunistic colonisations of that void once filled by authentic religious and artistic experience. When Steve is first committed to a mental institution in *Stanley and the Women*, for example, it is to the imagery of religion that Amis turns – 'She [Steve's mother] walked him to the door as though they were going into church'<sup>78</sup>. Representing an attempt to explore in precise, contemporary terms human needs, fears, desires and relations, psychology potentially shared many of Amis's aims as a novelist. As we soon realise, however, *Stanley and the Women's* hospital – like Larkin's sterile pseudo-cathedral in 'The Building' – is a spiritually and intellectually pauperised place, its language fodder for banal, uncritical theories. This, for Amis, is a farcical version of art or religion's concerns for the human: a realm of trite abstractions and ersatz-spiritual formulae.

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<sup>76</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Up to Our Neck' on *The Survival of English: essays in criticism of language*, by Ian Robinson (*Observer*, 6 August 1973), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 293.

<sup>77</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Lone Voices' (1960) in *What Became of Jane Austen?*, pp. 159-160.

<sup>78</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Stanley and the Women*, pp. 66-67.

Both *Jake's Thing* (1978) and *Stanley and the Women* (1984) witness the disastrous 'treatments' of major characters in attempts to restore, respectively, libido and sanity, and provide prime opportunities for Amis to vent his spleen against those whose 'expertise' he saw as a licence for empathetically barren, self-serving agendas. Comedy, as ever, is his greatest weapon in this business. Dr Rosenberg, Jake's sexual therapist in *Jake's Thing*, is a magnificently embodied example of clunking, humourless literalism:

[Rosenberg says] '... Now you commenced manual manipulation of her breasts.'

'Yes, I thought pedal manipulation was ruled out one way or another,' Jake ventured to reply on one such occasion. 'For instance etymologically.'

'I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't quite follow.'<sup>79</sup>

Rosenberg is deaf to those sympathetic, collaborative layers of meaning that generate comedy: a shibboleth throughout Amis's oeuvre, in which characters can invariably be divided between those who are decent enough to be self-mocking and witty, and those who, lacking any sense of their own limitations, become a source of comedy for others. The style of Jake's retort is taken to its logical conclusion in Amis's posthumously-published volume, *The King's English* (1997), in which his respect for language fuels a delicious series of diatribes against crassness, error and self-inflating verbiage:

**Ere:** I mention this dead and unlamented word only to note that its ghost is sometimes raised by jocular chaps who affect phrases like 'ere long' and 'ere now'. I have two messages for such chaps: one is unprintable, the other goes, If you must write this shred of battered facetiousness, for Christ's sake get it right. The word is *ere*, not *e'er*.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Jake's Thing* (London, 1978), p. 230.

<sup>80</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The King's English: A Guide to Modern Usage* (London, 1998), p. 60.

Humourlessness and pretension, both for Jake and his creator, are rooted in egoism and an entirely misplaced conviction of one's own rightness. Jake goes on to identify

Rosenberg as

. . . another fucking displaced egotist . . . this sort put a cause or subject in place of self, identified with it to a degree seldom envisaged by those fond of that term and made everything an example of something, some theory, generalisation, set of facts already in their keeping . . . philosophasters, global-equality persons – all or any of whom Rosenberg had reminded him of on the same occasion. That was today and yesterday; the day before yesterday had been far less daft, with Marxists of various sorts predominant or thought to be[.]<sup>81</sup>

These 'displaced egoists' are people (Jake expounds) who claim access to profound truths via a language of generalisation and a few canonical facts, but whose motivations are self-serving rather than truth-seeking. Marxism, interestingly, is placed in a separate and slightly 'less daft' bracket; perhaps evidence of Amis's lingering sympathy for its aims.

More bluntly than *Jake's Thing*, *Stanley and the Women* directly equates sanity and humour. One of its most sympathetic characters – the plain-talking psychiatrist Dr. Nash – suggests to Stanley the formulation that

The rewards for being sane may not be very many but knowing what's funny is one of them. And that's an end of the matter.<sup>82</sup>

This is a 'sanity' which fully echoes the sense of Larkin's comment 'I don't find anything defeatist about being sane, do you?'<sup>83</sup>. Throughout Amis's novels, the author's (and his characters') ability to make other laugh is bound up with his position as a guardian of this 'sanity': laughter comes as a recognition of rightness, and as a testament to the puncturing of misconceptions. Moreover, like Larkin, Amis is funniest when he is most right – *Stanley and the Women* is funny despite its

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<sup>81</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Jake's Thing* p. 233.

<sup>82</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Stanley and The Women* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 183.

<sup>83</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with John Haffenden' (1981), in *Further Requirements*, p. 53.

prejudices rather than because of them, and the role of reactionary polemicist was one in which Amis singularly failed to approach the heights of his best comedy. As

Richard Bradford notes at the end of his biography,

[Kingsley Amis] used comedy in a way that has since the eighteenth century been relegated to the second division in the league of literary endeavour. When we are laughing with Amis or at his literary world . . . there is a sense of immediacy which draws his presence out beyond his fictive creation. Moreover he is serious *because* he is funny.<sup>84</sup>

One of the single most positive literary descriptions to emerge from Amis's work comes toward the end of *I Like It Here* (1958), a novel of which Amis himself remarked that

I did once, out of laziness or sagging imagination, try to put real people on paper and produced what is by common consent my worst novel, *I Like it Here*.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps because of this directly autobiographical genesis, the novel's discussions of writers and writing are among the most revealing in his oeuvre. Our narrator, the academic Garnet Bowen, visits Henry Fielding's grave in Portugal in the company of a 'Man of Letters', Wulfstan Strether, and considers Fielding's achievement:

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 . . . [Did Fielding depict] a simplified world? Perhaps, but that hardly mattered beside the existence of a moral seriousness that could be made apparent without the aid of evangelical puffing and blowing.<sup>86</sup>

*I Like It Here* presents Fielding's combination of seriousness, interest and wit as a standard to which all novels should aspire – and adds emphasis to the primacy of humour through the person of Strether, who pronounces:

' . . . we are surely not to say . . . that the utterances of comedy, whatever their purity or power, can move us as we are moved by the authentic voice of

<sup>84</sup> Richard Bradford, *Lucky Him: the life of Kingsley Amis*, p. 419.

<sup>85</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Real and Made Up People', in *The Amis Collection*, p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> Kingsley Amis, *I Like It Here* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 167.

tragedy. That alone can speak to us of the loneliness and the dignity of man. And this, my friend, means that much as I reverence this assured master of the picaresque I am unable to consider him my equal.’<sup>87</sup>

Just as Dr Rosenberg is betrayed by a complete absence of irony and self-awareness, so Strether’s portentous egotism reveals him as a second-rate literary figure – and, ironically, as the genuine article rather than an impostor. Only a *real* ‘great’ author, Bowen reasons, could be so lacking in modesty and insight, so magnificently indifferent to his audience.

The central thesis of *I Like It Here* is a radical one: through Bowen’s investigations and the figure of Strether, Amis makes it clear that ‘the utterances of comedy’ at their best are to be valued over those of tragedy – a violation of traditional decorum for modern times. Near the opening of the novel, Bowen finds himself constructing a literary fantasy whereby ‘the *Iliad* or some other gruelling cultural monument had turned out to be a good read as well as a masterpiece’<sup>88</sup>. By the time he stands at Fielding’s grave, it has become clear to him that a masterpiece can indeed be worthy of ‘unaffected and wholehearted interest’ as long as it embraces the credo that to be amusing in the truest sense is also to be wise. *I Like It Here* itself is implicitly an endorsement of Fielding over Homer, and of all unpretentious and honestly excellent literature over the strictures of the canon (embodied in Kingsley’s championing of jazz and Science Fiction as legitimate areas of sophisticated interest): in it, the highest artistic value lies in making the permanent interesting. Hence the falsity of labels such as ‘high’ culture or, indeed, of ‘culture’ as a static artefact, denounced by Amis in his essay ‘Definitions of Culture’ (1961):

The moment you descend to particulars, you see unmistakably that there is no monolithic ‘it’ [culture]; that all these ‘artefacts’ [constituting ‘low culture’]

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<sup>87</sup> Kingsley Amis, *I Like It Here*, p. 168.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

vary enormously in merit . . . To acknowledge that nearly all of us are implicated in mass culture, rather than confronted by it, is an essential step towards doing something for ourselves.<sup>89</sup>

Writing against T.S. Eliot's *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (1948), the final emphasis here falls on an individual's responsibility for engaging with the particulars of life both as an artist and as a member of society. It was a position first summarised at the end of Amis's 1957 Fabian pamphlet *Socialism and the Intellectuals*:

I think that the best and most trustworthy political motive is self-interest. I share a widespread suspicion of the professional espouser of causes, the do-gooder, the archetypal social worker who knows better than I do what is good for me.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, in *I Like It Here*, Bowen's entire trip has by the end become a search for the kind of wisdom that does not involve being told what one ought to think or like or do; and his conclusions are definite – 'Going and standing on the touchlines of other chaps' ways of life and telling yourself you're joining in isn't very self-aware.<sup>91</sup>

Self-knowledge is to be found at the root of one's own life, alongside the intimate knowledge of a place and a people, and its surest sign is unforced humour.

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<sup>89</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Definitions of Culture' (*New Statesman*, 2 June 1961), on *Socialism and Culture* by Richard Wollheim, in *The Amis Collection*, pp. 224-5.

<sup>90</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, Fabian Tract no. 304 (London, 1957), p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> Kingsley Amis, *I Like It Here*, p. 185.

## 2.vi. The problem of love

In his 1974 review of *High Windows*, Kingsley Amis praised Larkin's poetry above all for its ability to move from personal experience towards larger truths without losing that sceptical, qualified tone central to its gift of generating consensus:

Larkin is serious, which also means non-trivial, though he is fond of starting with the trivial . . . But then – what a dizzying, appalling, electrifying swoop into the midst of most things that matter: death, solitude, loss, change, the past, our relations with others, religion (what there is left of it) . . . There are no love poems, nor, thank heaven, any gobbets of over-private, under-personalised chatter about the poet's wife or girl such as pass for love poems these days. I doubt if there can be love poems these days.<sup>92</sup>

Amis was praising here almost the only modern poetry which for him spoke of 'most things that matter': which attended to art's public and moral duties rather than losing itself in 'over-private, under-personalised chatter'. Yet Larkin's work is described as faithful to 'most' rather than to 'all' that really matters – its greatest omission being, Amis's review suggests, that of love, a topic on which Amis himself wrote a great deal.

As Amis freely confessed, there was only one area of the arts which seemed fully able to suspend those intractabilities which even Larkin's poetry could not: music and, above all, jazz. Like the best poetry, jazz was for Amis a form able to make that 'electrifying swoop' between the accessible and the profoundly moving – and it was a passion which, for him as for Larkin, embodied everything most hopeful and enriching about the presence of the arts in daily life. Above all, Amis's love of jazz was based on the recordings of a generation of artists born in the period 1895-1914. These musicians – among whom he admired especially Blix Beiderbecke, Pee

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<sup>92</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'A Poet for Our Time', on *High Windows* by Philip Larkin (*Observer*, 2 June 1974), in *The Amis Collection*, p. 213.

Wee Russell and Wild Bill Davison – were, he argued in an article for *The Times Saturday Review* on 2 March 1991, practitioners of an art

. . . exciting and absorbing in a way otherwise unknown to me, intense but abstract, encouraging no mood or thought beyond itself, satisfying . . . It remains not what I think the best or the highest of the forms of art, but my only enthusiasm among them, not greatly dimmed by the passage of time and by the loss of that sense of being in the middle of something living.<sup>93</sup>

For Amis, this jazz was ‘human’ in a special and idealised way, in part because it recalled that intense undergraduate period at Oxford during which Amis’s musical and literary tastes had developed alongside Larkin’s and select others’, and jazz had offered intimations of values entirely outside of war’s chaos and austerity. Jazz was for them the embodied evidence of a public, communicative, delightful art – and a spur towards modes of writing which might, catalysed by a few close friendships, similarly sweep away existing barriers and pretensions.

Jazz at its best was both wildly popular and manifestly excellent: a living art within which great talents could collaborate and be heard. For Amis, for whom the audience and criticisms offered by Larkin had been so crucial, there remained always a sense that the enigma of human values might only approach resolution through those moments of communion in which – as in love or music – it was possible to feel entirely comprehended by another. One of the most complete examples of such agency in Amis’s fiction can be found towards the end of his Booker-winning novel, *The Old Devils* (1986), when Peter Thomas at last declares his love for Rhiannon. Larkin had died of cancer at 1.24am on 2 December 1985 at the age of 63, and the second half of *The Old Devils* (the novel was described as ‘just in’ on 24 July 1986<sup>94</sup>; and Amis wrote in a letter of 19 November 1987 that ‘Larkin was much in my mind

<sup>93</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing’, in *The Times Saturday Review*, 2 March 1991, p. 17.

<sup>94</sup> Kingsley Amis to Harry Ritchie, in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 1029.

while I was writing the second half of the book [*The Old Devils*]<sup>95</sup> ) was influenced both by this loss and by the family life Amis had regained after moving in with Hilary (his first wife) and her new husband, Lord Kilmarnock in July 1985. In *The Old Devils*, tenderness and pain mix in Peter's declaration that:

'I've always loved you and I do to this day. I'm sorry it sounds ridiculous because I'm so fat and horrible, and not at all nice or even any fun, but I mean it. I only wish it was worth more.'<sup>96</sup>

Peter is speaking to Rhiannon just after the funeral of her husband, Alun, dead of a heart-attack; yet this renewal of hope is all the sweeter for its belatedness, offsetting the themes of decline otherwise dominant in the novel and suggesting the possibility of regaining at least something of youthful happiness in age.

Amis's ante-penultimate novel, *The Russian Girl* (1992), also demonstrates what Martin Amis considered his father's journey 'back to life and love'<sup>97</sup> after the breakdown of his second marriage. Martin comments, in *Experience*,

In *The Russian Girl*, which he wrote at the age of seventy, love is exalted not only above politics and – far more surprisingly – above poetry;\* it is also exalted above truth.<sup>98</sup>

The footnote to this observation is also worth quoting, and offers an important acknowledgement on Martin's part of the relationship between music and love in his father's thinking:

\* Here we go back to 1973 and a piece [of Kingsley's] called 'Rondo for my Funeral': '. . . I should state that, since starting to find it in my early teens, music has given me more pleasure, and more intense pleasure, than any other art . . . Further yet: only a world without love strikes me as instantly and decisively more terrible than one without music.'<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Kingsley Amis to Jill Farrington, 19 November 1987, in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 1065.

<sup>96</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Old Devils*, p. 375.

<sup>97</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 312.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29n.

That a ‘decisively terrible’ world should be one without love and music (rather than, say, one ruled by a brutal theocracy or one without literature) highlights the emotional underpinnings of Kingsley’s moral programme: his insistence that rigour and rational insight should not replace or suppress feeling, but that they should acknowledge it carefully and wholly, and without recourse to abstraction.

*The Russian Girl* itself traces the growth of the relationship between an academic, Dr Richard Vaisey, and a Russian poetess, Anna Danilova. Despite everything he thinks he believes about the importance of literary honesty and professional integrity, Richard lies until the very end of the novel about his opinion of Anna’s (awful) poetry. Half-way through, he finds himself thinking,

A man who could have done that, said that [i.e. told Anna that he thought her poems were awful], would have been a much more unselfish man than he was, but . . . he would not have been able to get very friendly with such a man, assuming he wanted to.<sup>100</sup>

To his own amazement, Richard discovers that it is more important for him to be true to Anna than it is to stick to those standards once central to his identity. And, as Anna comments at the close of the narrative,

I knew within a few seconds that you were lying [about the poetry]. But that lie told me how much you loved me, and it means I’ll always love you. I don’t think I could put that into a poem, but I’ll probably have a shot at it one day.<sup>101</sup>

Here, abstract truth is unequivocally subordinated to feeling, while untruth becomes a means of exchanging worldly aspirations for a more selfless kind of understanding. Within the academic establishment Richard has now left, ‘truth’ and reputation are prized above everything – and yet, as he comes to see, they are a club ideology and a refusal of potentially the most precious human engagements.

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<sup>100</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Russian Girl* (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 112.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

As if to confirm this, the end of *The Russian Girl* sketches the insubstantiality of Richard's academic friendships, closing on a colleague's indication that he, for one, will not be wasting any more time on contact with Richard – 'Naturally I'll do my best [to keep in touch] . . . but I'm afraid this is rather a busy time for me. New boss and one thing and another.'<sup>102</sup> In both *The Russian Girl* and *The Old Devils*, love suggests to characters an exit from an otherwise stifling, reflexive existence – from the intellectual politics of academia, and from the boorish mechanics of old rivalries. And in each case, the leap into love is an act of both comedy and sanity: because love, like shared laughter, is a knowing embrace of the limitations of the self and others (whether these be age, looks, knowledge, or the simple inability to write poetry).

When faith in the possibility of love is driven into retreat, however, Amis's comedy of hope and sanity turns bitter. The closing diatribe of *Jake's Thing*, for example, while purporting to be a rejection of women in fact serves as an unmaking of all authentic human relations. Jake's indiscriminate extension of Amis's habitual gripes of hypocrisy, selfishness and pretension takes on a tone of hysterical retreat all the more disturbing for its elision between narrator and character:

Jake did a quick run-through of women in his mind . . . all of them: their concern with the surface of things, with objects and appearances, with their surroundings and how they looked and sounded in them, with seeming to be better and to be right while getting everything wrong, their automatic assumption of the role of injured party in any clash of wills, their certainty that a view is the more credible and useful for the fact that they hold it . . .<sup>103</sup>

Faith in others collapses in tandem with faith in the ability to master one's own desires and fears. In the passage above, both Jake's sanity and his wit are compromised by a departure from actuality's complexity into aggressive

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<sup>102</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Russian Girl*, p. 296.

<sup>103</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Jake's Thing*, p. 285.

generalisation. Jake shores up his sense of self with poisonous abstractions, and the result evidences a loss of faith in the human capacity to relate to others through more than the twinned pressures of fear and desire: a gesture of defeat to ‘the darker side’ of the human. Moreover, although Jake forswears love and sex and indeed an entire gender, his rage is simply a mirror-image of the desire that has failed in him: fantasy-fuelled, self-isolating and ultimately self-destroying in its perversion of judgement and personality. Jake is the biggest loser in *Jake’s Thing*: an incomplete man in every sense whose words stir should pity and anger in his readers as well as laughter.

Much as for Larkin, the relationship between love and sexual desire – and what this signified in terms of human nature – was the source of especially potent fears for Amis. One of his finest explorations of this paradoxical dynamic comes in the poem ‘Nothing to Fear’. The poem’s narrator is about to meet with a married lover for some furtive pleasure, a room is ‘all fixed’, the cover-story watertight, flesh and spirit are willing, conscience unruffled, when a disturbing kind of doubt begins to encroach:

Yes, all fixed. Then why this slight trembling,  
 Dry mouth, quick pulse-rate, sweaty hands,  
 As though she were the first? No, not impatience,  
 Nor fear of failure, thank you, Jack.  
 Beauty, they tell me, is a dangerous thing,  
 Whose touch will burn, but I’m asbestos, see?  
 All worth while – it’s a dead coincidence  
 That sitting here, a bag of glands  
 Tuned up to concert pitch, I seem to sense  
 A different style of caller at my back,  
 As cold as ice, but just as set on me.<sup>104</sup>

As in Larkin’s ‘Talking in Bed’, the sexual act – even in prospect – has become a perversely isolating one. Far from banishing thoughts of mortality, sex calls up its spectre; a sinister echo of the Renaissance dubbing of orgasm as a ‘little death’.

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<sup>104</sup> Kingsley Amis, ‘Nothing to Fear’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 80, ll. 12-22.

Amis's poem, however, is not so much concerned with the loss of self during sex as with the literal and inevitable death from which seduction is supposed to be a distraction. The supposedly life-affirming act has become a death-affirming one: *eros* summons *thanatos*, with *agape* and *philia* nowhere to be seen, leaving the speaker more transfixed than ever by the spectre of 'unresting death'.

The poem's 'dead coincidence' is, of course, no coincidence at all, and its causes are further explored in *The Green Man*. For its protagonist, publican Maurice Allington, sex and seduction initially appear to offer a unique means of escape from the lack of deeper meanings (and feelings) in his life. As Allington claims towards the start of the novel, sexual conquest alone creates in him a sense of substantial value, of time redeemed from insignificance:

It has never surprised me that some men should try to beat Don Juan's traditional total, only that more do not. Seduction is the unique sensual act; other pleasures, including sex *per se*, are mere activities, durative and repetitive. Each particular seduction is a final and unchangeable thing, a part of history . . . <sup>105</sup>

Sensuality, and the anticipatory sensuality of seduction still more so than of sex itself, seems to promise an 'unchangeable' element which his life otherwise lacks – a perfect refuge from mortality and existential uncertainty. After successfully seducing Diana, a friend's wife, Allington thinks 'I cannot imagine ever quite forgetting what it was like, while I can remember anything.'<sup>106</sup> The events of the novel, however, prove a disconcerting education.

Influenced by the ghost stories of M.R. James<sup>107</sup>, the plot traces Allington's battle with and eventual victory over the ghost of a medieval sorcerer, Underhill, and

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<sup>105</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Green Man*, p. 76.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>107</sup> cf. Kingsley Amis to Dale Salwak, 24 May 1990: 'Any resemblances [between Bruce Montgomery's *Holy Disorders* and *The Green Man*] are accounted for by the fact that both Crispin [Montgomery's pen-name] and I greatly admired the ghost stories of M.R. James', in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, p. 1089.

his mindless creature, the ‘green man’ of the title. Yet, in many ways, Underhill’s murderous quest for immortality is a grotesquely literalised version of Allington’s own desire for some ‘unchangeable thing’: for a way of breaking out of time and all its losses. It is a relationship evident in the infantile violence of the visions with which Underhill unsuccessfully tempts Allington:

A group of naked women flashed into apparent existence . . . Their voluptuousness was extreme, and also theoretical, like the fantasy-drawings of a prurient but talented schoolboy<sup>108</sup>

In this feeble pornography, both the reader and Allington glimpse the essential puerility of his hopes for the ‘unique’, as well as their potential cruelty and violence. If, as Larkin argued, it is loss and mortality that spur us to kindness, then the great game of seduction is in the end an indulgence no more meaningful than these ‘schoolboy’ fantasies; while Allington’s dreams of ceaseless conquest are, like Underhill’s magic, aligned with death and unreality in their attempts to dismantle all common human ground.

Nevertheless, Allington’s victory over Underhill is a triumph of the humane and the reasonable over the fantastical. *The Green Man*’s most unsettling supernatural visitation is not, however, by Underhill at all, but rather by a being who claims to be God, and who approaches Allington in the guise of an icily ironical young man. As well as declaring a lofty indifference to human suffering and the general insignificance of existence, this God suggests that Allington ‘deal’ with Underhill for the sake of preserving earthly order:

‘He’s a dangerous man, old Underhill. Well, in a mild way. A minor threat to security. If he’s left to himself, it’ll be just that much more difficult to keep going the general impression that human life ends with the grave. A very basic rule of mine says I have to maintain that impression. Almost as basic as the one about everything having to seem as if it comes about by chance.’<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Green Man*, p. 153.

This long conversation is one of the bleakest passages in Amis's oeuvre, and its unredeemable vision of eternity dominates the novel's conclusion, which sees Allington supplying a series of comfortless insights as he gazes into the mirror:

I found I had begun to understand the meaning of the young man's prophecy that I would come to appreciate death and what it had to offer. Death was my only way of getting away for good from this body and all its pseudo-symptoms of disease and fear, from the constant awareness of this body, from the person, with his ruthlessness and sentimentality and ineffective, insincere, impracticable notions of behaving better, from attending to my own thoughts and from counting in thousands to smother them and from my face in the glass. He had said I would never be free of him as long as the world lasted, and I believed him, but when I died I would be free of Maurice Allington for longer than that.

I put on my dinner-jacket, swallowed a strong whisky and went downstairs to begin the evening round.<sup>110</sup>

Theologically speaking, as Amis would have been well-aware, the man who appears to Allington must have been the Devil rather than God, tempting him towards the unforgivable sin of despair. In this he appears to have succeeded. Allington, whose wife has just announced her intention to leave him, finds himself embracing the thought of death not as a spur to earthly kindness but as the final destruction of a self he no longer values – a self unable to find in music, art, poetry or other people an answer to the question of what meaning his life might have. This is the voice which seduction attempts to drown out but ultimately only inflames. Allington can cope with life, even with monsters and magicians, but coping is all he can do: he is a man, like Jake, damaged in his capacity to love, to whom questions of higher meaning have become senseless.

Allington's final words are echoed in a poem of Amis's, never published in his lifetime, which came to light in 2004 among his papers. Untitled and possibly unfinished, it reads:

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<sup>109</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Green Man*, p. 140.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175.

Things tell less and less:  
 The news impersonal  
 And from afar; no book  
 Worth wrenching off the shelf.  
 Liquor brings dizziness  
 And food discomfort; all  
 Music sounds thin and tired,  
 And what picture could earn a look?  
 The self drowns in the self  
 Beyond hope of a visitor.  
 Desire and those desired  
 Fade, and no matter:  
 Memories in decay  
 Annihilate the day.  
 There once was an answer:  
 Up at the stroke of seven,  
 A turn round the garden  
 (Breathing deep and slow),  
 Then work, never mind what,  
 How small, provided that  
 It serves another's good  
 But once is long ago  
 And, tell me, how could  
 Such an answer be less than wrong,  
 Be right all along?  
 Vain echoes, desist.<sup>111</sup>

This is the lucidity of 'Aubade' stripped of its anger and reduced to a plaintive questioning – asking how it is that time and age have destroyed the value of things once loved, and how the unreliable, mutable self which these changes evidence can hope to find any lasting value in life. As Allington realises, the mutability of the self is a potentially terrible thing; and in an inversion of the educative process seen in 'The Value of Suffering', we face the proposition both in this poem and *The Green Man* that time will eventually teach the unreality of even one's best hopes. Like the course of the twentieth century itself, experience here seems to reveal that all along 'human nature' has been senseless mutability. The 'self drowns' unreachably in the self, and no 'visitor' or art can break its isolation.

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<sup>111</sup> Kingsley Amis, 'Things Tell Less And Less', ed. Zachary Leader, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 2004.

At its best, Amis found love to be the supreme collaboration, transforming weakness and vulnerability into strength. To love in this way was to feel something diametrically opposed to the sex obtained by seduction: undeceived in another human being. In his comedy, similarly, the imperfect can become not only endurable but preferable to dogma and ideology – while, conversely, to believe in the necessity of dogma and ideology is to believe in the failure of love. From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Lucky Jim*, comedy's unions have always shown the sympathetically human overcoming the oppositions of custom and prejudice. This lies at the heart of Amis's privileging of comic form above all others – because it is potentially able to answer his question 'IS there anything that will help us overcome or put up with the darker side of our natures and our lives?' with a qualified but assured *yes*. This is also, however, a question which has no such answer in the context of works like 'Things tell less and less' – in which mutability reduces mortality and love alike to the status of illusions, while the prospect of serving another's good possesses no greater appeal than any other arbitrary action.

For all their deploring of God, the balance of hope in both Amis's and Larkin's work seems to rest on belief: the question of what one is able to believe, and fears to believe, of the human. Both art and our relations with other people can, they suggest, help us to endure – and can even teach us to live well, if we confess the needs, fears, imperfections and limits that might otherwise rule us. Yet, in the context of our society's recent history, the question of what is most 'true' and most potent within our natures seems liable to collapse at any moment into bottomless anxiety, or into compensatory, betraying abstractions, accessible neither to the insights nor the absolutions of art.

## Chapter Three

### Martin Amis – attitudes to writing, and fiction

#### from *The Rachel Papers* to *Money*

##### 3.i. Beginnings

Despite the irony with which Martin Amis has met accusations of literary nepotism throughout his career – ‘Oh, sure. It’s just like taking over the family pub’<sup>1</sup>, as his fictional alter-ego answers John Self’s comments in *Money* – Kingsley Amis is a central point of reference in much of his writing, and the relationship between father and son has lent particular force both to Martin’s attitudes to writing and to his relationship with British literature. *The Rachel Papers* (1973), Martin’s first novel, began his career in explicit negotiation with his father’s *Lucky Jim* and is a natural place to begin – as several critics, including David Hawkes and Gavin Keulks, have done. Less commented upon but also significant, however, are the ways in which *The Rachel Papers* echoes Philip Larkin’s work, and in which it revisits the terrain debated so vigorously by Kingsley Amis and Larkin during *Lucky Jim*’s genesis.

The principal differences between *The Rachel Papers* and *Lucky Jim* are embedded in their central characters and narrative techniques. Where Jim Dixon’s imitations, gurnings and rants occur behind closed doors, acting as a mildly subversive subtext to the urbane lucidity of *Lucky Jim*’s omniscient narrator, Charles Highway himself narrates *The Rachel Papers* from start to finish with virtuosic, self-conscious and brittle panache, speaking on behalf of an edgier and more overtly cynical generation. Kingsley Amis began his literary career with a declaration of faith in his unstuffy, pretension-puncturing character’s ability to take on the hypocrisies of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Amis, *Money* (Harmondsworth, 2000), p. 88.

the establishment and win: Martin Amis replaces the token rebellions of *Lucky Jim* with a character uncomfortably (and largely impotently) aware of the questions lurking at the margins of his world –

I realized even at the moment how shaky were my claims to any social concern. Like most people, I feel ambiguous guilt for my inferiors, ambiguous envy for my superiors, and mandatory low-spirits about the system itself.<sup>2</sup>

Highway's self-accusations echo the charge of over-simplification which Larkin levelled at *Lucky Jim*. Like Jim Dixon, Highway is wittily sensitive to the limits of those around him. Unlike Dixon, however, he has little faith in his own reasonableness or the validity of 'lucky' endings, and his paralysing self-consciousness in many ways aligns him with Larkin's John Kemp rather than Kingsley Amis's creation. Dixon wins the girl and the job of his dreams, but Highway spends the last part of the novel disentangling himself from a relationship of mutual illusion in which, with more than a passing echo of Kemp's creation of the fictionally perfect Jill, 'We never contradicted or satirized each other . . . Neither of us defecated, spat, had bogeys or arses'<sup>3</sup>.

Highway finishes *The Rachel Papers* single, making disappointment in personal life a starting point for his career as a critic. Unlike *Jill*, however, *The Rachel Papers* has at least half a happy ending waiting for him in his successful entry to Oxford. Highway himself has evidently read *Lucky Jim* and, updating one of Dixon's most famous lines, observes that 'Surely, nice things are dull, and nasty things are funny. The nastier a thing is, the funnier it gets'<sup>4</sup>: wit is still paramount, but the comedy of disappointment has replaced the comedy of delight. Along these lines,

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers* (London, 1984), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88. cf. Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, p. 140.

Highway presents the relationships of his own times as a degenerated, distended version of Shakespeare's or Fielding's comedies -

. . . the final kiss no longer symbolizes anything and well-oiled nuptials have ceased to be a plausible image of desire. That kiss is now the beginning of the comic action . . . We have got into the habit of going further and further beyond the happy-ever-more promise: relationships in decay, aftermaths . . .<sup>5</sup>

As would be confirmed in Martin Amis's second and third novels, *Dead Babies* (1975) and *Success* (1978), the 'decay' and 'aftermaths' that were his prime interests demanded a correspondingly intense focus on the 'nasty' and the 'nastier'; and in the business of endings Martin's novels invariably echo the bleaker and more conflicted aspects of Larkin's work rather than his father's fondness for tidy resolutions.

Wit and critical 'rightness' are prime concerns in *The Rachel Papers*. Charles Highway is a would-be literary critic, and much as in *Lucky Jim* one of the greatest pleasures of *The Rachel Papers* is the acuity with which Highway (and, through him, Martin Amis) skewers his manifold targets and presents his digressions on culture and society. While Dixon's triumph involves leaving a university, however, Highway's lies in gaining entry to one: and while academics in *Lucky Jim* are satirized as pretentious bores, *The Rachel Papers* makes its most impressive character a Don. The Don in question is one Dr Knowd, who towards the end of the novel interviews Highway for a place at Oxford<sup>6</sup> and proceeds in a few paragraphs to demolish most of his pretensions:

'Mr Highway . . . do you like literature? . . . On Blake you seem quite happy to paraphrase the "Fearful Symmetry" stuff about "autonomous verbal constructs, necessarily unconnected with life", but in your Essay paper you come on all excited about the "urgency . . . with which Blake educates and refines our emotions, side-stepping the props and splints of artifice". Ever tried side-stepping a splint, by the way? Or educating someone urgently, for that matter? . . . Literature has a kind of life of its own you know. You can't

<sup>5</sup> Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers*, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> The interview scene is probably based on Amis's own Oxford interview at St. John's College by John Carey, who did not offer the young Amis a scholarship, leading to his admission on an exhibition to Exeter College. cf. Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 126.

just use it . . . ruthlessly, for your own ends . . .’<sup>7</sup>

Knowd’s presence adds a new note to the novel, speaking for Martin Amis in a way that Highway cannot – and speaking for precisely those values of literary honesty and reasonableness Larkin and Kingsley Amis had so despaired of finding during their own time at Oxford. Knowd’s comments serve as a model of critical technique, picking apart the pretensions of Highway’s style through an exacting attention to detail; a technique close both to Martin Amis’s early literary criticism and John Carey’s distinctive style, which Amis experienced both at Oxford and, afterwards, in Carey’s influential study of Dickens, *The Violent Effigy* (1973)<sup>8</sup>. There is an element of parody in Highway’s description of Knowd’s ‘urban-guerrilla dress: variegated, camouflage-conscious green and khaki canvas suit; beetle-crusher, pig-stomper boots’<sup>9</sup>, but Knowd’s speech is itself presented without any comment or addition and it voices criticisms which Highway is quite unable to refute.

Much like Gore-Urquart in *Lucky Jim*, we find in Knowd a figure speaking from outside the satirical structures of the novel and presenting a possible escape from its pitfalls. In the twenty-one years dividing these novels the direction of escape has reversed – high literature and the academic establishment, the terrain of *Lucky Jim*’s villains, emerge heroically from *The Rachel Papers* – yet its essential import has not. A sufficient attitude to art and society is being sought: and where the society of 1954 seemed to promise the young Kingsley Amis a socially mobile public arena into which a likeable hero could emerge armed with ‘common sense’, Martin’s vision of 1973 is mediated by a self-centred protagonist who ends up in retreat from the moral

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers*, pp.210-11.

<sup>8</sup> Which Amis reviewed in the November 23 issue of the *New Statesman* in 1973, and found impressive but guilty of ‘a string of tweedy egalitarianisms whenever Dickens offends the modern liberal taste’ (p. 776) – an accusation of anachronism which he would augment in later attacks on both Carey and Andrew Motion. cf. my discussion on pp. 137-8 of this thesis.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers*, p. 210.

and intellectual crudity of his times – from the lack of any ‘sense’ in the public arena towards the insights of a discerning élite (good academics, good writers, good critics). Both Kingsley Amis and Larkin were, of course, members of just such an élite by 1973 and, far from representing an attempt to declare the writings of their generation redundant, *The Rachel Papers* devotes itself to issues of literature and literary influence in the largest sense. The sin Knowd accuses Highway of is disrespect to literature – of setting up and knocking down others’ works rather than seeking to understand them – but Amis’s novel is anything but guilty of this fault, using its narrator to explore the limits of a cockily contemporary critical programme and to argue the importance of writing about those lasting issues invisible to the Rachels of this world

Despite his insecurities, Charles Highway instinctively understands the power of good writing, just as he is acutely aware of a lack of sincerity, sense and sanity in his society, and it is to books that he turns for refuge, which can be everything his world refuses to be: clever, vigorous, interconnected. He is misguided, pretentious and manipulative, but he is also asking the right questions and has, at least by the end of the novel, been given a shot at getting it ‘right’ in his author’s eyes. Thus, despite the comedy of his ceaseless self-authorings and adopted personae, Highway’s decision to turn away from Rachel and towards literature signifies more than an ironical assault on Shakespearean resolutions. It is, in its own, way, a technique of redress and of ‘proper’ engagement, as important to Martin Amis the literary-critic author as to his literary-critic creation (Amis would work full-time as a literary critic and editor, at the *Times Literary Supplement* and then the *New Statesman*, until 1979). As the rest of this chapter will argue, his attitude to literature developed from something far more complex than the impulse to outdo and defy his father’s

generation: from a passionate involvement in issues of literary influence, excellence and tradition, and from a sincere commitment to the author's duties as both reader and critic.

### 3.ii. Good writing, permanence and difference

It is through writing on other writers that nearly all of Martin Amis's literary battles have at some stage been defined. Where his father and Larkin launched their careers as literary outsiders – provincial newcomers disputing the value of existing academic and literary discourses – the younger Amis's milieu was, above all, a literary one. He entered an arena in which his foremost points of social and moral reference were other writers, and in which the discussion of literature was central to discussions of life. Naturally enough, the refusal to honour any arbitrary boundary between fiction and non-fiction has been from the beginning central to Amis's sense of writing as a profession. Reviewing Philip Roth's *Reading Myself and Others* for the *New Statesman* in 1975, Amis posed the question:

How did the split between creation and response occur, and when did we stop thinking that they called on the same talents?<sup>10</sup>

The bridging of this 'split' is central to Amis's articulation of, in Dr Knowd's phrase, literature's 'life of its own'; its existence as a more important and permanent resource than the impressions of any one reader.

In parallel with his large critical and financial successes as an author, Amis's production of non-fiction has intensified and even accelerated during his career. Today, thirty years after that review, Amis's works include three collections of essays<sup>11</sup>, an account of arcade gaming<sup>12</sup>, an autobiography<sup>13</sup>, a tract on Stalin and Stalinism<sup>14</sup>, and numerous uncollected essays, reviews and articles. As James Diedrick notes, to possess the 'complete prose' of Martin Amis even up to the end of

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Amis, 'Being Serious in the Fifties', *New Statesman*, 7 November 1975, p. 578.

<sup>11</sup> *The Moronic Inferno* (1986), *Visiting Mrs Nabokov and Other Excursions* (1993) and *The War Against Cliché, Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* (2001).

<sup>12</sup> *Invasion of the Space Invaders* (1982).

<sup>13</sup> *Experience* (2000).

<sup>14</sup> *Koba the Dread – Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002).

the year 2000 would require at least two additional volumes to those already published –

. . . to contain the more than fifty essays, more than sixty book reviews, and more than forty film and television review columns from this period [1971 to 2000] that remain uncollected.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the motivation for this critical output seems to have been the desire – even the urgent need – to evidence literature’s vivifying force through the example of others’ talent. Amis’s personal canon is forcefully, frequently and unapologetically invoked as proof of good writing’s importance. Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago* is ‘an awakener’<sup>16</sup>, compelling his audience towards truths their minds would otherwise slide away from. With the ‘easy mastery’<sup>17</sup> of his prose John Updike can ‘conclusively demonstrat[e] . . . that the unexamined life is worth examining’<sup>18</sup>. ‘[T]he highest and the lowest mingle and hobnob in the vast democracy of [Saul] Bellow’s prose’<sup>19</sup>, achieving a language in which ‘Things are not merely described but registered, measured and assessed for the weight with which they bear on your soul’<sup>20</sup>. Nabokov, meanwhile, is a master of crueller but equally brilliant expansions, so that ‘It is the central miracle of the novel [*Lolita*] that the tiny madman in his tiny cell becomes, artistically, by a series of radical shifts in context, a lord of infinite space’<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 220.

<sup>16</sup> A phrase Amis quotes from V. S. Pritchett’s review of *The Gulag Archipelago*; cf. Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Amis, on *Rabbit at Rest* by John Updike (*Independent on Sunday*, October 1990), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 382.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Amis, on *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1995), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 469.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Amis, on *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (*Atlantic Monthly*, September 1992), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 478.

The sense of mission with which Martin Amis's non-fiction resonates is perhaps best summarised in the 'Foreword' to his 2001 collection of essays and reviews, *The War Against Cliché*. He writes:

To idealize: all writing is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart. When I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés. When I praise, I am usually quoting the opposed qualities of freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice.<sup>22</sup>

This is a version of taste for the close of the twentieth century, arguing that there remains an intention common to all proper writing (fictional or non-fictional) – an intention of expansion and addition, of words which honour the complexities of reality and oppose the 'pale glow of illusion'<sup>23</sup> produced by utopian and oversimplifying formulations. In this, Amis is directly and explicitly allied with his father's and Larkin's demand for 'human reality' as the test of all art, arguing that

Emotional egalitarianism, for example, looks hard to attack . . . [but] It is utopian, which is to say that reality cannot be expected to support it.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever else it does, for Martin Amis, good writing must be measured by what in *Experience*, borrowing from Northrop Frye, he terms its '*disinterested* use of words'<sup>25</sup> (a formula which closely echoes D.H. Lawrence's demand for 'true and vivid relationships'): its ability to convince an audience that it contains more than abstraction and wishful thinking.

In parallel with its championing of excellence, Amis's 'war against cliché' is directed against what he sees as the levelling 'forces of democratization' and their representatives in a literary culture in which:

[t]he reviewer calmly tolerates the arrival of the new novel or slim volume, defensively settles into it, and then sees which way it rubs him up. The right way or the wrong way. The results of this contact will form the data of the review, without any reference to the thing behind. And the thing behind, I am

<sup>22</sup> Martin Amis, 'Foreword' to *The War Against Cliché*, p. xv.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 30.

afraid, is talent, and the canon, and the body of knowledge we call literature.<sup>26</sup>

For Amis, such reviewers fail to respect that ‘thing behind’ which fuses the roles of critic and author: the ‘body of knowledge’ (which might be approximately represented by the contents of a decent library) which guards art’s claim to be of lasting importance. The largeness and permanence of art are crucial for Amis, summarizing those qualities which distinguish it from merely ephemeral productions and ideas. As he told Will Self in interview, ‘I’ve come to equate talent with the universal’<sup>27</sup>, and it is in its aspiration towards the universal that Amis finds art acting as a positive social force. The canon, Amis’s ‘Foreword’ continues, is safe because of great art’s permanence – because of the inexorable pressure of ‘Judge Time, who constantly separates those who last from those who don’t’<sup>28</sup>. The art of the critic rests, in this sense, on achieving a taste distinct from simple conformity and decorum – a critical sense informed by the study of those works which have endured, and which will in turn assist the present in creating its own enduring art.

Amis pays careful homage to the Western canon – Cervantes, Austen, Joyce, Coleridge, Milton, Dickens, Donne and Waugh, among others – but equally carefully acknowledges its decline as an efficacious abstraction. Everything must, in his criticism, be done from first principles: the reviewer is entirely reliant upon his or her rigour of argument. As he puts it,

You proceed by quotation. Quotation is the reviewer’s only hard evidence. Or semi-hard evidence. Without it, in any case, criticism is a shop-queue monologue.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Foreword’ to *The War Against Cliché*, p. xiii.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Martin Amis, in conversation with Will Self’, (*Mississippi Review*, Summer 1993), in Will Self, *Junk Mail*, p. 387.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Foreword’ to *The War Against Cliché*, p. xiv.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. xv.

For Amis, criticism descends to an irrelevant ‘shop-queue monologue’ (with all its connotations of the marketplace) the moment a measured interrogation of the text is supplanted by point-scoring and self-indulgence. E.P. Thompson is in the ‘Introduction’ to *Einstein’s Monsters* rather unkindly faulted for subverting his own case against SDI through such indulgences

. . . because he has no respect for tone . . . His tone is lax, impatient, often desperately uncertain; it is excitedly alarmist; it takes pleasure in stupidity [.]<sup>30</sup>

While Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* is found similarly lacking in *The War Against Cliché*: ‘To put it simply, Mr McKibben lacks weight of voice . . . [he is] throughout a puzzled and guileless presence’<sup>31</sup>. ‘Weight of voice’ and respect for a subject are mutual virtues for Amis, representing a mastery of both oneself and the issues under address: McKibben is fine when ‘sticking to his dignified summaries of the not very numerous books and reports he has read’<sup>32</sup>, but is frankly inadequate when straining to articulate ‘the slow accretions of human folly, human weakness, human accident’<sup>33</sup>.

Amis’s application of these criteria is evident throughout his writings. In 1977, four years after the publication of *The Rachel Papers*, he gleefully chides Fay Weldon’s *Words of Advice* for inattention to tone:

Cliché spreads inwards from the language of the book to its heart. Cliché always does. Miss Weldon may have climbed the social scale, but she now seems absurdly remote from its lowlier representatives. Even when it is your intention to show people pathetically conditioned by their experience, you can’t have dumb secretaries saying things like ‘I’ll look it up under “superstitious” in *Occult Weekly*’ and ‘Everything can be filed. It said so in Lesson Six, Office Routine.’ Unsurprisingly, when Miss Weldon chooses to gouge some ‘real’ emotion out of these mock-ups, she starkly announces that this is what she is doing – we get ‘real sorrow’ and ‘real affection’ within a

<sup>30</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Introduction: Thinkability’ to *Einstein’s Monsters*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The World and I’ on *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben (*Independent on Sunday*, February 1990), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36.

few lines.<sup>34</sup>

Eighteen years later, still a prolific critic, it takes only one paragraph to dismantle

Michael Crichton's prose:

It's a jungle out there, and jungles are 'hot', sometimes 'very hot'. 'Malcolm wiped his forehead. "It's hot up here."' Levine agrees: "'Yes, it's hot.'" Thirty pages later it's still hot. "'Jeez, it's hot up here," Eddie said.' And Levine agrees again: "'Yes," Levine said, shrugging.' Out there, beyond the foliage, you see herds of clichés, roaming free. You will listen in 'stunned silence' to an 'unearthly cry' or a 'deafening roar'. Raptors are 'rapacious'. Reptiles are 'reptilian'. Pain is 'searing'.<sup>35</sup>

Style is hailed as both the evidence of deeper malaise and the weapon through which this might be purged – for, as Amis notes in *Experience*, the literary reviewer has the unique ability among critics to outdo the reviewee at their own game during the course of his criticism:

When you write about a painter, you do not produce a sketch. When you write about a composer, you do not reach for your violin . . . But when you write about a novelist, an exponent of prose narrative, then you write a prose narrative.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the 'Foreword' to *The War Against Cliché* also includes a brief *mea culpa*, distancing Amis's mature attitudes from the harshness of a younger self:

Enjoying being insulting is a youthful corruption of power. You lose your taste for it when you realize how hard people try, how much they mind, and how long they remember . . . I am also struck by how hard I sometimes was on writers who (I erroneously felt) were trying to influence me: Roth, Mailer, Ballard.<sup>37</sup>

As this suggests, alongside its insistence on the importance of good style Amis's criticism has increasingly acknowledged the primacy of the creative act and the collaborative nature of the best criticism – a collaboration rooted in author and critic's

<sup>34</sup> Martin Amis, on *Words of Advice* by Fay Weldon (*New York Times Book Review*, October 1977), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Amis, 'Popularity Contest' on *The Lost World* by Michael Crichton (*Sunday Times*, October 1995), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 222.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 6n.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché*, pp. xiv-xv.

mutual respect for literature. The errors Andrew Motion commits when he chastises Larkin are, for example, attacked by Amis not only as anachronistic, but also as a grossly misjudged submission to the most vacuous of present intellectual trends:

*Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* is confidently managed, and chasteningly thorough; it is also an anthology of the [sic] contemporary tendencies toward the literal, the conformist, and the amnesiac. Future historians of taste wishing to study the Larkin fluctuation will not have to look very much further.<sup>38</sup>

Motion's attack on Larkin rouses Amis's most incisively aggressive instincts, and he pulls apart the biographer's thesis as an example of democratisation at its most insidious. Motion is presented as an 'amnesiac', a creature of 'the vaguer promptings of a new ethos'<sup>39</sup> which mistakes an anaemic brand of political correctness for critical taste, evaluating art as it does everything else: divorced from temporality, deaf to the exceptional and the indirect. Similarly, John Carey is taken to task for what Amis finds to be the easy superiority of his monographs, and for his insensitivity to the living, troubled and essentially difficult nature of great art:

Carey's hostility towards his chosen writers is amused and sardonic in tone, and doesn't decisively prejudice him against their work. You sense that he is simply too levelheaded, too modern and liberal to have much sympathy for the essential messiness of the creative temperament. It seems that Carey can't get over feeling cleverer and above all more practical than those chaotic charlatans, who are thrashing about in history and their own disordered lives, while laying their claims to enduring art.<sup>40</sup>

This essay, published in 1981, shows Amis picking up where his 1973 review of *The Violent Effigy* left off, and further probing the limits of the model of literary criticism offered at the end of *The Rachel Papers*. Carey's enumeration of Donne's apparent confusions and contradictions is contrasted to an 'essential messiness' in the creative temperament – something which cannot be analysed only in terms of its mixed metaphors – and Amis is clear about where the ultimate emphasis should lie. The art

<sup>38</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Ending: Don Juan in Hull', in *The War Against Cliché*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Amis, 'Donne the Apostate' (*Observer*, May 1981), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 197.

these authors (Milton, Dickens and Thackeray, in this case) have produced from their messy lives is, for him, ‘enduring’ – while Carey, like Motion, is trapped within his times, ‘too modern and liberal’ to treat the lasting issues of this art as they deserve.

The lack of boundaries within good writing is a constant theme in Amis’s later prose. In a 1995 article praising Saul Bellow, he makes it very clear that style, moral content and thematic depth cannot be judged in separation from one another:

Style, of course, is not something grappled on to regular prose; it is intrinsic to perception. We are fond of separating style and content (for the purposes of analysis, and so on), but they aren’t separable: they come from the same place. And style is morality. Style judges. No other writer and no other novel [than *The Adventures of Augie March*] makes you feel surer about this.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, *Experience* bluntly underlines, after Nabokov, the indivisibility of form and moral content:

I would argue that style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It’s not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality make itself felt. It can be there in every sentence.<sup>42</sup>

As Amis remarked to Will Self, such a style can only be achieved by questioning the present on every level, by refusing to take anything for granted:

I feel more and more [that] writers are always looking for first principles. And when I look around at the city I think, what’s this doing here? Nobody said there had to be cities. It’s just a direction we took and went along with. When I’m walking the streets, I’m thinking: why cars? Why parking meters? Why walls? Why bricks? Who said? It doesn’t have to be this way.<sup>43</sup>

These ‘first principles’ return us to the ‘human values’ sought by Kingsley Amis and Larkin: permanent, moral and secular, evident in love and art and death. Yet an intense sense of present difference is also a central motif in Amis’s writing, as it was in theirs; a difference trailing lost frames of reference and social structure. Angus Wilson, for example, is chided – despite Amis’s broad sympathy with his aims – for

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<sup>41</sup> Martin Amis, on *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1995), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 467.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 121n.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Amis, in conversation with Will Self, in Will Self, *Junk Mail*, p. 390.

clinging to certainties of taste that have little force in the context of contemporary literature:

The tone [of Wilson's essays] makes its appeal to a lost consensus, a unanimity that might have existed in 'those far-off days' but exists no longer.<sup>44</sup>

*The War Against Cliché* initially looks to economics as a driving factor in such change, describing the 'Age of Criticism' founded by T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis coming to an end with the oil-price hike of 1973 and its consequences:

What ended it [the Age of Criticism]? The brutalist answer would consist of a single four-letter word: OPEC. In the Sixties you could live on ten shillings a week: you slept on people's floors and sponged off your friends and sang for your supper – about literary criticism. Then, abruptly, a *bus fare* cost ten shillings. The oil hike, and inflation, and then stagflation, revealed literary criticism as one of the many leisure-class fripperies we would have to get along without. Well, that's how it felt.<sup>45</sup>

From here, however, Amis moves to a larger and more ominous formulation:

But it now seems clear that literary criticism was inherently doomed. Explicitly or otherwise it had based itself on a structure of echelons and hierarchies; it was about the talent elite. And the structure atomized as soon as the forces of democratization gave their next concerted push.<sup>46</sup>

1973 rather than 1914 is being offered as a watershed, but a similarly absolute fracture is envisaged, and one which coincides exactly with the beginning of Martin Amis's own career as an author. He is casting himself as a figure of the threshold, against the background of an 'atomized' older order – a word which explicitly echoes the absolute annihilation associated with nuclear bombardment, along with something of its horror. The forces of democratization – 'incomparably the most potent in our culture',<sup>47</sup> – have, for Amis, created an intellectual order in which a belief in exceptionality has given way to a conception of literature and society ruled by the

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Amis, on *Diversity and Depth in Fiction* by Angus Wilson (*Atlantic Monthly*, May 1984), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 80.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Amis, 'Foreword' to *The War Against Cliché*, p. xii.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

assumption that ‘nobody’s feelings are more authentic, and thus more important, than anybody else’s’<sup>48</sup>; a relativistic soup within which his struggle to restore a sense of hierarchy, excellence and discernment is hampered at every turn.

At this point, Amis’s ‘Foreword’ warns his readers that ‘It is the summit of idleness to deplore the present, to deplore actuality’<sup>49</sup>, before going on to put the argument that it is through permanent human values that authentic talent is evidenced, and that literature will inevitably ‘resist levelling and revert to hierarchy’. There remains, however, a central friction between the two halves of his essay. No matter how carefully the decline of past hierarchies is explained, the possibility of a present moment cut off from its past is inimical to Amis’s explanation of great art’s permanence and connectedness to a constant ‘humanity’. Just how much has been ‘atomized’ is unclear, as is the degree to which Amis believes ‘democratisation’ to be a trend as deeply rooted in the ‘human’ as more positive values; and, although difference and continuity have always combined to describe historical change, there is a particularly destructive, even apocalyptic, tint to Amis’s vocabulary which uneasily counterpoints the optimism of his programme – ‘dead and gone . . . unrecognizably remote . . . inherently doomed . . . atomized’. Just as Larkin’s and Kingsley Amis’s anger at modernism in places became a mythic simplification, Martin Amis’s ‘Foreword’ in places retreats from a historical to similarly emotive and absolute model: and it retreats from the possibility that second-rate and pernicious ideas might have a vigour of their own, clothing themselves from year to year in a different set of clichés.

Although they never quite say as much, part of the ‘war’ Amis’s essays fight is against the fear that literature’s future is bleaker than its past. Amis’s impassioned

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<sup>48</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Foreword’ to *The War Against Cliché*, p. xiii.

canonisations, his rigorous searches for talent, are a compensation as well as an assertion, fighting an anger and despair stirred by much of the contemporary world – and his spleen has in particular been vented over the years on the state of British literature. As he commented in 1990,

The 19th-century British novel was, if you like, a superpower novel. It was 800 pages long, about the whole of society. With decline, the novel has shrunk in confidence, in scope. In its current form, the typical English novel is 225 sanitized pages about the middle classes . . . You know, 'well-made' with the nice color [sic] scheme and decor, and matching imagery. I almost try and avoid form. What I'm interested in is trying to get more truthful about what it's like to be alive now.<sup>50</sup>

Facing such 'decline', it is no surprise that Amis has throughout his career so actively sought a surrogate literary milieu outside of the British isles – above all among the writers of the world's remaining superpower (the *New York Times* called him 'the best American writer England has ever produced'<sup>51</sup>). Ever since their first meeting in 1983<sup>52</sup>, Saul Bellow has been by far the most important of these writers. *Experience* gives this account of a conversation with Bellow soon after Kingsley's death:

[Martin Amis is speaking to Bellow] – Do you remember I called you on the day my father died? And you were great. You said the only thing that could possibly have been of any use to me. The only thing that would help me through to the other side.\* And I said dully, 'You'll have to be my father now.' It worked, and still works. As long as you're alive I'll never feel entirely fatherless.

\* [Amis's own footnote] He said, in parting, "Well I love you very much." I am not his son, of course. What I am is his ideal reader. I am not my father's ideal reader, however. *His* ideal reader, funnily enough, is Christopher Hitchens.<sup>53</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Bellow is most valued not because of his divergence from the traditional aims of the British novel but because of his perfection

<sup>49</sup> Martin Amis, 'Foreword' to *The War Against Cliché*, p. xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Amis, quoted in Mira Stout, 'Down London's Mean Streets' (*New York Times Magazine*, 4 February 1990), p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> A.O.Scott, 'Trans-Atlantic Flights', on *Heavy Water And Other Stories* by Martin Amis (*New York Times*, 31 January 1999), online at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>52</sup> cf. Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 175.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 360 &n.

of these, achieving high seriousness and moral import from the realistic presentation of present lives:

[Bellow presents] the permanent soul in its modern setting . . . Bellow [is] perhaps a modernist but never a post-modernist. His storytelling, as storytelling, is all earnest and no play. His only *ism* is realism. Meditative Realism, or Inner Realism, perhaps.<sup>54</sup>

For Martin Amis, Bellow embodies an extension and a deepening of Kingsley Amis's and Larkin's literary values rather than an alternative – an escape from callow artistic postmodernism into an authentic, 'permanent' realism – and much of Amis's fullest praise for Bellow repeats almost exactly those terms of special praise his father reserved for Larkin; that inspiration towards a more fully apprehended life:

Many times in Bellow's novels we are reminded that 'being human' isn't the automatic condition of every human being. Like freedom or sanity, it is not a given but a gift, a talent, an accomplishment, an objective.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout his writing, moreover, Amis treats his father and Larkin as somehow outside of the general decline of British literature. Larkin, accorded his own section in 2001's *The War Against Cliché*, is a figure above all of personal and artistic integrity:

They [the critics] think they judge him? No. He judges them. His indivisibility judges their hedging and trimming. His honesty judges their watchfulness.<sup>56</sup>

Larkin's watchful, indivisible presence is of huge importance in the moral structure of Amis's work, and is used to exemplify the redeeming force of the richest comedy: '[Larkin's is] the comedy of candour. Here melancholy still hurts, but it embodies its own comic relief; and dignity is not needed'<sup>57</sup>.

Kingsley Amis himself is given virtually his own book in *Experience* and half of another in *Koba the Dread*, and Martin makes him an explicit exception to the

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Amis, 'Saul Bellow in Chicago' (*Observer*, 1983), in *The Moronic Inferno*, (London, 1986), p. 208.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 169.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Ending: Don Juan in Hull', in *the War Against Cliché*, p. 169.

poverty of ideas in post-war British fiction, with his 1984 novel *The Old Devils* credited as one which ‘stands comparison with any English novel of the century . . . It fears no man – no, nor woman either’<sup>58</sup>. If 1973 is Martin Amis’s year of the Fall, then Kingsley Amis and Larkin serve as a kind of Eden: somehow outside of the depletion afflicting other recent British literature and. It is, tellingly, when writing on his father and Larkin that Amis’s work reveals its most intense fears of depletion and loss. Writing on Larkin in 1993, for example, Amis allowed himself to lament –

For his [Larkin’s] generation, you were what you were, and that was that. It made you unswervable and adamant. My father has this quality. I don’t. None of us does. There are too many forces at work on us. There are too many fronts to cover. In the age of self-improvement, the self is inexorably self-conscious.<sup>59</sup>

This ‘inexorable’ self-consciousness, this vulnerability to ‘too many forces’, echo the sense of fracture implied by the ‘atomization’ of past literary certainties – a sense that individuals are being worked upon by their times in an unprecedented and damaging way, and that the ‘war against cliché’ is a more troubling prospect than its manifesto suggests. Clearly, to be ‘unswervable and adamant’ is preferable to being ‘inexorably self-conscious’: or, to put it another way, progress needs also to be a matter of recovery (an idea familiar from Larkin’s own work).

In Amis’s first published essay on Larkin, written as an obituary for *Vanity Fair* in 1985, the metaphor most consistently applied to Larkin’s life is a religious one. There was ‘a priestly stoicism in Larkin’s devotion, or submission, to his job as University Librarian at Hull’; being given money by him in his capacity as godfather to Martin’s elder brother, Philip, was ‘a solemn moment . . . almost a religious experience’; his death is accorded the austerity and integrity of an inverted martyrdom – an unwavering refusal to flicker in the beliefs that had ruled his life – ‘Live out the

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<sup>58</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, pp. 257-8.

comfortlessness in fear and bafflement – that was the strategy’<sup>60</sup>. Amis mourns Larkin in tandem with a lost mode of being for which he can only turn to the language of religion. Similarly, in *Koba the Dread*, it is to the Bible that Amis turns for words fit to salute his father, opening his ‘Letter to My Father’s Ghost’ with a near-quotation from Job 3:25 –

... the thing you greatly feared is come upon you, and that which you were afraid of is come unto you.<sup>61</sup>

The religious tone seems, in each case, both urgently needed and without a contemporary equivalent. No matter how much Martin Amis might want to predict the eventual defeat of democratisation and cliché, the passing of this ‘adamantine’ generation (a word with Biblical resonances of its own, occurring as ‘adamant’ three times in the *King James Bible*<sup>62</sup> and eight times in *Paradise Lost*<sup>63</sup>) stirs the fear that present difference is an irremediable depletion.

Amis’s characteristic hyperbole is, in places, a further indicator of this fear. In ‘The Moronic Inferno’, for example, attempting to portray contempt for the present as a ‘myth’ common to all ages, Amis’s prose cannot help weighting the scales against his own times:

Of course, the myth of decline – the elegiac vision, which insists that all the good has gone and only the worst remains – has never looked less like a myth and more like a reality.<sup>64</sup>

Failing to gloss the difference between that which ‘looks’ like a reality and reality itself, the grim tone of Amis’s ‘never’ implies that hopes of progress are the real

<sup>59</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Don Juan in Hull’ (*New Yorker*, July 1993), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 170.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Amis, *Philip Larkin 1922-1985* (*Vanity Fair*, 1985) in *Visiting Mrs Nabokov and other excursions* (Harmondsworth, 1994), p. 203, 205 & 206.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 271. Compare. Job 3:25, ‘For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me.’

<sup>62</sup> Ezekiel 3:9, Zecharia 7:12, Sirach 16:16 [an apocryphal book not published in modern editions].

<sup>63</sup> ‘Adamantine’ features four times, ‘Adamant’ four times, in every case as a noun. The adjectival sense is not recorded until 1677 (OED).

<sup>64</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The Moronic Inferno’ (*London Review of Books* 1982 and *Observer* 1984), in *The Moronic Inferno*, p. 10.

'myth'. Much as in his criticisms of E.P. Thompson, this is a tone which subverts its author's intentions and which endorses the very myths it hopes to dispel. Moreover, there is in this particular essay a troubling gulf between the faith in humanity admired in Saul Bellow and the wavering of such faith in Amis's own prose, with the supercharged eloquence of Amis's response seeming as much an effort to convince himself as his readership that 'to evolve an exalted voice appropriate to the twentieth century'<sup>65</sup> is a continuing possibility. With this in mind, we should remember that Bellow (born 1915) – along with Nabokov (born 1899), Updike (born 1932), Ballard (born 1930), Roth (born 1933), Mailer (born 1923), Borges (born 1899) and most of Amis's other idols – came from a generation (or generations) closer to Kingsley's (born 1922) and Larkin's (born 1922) than to Martin's (born 1949). These are very much literary fathers and grandfathers, and looking along the list of lasting talents suggested by Amis's criticism there is a disturbing lack of contemporaries to be found.

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<sup>65</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Moronic Inferno', in *The Moronic Inferno*, p. 5.

### 3.iii. Pornography, invasion and control

In 1982, Martin Amis brought out perhaps his most unusual book, *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, a non-fictional mixture of essay and how-to-play guide on the nascent topic of arcade gaming, with an introduction by Steven Spielberg. The book's sub-title suggests Amis's angle – *An Addict's Guide* – and it finds him playing the dual roles of Martin Amis the critic-intellectual and Martin Amis the avid gamer. It is a work in the spirit of Barthes's *Mythologies*, embracing the particulars of pop culture in the service of larger truths, yet its different modes of discussion are kept distinct rather than integrated – perhaps symptomatic of Amis's difficulty in reconciling his responses as fan and critic. The second half of the book consists of insiders' tips and tactics, detailing how to beat games and maximize scores:

The phalanx of enemy invaders moves laterally across a grid not much wider than itself. When it reaches the edge of the grid, the whole army lowers a notch. Rule one: **narrow that phalanx**. Before you do anything else, take out at least three enemy columns either on the left-hand side or the right (for Waves 1 and 2, the left is recommended). Thereafter the aliens will take much longer to cross their grid . . . Advice: position your tank under the eave of a defensive, **and keep your eye on the aliens, not on the bombs.**<sup>1</sup>

The first half debates arcade gaming as both symptom and force for change within the 1980s:

There is something wilful, is there not, something *voulu*, about putting the last coins you own into one of these squat monsters . . . that is part of the spur. What more eloquent and effortless way of showing that you don't care, that nothing matters? . . . Money has never looked cheaper. It looks disposable, throwaway stuff.<sup>2</sup>

For Amis, as it soon becomes apparent, arcade gaming represents both an immensely appealing entertainment and a nexus of the insidiously manipulative forces explored

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Amis, *Invasion of the Space Invaders* (London, 1982), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

by his novels and non-fiction – an epitome of technological modernity which blends pornography, addiction, denial and the pursuit of profit:

When the eggheads in Tokyo and Los Angeles roll up their sleeves and settle down over the logic boards, they aren't out to improve the punter's trigonometry or hand-eye co-ordination. They're out to get his money into the international coin slot.<sup>3</sup>

[I]f you wanted to locate space-game playing as a moral activity, one would have to align it with pornography and its solitary pleasures. As such, it is no worse than any other form of selfish and pointless gratification; it is also very appropriate to the age.<sup>4</sup>

We live in a time of extraterrestrial hopes and anxieties . . . It would seem that many of us have vacant or dormant areas in our minds, empty spaces waiting for invasion. This is the area whose expansion leads to quirkiness, eccentricity, madness. It used to be the Devil who invaded these spaces in the common mind. Now, for obvious reasons, it is the Martians, the Space Invaders . . .<sup>5</sup>

While acknowledging gaming's delightful intricacy and his own vulnerability to its allure, Amis outlines a relationship of potentially devastating positive feedback: people are delighted to escape from the world into the simplicities of solitary gratification, the business of providing such gratification has become unprecedentedly possible and profitable, and so we have a situation in which (to borrow a phrase from *The Information*) each element in the equation is 'lashed . . . towards infinity'<sup>6</sup>. The Space Invaders phenomenon, Amis suggests, is essentially pornographic, in that it embodies a larger and more dangerous body of invasive forces: economically motivated, targeting and inflaming the human appetite for gratification, sapping more complex mental resources and moral faculties.

Pornography in Martin Amis's fiction closely corresponds to cliché in his non-fiction, embodying literature's polar opposite: something entirely inauthentic, devoted to effacing reality with fantasy. It is by no means a central subject in all of his novels,

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Amis, *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, p. 32

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, pp. 295-6.

yet it is one to which they repeatedly return, and to which he has increasingly closely related his largest literary concerns. It is also a topic through which Amis's fiction engages explicitly with the subtext of much of his father's and Larkin's work: their ambivalence towards sex and the irrational aspects of the self, their fears for the 'thinness' of so much contemporary culture.

J.G. Ballard, whom Amis has termed 'our leading investigator of the effects of technology, pornography and television'<sup>7</sup>, offers a suggestive summary of the function of pornography in his 1995 'Introduction' to *Crash*:

. . . pornography is the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other, in the most urgent and ruthless way.<sup>8</sup>

This is an 'urgent and ruthless' realm which, as Germaine Greer observes in *The Whole Woman* (1999), the last decades of the twentieth century have seen vastly swollen by technology in both scope and power:

Sex at the end of the century is no longer a matter of intercourse. The sex of the millennium is pornography. Pornography is the sexuality of the information revolution, elaborated to achieve all the staggering impact of which the megamedia are capable, projecting the images of the best-known sex objects as far as distant planets in galaxies yet unknown.<sup>9</sup>

It is what pornography reveals about its consumers that most fascinates and appals Martin Amis. As his 2001 essay 'A rough trade' – subsequently published as the text of a 2004 collaboration with photographer Stefano De Luigi under the title *Pornoland* – argues, to ignore the evidence of pornography is not an option for a serious investigator of the human condition:

Now. American porno (and how could it be otherwise?) is market-driven. We can see what the above tells us about porno. But what does it tell us about America? And if America is more like a world than a country, what does it tell us about the world? . . . This isn't bullshit.

- Porno is far bigger than rock music and far bigger than Hollywood.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Amis, on *The Day of Creation* by J.G. Ballard (*Observer*, September 1987), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'Introduction' to *Crash*, (London, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London, 2000), p. 229.

- Americans spend more on strip clubs than they spend on theatre, opera, ballet, jazz and classical concerts combined.

- In 1975 the total retail value of all the hard-core porno in America was estimated at \$5-10 million. Last year [2003] Americans spent \$8 billion on mediated sex.

Whatever porno is, whatever porno does. you may regret it, but you cannot reject it. To paraphrase Falstaff: Banish porno, and you banish all the world.<sup>10</sup>

Amis's essay centres on an account of his meetings and conversations with workers in the LA porno industry, undertaken as part of his research for *Yellow Dog*.

'Temptress', a twenty-one-year-old porn starlet, is accorded the distinction of a line from one of Amis's favourites Larkin poems, 'Sad Steps':

Physically, Temptress reminded me of the daughters of my friends. She didn't sound shy, but she looked it. With her long straight hair frequently steered over her shoulders by her slow-moving hands, with her face unglazed by cosmetics, with her gently narrowed eyes, she exuded what Philip Larkin called the 'strength and pain/Of being young'. I asked about her history and she told me something of it. And there was strength and there was pain (and there was certainly youth: Temptress is 21).<sup>11</sup>

Amis uses Larkin's words as a means both of universalising and humanizing (as pornography cannot) – calling upon that common humanity Temptress shares in, with all its hopes and its weaknesses. Individually, Amis is at pains to show, the stories of these actors and actresses are painfully, strugglingly human. But as a whole, their industry is at the cutting edge of the anti-human: the commodifying, the violent, the alienating:

And that was the tenor of it: heat. That is where the market is taking us: toward heat, intensity, a frenzied athleticism. More than this, porno, it seems, is a parody of love. It therefore addresses itself to love's opposites, which are hate and death. "Choke her!" "Spit inside me!" "Break me! You can't break me! Try!" "COMING!!!" Chloe screamed this last word like a mother answering a child's cry from the other end of the house. Then, to Lola, "Choke me!" And Chloe's entire upper body flushed with pink, and she seemed to swoon . . .<sup>12</sup>

As John Stagliano, ex-pornstar turned successful director, comments to Amis:

<sup>10</sup> Martin Amis, 'A Rough Trade', (*The Guardian*, 17 March 2001), online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

‘. . . It looks like violence but it’s not. I mean, pleasure and pain are the same thing, right? Rocco [an actor] is driven by the market. What makes it in today’s marketplace is reality.’ And assholes are reality. And pussies are bullshit.’<sup>13</sup>

Stagliano is both right and wrong in his equation of pleasure and pain, in that, although there ought to be a difference between them, in the world of porno this is dissolved. Each one is simply a product – and Stagliano’s observations, like porno itself, are both universal and fatuous. Yet, as Larkin’s ‘Sunny Prestatyn’ suggests, this world of saleable fantasy reveals more viscerally than almost anything else the brute mechanics veiled elsewhere in contemporary society. With its seductive irrationalism, its targeting of lusts and fears, its refusal of moral complexities, pornography embodies for Martin Amis everything that is reductive and pandering in bad art – but also presents his writing with perhaps its most central challenge: to speak to and of a world which ended up spending \$8 billion on ‘mediated sex’ in 2003, and to offer not only a convincing but also a communicative and enjoyable alternative.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson describes (after Baudrillard<sup>14</sup>) the increasing abstraction of desire within modernity as ‘a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum’<sup>15</sup>: fantasy, floating free of all empirical reality, perpetually generates the pseudo-spiritual comforts of excess, but constructs these across a void, demanding that the underlying anxiety of consequence and relations remains unarticulated. As Jameson notes,

. . . there cannot but be much that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Amis, ‘A Rough Trade’, (*The Guardian*, 17 March 2001).

<sup>14</sup> cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991), ch. I, p. 6.

fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm.<sup>16</sup>

For many of Martin Amis's characters, coherence and continuity are often not so much threatened as inconceivable. As *Money's* John Self puts it,

The future's futures have never looked so rocky. Don't put money on it. Take my advice and stick to the present. It's the real stuff, the only stuff, it's all there is, the present, the panting present.<sup>17</sup>

Television is the supreme medium of their reality, a one-way tube which asks for none of the engagements and interpretations of the written word, and which – like all the best pornography – indiscriminately *shows*. Keith Talent in *London Fields* is the perfect example:

Boy, did Keith burn that tube. And that tube burnt him, nuked him, its cathodes crackling like cancer. 'TV,' he thought, or 'Modern reality' or 'The world'. It was the world of TV that told him what the world was . . . . TV came at Keith like it came at everybody else; and he had nothing whatever to keep it out. He couldn't grade or filter it. So he thought TV was real . . . an exemplary reality, all beautifully and gracefully interconnected, where nothing hurts much and nobody got old . . . beyond a taut and twanging safety-net called *money*.<sup>18</sup>

Keith has 'nothing whatever to keep it out', and it is integral to Amis's perception of this pornographic culture that it is aimed at the most basic and vulnerable levels of the mind. John Self is similarly aware of this process, and helpless to resist:

Television is cretinizing me – I can feel it. Soon I'll be like the TV artists. You know who I mean. Girls who subliminally model themselves on kid-show presenters . . . Or the cretinized, those who talk on buses and streets as if TV were real.<sup>19</sup>

For Amis, everyone is increasingly the 'TV artist' of their own life, subliminally fed models which become their only measure of reality: areas of need, want, fear and lust are remorselessly targeted and expanded, becoming a more 'real' arena of involvement than the less-brilliant hues of the mundane world.

<sup>16</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, ch. I, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Amis, *London Fields*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 27.

Amis's analysis of arcade gaming in *Invasion of the Space Invaders* was a prescient one – the North American video game market alone was valued at \$12.6 billion in 2005<sup>20</sup> – and his sense of the power of these forces recurs with a vengeance in arguably his greatest novel, *Money* (1984). Pornography is central to *Money* and to its central character and narrator, John Self, who more than any other of Amis's creations enacts the struggles and debauches of the late twentieth century. 'All my hobbies are pornographic in tendency', Self admits:

The element of lone gratification is bluntly stressed. Fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs.<sup>21</sup>

Himself a director of soft-porn TV commercials for junk food, alcohol and cigarettes, Self hurtles between London and America attempting to direct a film based on his own life, titled alternately *Good Money* and *Bad Money*. In a direct echo of *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, Self bemoans the much-invaded space of his mind – he is in constant conflict with both 'some fucking joker' inside and with the outside world, unsure what a proper, fully-known self (or Self) might be, or even whether such a thing is possible:

I sometimes think I am controlled by someone. Some space invader is invading my inner space, some fucking joker. But he's not from out there. He's from in here.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of the 'space invader' is important, establishing the technologised, contemporary shape of Self's (entirely justified) paranoia. His sense of helplessness and uncertainty is, as he realises, of quite a different order to the feelings of people even a few generations before him –

Before . . . these tribes of spacefaced conquered would brood about God, Hell, the Father of Lies, the fate of the spirit, with the soul imagined as an inner being . . . But now the invader is a graph shadow swathed in spools and

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<sup>20</sup> Wired News Report, 10 May 2006, online at <http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,70864-0.html>

<sup>21</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 330.

printouts, and he wears an alien face.<sup>23</sup>

For Self, the realm of the fantastic has become increasingly inhuman, even anti-human, beneath its pornographic exterior; and there is something more terrible about this shadowed 'alien face' than either the God or the Hell of 'before'. As Nathanael West, pre-empting both Kingsley Amis's and Larkin's criticisms of the 'thinness' of contemporary life, commented in *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933),

Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio, and newspapers. Among many betrayals this one is the worst.<sup>24</sup>

For both Self and West, the coherence and power of past 'broodings' have become a cacophony of unmeaning spools and syllables: Self wistfully observes, 'I wish I knew more about that time – before. I don't suppose I'll ever find out much about it now'<sup>25</sup>. Instead, his mental life is laid before us in *Money* as an unstructured squabble of impulses and yearnings, its attempts at form hopelessly compromised by invasion and conflict:

There are, at the latest count, four distinct voices in my head. First, of course, is the jabber of money . . . Second is the voice of pornography . . . Third, the voice of ageing and weather, of time and travel through days and days . . . Number four is the real intruder . . . It is the most recent. It has to do with quitting work and needing to think about things I never used to think about.<sup>26</sup>

Formlessness is central to Self's vulnerability, and is a state which *Money* directly relates to the 'bad art' of pornography and money: all possibilities of reform or wisdom are constantly battered by the 'panting present'<sup>27</sup>. As Amis has himself

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 330.

<sup>24</sup> Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) from *The Collected Works of Nathanael West* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 254.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 330.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

commented, '[Self] has no resistance, because he has no sustenance, no structure.'<sup>28</sup>  
(with a distinctly Biblical echo in the word 'sustenance'<sup>29</sup>).

Money lies at the heart of the pornographic, as Self admits: 'I don't know how to define pornography – but money is in the picture somewhere. There has to be money involved, at one end or the other'<sup>30</sup>. Behind this lies the fact that, still more than pornography, money is the ideal generator of unanchored fantasy, matching the potentially limitless desires of consumers to sellers' limitless desire for profit. As Self notes after watching pornography in a cubicle, it is 'Hard to tell, really, who was the biggest loser in this complicated transaction – her, him, them, me'<sup>31</sup>. Money is changing hands, some are exploited, others may be gratified, but everything is drained of meaning or value beyond the 'transaction': everyone has 'lost' something. This is the exact opposite of proper, unclichéé art: there is no human interaction, no possibility of resolution beyond the further expansion of fantasy. As Steve Cousins, one of Amis's nastiest creations, discovers in *The Information*:

He had found [in pornography] something that was all about sex. And nothing else . . . Pornography sometimes tried to be about other things, or to happen in other settings. But all it could ever tell you about these other things, these other settings, was that *they* were all about sex too. And nothing else.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, pornography is most stimulating when it is most intensely superficial: the aim is for a gratification that is ceaseless because it is entirely divorced from the limited stuff of actuality. In his lover, the eponymous Selina Street, Self finds the 'thrilling proof, so rich in pornography, that she does all this not for passion, not for comfort, far less for love, the proof that she does all this for money'<sup>33</sup>. Despite his chances of a better and fuller relationship, Selina's fakery – the act put on purely for

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in John Haffenden, 'Martin Amis' in *Novelists in Interview* (London, 1985), pp. 13-14.

<sup>29</sup> cf. Judges 6:4, 2 Samuel 19:32, Wisdom 16:21, Acts 7:11.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 315.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information* (London, 1995), p. 410.

appearances – is more acceptable than the real precisely because it is impersonal, because it most directly mimics and generates further fantasy. Once, Self tells us,

. . . she [Selina] made a noise I'd never heard her make before, a rhythmical whimpering of abandonment or entreaty, a lost sound . . .  
 'Hey,' I said accusingly (I was joking, I think), 'you're not faking it!'  
 She looked startled, indignant. 'Yes I am,' she said quickly.<sup>34</sup>

To admit to something authentic, an even momentary loss of artistic control over one's appearance, is to admit a dangerous vulnerability which might be exploited – especially for a woman such as Selina, whose entire persona is a weapon in the struggle for success and money. Similarly, when Self visits the actress Butch Beausoleil, it is in her studied unreality that power resides – 'the stuff that hot fox was giving out, all miming so fluently with the pornography still fresh in my mind'<sup>35</sup>. Self is stuffed full of second-hand desires, his most basic urges and responses inflamed for the profit of others, and everyone is only too anxious to collude. A 'lost sound', an 'entreaty', begins to ask deeper questions which the entire interplay of illusion is engineered to repress; and as every participant in the game is aware, to be without money is to enter a terrifying place, pregnant with the violence of the dispossessed. For both Selina and Self, submission appears the only route to salvation: 'Render up your soul, and gain power'<sup>36</sup>, as Tod Friendly discovers in one of the diabolical capitulations at the heart of *Time's Arrow*.

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, p. 58.

### 3.iv. The Iago-figure and *Dead Babies*

Fielding Goodney – John Self’s producer, high-priest of capitalism and, as it turns out, deceitful psychopath – is the most obvious representative of earthly powers within *Money* (in the fullest sense of Anthony Burgess’s vision of earthly evil). Near its start he offers Self some frank advice about the industries of addiction and their role in the status quo of business and wealth:

Always endeavour, Slick, to keep a fix on the addiction industries: you can’t lose. The addicts can’t win . . . Nowadays the responsible businessman keeps a finger on the pulse of dependence . . . People just can’t hack going out any more. They’re all addicted to staying at home . . . Swallow your chemicals, swallow them fast, and get back inside. Or take the junk back with you. Stay off the streets. Stay inside. With pornography.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, Fielding himself emerges as another kind of illusion, his super-virile public face a front for the loathsome half-man whom John Self labels ‘Frank the Phone’, revealed finally in a scene of animal combat: ‘The thing turned on its side. Bits of half-digested meat and broken dental pieces came from its mouth . . . I had seen those eyes before, but not in that face’<sup>38</sup>. Fielding and Frank inhabit opposed extremities of the same urban space, yet theirs is as false an opposition as that of wealth and poverty. Each implies and demands the other – Frank’s vicious delight in manipulation and self-deluding sense of injustice are just another version of Fielding’s pursuit of money and power – and their double existence forms one of the vicious circles within which Self (only too willing to capitulate to the promise that ‘you can’t lose’ and ‘the addicts can’t win’) is trapped throughout the novel.

As Self himself recognises, all his frames of reference are terrifyingly reflexive; there can be no escape from his ‘panting present’ so long as he can think of nothing beyond the pairings of money and poverty, power and fear. His definitions

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 349-350.

begin where they end, in money, a word which appears on almost every page of the novel:

I am pussy-whipped by money, but then so is the United States. So is Russia. We are all stomped and roughed up and peed on and slammed against the wall by money . . . money is freedom. That's true. But freedom is money. You still need money.<sup>39</sup>

Self's entrapment, knowingly on Amis's part, echoes George Orwell's 1936 novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, which traces the rebellion and subsequent capitulation of Gordon Comstock to the moneyed world –

He [Comstock] had blasphemed against money, rebelled against money . . . and it had brought him not only misery, but also a frightful emptiness, an inescapable sense of futility. To abjure money is to abjure life . . . He would buckle to work, sell his soul, and hold down his job . . . Everyone rebels against the money-code, and everyone sooner or later surrenders. He had kept up his rebellion a little longer than most, that was all.<sup>40</sup>

Orwell is one of *Money's* central points of literary reference – published in 1984, *Money* sees John Self attempting to read both *Animal Farm* and *1984*, not to mention staying in room number 101 at his New York Hotel – and, like his father, Martin Amis seems to have responded to Orwell's parable with a frightened recognition of the irrational powers at its heart. In particular, Fielding resembles Orwell's O'Brien (Winston Smith's deceiver and interrogator), with his 'urbane manner and his prize-fighter's physique'<sup>41</sup>; a commanding, seductive presence whose greatest weapon is full knowledge of his victims' desire to be deceived –

'They got you too!' [Winston] cried.  
 'They got me a long time ago,' said O'Brien with a mild, almost regretful irony . . . 'You knew this, Winston,' said O'Brien. 'Don't deceive yourself. You did know it – you have always known it,'  
 Yes, he saw now, he had always known it.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 270.

<sup>40</sup> George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* from *George Orwell: Animal Farm, Burmese Days, A Clergyman's Daughter, Coming up for Air, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (London, 1976), p. 731.

<sup>41</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from *George Orwell: Animal Farm, Burmese Days, A Clergyman's Daughter, Coming up for Air, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 748.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 880.

*I've settled the motivation question [John Self comments near the very end of Money]. I supplied it all. The confidence trick would have ended in five minutes if it hadn't been for John Self. I was the key. I was the needing, the hurting artist. I was the wanting artist. I wanted to believe. I wanted that money so bad. Me, and my no-confidence trick.*<sup>43</sup>

In plumbing the depths of Self's 'no-confidence trick', however, perhaps the most important single text among *Money's* many intertexts is Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Fielding Goodney is one of the most important of several Iago-figures in Amis's novels. Fielding is, like Iago, a 'demi-devil'<sup>44</sup>: able to exert an almost supernatural influence over others; what Coleridge termed a 'motiveless Malignity'<sup>45</sup>. He is also, as the Martin Amis character in *Money* notes, a kind of artist – or, rather, an anti-artist, harnessing language and fantasy into a watertight propaganda of power and wealth. Unreality is his element and his triumph; only when he abandons fantasy for fleshy reality does his vulnerability becomes apparent and even then he is, like Shakespeare's Iago, wounded rather than vanquished, his presence impossible to eradicate. Of course, Self is no Othello, but neither are Amis's references intended simply to highlight the wretched state of the present. The intertextual game is amusing, but it also pays tribute to the ground shared by human lives and art across the centuries, and to those conflicts Amis considers most central in both life and literature.

The first such Iago-figure to appear in Amis's work features in his second novel, *Dead Babies* (1975); an apparently programmatic satire<sup>46</sup> which quickly turns into an assault on all moral and metaphysical order. Amidst its numerous intertextual

<sup>43</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, pp. 392-93.

<sup>44</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, V, ii, l. 352.

<sup>45</sup> 'The last Speech, ["Thus do I ever make my fool my purse"] the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity - how awful! . . . A being next to Devil'; from *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature (Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 5)*, ed. R.A. Foakes (2 vols.; 1987), II, p. 315.

<sup>46</sup> Its epigraph purports to be a quotation from the third-century Greek satirist Menippus – 'and so even when [the satirist] presents a vision of the future, his business is not prophecy, just as his subject is not tomorrow . . . it is today.'

references<sup>47</sup>, *Dead Babies*'s most 'literary' character is also its most terrifying and duplicitous: the Hon. Quentin Villiers, Lord of Appleseed Rectory, editor of a literary magazine, rhetorical opponent of the American Marvell's post-humanist hedonism, and psychotic murderer. It is to Augustan rather than Shakespearean literature that the novel is most directly indebted<sup>48</sup> – and it should be noted that Amis's literary references are more of a clever trundle through the Oxbridge canon than a radical interrogation of genre – but Quentin leads the other characters as irresistibly towards their dooms as Shakespeare's Iago does Othello. Like Iago and, later, Fielding, he is a perfect manipulator, perfectly able to snare others within his conceits; and at his centre there seems to be only the demonic need to disprove all systems of meaning beyond his own nihilism, a task in which *Dead Babies* itself intermittently colludes.

As the novel opens, Quentin is sat beside his beautiful wife reading Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau – Rameau's Nephew*, an eighteenth century satire which consists of a dialogue between a hedonist and a believer in virtue. Quentin shows himself able to play both of Diderot's roles with impunity, but the truth of his nature lies outside of the polarities of pleasure and principle, in his alter-ego as Johnny, a 'practical joker'<sup>49</sup> who murders each one of his companions through a series of bizarre and brutal manipulations. The figure of Quentin/Johnny entwines the supposed polarities of the urban and the pastoral, the hateful and the glorious: Quentin is 'a superman. The versatility of the fellow! . . . it is impossible to meet Quentin without falling a little bit

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<sup>47</sup> As well as having a character who names himself after Theodor Adorno, the plot and setting (a debauched long weekend in the country) mimic the country-house novel as perfected by P. G. Wodehouse, while Appleseed Rectory itself and the American character Marvell Buzhardt recall Andrew Marvell's 1651 country-house poem *Upon Appleton House*. D.H. Lawrence's attitude to sex also comes in for a drubbing via the person of Marvell.

<sup>48</sup> *Dead Babies* echoes the darker and more anarchic side of works such as Pope's *Dunciad* (1728 & 1729) and, in particular, Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), whose central conceit is the solution of the 'Irish problem' through the eating of babies.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 10.

in love'<sup>50</sup>, yet within him is the 'hideous, inhuman'<sup>51</sup> figure of Johnny, who has emerged from the broken detritus of the city itself: '*Mondays he was bucket-boy at Greek Charlie's down-river abortion factory . . . evicted widows and cripples from South London tenements Wednesdays*'<sup>52</sup>. Quentin/Johnny embodies both the brilliant surfaces and the motiveless depths of the 'urban pastoral'<sup>53</sup>, as Amis terms it in *The Information* (1995) – the power of its forces to seduce and to harm, and what seems to be the entirely inscrutable gulf between its polarities. Through him, Amis suggests a more intractable evil than the unconcern, ignorance and naivety of his characters in *The Rachel Papers*. Quentin is dressed in literature rather than cliché; he seems a great reader, a talker, a thinker. He is also, to return to Knowd's formulation in *The Rachel Papers*, the ultimate *user* of literature and the embodiment of failure to grasp its 'life' – a supreme instrumentalist whose own writings are a dazzling collage of abuse and plagiarism (a terrain, again, with which *Dead Babies* itself flirts):

To begin with he [Quentin] wrote most of the book reviews [for his magazine] himself. He would allow a cooling-off period after publication, collate and synthesize the notices of rival journals, find the points on which they agreed, and rewrite them in the inimitable *Yes* style . . . As regards the political side of the paper Quentin filled his pages with hate-pieces too scabrous and extreme to be printed elsewhere . . . The remainder of the magazine was bulked out with vicious gossip about imaginary persons . . . rather good satire, exposés culled from celebrity acquaintances, Andy's erudite though often loosely-argued contemporary music page . . . and Quentin's excellent film and theatre reviews.<sup>54</sup>

The magazine is, of course, a huge success, winning the approval of luminaries including 'William Burroughs, Gore Vidal, Angus Wilson, and a quorum of distinguished intellectuals'<sup>55</sup>. It deceives everyone, and is an extreme version of the essays Charles Highway produces for his Oxford interview in *The Rachel Papers*,

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 53.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 220.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 220.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information* (London, 1996), p. 138.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, pp. 50-52.

concerned with effect to the exclusion of all empathy. There is, however, no Knowd to hold Quentin to account, and the result is a great uncertainty within the novel as to how far the relationship between readers and writers can ever be either trusted or trusting. Style, in *Dead Babies*, is ruled by insincerity and brutally successful fakery – and as well as being a dangerously sharp satire on his own profession as critic-editor in 1975, Amis's sketch of this journal and its illustrious list of deceives suggests how troubling the question is in his own work of distinguishing excellent but insincere pastiche from an 'authentic' piece of writing.

As Amis has himself commented, he sets out to write the kind of novels in which:

What the reader should do is identify with the writer. You try to see what the writer is up to, what the writer is arranging . . .<sup>56</sup>

Our central concern as we exit *Dead Babies* is closely linked to Amis's own: how can we read others' words and actions with any certainty of intention or value, and how far are we willing to be deceived? Just as Othello lacks any insight into his own jealousy, the cast of *Dead Babies* fail at every stage to analyse their condition. Instead, they deny both past and future, preferring specious claims of apocalypse, impotence or mastery: 'We have chemical authority over the psyche'<sup>57</sup> (Marvell), 'All you can do is smash everything, raze the entire planet, and then start over'<sup>58</sup> (Roxeanne), 'It seems like I've always been like I am now, always lived like I live now . . . You just go on.'<sup>59</sup> (Andy). Attempting to inhabit a world devoid of morality, blame or consequence, reality inexorably exposes the redundancy of their attitudes as they begin to be killed by Quentin/Johnny. Even little Keith, the last man standing, is

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<sup>55</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 53.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted by Susan Morrison in 'The Wit and Fury of Martin Amis' (*Rolling Stone*, 17 May 1990), p. 98.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Amis *Dead Babies*, p. 56.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 155.

just about to be murdered as the novel ends. Yet, curiously and touchingly, Keith's almost-final thoughts form a quotation from one of Larkin's most hopeful poems, 'The Trees', and seem to indicate some other set of values almost breaking through from author to character: '[Keith] looked round at . . . the unresting trees (what was it they were saying . . . *fresh, fresh, fresh*)'<sup>60</sup>. For Amis, Larkin's words embody something outside of Quentin's bleakly reductive vision: something almost being said, almost being heard.

In each case, the cast of *Dead Babies* is snared by the instrumentalist paradigms it refuses to exit: having decided that there is nothing outside the present of material satisfactions and chemical denials, Amis's characters lack any perspective from which Quentin's pitiless, loveless evil might be glimpsed. As with both Fielding Goodney and Orwell's O'Brien, there is something pornographic in the inflated fantasy that is Quentin Villiers, and the 'dead babies' of the novel lap him up as they do other pornography. Quentin is the most evolved of dissemblers, murmuring clichés to match his sham-genteel exterior – 'You shun your spirit . . . every time you agree to sell your days to the city, to measure out your life at the city's pace'<sup>61</sup> – while grinding down every individual he meets. As the glimpse of Larkin's poetry hints, real truths and real style sound very different to this: they are difficult, they do not flatter to deceive. Yet, when Amis's narrator himself tries to provide an alternative frame of reference, the novel's brief departure from black satire into tenderness has little of the conviction of its assaults on weakness and ignorance. 'But pity the dead babies', we are suddenly asked –

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<sup>59</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 168.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 223. Larkin's poem ends 'Yet still the unresting castles thresh / In fullgrown thickness every May. / Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.', *Collected Poems*, p. 166, ll. 9-12.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 63.

Now, before it starts. They couldn't know what was behind them, nor what was to come. The past? They had none. Like children after a long day's journey, their lives arranged themselves in a patchwork of vanished mornings, lost afternoons and probable yesterdays.<sup>62</sup>

The effect is uncertain and unexpectedly bathetic, and it underscores a greater uncertainty in the novel itself – as to what a present-day resistance to Quentin's malignity might actually sound like; and as to how far the 'dead babies' blindness to such a possibility faithfully represents the limits of contemporary lives.

*Money* extends the concerns of *Dead Babies* dramatically, not only through the figure of Fielding but also through the presence of 'Martin Amis' himself as a character: the true Iago to Self's Othello/Roderigo (the fictional Amis drives an 'Iago 666': *Money* is stuffed full of hints which might lead John Self, were he a more literary type, to guess his role as dupe in a universe tailor-made for his manipulation). Fielding is, in this sense, as much a puppet as Self – and still more so in his total lack of insight. As the Martin Amis character recognises, Fielding's words to Self after their eventual combat reveal an attitude of 'pure transference'<sup>63</sup>: he calls Self an 'inhuman dog', deludedly representing himself as an unknowing Roderigo to Self's Iago. Fielding, however, is not the only one to mangle Shakespeare around his own inadequacies, and Self himself becomes a misreader of *Othello* during the course of *Money*. Taken by Martina Twain to see Verdi's *Otello*, even as a member of the audience he is deceived by the stage Iago's manipulations:

The flash spade general arrives to take up a position on some island, in the olden days there, bringing with him the Lady Di figure as his bride. Then she starts diddling one of his lieutenants . . . Otello's sidekick is on to them, and, hoping to do himself some good, tells all to the guvnor. This big spade, though, he can't or won't believe it.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Martin Amis, *Dead Babies*, p. 180.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 377.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

Unlike Fielding, however, Self manages to progress beyond this distorted view of the text, a crucial moment in the struggle to escape the most venal aspects of his nature:

Another thing I learned that night [spent in bed with Martina], a night when I learned many things. Desdemona never did it. She was faithful. She was true. Desdemona never did it – no, she never did.<sup>65</sup>

Once again in Amis's work, literary criticism and the ability to understand the 'life' of literature prove crucial. Where Self's capacity for learning reveals at least the potential for better things within his addled humanity, Fielding's delusions betray the limits of his amorality. For him, Self is guilty because everyone is guilty. Fielding's vision of the world as an endlessly interconnected web of money-making opportunities seamlessly elides into his interpretation of it as an undifferentiated network of paranoid fantasies; a relativism devoid of root causes or degrees of blame beyond his own peculiar victimhood. In a disturbing inversion of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, which foretell final judgement and the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous<sup>66</sup>, Fielding spells out his 'motivation' as a gross counterpoint to the suffering spread by Self's instinct-driven, unexamined life, failing to see that his attitude is still more narcissistic and self-deceiving than Self's own:

'Oh it's motivation you want. You want motivation. Okay. Here. Have some motivation.' . . . 'Remember, In Trenton, the school on Budd Street, the pale boy with glasses in the yard? You made him cry. It was me. Last December, Los Angeles, the hired car you were driving when you jumped that light in Coldwater Canyon? A cab crashed and you didn't stop. The cab has a passenger. It was me . . . .'<sup>67</sup>

This is Fielding at his most bizarrely potent – knowing things he should not be able to know, inhabiting Self's mind as only an actual devil could. Yet it also offers a

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<sup>65</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 316.

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 25:42-45 – For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not . . . Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did *it* not to one of the least of these, ye did *it* not to me.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 217.

glimpse of the roots of Fielding's power over Self, and of how his control might be escaped – because Fielding's control relies on Self's willingness to accept his own unassuageable worldly guilt. For Self, realising the impossibility of Fielding's knowledge would be synonymous with realising the possibility of forgiving himself, and thus of entering into a relationship with society and others predicated upon more than needs and fears.

### 3.v. Doublings, twins and Success

John Self's fears in *Money* are in an important sense only too real and pressing: poverty and violence, in which his life began, are always waiting to reclaim him. Similarly, at the rear ends of *Money's* cities, the slums wait, ready to 'bite back, with their mean little teeth'<sup>68</sup> – a typical Amis phrase in its extension of an image from cliché ('bite back') to pointed social reference, evoking those damaged countless lives too numerous and uncertain to be fended off by anything except 'the hug and the glaze'<sup>69</sup> of money. Money and power, in *Money*, inexorably imply and generate this fear and aggression: they draw their meanings from a cultivated otherness, from the existence of those who have less (and want more). Central to the moral impact of the novel is Amis's insistence that neither inaction nor action are morally neutral: for everything there is a consequence and a reason, for every gain a loss. Fielding implies Frank the Phone, and their twinning is a portrait of the ugly amorality that lies beneath capitalism's bright surfaces. Similarly, while money reaches for an excess beyond all proportion, *Money* also traces the escalating violence at its edges, a region equally devoid of insight and equally gratuitous – 'They want revenge. You can't just pay them off. They take it all and cut you up anyway'<sup>70</sup>, as Self explains to the bewildered Martina. There are, to paraphrase Larkin, deceptions on both sides of the glass.

'Free market populism', David Harvey argues in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 'does nothing for the poor except to eject them into a new and quite nightmarish landscape of homelessness'<sup>71</sup>. This is a landscape which functions for Amis as the repressed affluent unconscious: the dark, fearful, jealous place from

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<sup>68</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 254

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p. 284.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 306.

<sup>71</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1990) p. 77.

which Fielding's manipulations draw much of their power. Exploited, suppressed and dehumanized, the lower levels of the city come to resemble those clichés by which they are perceived and oppressed, while 'life is hoarded elsewhere by others'<sup>72</sup>.

*Money* insists that these upper and lower worlds are not true opposites. They are entwined – just as the doppelgänger stalks its twin, just as the picture in the attic evidences the debaucheries of the other's flesh – and it is above all as an assault on the glib compartmentalisations of contemporary thought that its patterns of doubling function.

The first example of this kind of relationship in Amis's work can be found in his third novel, *Success* (1978). *Success* is a novel both about and dedicated to brothers – it bears the epigraph 'To Philip', Martin's older brother, Philip Amis, born in Oxfordshire on 15 August 1948 and named by Kingsley after Philip Larkin. At the time of the novel's conception and writing, from 1975-7, Philip Amis was living largely in America, playing the wayward son to Martin's own success story as novelist and critic in London. Always close to his brother, Amis describes himself in *Experience* as from his early childhood aware of the chains of action and reaction through which family identities are forged:

. . . the Amises were, in configuration, a rough and ready boy-boy-girl . . . Philip, therefore, exerted his will on Martin, and Martin, therefore, exerted his will on Sally.<sup>73</sup>

*Success* contains an extreme version of this dynamic, and investigates how exerting one's 'will' (such a dangerous word in both Kingsley Amis's and Larkin's work) can result in a crippling diminishment of both the self and others.

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<sup>72</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 153.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 148.

Terry Service is the first of the novel's two narrators, the other being his foster brother, Greg, into whose aristocratic family he was adopted at the age of nine. They share between them each of the novel's twelve chapters, corresponding to the seasons from January to December, and the trajectories of their interconnected lives form an approximate cross as Terry's rise out of squalid self-loathing mirrors Greg's fall from self-satisfaction into despair. On each side, their attitudes are dominated by a number of violent exclusions. Terry's initial sense of failure is defined by Greg's success, while all his hopes of success demand Greg's failure:

I'm very keen indeed, as a matter of general principle, on picking up intimate details about Gregory. I want details, I want details, actual details, and I want them to be hurtful, damaging and grotesque. I nurse dreams of impotence, monorchism and premature ejaculation. I lust for his repressions and blocks; I ache for his traumata . . . And above all, of course, I long for Gregory to be dismally endowed.<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, Greg uses the 'yob' Terry as a yardstick for his own exceptionality, propping up each one of his attributes with reference to Terry's inadequacy. Dress, for instance:

I unconditionally promise you that Terence was wearing Sherwood-green velvet trousers, a flounced orange shirt, and a red corduroy jacket. But then Terence's taste in clothes, as in most other things, has always been quite beyond the pale . . . because of his want of inches he is moreover obliged to wear stilt-like yob's boots – you can do that if, like me, you're already very tall, but not if, like him, you're actually very small . . .<sup>75</sup>

Although neither narrator knows it, even as the novel begins it is already too late.

Locked into the claustrophobic geometry of mutual loathing, each brother has decided that success cannot be a mutual gain. For one to succeed the other must fail, and the result is an abject failure of brotherhood in which Terry's ultimate success proves at least as repugnant as Greg's failure.

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<sup>74</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

As well as being brothers, Terry and Greg are representatives of two opposed but interconnected worlds – the upcoming urban world of Terry’s ‘yob’ middle-class and the declining feudal order of Greg’s genteel family. As their times work upon them, the mutual affection they enjoyed as children (begun by Greg’s father’s kindly, if misguided, adoption of the orphaned Terry) recedes along with their capacity to see this connectedness as anything other than conflict. Instead, fear and anger come to dominate. Terry, representative of the upcoming class, takes on all its loyalties and furies: terrified of running out of money and ending up on the streets, he gives himself up to a new orthodoxy in which there are no values beyond wealth and worldly success. Greg, terrified of a world in which he cannot live simply by being the ‘right’ kind of person, withdraws into self-indulgent fantasy while life collapses around his ears. Much like *Dead Babies*, *Success* offers its readers a lesson in both the unreliability of appearances and the hidden bonds linking the appealing and the appalling. Our narrators’ apparently opposed styles, between which Amis laces continual parallels and echoes, are a case in point. Terry’s ‘dour fidelity to the actual,’<sup>76</sup> is in fact as much of a self-protecting shield as Greg’s ludicrous linguistic poses (of which the opening chapter is typical: ‘And so I considered how to invest this cool deliverance of an evening, this sudden cargo of hours, standing at my penthouse window . . .’<sup>77</sup>): each pushes aside deeper connections and consequences. Later in the novel, paying a visit to his boss’s house, we see the degree to which Terry has surrendered to an exclusive, distorting ideology in his similarly warped language:

I want all that and I want all that. And I want all *that* and I want all *that*. And I want *all* that and I want *all* that. I don’t want what he has. But I want what he wants.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, p. 184.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

Acquisitive lust has become a substitute for all other aspirations, as he capitulates to the 'goods and sex' philosophy which Larkin's 1973 poem 'Money' contemplates with such sadness<sup>79</sup>.

As Greg rightly observes, moral passivity lies at the heart of Terry's worst failures –

That sad bastard [Terry], he didn't do anything to end up like he is. Only he let what happened to him happen to him, and that's enough these days. The world is changing; the past has gone, and from now on it is all future tense.<sup>80</sup>

And, later in the novel –

Terence is simply the representative of the values that have got to him first . . . And Terry, of course, is 'doing well'. He is *doing well*. Of course. He has shown that he will perform what is necessary to succeed.<sup>81</sup>

Greg's own flaws are, however, almost identical to those of the brother he claims to despise, and are rooted in narcissism and ignorance. Theirs is a shared pathology, and it is manifested above all in their sexual and emotional abuses of Greg's younger sister, Ursula: a horrifically extreme version of the Amis brothers' relationship and its impact on Sally Amis<sup>82</sup>. Greg, typically, uses a screen of cod-Romantic prose to present the incest he forced upon Ursula, introducing it in the style of a fairy-tale:

Remember (I want to say), remember, my princess, when it happened? Listen. Your first day at the big girls' school. Mama and Papa had driven you in . . . You lay on the stripped bed. I lay on top of you. You were shaking insanely. You wanted to be smothered, joined up, plugged, to stop the bits of you flying apart for ever. You wanted me as close as I could get. Who would have borne it? I couldn't . . . I just lowered my trousers. Everything was over in a moment. I hoped I didn't break anything.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The first and last stanzas of which read – 'Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me: / "Why do you let me lie here wastefully? / I am all you never had of goods and sex. / You could get them still by writing a few cheques.' . . . 'I listen to money singing. It's like looking down / From long french windows at a provincial town, / The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad / In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.', in Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 198, ll. 1-4 & 13-16.

<sup>80</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, p. 49.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 184.

<sup>82</sup> Sally Amis died in November 2000. cf. Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 268.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, pp. 185-7.

All desire, here, is projected on to Ursula – ‘You wanted . . . You wanted’ – leaving Greg an innocent, responding to her wants, masking his lust as love. It is a trick which the increasingly prosperous Terry echoes, gradually adopting Greg’s diction and habits of denial until, after the now mentally-ill Ursula moves in with them in London, Terry’s own relations with her climax in a similar rape and an almost identical summary – ‘Everything was over in a moment. I just lowered my trousers. I only remember the smell . . .’<sup>84</sup>. Ursula’s suicide, just before the end of the novel, is a crisis precipitated by the cruelty and unconcern of both brothers; a final and irrevocable defiling of innocence which sets the seal on their mutual moral squalor.

Importantly, however, *Success* rejects a simple equivalence between Terry and Greg. As even they sense, there are differences of a crucial kind in its doubling. Even while furiously abusing his brother, Terry is aware of the great pity at the heart of Greg’s transformation from golden youth to posturing, dissembling adult:

[Greg] had tenderness then [during his childhood], and real radiance, an extraordinary flair for boyhood and youth . . . What fucked you up? What changed you? Something did. Something has robbed you of all soulfulness and feeling and heart and left you the thing you are now, the little bundle of contempt, vanity and stock-response you pass yourself off as, all the stuff that simply got to you before anything else could.<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately, the voice within *Success* which comes closest to Amis’s own is Greg’s. Throwing off his pretensions in despair, Greg begins to combine Terry’s horrified awareness of what it means to be at the bottom of the urban food-chain with his own memory of how things once were different. His perspective, suddenly, echoes that of the authors Amis most praises in his non-fiction, refusing to take anything for granted:

A whole layer of protective casing has been ripped off my life. Nothing looks the way it used to look . . . When my eyes pass over the tregs, the yobs, the animals in the street – people who were hardly there at all before – I get

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<sup>84</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, p. 196.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

sucked in by them helplessly and see the hell *they* are too. I take nothing for granted any more: the tiniest action or thought is broken down into a million contingencies. I have come out.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly to the central figure of Kingsley Amis's poem 'The Value of Suffering', a descent from privilege to destitution grants Greg new vision. Terry has usurped all his old pride and status, but in doing so has released Greg from their destructive twinning. Greg has dropped out of the bottom of society and now laments the losses of contemporary lives with bitter intensity, seeing the evidence of injustice written across the city in madness and misery –

Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems that approximately one in three of this city's indigenous population is quite mad – obviously, openly, candidly, brazenly mad. Their lives are entirely given over to a bitter commentary on the world . . . In every busload there will be six or seven people who just sit there growling about nothing with tears in their eyes.<sup>87</sup>

Although each of these brothers were thrust from childhood innocence into bitter experience, it is only Greg who remembers Eden and who can, in his deluded way, attempt to keep faith with it. Greg's nostalgia is in part *Success's* own. Its final few paragraphs, spoken by Greg from the remains of his family estate, transpose *Dead Babies's* occasional sentiment into full-throated lament:

I'm cold. Dew is falling. In the distance, to my left beyond the Indian file of silver birches, the railway line runs on its banked mound. Something's coming. I pause as a smart blue train steams by. I look down to see that my hand is waving childishly. How absurd. Why? Always wave to trains, my nanny or my mother or my grandmother said. I remember now. Someone nice might see you and wave back.

. . .

I stand behind the row of birches. I'm cold – I want to shiver and sob. I look up. Something's coming. Oh, go *away*. Against the hell of sunset the branches bend and break. The wind will never cease to craze the frightened leaves.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, p. 170.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 200.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 224.

The innocence of Greg's vanished childhood merges with the winter landscape. A fragment of remembered speech – 'Someone nice might see you and wave back' – is marooned in an unkind present like an old photograph or song. Larkin's cry of 'Never such innocence again'<sup>89</sup> hangs over this scene and, moving into the iambic rhythm of blank verse for its last sentence, this is as close as *Success* comes to a high style.

*Money*, as we have seen, considerably expands these themes, attempting to find a more robust response than regression in the complexities it traces between supposed polarities and twinnings. Martin Amis's character and John Self are themselves, as James Diedrick argues, 'secret sharers' rather than antagonists:

Many of Self's experiences are, in fact, those of his creator viewed through the distorting lens of an unlikely double . . . Both were shaped by the youth culture of the 1960s, which is reflected in their work; both made professional names for themselves in the 1970s; both sought artistic recognition on the other side of the Atlantic in the 1980s . . . [B]oth Amises – the author of *Money* and his persona within the narrative – have been shaped by the forces that have shaped Self.<sup>90</sup>

Self, the 'unlikely double', offers what neither Terry nor Greg can: the voice of the addict as hero, dancing through Amis's literary as well as biographical hoops armed with a poetry of his own. The character of 'Martin Amis', meanwhile, represents a different kind of epitome. As the daily routine he describes to Self suggests, he is a marooned modernist, attempting to exist above and beyond the daily life of his times:

I get up at seven and write straight through till twelve. Twelve to one I read Russian poetry – in translation, alas. A quick lunch, then art history until three. After that it's philosophy for an hour – nothing technical, nothing *hard*. Four to five: European history, 1848 and all that. Five to six: I improve my German. And from then until dinner, well, I just relax and read whatever the hell I like. Usually Shakespeare.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Philip Larkin, 'MCMXIV' in *Collected Poems*, p. 128, l. 32.

<sup>90</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, pp. 96-7 & 101.

<sup>91</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 236.

As one would expect from Amis, this description mixes parody with a sincere emphasis on the author as a reader and worker. Yet this ‘Martin Amis’ is also something of a Stephen Dedalus figure, in contrast to whom John Self provides a Bloom-like demonstration of the primacy of those fleshy realities the other is determined to efface –

[The Amis character says to Self] ‘The distance between author and narrator corresponds to the degree to which the author finds the narrator wicked, deluded, pitiful or ridiculous. I’m sorry, am I boring you?’

‘ – Uh?’

‘This distance is partly determined by convention. In the epic or heroic frame, the author gives the protagonist everything he has, and more. The hero is a god or has godlike powers and virtues. In the tragic . . . Are you all right?’

‘Uh?’ I repeated. I had just stabbed a pretzel into my dodgy upper tooth. Rescreening this little mishap in my head, I suppose I must have winced pretty graphically and then given a sluggish, tramplike twitch. Now I checked the tooth with my tongue. Martin talked contentedly on.<sup>92</sup>

As James Diedrick notes, ‘Self and realism alike emerge triumphant from this encounter’<sup>93</sup>: for all his affability and manipulative power elsewhere, this ‘Martin Amis’ is too glibly postmodern, too deep in Theory and high notions of art, to respect actuality itself.

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<sup>92</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 246.

<sup>93</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 99.

### **3.vi. Martina Twain, *Other People* and literature as salvation**

It was in a 1986 article for *Atlantic Monthly* on Joyce's *Ulysses* that Martin Amis coined the idea of 'the war against cliché', and the admiring ambivalence of this piece charts the limits of his own modernism. He concludes,

. . . it is impossible to conceive of any future novel that might give the form such a violent evolutionary lurch [as *Ulysses*]. You can't help wondering, though. Joyce could have been the most popular boy in the school, the funniest, the cleverest, the kindest. He ended up with a more ambiguous distinction: he became the teacher's pet.<sup>94</sup>

Joyce's retreat from his readers – the price at which 'distinction' was achieved – worries Amis; and *The War Against Cliché* implicitly contrasts Joyce to Saul Bellow by making its very next essay Amis's account of *The Adventures of Augie March*. This, Amis unreservedly claims, is the Great American Novel, because it is 'all about life: it brings you up against the dead-end of life'<sup>95</sup>. Unlike his 'teacher's pet' Joyce, Amis's Bellow functions as a direct conduit between art and world, pointing his audience not towards the play of texts but towards the irreducible stuff of actuality itself: endlessly beyond our comprehension, yet susceptible to our awe and intuition. It is in this sense of literature bringing you 'up against the dead-end of life' that Amis locates a true alternative to the manipulations of Fielding and 'Martin Amis'.

Amis's other double in *Money* – Martina Twain, Self's friend and lover – in many ways embodies the opposite of the manipulative, egotistical 'Martin Amis'. For the fictional Amis, both books and people are largely opportunities for bullish intellectual theorizing. Both Fielding and 'Martin Amis' could claim they have attempted to educate Self during the course of *Money*, but in each case the pedagogic mantle conceals a desire to manipulate and to destroy. It is, within *Money*, only

<sup>94</sup> Martin Amis, 'The War Against Cliché' on *Ulysses* by James Joyce (*Atlantic Monthly*, September 1986), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 446.

<sup>95</sup> Martin Amis, 'The American Eagle' on *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1995), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 448.

Martina who is committed to kindness and persuasion rather than self-assertion, and who suggests that a focus on life as well as texts can play its part in a contemporary novel. Martina takes a pragmatic attitude towards books. She offers them to Self as a ‘how-to kit for the twentieth century’<sup>96</sup> – and actually gets him to read some of them rather than just impressing him with her literary superiority. Literature is, for her, about living a better and a richer life, not about achieving abstract excellence; and although *Money* is well-aware of the connections between affluence, security and the luxury of reading (Martina has a lot of money, ‘the stuff that just wallows there inviolably and never goes away’<sup>97</sup>) it does not accept that the enjoyment of good writing is simply a moneyed-class indulgence. Rather, through Martina’s treatment of Self, it suggests that reading can be a proper aspiration as well as a project of egotistical triumph: that it can express an authentic yearning for betterment and for a common ground other than the financial.

Through Martina and the books she lends him, Self begins to discover a way of looking at the world which is in its own way more shocking than his ceaseless debauches. ‘I can’t believe this stuff. And you’re telling me it’s *true*?’<sup>98</sup> he exclaims as he begins to find out about twentieth century history. For John Self just as for any reader, Amis suggests, literature in the right circumstances can permit a different way of being in the world:

The big thing about reading and all that is – you have to be in a fit state for it. Calm. Not picked on. You have to be able to hear your own thoughts, without interference. On the way back from lunch (I walked it) already the streets felt a little lighter. I could make a little more sense of the watchers and the watched.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 334.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, p. 302.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 298.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 136.

Self's encounter with Martina and with literature closely echoes the function of churches in the works of Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch and Philip Larkin. Self discovers in books a 'space' outside of normal life which awakens a deeper sense of humanity in him – a hunger for truth, for life, for love. It is not a place, however, he could have come to unaided. Martina's love that offers the 'fit state' society has denied Self and, in her, he is at least temporarily metamorphosed into something more fully human. As he puts it –

We [Self and Martina] kissed, we embraced, and I know I'm a slow one and a dull dog but at last I saw what her nakedness was saying, I saw its plain content, which was – Here, I lay it all before you. Yes, gently does it, I thought, with these violent hands . . . And in the morning, as I awoke, Christ (and don't laugh – no, don't laugh), I felt like a *flower*: a little parched, of course, a little gone in the neck, and with no real life to come, perhaps, only sham life, bowl life, easing its petals and lifting its head to start feeding on the day.<sup>100</sup>

Too far gone in his modernity to be touched by, or even to encounter, places of worship, it is love that brings Self into contact with books, and books that begin to awaken his sense of both the permanently human and the historically real – that other, actual realm of historical events and ongoing history which he had thought himself outside of. On an innate level, it seems, even John Self is able to recognise the different order of these thoughts and feelings to the disposable, pornographic stuff of the rest of his life.

*Money's* immediate predecessor, *Other People*, is perhaps Amis's most important fictional investigation of the relationship between literature and consciousness, and it too is haunted by this 'little more sense' which the right words might allow us to make of the world. As Saul Bellow's Augie March declares, 'Everybody knows there is no fineness or accuracy of suppression; if you hold down

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<sup>100</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 336.

one thing you hold down the adjoining.’<sup>101</sup>, and this could serve as *Other People’s* motto. Amis has described Augie’s development as a heightening awareness of suppression –

. . . after Augie has broken clear from Chicago, he returns to the city with a disinfected eye, and he can see this suppression daubed all over the landscape like paint<sup>102</sup>

– and Mary Lamb moves through *Other People’s* London, another urban landscape devoted to suppression and pretence, similarly ‘disinfected’ by her amnesia. ‘The streets’, she realises, ‘were full of display, of symbols whose meaning was coolly denied to her’<sup>103</sup>. Immune to such display, she senses instead the trapped, desperate energies of the city and its lurking possibilities of violence –

They [the streets] teemed with a last, released, galvanic hate . . . Each turning seemed more likely to deliver its possibilities of hurt and risk; soon, someone or something would feel the need to do her special damage.<sup>104</sup>

Like Greg towards the end of *Success*, trauma has forced Mary into a fresh relationship with the world, and like him she finds herself reaching in instinctive sympathy towards the people around her. The first people she speaks to are a collection of drunks and tramps; but her immediate response, rather than fear or disgust, is to recognise in them a common, damaged humanity:

She peered at them through their hot breath. Their skin was numb and luminous, but all their eyes were ice. I’m one of them, she thought, and perhaps I always have been. And as she looked from face to face, sensing the varieties of damage which each wore, she guessed that there were probably only two kinds of people. There were only two kinds of people: it was just that all kinds of things could happen to them.<sup>105</sup>

‘I’m one of them’, Mary realises. At the root of all these lives there lies a common nature – and difference is simply a matter of time and experience.

<sup>101</sup> Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (London, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The American Eagle’, (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1995), from *The War Against Cliché*, p. 461.

<sup>103</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People* (London, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

James Diedrick draws attention to the poetic precedent for *Other People's* central device in Craig Raine's poem 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home', published in the Christmas issue of the *New Statesman* in 1977. Using a technique for which James Fenton coined the idea of the 'Martian School' of poetry, Raine's poem defamiliarises everyday objects and activities to striking effect:

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings  
and some are treasured for their markings –

they cause the eyes to melt  
or the body to shriek without pain.

I have never seen one fly, but  
sometimes they perch on the hand.<sup>106</sup>

'Caxtons' are, of course, books. Yet there is a crucial difference between Raine's narrator and Mary Lamb. Unlike the Martian of the poem, Mary is an entirely ordinary human being; rather than descending from above, she has returned to some kind of human bedrock, and her resulting perspective is very different to a playful 'seeing-again' of the world. Instead, as the novel makes increasingly clear, Mary's state is closely linked to those 'first principles'<sup>107</sup> that are for Martin Amis the prime concerns of literature and morality.

The novel's mysterious narrator and arranger, Prince, suggests that any quest for understanding must begin in the past and its weight of buried experience:

You know, don't you, that your forgotten wrongs will never cease to caffeinate your thoughts? . . . I used to think there was no time like the present. I used to think there was no time *but* the present. Now I know better – or different, anyway. In the end, the past will always be there. The past is all there is: the present never sticks around for long enough, and the future is anybody's guess. In time, you always have to hand it to the past. It always gets you in the end.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>106</sup> Craig Raine, 'A Martin Sends a Postcard Home' in *Collected Poems 1978-1999* (London, 2000), p. 95, ll. 1-6.

<sup>107</sup> Martin Amis, in conversation with Will Self, in Will Self, *Junk Mail*, p. 390.

<sup>108</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 76.

A total wipe has freed Mary from her past – and her innocence acts as a constant, luminous alternative throughout the novel, exposing the extent to which others are the victims of unexamined and potent psychic forces rooted in their pasts. After having sex with the hopeless Alan, for example, Mary lies awake listening to ‘his dream talk . . . his confusion and sadness at being alive among all these other people’<sup>109</sup>. Like all of the characters Mary meets, Alan is in thrall to events that have gone ‘underground’, leaving only twitches of response. *Other People*’s sense of these forces is relentless and fearful. ‘[O]rdinary people are really terribly strange, deep with dreams and infamies’<sup>110</sup>, Mary thinks; and it is at night that the unconscious takes its revenge in many of Amis’s novels – in *The Information*’s ‘men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing’<sup>111</sup>, in the Holocaust nightmares of *Time’s Arrow*. This is, for Amis, the difference between an understood and a felt history – between that chaotic twentieth century John Self finds driving him between London and New York, and those narrative connections which restore some order to its apparent chaos.

Much as in *Money*, drunkenness sets the pattern for all of *Other People*’s suppressions: it is an exit from unbearable complexity, a way of existing among other people without acknowledging anything about either them or your self. All of Amis’s drunks are narcissists, pandering to the narrowest kind of selfhood. Mrs Botham, with whom Mary briefly stays, is typical:

When Mrs Botham was talking to you, you just looked her way without really listening. Mrs Botham wasn’t about to mind. As far as she was concerned, talking was the main thing. It wasn’t really to do with you: it was to do with her.<sup>112</sup>

Mrs Botham uses language as a series of comforting reflexes rather than as a tool for mutual communication: like the ‘shop-queue’ monologues of bad criticism or

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<sup>109</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 126.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, pp. 102-3.

<sup>111</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 9.

Dr Rosenberg's jargon in Kingsley Amis's *Jake's Thing*, her talk turns back on itself, iterating specious claims of special insight. It is an attitude which, *Other People* makes clear, is far from harmless even in Mrs Botham's case, and which is actively malevolent elsewhere.

The concept of sin, much as in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973), is never far away in *Other People*. As his knowing interpolations increasingly make clear, Prince is an avatar of the Prince of Darkness, operating this version of Mary's life as a personal hell – or, perhaps more accurately, as a purgatory from which she might eventually confront the circumstances that led to the end of her previous existence. In this sense, *Other People* anticipates the reverse-time narrative of *Time's Arrow* (1991); even more than *Dead Babies* or *Success*, it is a novel of foregone conclusions and pre-determined actions, in which every character is through a combination of weakness and circumstance unable to take control of their life. Yet, as Amis explained in interview with John Haffenden,

At the very end of [*Other People*] she [Mary] starts her life again, the idea being that life and death will alternate until she gets it right . . . but actually I wanted to suggest on top of everything else that she would in fact get it right this time.<sup>113</sup>

When Mary first finds a job, performing menial tasks in a café, a brief textual reference between Amis's novels suggests a possible answer to what this question of 'getting it right' might mean. Beginning to learn her way in the world, the work and the certainty of the place fill Mary with a full, spontaneous pleasure in living:

Mary loved her job . . . She loved the way everybody knew everybody else, the familiar acknowledgements of morning and evening, the sense of inclusion and with it the sense of time made lighter, the summer angles of the sun on the wiped dishes . . . Sociable flies weaved their fishing-nets in the air.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 51.

<sup>113</sup> Martin Amis in interview with John Haffenden, from *Novelists in Interview* (London, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>114</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 83 & 85.

Mary is in love with life, uncritically open to the variousness of the world. Her co-worker Russ, meanwhile, complains about the flies:

‘Jesus, these fucking *flies* . . . What’s the bloody *point* of them, that’s what I want to know.’<sup>115</sup>

The form of Russ’s question echoes Charles Highway in *The Rachel Papers*:

What was the point? There always was a point.<sup>116</sup>

As well as Terry in *Success*:

*Anyone* can get fucked if they’re queer. That’s the whole point of being queer, surely . . .<sup>117</sup>

And it anticipates John Self, who finds himself thinking, after Selina has refused to have sex with him:

*Then what do you think is the point of you?*<sup>118</sup>

Mary sees things entirely differently:

Mary, who moreover knew several of them [the flies] by sight, wasn’t worried by flies. She knew what the point of flies was . . . How readily the world had spanned out to accommodate her, Really the main thing about life was its superabundance: there was so much of it, and always room for more inside.<sup>119</sup>

Russ, Highway, Terry and Self speak as instrumentalists, demanding a ‘point’ for any part of the world that happens to have caught their attention. Mary is wiser than this, intuiting from the ‘superabundance’ of life that being must be an end in itself if it is to be found sufficient (the notion of a creator never even crosses her mind). She knows that the ‘point’ of flies, just like the point of people, is simply to be as best they can, according to their natures. As Terry Eagleton has argued,

To live a really fulfilling life, we have to be allowed to do what we do just for the sake of it . . . you cannot ask why people should want to feel happy and fulfilled. It would be like asking what someone hoped to achieve by falling in love. Happiness is not a means to an end.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 85.

<sup>116</sup> Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers*, p. 60.

<sup>117</sup> Martin Amis, *Success*, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 244.

Most significantly, it is in literature that *Other People* above all locates this kind of fulfilment. Mary's first encounter with books is a revelation:

Each word she recognized gave her the sense of being restored, minutely solidified, as if damaged tissue were being welded back on . . . she knew that language would stand for or even contain some order, an order that could not possibly subsist in anything she had come across so far . . . <sup>121</sup>

Instinctively feeling that 'Reading might well hold the key to any order the world disclosed'<sup>122</sup>, Mary recognises something in words which precisely matches her own struggle to grasp actuality. Literary taste, moreover, comes entirely naturally to her, through the comparison of texts to life. Reading innumerable bad novels from a cupboard in the Church-Army Hostel, Mary notes that

they couldn't make you care. They made you sure of something that other books made you only indifferently suspect: that stories were lies, imagined for money, time sold. <sup>123</sup>

In the world of great books, however, she finds expansions and awakenings which echo her own delight and awe at life:

A few of the books were dead – they were empty, there was really nothing inside. But some were alive: they spanned out at you seeming to contain all things, like oracles, like alephs. <sup>124</sup>

The 'aleph' Mary is referring to is not the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'The Aleph', which centres on a mysterious object known as an Aleph that is 'one of the points in space that contains all other points'<sup>125</sup>. The story's narrator describes his contact with it in an image of limitless possibility, transcending every usual limit of representation – a description which could equally read as an account of divinity –

<sup>119</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 85.

<sup>120</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, pp. 115-6.

<sup>121</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 37.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>125</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Aleph' in *The Aleph* (London, 2000), trans. Andrew Hurley, p. 126.

Every language is an alphabet of symbols the employment of which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors . . . in that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency.<sup>126</sup>

It is the wonder of this central image that *Other People* invokes (although ‘The Aleph’ is also a witty exploration of literary envy, and of writers’ frequent inability to do justice to such vision), sharing Borges’s sense – echoed in Amis’s article on *The Adventures of Augie March* – that great writing can conjure the world’s boundlessness even in a finite language, pointing us away from ourselves towards the infinite. Secular and religious experience blur in this. Amis’s assertion, much like Larkin’s, is that gazing at our limits in relation to illimitable actuality is a route both to compassion and to imaginative sympathy, awakening the longing to be more and better than we are.

Anticipating Amis’s later non-fiction, *Other People* suggests that good and bad writing address opposed and warring aspects of our natures: that good writing is concerned with the complexities of actuality (the virtue of humbleness), while bad writing pushes the world away, preferring fantasy and self-serving formulae (the sin of pride). Prince, playing the entirely appropriate role of devil’s advocate, offers a provocative monologue late in the novel which touches obliquely on these ideas:

Policemen look suspicious to normal murderers. To the mature paedophile, a child’s incurious glance is a leer of predatory salacity. In more or less the same way, live people are as good as dead to active necrophiles.

It is often extra affectionate to leave people you care about alone. Anyone who has ever walked into a lamp-post knows that all speeds above nought miles per hour are really pretty fast, thanks.

Some people look at the sunset and can see only blood in the vampiric sky . . . All clichés are true. No one knows what to do. Everything depends on your point of view.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Aleph’ in *The Aleph*, p. 129.

<sup>127</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 173.

This passage first appeared in the form of a poem by Amis entitled 'Point of View' in the *New Statesman* on 14 December 1979, just over a year before the publication of *Other People*, and it suggests the centrality of these awkward moral inversions in the novel's genesis. The poem itself reads:

Policemen look suspicious to normal  
 Murderers. To the mature paedophile  
 A child's incurious glance is a leer  
 Of intimate salacity; in more  
 Or less the same way, live people remain  
 As good as dead to active necrophiles.

It is often extra affectionate  
 To leave people you care about alone.  
 Anyone who has ever walked into  
 A lamp-post knows that all speeds above nought  
 Miles per hour are really pretty fast, thanks.

Some of us look at the sunset and can  
 See only blood in the vampiric sky.  
 I've got a clock that turns its back on me,  
 In disdain. A watch wouldn't dare do that.

If you don't feel a little mad sometimes  
 Then I think you must be out of your mind.  
 No one knows what to do. Clichés are true.  
 Everything depends on your point of view.<sup>128</sup>

On its own, the poem reads as an amusing piece of provocation. Put into Prince's mouth, however, it becomes more clearly an anti-manifesto, its extreme reversals provoking the reader towards an opposed realisation – that clashes between appearances and actuality are far from being a neutral affair, and that all points of view are far from equal. As Prince must know, if we are unable to contradict the view that a child is begging to be raped, we allow the most sinful kind of narcissism to become rampant. Through Prince, with his unmatched experience of falls and self-deluding pride, Amis acknowledges such sophistry as essentially demonic; and

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<sup>128</sup> Martin Amis, 'Point of View', *New Statesman* (14 December 1979), p. 954.

reminds us that to confuse the impossibility of absolute certainty with the absence of any certainty is to be incapable of speaking of any action – paedophilia, murder, abuse – as wrong or right. Wisdom, rather, lies in the realisation that *nothing* depends on your point of view (a sentiment central to *The Information*): the world turns regardless, time brings you closer to death.

There remain large doubts hanging over *Other People's* programme of awakening, however. Towards the end of the novel, Mary's relationship with literature is touched by a sudden realisation of its imperfection, its worldliness:

And suddenly she realized: books *were* about the living world, the world of power, boredom and desire, the burning world . . . they all fawned and fed on the buyable present. What had she felt before? She felt that books were about the ideal world, where nothing was ideal but everything had ideality and the chance of moral spaciousness. And it wasn't so. She ran her eyes along the shelves with mordant pride. Books weren't special. Books were just like everything else.<sup>129</sup>

As elsewhere in *Other People*, it is hard to tell where Mary ends and Martin Amis begins; and the friction between literature's mundane existence and its moral potential embodies other tensions within the novel itself. *Other People* is a book whose central themes are the evil of suppression and the need for an honest engagement with the self and others, yet it provides a partial and deliberately exclusive model of human nature. Mary and Amy are the same person, but the divide between them is vast. Mary's amnesia is impossibly unworldly, while for every other character in the novel worldly experience has proved an incurable moral toxin. Mary's 'nature', moreover, seems connected to the 'nature' of the others she meets in only the loosest sense; and there is a constant tension between Amis's presentations of human virtue as both an innate capacity polluted by experience and an enlightenment gained only after laborious self-mastery. Mary seems unable to contemplate books possessing 'moral

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<sup>129</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 169.

spaciousness' alongside their 'buyable' existence, but her blindness to compromise echoes the perversity of Prince's monologue. As she fails to realise, the absence of absolute values is very different from the absence of any values – and books, while not wholly divorced from 'the burning world', are not necessarily 'just like everything else' either. For Amis himself, it seems, any compromise would destroy her innocence – and the possibility of approaching goodness from a position of experience is one which *Other People* represses as unbearably problematic.

Much like *Success*, *Other People's* deadlocked structure instead finishes by suggesting possibilities of resolution in a retreat from the present. Its ending is formally and thematically conservative, as a reborn Mary/Amy makes her new way with family at her side:

She ran down the stairs. Her father stood with his back turned in the hall. He was winding the grandfather clock. She walked up to him and put her hand on his shoulder, her face full of gentle insistence.

'Amy,' he said, and turned slowly. 'Back in the land of the living, are you?'

'Forgiven?'

He took her hand and kissed it. 'Forgiven. Now take care.'

Amy opened the door and stepped out into the afternoon.<sup>130</sup>

Sentiment and nostalgia crowd into the frame, and Amis's vision of 'getting it right this time' proves a literal return to childhood and the trappings of blissful domestic innocence. Finally, Prince offers an 'Epilogue' which locates him somewhere between serpent and guardian angel –

Here she comes, shutting the front door behind her and walking quickly down the path . . . Even at this distance I can tell by the brightness in her eyes that she's been crying. Poor baby . . . Any moment now I'll step out into the street. I can see her coming to the end of the path and hesitating as she reaches the road, looking this way and that, wondering which way to go.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Martin Amis, *Other People*, p. 206.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 207.

The final lines of *Paradise Lost* – hailed by Martin Amis in *Experience* as both his and his father's most-admired piece of non-dramatic English poetry<sup>132</sup> – ring behind this paragraph, poised in delicate balance between fallibility and hope:

Some natural tears they drop'd. but wip'd them soon;  
The World was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:  
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Whether and how far Amy will fall is undeclared. We are left at the gates of Eden, but without any promise of Christ to combat our demons. From the shadows emerges, instead, Amis as Old Testament moralist, preaching the difficulty of wisdom in a suffering world. Free will, such as it is, must suffice – yet modern worldly experience seems often in *Other People* to be an inexorable ill, incompatible with the best aspects of human nature.

The unearthly paradise of a life with Martina is similarly not permitted for John Self in *Money*. But neither do death or despair await him. Despite the novel's sub-title, 'A Suicide note', and the inexorable 'death' of a character once the author's text has ceased to be read, Self does escape his textual nemeses and even manages to make 'a little more sense' of his frantic world. Having lost all his money he begins, in the italicised final section, to relate a little more closely to that irreducible reality outside of language against which every fantasy is ultimately directed. Fallen and almost certain to fall again, Self, the half-wise half-savage, seems in his way the perfect and only antidote to the sophistry of a Iago; and his final insight is as much a linguistic triumph as it is a coda to financial defeat: *'I've settled the motivation question. I supplied it all . . . I was the needing, the hurting artist. I was the wanting*

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 133n.

*artist*<sup>133</sup>. More than any other of Amis's novels, *Money* tolerates and even embraces the incompleteness of human efforts, locating hope in bloody-minded going-on-living: in literary art as pragmatism, its hopes incremental but none the less real for that. It ends not with death or apocalypse, but with an image of the human form – Self's new partner, Georgina – and a sense of gain as well as loss, a salute to humanity:

*Humans, I honour you . . . Now here's that Georgina at last, moving clear of the crowd; her smile is touching and ridiculous – delighted yet austere, and powerfully confident – as she ticks towards me on her heels.*<sup>134</sup>

As the next chapter will explore, this embrace of limited success is an important but unstable component in Martin Amis's fiction – a counterpoint but not a resolution to its fears for contemporary lives, and a note rarely struck with such satisfying substantiality as in the voice of John Self.

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<sup>133</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, pp. 392-93.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

## Chapter Four

### Martin Amis – from *Einstein's Monsters* to *Yellow Dog*

#### 4.i. Responsibility and causation: *Einstein's Monsters* and *London Fields*

The Iago-figure, the fallen present, doublings, pornography and cliché – in Martin Amis's work all these offer versions of the problem of human evil and fallibility so central to this father's and Larkin's fears for the present. But Martin Amis also offers a more restless literature than theirs, and one whose central uncertainties his novels have posed increasingly explicitly to readers. *Money*, in particular, marks a transition in a way that none of Kingsley Amis's or Larkin's individual works do: the beginning of an intensifying focus on the political ills of the twentieth century as well as its cultural and social conflicts, and of an increasingly intractable sense of difficulty in Amis's art.

As Richard Tull finds out in *The Information*, artistic perception itself can be isolating and paralysing as well as empowering:

[Richard] was an artist when he saw society: it never crossed his mind that society had to be like this, had any right, had any business being like this. A car in the street. *Why? Why cars?* This is what an artist has to be: harassed to the point of insanity or stupefaction by first principles.<sup>1</sup>

Richard is a freakish parody of artistic modernism, his work so troubled and opaque that his latest novel, *Untitled*, does physical harm to those attempting to read it. Yet he is also a facet of Martin Amis, and the unbearable pain he inflicts on his readership mirrors one of his author's growing concerns: the agony of being able to find no underlying coherence in the world, and of being able to derive little comfort from the store of what is known about both man and the universe. In *The Information* as elsewhere in Amis's work, popular art (embodied in Gwyn Barry's grotesque utopian

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 11.

fantasy, *Amelior*) is in its banal comforts invariably the enemy of truth – and yet ‘truth’, such as it is, seems increasingly to be becoming an incomprehensible or appalling prospect.

Three years after the publication of *Money*, Amis launched himself at one major aspect of the political *why* of contemporary society in his first collected volume of short stories, *Einstein’s Monsters* (1987). Their focus is nuclear weapons. ‘I first became interested in nuclear weapons’, Amis’s polemical ‘Introduction: Thinkability’ reads, ‘during the summer of 1984’<sup>2</sup>, and he traces this awakening to two factors: impending fatherhood (his first son, Louis, would be born later in 1984; his second, Jacob, in 1986) and a reading of Jonathan Schell’s study *The Fate of the Earth* (1982). ‘Thinkability’ makes powerful but uneasy reading, explicitly linking *Einstein’s Monsters* to Amis’s previous work with the claim that:

Soon after I realised I was writing about nuclear weapons (and the realization took quite a while: roughly half of what follows in this book was written in innocence of its common theme), I further realized that in a sense I had been writing about them all along. Our time is different. All times are different, but our time is *different*. A new fall, an infinite fall, underlies the usual – indeed traditional – presentiments of decline.<sup>3</sup>

Amis presents himself as an author clarifying the relationship between his writing and the world he inhabits – at last able to give one of the imperatives motivating his work its true name (the threat of nuclear weapons) and to spell out one of his most central preoccupations (a contemporary Fall of an unprecedented kind). On a less polemical note, he might have added, the grim fact of nuclear weapons offered another useful emblem for many of his existing fears for society.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Introduction: Thinkability’ to *Einstein’s Monsters* (London, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

One of the most striking features of *Einstein's Monsters* is the urgency with which it relates Amis's political engagements to his literary work. The brief 'Author's Note' puts it modestly:

I do want to get my chip on the table, however thin, however oddly coloured, however low its denomination.<sup>4</sup>

The ensuing twenty-three sides of Introduction, however, prove a 'chip' of considerable moral and rhetorical weight, and represent the most serious attempt in Amis's career to that point at integrating his literary, moral and political concerns. 'Thinkability' is not the definitive account of 'why I write' offered by 2001's *The War Against Cliché*, but it comes close; and Amis is nowhere more impressive than in his dismantling of the bad thought and worse language of nuclear deterrence:

It is gratifying in a way that all military-industrial writing about nuclear 'options' should be instantly denatured by the nature of the weapons it describes, as if language itself were refusing to cooperate with such notions. (In this sense language is a lot more fastidious than reality, which has doggedly accepted the anti-reality of the nuclear age.) In the can-do world of nuclear 'conflict management', we hear talk of *retaliating* first; in this world, deaths in the lower tens of millions are called *acceptable*; . . . in this world, opponents of the current reality are known as *cranks*. 'Deceptive basing modes', 'dense pack groupings', 'baseline terminal defence', 'the Football' (i.e. the Button), acronyms like BAMBI, SAINTS, PALS and AWDREY . . . 'Star Wars' itself: these locutions take you out on to the sports field or back to the nursery.<sup>5</sup>

This 'nursery' is a region which grossly betrays the actual children of its time, its wilfully regressive language abnegating all responsibility towards future generations; and the theme of responsibility – to others, to one's own humanity, to literature and to language itself – underlies much of 'Thinkability'. Amis accuses the writers and the politicians of his father's generation of a gross failure to think in the kind of terms he is now employing:

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Amis, 'Author's Note' to *Einstein's Monsters*, p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Amis, 'Introduction: Thinkability' to *Einstein's Monsters*, p. 4.

In this debate, we are all arguing with our fathers. They emplaced or maintained the status quo. They got it hugely wrong. They failed to see the nature of what they were dealing with – the nature of the weapons – and now they are trapped in the new reality, trapped in the great mistake.<sup>6</sup>

As his prefatory comments suggest, parenthood represented one enormous and newly forceful *why* for Amis – a suddenly overwhelming reason why these arguments must be had – and it is as much to his father as to the general reader that Amis seems to address ‘Thinkability’ (his next novel, *London Fields*, would be the first to bear the dedication ‘to my father’, while *Einstein’s Monsters* itself is dedicated to his sons). Kingsley himself found the link between family and disarmament a far from inevitable one. As he wrote to Robert Conquest in June 1986:

Talking of Martin, he has as I said gone all lefty and of the crappiest neutralist kind, challenging me to guess how many times over the world can destroy itself, writing two incredible bits of ban-it bullshit in the Obs (of course) . . . Luckily having now a 2<sup>nd</sup> baby has given him (M) other things to think about. I suppose you can’t recommend some book? He’s bright, you see, but a fucking fool, and the worse, far worse, for having come to it late in life, aetat. nearly 37, not 17.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their disagreements, however, and the slanging match detailed in *Experience* from the week that *Einstein’s Monsters* was published<sup>8</sup>, ‘Thinkability’ suggests an increasing desire on Martin Amis’s part to frame his arguments with his father within the context of larger continuities. The stance ‘Thinkability’ actually represents through Kingsley is neither a ridiculous nor an easily dismissed one. Instead, Martin employs Kingsley’s satirical broadsides to make perhaps his simplest and most important point:

[Kingsley] usually ends up by saying something like, ‘Think of it. Just by closing down the Arts Council we could significantly augment our arsenal. The grants to poets could service a nuclear submarine for a year. The money

<sup>6</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Introduction: Thinkability’ to *Einstein’s Monsters*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Kingsley Amis to Robert Conquest, 7 June 1986, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, pp. 1021-22.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 59 – [Kingsley] I READ YOUR THING ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND IT’S GOT ABSOLUTELY BUGGER-ALL TO SAY ABOUT WHAT WE’RE SUPPOSED TO DO ABOUT THEM. / [Martin] WELL IT’S NOT SURPRISING IS IT BECAUSE AFTER FORTY YEARS NO ONE ELSE KNOWS WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM EITHER’, &etc.

spent on a *single* performance of *Rosenkavalier* might buy us an extra neutron warhead . . .'. The satire is accurate in a way, for I [Martin Amis] am merely going on about nuclear weapons; I don't know what to do about them.'<sup>9</sup>

As Martin admits, he and his father are connected by the fact that neither of them knows what to do about nuclear weapons – whose existence did, after all, predate both of their literary careers. Wit and defeat unite them, and Martin's comments close with the image of three generations of (male) Amises brought together by just those 'other things' Kingsley's letter to Conquest suggests they ought to think about – the two of them 'admiring my infant son' in the hope that 'perhaps he will know what to do about nuclear weapons'<sup>10</sup>. The disjunction between personal and political concerns is clear, and we see in the tableau of family harmony an anticipation of the larger rehabilitation of Kingsley's politics attempted in *Koba the Dread*, and of its more sustained attempt at answering the history of the twentieth century with a morality of the particular.

While 'Thinkability' brilliantly succeeds in its aim of discrediting the notion of 'civilian nuclear defence' as a 'mischievous fabrication'<sup>11</sup>, it gives little thought to practicalities or indeed to the historical and political contexts from which a more pragmatic analysis might begin. The terms of Amis's debate are resolutely general, and resolutely transpose the politics of the nuclear issue into the realm of the literary and the existential. The very existence of nuclear weapons, for Amis, damages those qualified, self-limiting bonds upon which civilization and culture are based. As he comments in his 'Author's Note':

"Einstein's Monsters", by the way, refers to nuclear weapons, but also to ourselves. We are Einstein's monsters, not fully human, not for now.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Amis, 'Introduction: Thinkability', *Einstein's Monsters*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Amis, 'Author's Note' to *Einstein's Monsters*, p. ix.

This is a sub-humanity which Amis relates, in its perversity and arbitrariness, to the excesses of fantasy and desire explored by *Money*:

I believe that many of the deformations and perversities of the modern setting are related to – and are certainly dwarfed by – this massive preemption. Our moral contracts are inevitably weakened, and in unpredictable ways. After all, what *acte gratuit*, what vulgar outrage or moronic barbarity can compare with the black dream of nuclear exchange?<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, the principal hope Amis's essay does offer is a linguistic one – 'Our hopes lie in a gradual symbiosis. We must find the language of unanimity.'<sup>14</sup> – a sentiment at once noble and troublingly reminiscent of the kind of abstraction his essays so ably assault elsewhere. It is a call for 'unanimity' and 'gradual symbiosis' which also prefigures elements of Amis's stance in 'Fear and Loathing', an essay written just a week after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon in 2001:

Our best destiny, as planetary cohabitants, is the development of what has been called "species consciousness" - something over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities. During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness, and such a sensibility. Thinking of the victims, the perpetrators, and the near future, I felt species grief, then species shame, then species fear.<sup>15</sup>

In both cases, Amis's most positive sentiments are at once powerful and curiously abstracted. It is difficult to object to these pleas for compassion and empathy, and yet their form raises a troubling spectre: that the horrendous realities confronted by Amis's prose, having been converted into brilliant language, are now being treated as linguistic problems and as such beyond the reach of political solutions. The parable with which 'Thinkability' ends is similarly revealing:

At the multiracial children's teaparty the guests have, perhaps, behaved slightly better since the Keepers were introduced. Little Ivan has stopped pulling Fetnab's hair, though he is still kicking her leg under the table . . .

<sup>13</sup> Martin Amis, 'Introduction: Thinkability' to *Einstein's Monsters*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Amis, 'Fear and Loathing', *The Guardian* (18 September 2001), online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

Although they are aware of the Keepers, they don't want to look at them, they don't want to catch their eye. They don't want to think about them. For the Keepers are a thousand feet tall, and covered in gelignite and razor-blades, toting flamethrowers and machineguns, cleaver and skewers, and fizzing with rabies, anthrax, plague . . . If they only knew it – no, if they only *believed* it – the children could simply ask the Keepers to leave. But it doesn't seem possible, does it? The party has not been going for very long and must last until the end of time.<sup>16</sup>

This is Amis at his most expansive and sentimental, calling upon the full pathos of universal scale, shockingly opposing innocence and experience, and his statement that 'if they only *believed* it – the children could simply ask the Keepers to leave' is both appealing and divorced from reality. Its very universality reduces its force in the context of nuclear weapons, leaping from focused polemic to a disconcertingly woolly plea for faith. Similarly, as an awakener and a plea for imaginative sympathy 'Thinkability' has few equals, but as a political essay it is disjointed, allowing the indisputable fact of the need for nuclear disarmament to obscure the importance of a practical debate about how this might be effected. Amis treads a fine line, moreover, between force of argument and the kind of aesthetic gratification which paralyses even as it delights and appals.

The relationship between *Einstein's Monsters* and Amis's next novel, *London Fields*, is a close one, and between them they set the tone for much of Amis's later work. Most directly, *London Fields* draws upon 'Bujak and the Strong Force or God's Dice', a story which first appeared in the *London Review of Books* in 1985 and which tells through the eyes of Samson, an American Jew living in London, the story of Bujak, a sixty-year-old Pole whose 'life went deep into the century'<sup>17</sup>. 'Bujak and the Strong Force' addresses many of the historical circumstances 'Thinkability' does not. Every major character has before its beginning been touched and diminished by

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Amis, 'Introduction: Thinkability' to *Einstein's Monsters*, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

what Samson terms ‘the big deaths’<sup>18</sup> of the century: himself through the Holocaust, his Japanese wife through the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, and Bujak through the German invasion and occupation of Poland. Its plot traces a smaller but equally appalling trauma in Bujak’s life. Living in London in 1985, Bujak returns home from a trip to find his mother, his daughter and his grand-daughter murdered, and their murderers still asleep in a bedroom. Bujak is immensely strong, a veteran of the Polish resistance; the ‘strong force’ of his arms could kill them instantly. Instead, he lets them live and sees them brought to trial. As he comments to Samson some years later:

I had no wish to add to what I found. I thought of my dead wife Monkia. I thought – they’re all dead now. I couldn’t add to what I saw there. Really the hardest thing was to touch them at all. You know the wet tails of rats? Snakes? Because I saw that they weren’t human beings at all. They had no idea what human life was. No idea! Terrible mutations, a disgrace to their human moulding. An eternal disgrace. If I had killed them I would still be strong. But you must make a start somewhere. You must make a start.<sup>19</sup>

Bujak, in the terminology of the physics which thematically underpins Amis’s story, refuses to provide an equal and opposite reaction to the action he has suffered. His family have been taken away, yet in refusing to take revenge he preserves and even enhances in himself the humanity that these others have lost (having previously thought revenge a necessary righting of wrongs which would otherwise pass unaddressed). Bujak makes a leap of faith beyond the century’s vicious circles of retaliation, deciding that to ‘start somewhere’ is to invert the human capacity for gratuitous hurt by showing an equal and opposite restraint; and Samson’s response is designed to guide Amis’s readers through a similar realisation:

And now that Bujak has laid down his arms, I don’t know why, but I am minutely stronger. I don’t know why – I can’t tell you why.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Bujak and the Strong Force’ in *Einstein’s Monsters*, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

This, then, is the kind of humanity in which Amis wants to have faith – its nature aligned to his account in ‘Thinkability’ of why art remains a crucial act even in the nuclear world:

Art celebrates life and not the other thing, not the opposite of life. And art raises the stakes, increasing the store of what might be lost.<sup>21</sup>

Paralleling the parable with which ‘Thinkability’ ends, ‘Bujak and the Strong Force’ also ends with a passage of highly-wrought prose. Samson is considering the model of the universe proposed by Bujak: a creation perpetually oscillating between expansion and contraction, between a big bang and a big crunch:

If, and I can’t believe it, time would also be reversed, as Bujak maintained . . . then this moment as I shake his hand shall be the start of my story, his story, our story, and we will slip downtime of each other’s lives . . . out of the fiercest grief, Bujak’s lost women will reappear, born in blood (and we will have our conversations, too, backing away from the same conclusion), until Boguslawa [Bujak’s grand-daughter] folds into Leokadia [his daughter], and Leokadia folds into Monika [his wife], and Monika is there to be enfolded by Bujak . . . and then big Bujak shrinks, becoming the weakest thing there is, helpless, indefensible, naked, weeping, blind and tiny, and folding into Roza [his mother].<sup>22</sup>

Samson’s inversion anticipates the technique of *Time’s Arrow* as well as its sustained, dazzling attempt at stepping outside existing cycles of retaliation and violence – this, perhaps, is what the language of unanimity might sound like. It also, however, echoes the uncomfortable friction in ‘Thinkability’ between worldly problems and aesthetic consolations. As James Diedrick comments, this ‘unexpected beauty . . . is so at odds with the actual loss recorded by the story that it highlights the gap between the world and the word’<sup>23</sup>. It is a visionary re-imagining of the present, resonating with Bujak’s willingness to imagine his present differently (and is a passage which in turn resonates with the language of the Bible – ‘human moulding’, ‘eternal disgrace’); but

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Introduction: Thinkability’ to *Einstein’s Monsters*, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Amis, ‘Bujak and the Strong Force’ in *Einstein’s Monsters*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>23</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 112.

it leaves the troubling relationship between Bujak's, Samson's and Amis's heightened sense of humanity and the rat-like 'mutation' of the murderers far from clear. Much as in *Other People*, this is a realm of violently opposed human polarities whose interconnections lie as far from the page as God and eternity might seem to from the twentieth century.

Amis's concerns over just how far and how effectively his art can 'raise the stakes' are evident in the transition from 'Bujak' to *London Fields*. Every detail taken from the short story into the novel recurs in the latter in a less hopeful version. In *London Fields*, our Bellovian narrator, rather than anticipating death by cancer, is now actually dying of a radiation-related ailment. We are once again being told a 'true' story, but this time Samson is the dupe of his hopes for art, manipulated both by Nicola Six and by the sinister Amis-twin Mark Asprey. Similarly, the world of *London Fields* is one in which the unthinkable has already happened – like the 'murderer' Nicola Six's life it lies beyond the event horizon of nuclear crisis, winding entropically towards disintegration. As Samson puts it, the world is afflicted with its own terminal illness – an inexorable pressure negating any hope that might be drawn from individual action or feeling:

Hard to love, when you're bracing yourself for impact. And maybe love can't bear it either, and flees all planets when they reach this condition, when they get to the end of their twentieth centuries.<sup>24</sup>

There is a sense of fulfilled destiny in this talk of 'their twentieth centuries', as if such centuries were vehicles bearing their occupants towards an armageddon inevitable as soon as the calendar ticked over to 1900; and it is worth noting John Updike's observation in his review of *Time's Arrow* that:

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Amis, *London Fields*, p. 197.

‘Holocaust’ has taken on two meanings in our time – nuclear war, which hasn’t yet happened and we hope never will, and Nazi Germany’s systematic murder of six million helpless European captives, most of them Jews. This Holocaust did happen, yet remains, like the other, unthinkable.<sup>25</sup>

*London Fields* treats its imminent second Holocaust as a fulfilment of the prophecy of the first; an act – like several others during the course of the twentieth century, for which the Somme is the archetype – evidencing the inexorability of mankind’s talent for doing the worst that can be done.

In *London Fields*, then, we see the present horrifically but all too credibly extended into a future in which human actions have gone beyond the human capacity for rational explanation or imaginative ordering. *Why* is no longer a question which can meaningfully or bearably be asked, and the novel’s vocabulary is correspondingly peppered with ‘unforgivable’ and ‘unthinkable’ acts. Samson’s nightmares revolve around ‘the unbearably large, the unbearably small’<sup>26</sup>; a plant sticks out of its pot in Keith’s flat at ‘an unforgivable angle’<sup>27</sup>; one of Nicola’s most devastating erotic weapons is

a kiss she seldom used: unforgivably, it was called the Jewish Princess . . . a weapon of the exponential kind (one that called upon the speed of light), because it was almost unusably powerful . . . The kiss was called the Jewish Princess – unforgivably. But then the kiss itself was unforgivable. The Jewish Princess was unforgivable.<sup>28</sup>

As in Kingsley Amis’s godless *Russian Hide-and-Seek*, this is the realm of despair – the unforgivable sin, the sin against hope. Nicola’s actions are ‘unforgivable’ because hers is a life lived without hope or choice, and she in turn eliminates hope from the lives of her victims. As the ‘exponential’ power of her manipulations suggests, Nicola is to the other characters in the book what nuclear war is to its world, an identification made explicit in her ‘friend’ Enola Gay and the child ‘Little Boy’ (the

<sup>25</sup> John Updike, ‘Nobody Gets Away with Everything’, (*New Yorker*, 25 May 1992), p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Amis, *London Fields*, p. 261.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 265.

names of the first atomic bomb and its carrier plane). In her we see a terminal kind of Quentin or Fielding: the 'motiveless malignity' of a Iago enacted not with perverse delight, but with only the bleak lust for self-destruction.

In their differing ways, Keith, Guy and Samson all attempt to take refuge from the world in Nicola's artistry – Keith in his TV-fantasies of 'spangled superlegitimacy . . . a possible future in World Darts'<sup>29</sup>, Guy in the fantasy of a virgin immune to the world's corruption, Samson in a 'true story' able to provide the art he can no longer write – yet in Nicola they also unconsciously seem to recognise that the only actual escape from their reality is self-destruction. At the end of the novel, only Nicola and Samson die, but Keith and Guy have murdered their old selves and dreams for her sake (and will in any case be dead soon along with everyone else). Much as for Winston Smith or John Self, doomed lies are preferable to their doomed present; but significantly, it is Samson who fulfils Nicola's prophecy of murder. Of the three male leads, he is in the end the only one with sufficient feeling to do the deed – driven not by love in the ordinary sense, but by an artistic quest for some kind of completion. Like John Self, Samson is the 'needing, the hurting artist': but unlike Self he refuses to pull back from the brink, perhaps because even his failed art is a better thing than the reality he abandons.

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Amis, *London Fields*, p. 187.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

#### **4.ii. A respite from entropy: from *London Fields* to *Time's Arrow***

Despair is in many ways a logical response to the proposition that people have no control over their own or their society's future, and *London Fields* suggests a disturbing synthesis of the themes of Amis's previous five novels. Its ubiquitous entropy and exhaustion – of motivation, of love, of literature, of the planet – invert the nostalgia of *Dead Babies*, *Success* and *Other People*, and gesture towards the absolute in the form of a definitive ending rather than the definitive beginning of a lost Eden. The Fall, however, is more than ever a central motif. Amis has himself called *London Fields* 'a kind of prequel'<sup>30</sup> to *Other People* – with Nicola a version of Amy Hide before her first death – yet, in replacing the former's dreams of literary salvation with a comprehensive assault on the possibility of synthesis between words and world, he does not so much escape *Other People*'s problems of evasion as deepen them into a state of implacable dread. Instead of sentiment we have apocalyptic rage, and a close echo of both Larkin's and Kingsley Amis's worst fears of what twentieth century history implied for the future.

Throughout *London Fields*, Larkin's sense of mortality and limitation as spurs to kindness is similarly inverted. 'Permanent' human values and universal reality are in open conflict, and it is a conflict with only one possible outcome: not only extinction of the individual but also of the species. We are given a dying present in which the lowest common denominators of loveless greed and fear are rampant – above all in Keith Talent, but also in Guy's naive amorphousness and Samson's morally neutered voyeurism – and within it the lizard-level art of Keith's pornography

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<sup>30</sup> Carl and John Bellante, 'Unlike Father, Like Son. An Interview with Martin Amis.', in *The Bloomsbury Review* 12.2 (March 1992), p.4.

is all that can be said to be 'true'. As Mark Asprey retorts in a final bitter note to Samson,

You don't understand, do you, my talentless friend? Even as you die and rot with envy. It doesn't matter what anyone writes any more. The time for it mattering has passed. The truth doesn't matter any more and *is not wanted*.<sup>31</sup>

This is a vastly extrapolated version of 'Aubade's bitter thesis. Faced by the extinction of human life, Asprey argues, all hopes of lasting cultural and enduring human value become self-evidently absurd: when time itself is broken, to gesture towards enduring values is unbearable and futile. Similarly, as Samson gradually realises, his 'non-fictional' work of art itself has only a single theme: deaths, of various kinds; the dismantling of human order into chaos, mutation and waste:

And meanwhile time goes about its immemorial work of making everyone look and feel like shit. You got that? And meanwhile time goes about its immemorial work of making everyone look, and feel, like shit.<sup>32</sup>

Such a view of time and its 'immemorial work' might seem a creative dead-end of exactly the type deplored by Seamus Heaney. In *Time's Arrow* (1991), however, Martin Amis's next novel after *London Fields*, the entropy and endings of *London Fields* are brought forward a further imaginative leap. We now appear to be in a universe whose 'end' has taken place, shrinking – in accordance with Bujak's oscillating model – inexorably back towards its first innocence. It is both an ironical and a beautiful conceit, and it allows Amis to offer a morally and linguistically supercharged account of one of the twentieth century's most terrible crimes – the industrialised murder under Nazi Germany of around six million Jews, gypsies and others deemed unworthy of life – and of the ways in which human weakness, ignorance and hate participated in this evil.

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Amis, *London Fields*, p. 452.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

‘What goes around comes around’ is the title of Amis’s opening chapter, and implicit in *Time’s Arrow’s* time-reversal device is the ceaseless pressure exerted on the present by the past, and of our past actions upon the people we become. Our narrator, an incorporeal innocent, is twinned to the body of Nazi doctor Odilo Unverdorben<sup>33</sup> as he moves backwards through his life: first death, then living and working in America and Europe under a number of aliases, then serving as a medical officer in the German army at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and finally his childhood and birth. *Time’s Arrow* eliminates the psychological agonies of Amis’s other novels by this literal splitting of body and mind into two distinct protagonists. ‘I have no access to his [Odilo’s] thoughts – but I am awash with his emotions’<sup>34</sup>, our nameless narrator tells us; and through this device we are granted precise, critical access to the non-verbal aspects of Odilo’s being. Like *Other People’s* Mary Lamb, our narrator is both unknowing and hyper-aware. *Time’s Arrow*, however, is far bolder in equipping its character with the tools of critical engagement. As we are told, six sides in,

I find I am equipped with a fair amount of value-free information, or general knowledge, if you prefer.  $E=mc^2$ . The speed of light is 186,000 miles per second . . . I have a superb vocabulary (monad, retractile, necropolis, palindrome, antidisestablishmentarianism) and a nonchalant command of all grammatical rules . . . Here’s another joke: ‘She calls me up and says, “Get over here. There’s nobody home.” So I get over there, and guess what. There’s nobody home.’<sup>35</sup>

As Martin Amis would be the first to admit, this demonstration is far from ‘value-free’. Not only does our narrator have knowledge – he/she/it has style, wit, and, we soon learn, a fully functioning morality, albeit one duped by time into a state of inversion whereby hospitals are seen as abattoirs while concentration camps become a means of generating life. Far more devastatingly than the defamiliarisations of *Other*

<sup>33</sup> Whose surname ironically translates as ‘unspoiled’, ‘untainted’, or even ‘innocent’.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 16-17.

*People*, it is via this narrator's bewildered judgements that Amis exerts a continual, ironical pressure on his readers throughout *Time's Arrow*.

In *Experience*, Amis describes Odilo's and his narrator's relationship as that of body and soul: '*Time's Arrow* . . . is narrated by the soul of one of Mengele's lesser assistants at Auschwitz-Birkenau'<sup>36</sup>. If we accept that Odilo and our narrator are not strangely shackled strangers but twin components of the same being, we face one of the most radical statements in all of Amis's work on the gulf between human potential and the actual state of many lives. The voice of Odilo's soul is eloquent, humane, and anything but 'common' in the sense of the mundane; yet Odilo's life was ruled by the most banal acts of conformity and craven amorality. *Time's Arrow* asks us to accept the possibility that this soul-narrator represents common humanity just as much as Odilo's flaws and weaknesses – and that, despite his deeds, Odilo's soul was somehow brought intact through his life: muffled, stunted, but unextinguished. This soul, then, is more than an acquired set of values and behaviours – it is something both remarkable and innate, something compassionate and moral in our very nature, to which individuals and their society owe a duty of care. In this sense, *Time's Arrow* is the most explicitly indebted of all Amis's works to Judaeo-Christian models of a mankind divided between the divine spark that is our hope of salvation and the sinful burden of our flesh; and, attempting to find fit words in the present for this most troubling duality, Amis in turn invokes the insights of both the Old Testament<sup>37</sup> and evolutionary biology.

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 289n.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that, in Jewish philosophy, free will is considered to be an intrinsic product of struggle between the three aspects of the human soul: *neshama* (originated by the breath of God at the moment of creation), *nefesh* (the life-force, borne by the blood) and *ruach* (the part of the soul that lies between these, and that must select between their impulses).

Much as in *Other People*, literature and language are among the most powerful indicators of Odilo's moral health. Just ten pages in, looking through Odilo's eyes at the American tabloid that is his daily reading, our narrator laments:

And so I sit here gurgling into my glass and soaking up all that moronic dreck. I can't help it. I'm at Tod's [Odilo's final pseudonym in America] mercy . . . There is a bookcase in the living-room. Beyond its dusty glass, the dusty spines, all standing to attention. But no. Instead, LOVE LIFE ON PLUTO. I AM ZSA ZSA GABOR SAYS MONKEY. SIAMESE QUINS!<sup>38</sup>

Odilo is, even at the end of his life, an exile from the world of literature and what it might awaken in him. His relationship with the world is, instead, informed by 'dreck': the kind of sensational, reductive propaganda of which the Nazis were such masters (and which receives its most comprehensive demolishing in Amis's work in 2003's *Yellow Dog*, via *The Morning Lark*, an outstandingly awful fictional tabloid). Odilo's problem, as our narrator sees it, is one of ordinariness in the worst sense of the 'common':

I've come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers. He could never be an exception; he is dependent on the health of his society, needing the sandy smiles of Rolf and Rudolph, of Rüdiger, of Reinhard.<sup>39</sup>

Like Terry Service in *Success*, Odilo has become the representative of those values that got to him first – in his case, Nazism. His ordinariness has 'no limit' precisely because he has embraced a mentality opposed to any idea of the exceptional: one determined to dehumanize anyone outside of its fiercely conforming cohorts of the chosen. In later life, in America, we watch Odilo present the futile appearance of a good man: giving toys to children, donating generously at church, working long hours in hard conditions. But everything, even more so than for Amis's other characters, is

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164-5.

already too late, and with volition out of the frame the narrative becomes an extended account of those weaknesses through which the world invaded him. 'I'd say I was way ahead of Tod on this basic question of human *difference*', our narrator notes:

Tod has a sensing mechanism which guides his responses . . . His feeling tone jolts into specialized attitudes and readiesses: one for Hispanics, one for Asians, one for Arabs'<sup>40</sup>.

A doctor, a specialist, Odilo puts things into compartments too small and too rigid for life. The narrator continues:

The way Tod feels about men, about women, about children: there is confusion. There is danger. Don't get me wrong. I'm not fingering Tod for a fruit, not exactly. I'm just saying that things might be less confused, and less dangerous, if he could soberly entertain the idea of being homosexual.<sup>41</sup>

Stunted in imagination and empathy, Odilo has made a demonic pact by subsuming himself in stock response and cliché. 'Render up your soul, and gain power'<sup>42</sup>, as our narrator puts it, knowing that Odilo's fear is perpetually that if he does not submit, this power (of healing and killing) will be turned against him. Amis's cadence and diction are Biblical, and echo in particular the assertion of Proverbs 24:12:

If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?

The soul must pay the price of our deeds, and *Time's Arrow's* reversal of time is the ultimate form of accounting, unpicking the lie of Odilo's most pernicious assumption – that 'Because I am a healer, everything I do heals, somehow.'<sup>43</sup> Nothing, he eventually learns, could be further from the truth than this vicious reflexivity: the meaning of our actions is not for us to choose. In the end, however, Odilo's pact is both more and less than demonic: more banal and more deadly. As our narrator

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<sup>40</sup> Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow* pp. 49-50.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

observes, ‘The devil has something to be said for him: he acts on his own initiative and isn’t just following orders’<sup>44</sup>. Others are the demons, the Iagos (and what of *them* and their humanity?). Odilo himself is all too ordinary.

Odilo’s guilt is thus closely aligned to a kind of innocence. He has been taught to act like an animal, trusting only appearances and the instinctual promptings of fear and desire, and so he learns to relate to others only via the gratification of these urges. Soon after his marriage as a young man, before his active military service, we witness his character already worn into the grooves of unthinking abuse:

Now that the wedding nears [i.e. just after the wedding in ‘real’ time], Odilo is altogether gentler. He has stopped having tantrums. No longer is his chimpanzee [his wife] required to do the housework naked, and on all fours . . . . When she weeps and sulks he dries her tears with kisses, and not with a punch in the breasts. And nowadays she hardly cries at all: the wedding is only weeks away.<sup>45</sup>

We finally get to the heart of the matter when Amis addresses in his ‘Afterword’ the concept of the ‘reptile brain’:

My alternative title was *The Nature of the Offence* – a phrase of Primo Levi’s . . . . The offence was unique, not in its cruelty, nor in its cowardice, but in its style – in its combination of the atavistic and the modern. It was, at once, reptilian and ‘logistical’. And although the offence was not definingly German, its style was. The National Socialists found the core of the reptile brain, and built an autobahn that went there. Built for speed and safety, built to endure for a thousand years, the *Reichsautobahnen*, if you remember, were also designed to conform to the landscape, harmoniously, like a garden path.<sup>46</sup>

Although its offence may have been ‘unique’, this description of National Socialism aligns it closely with the mechanisms of the ‘industries of addiction’ as depicted in Amis’s earlier fiction: a technologised power targeting and expanding the conforming, lusting areas of the mind at the expense of all other faculties.

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

The idea of the ‘reptile brain’ takes Amis’s thesis one step further in terms of precision, and prefigures many of the analyses of his most recent work. This reptile brain is literally part of our physiological ‘landscape’ – at least according to the triune brain theory developed by the American neurologist Dr. Paul MacLean (a theory Amis would certainly have encountered in some form via the ‘medical texts [he] unenthusiastically pored over’<sup>47</sup> during the researching of *Time’s Arrow*). According to MacLean, the function of the human brain can be approximately divided into three distinct areas, corresponding to three stages of our evolutionary development: the limbic system and neo-cortex, the brainstem, and the R-complex or reptilian complex. Maclean argues that the Limbic system and neo-cortex control advanced mental skills, such as reason and speech, while the brainstem controls basic unconscious homeostatic functions, such as breathing and circulation. Between these lies the reptilian complex, responsible for the most primitive emotions underpinning social hierarchies<sup>48</sup>. MacLean’s ideas were probably most eloquently popularized by Carl Sagan’s non-fictional *The Dragons of Eden* in 1977 and by Tom Robbins’s 1984 novel *Jitterbug Perfume*, and one of Robbins’s characters, Dr. Wiggs Dannyboy, offers an account of what this ‘reptile brain’ might signify in the present which resonates closely with *Time’s Arrow*:

When we are in a cold sweat, a blind rage, or simply feeling smugly dispassionate, we may be sure that, for the moment, our reptile brain is in control of our consciousness . . . . Obviously, there are powerful reptilian forces in the Pentagon and the Kremlin; and in the pulpits of churches, mosques and synagogues, where deathist dogmas of judgment, punishment, self-denial, martyrdom, and afterlife supremacy are preached. But there are also reptilian forces within each individual . . . Beowulf, Siegfried, and the other dragon slayers are aspects of our own unconscious minds. The significance of their heroics should be apparent. We dispatched them with their symbolic swords and lances to slay reptile consciousness. The reptile

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, pp. 175-6.

<sup>48</sup> cf. Paul D. MacLean, *The Triune Brain in Evolution: Role in Paleocerebral Functions* (New York, 1990).

brain is the dragon within us.<sup>49</sup>

Amis's sense of the power of this reptilian self is in brutal evidence throughout *Time's Arrow*. 'National Socialism is nothing more than applied biology'<sup>50</sup>, our narrator notes, and his observation is true in the most literal sense – Nazism is 'nothing' more than this because it tolerates nothing beyond its own pseudo-scientific vision of humankind as a number of biological types, amongst whom there is a necessary hierarchy of fitness or unfitness to live.

Unlike MacLean's work, of course, Nazi 'science' was entirely bogus – with its 'evidence' of frozen Aryan ancestors, its grotesque 'demonstrations' of racial superiority, its re-writings of history – and its 'applied biology' was little more than a sop to the most lazily brutal of ideologies. The tone of Amis's 'Afterword', however, itself strays towards the tempting prospect that a single hard, physiological fact (the reptile brain) might account for Nazism and the actions of Germany under Nazism. It is a temptation closely connected to the problem of free will, and to the principle of individual responsibility – integral to any notion of morality, and dangerously undermined by deterministic assumptions. Half-way through *Time's Arrow*, our narrator presents his confusion at the bizarre economics of his inverted world in terms of will and finance:

I don't understand. At the hospital we reward our victims with money. I pay the hospital. Irene [Odilo's American housekeeper] pays me. I don't get it. Are we all slaves? Are we somehow less than slaves?<sup>51</sup>

There is, of course, no freedom of any kind to be found in a universe whose time has been reversed. But the question posed by this inverted capitalism is one of freedom in the most general sense, and of where freedom resides even in our 'normal' universe of

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<sup>49</sup> Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume* (Harpenden: Herts, 2001), pp. 321 & 325.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.

transactions, regulations and biological determinants. Any answer, it seems, must lie in the human capacity for something in excess of each transaction – in each individual’s existence above and beyond mere type, and in those values of moral self-consciousness, non-conformity and critical engagement so determinedly effaced by Nazism. In diametric opposition to Amis’s aims as an artist, the ‘applied biology’ of Nazism has taught Odilo to be indiscriminate and, by association, indiscriminating. In healing, in killing, in his sexual life, he fails utterly to comprehend the essential individuality of others –

[T]o Tod’s glands, the world is a woman . . . But his new interest in women seems far too broad and anarchical; it isn’t specialized.<sup>52</sup>

Amis draws in Odilo an uncomfortable picture of the nearness of lust and murder, of killing and curing, each sanctioned by fantasies of authority, power and purity – the American doctors at the start like priests with their hands ‘so strong, so clean, so aromatic’<sup>53</sup>. Even as he attempts to practice medicine in America in amends for his earlier crimes, Odilo’s life remains devoted to awakening the ‘animal’ in himself and to burying the individual. He attends both sex and surgery ‘with his animal parts thickened’<sup>54</sup>; in daily life, ‘his body is its own lover’<sup>55</sup>, so completely does he isolate himself from others. As our narrator understands, love and fidelity are the opposite of this: a realisation of the unique, and of the absolute value of another’s being – ‘One man, one woman: I think we owe this to the human body’<sup>56</sup>.

Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) parallels *Time’s Arrow* on a number of points and, especially, in its accounts of the recurring human urge to separate ‘the clean from the unclean’, and of the debts we owe to the

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<sup>52</sup> Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

human body. The pairing of clean/unclean itself occurs in Barnes's novel in the context of four different moments in history<sup>57</sup>: Noah's ark, on a modern cruise-liner, at the shipwreck of the *Medusa* in 1816, and on the voyage of the *St. Louis* in 1939. History repeats, Barnes suggests, in the claims of 'natural' and inevitable process in which the human capacity for harm dresses itself, all the way from Noah's 'ethnic cleansing' of the animals to the fate of the Jews in 1939. Again and again, Barnes suggests, the instinct not to take responsibility for one's own actions has dominated history:

Blame someone else, that's always your first instinct. And if you can't blame someone else, then start claiming the problem isn't a problem anyway. Rewrite the rules, shift the goalposts.<sup>58</sup>

In Barnes's second chapter, 'The Visitors', an Arab involved in the hijacking of a cruise liner observes that, because his perspective is accorded no value on the international stage, his arguments can only impact upon international 'reality' via the use of force:

We have tried sitting on our hands and waiting for world opinion to come to our help. We have tried being good and hoping that we would be rewarded by getting our land back. I can assure you that these systems do not work.<sup>59</sup>

The hijackers are, their leader argues, using the method which official history (and much of the Old Testament) teaches, of fire to fight fire, of exclusion and murder in a world which seems to sanction only these as the roots of power. Their actions, however, engineer a situation which simply repeats the divisions of the society they are criticising, ending in a bloody storming of the ship by American Special Forces. Order is restored over violent disorder by the use of a greater violence. Unless one

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<sup>57</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (London, 1990), pp. 10, 44, 121, 184.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

learns to think differently, Barnes implies, there can be no escape from old patterns of injustice, and thus no meaningful freedom to human activity.

What this different mode of thought might look like is sketched by the half-chapter of the novel's title, 'Parenthesis', an essay in a voice close to Barnes's own which debates how we might be able to wrest values other than those of survival and conquest from history. Examining Larkin's line that 'What will survive of us is love' and Auden's famously amended 'we must love one another or die'<sup>60</sup>, Barnes argues that Auden's sentiment is at once empirically wrong and true in the most important sense – because it is only in loving individual relationships that we come close to comprehending the essential nature of things (a nature essentially unyielding to schemes and classifications). 'Dates don't tell the truth. They bawl at us'<sup>61</sup>, he argues; while love, unlike contemporary religion or art, 'gives us our humanity, and also our mysticism'<sup>62</sup>:

I can tell you why to love. Because the history of the world, which only stops at the half-house of love to bulldoze it into rubble, is ridiculous without it. The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love. Our random mutation is essential because it is unnecessary . . . Love and truth, that's the vital connection, love and truth . . . Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth<sup>63</sup>

As in *Time's Arrow*, our 'duty' is honestly to acknowledge the mortal flesh we share and the primacy of its claims over all ideologies. Yet, as both Amis and Barnes are aware, both absolute truth and absolute falsity are themselves fictions; and *Time's Arrow*, for all the pragmatism of its purpose, is also a novel of wishful and frustrated fiction – an imaginative unmaking of wrongs which cannot be undone, a restoration of certainties which post-Christian society may never be able to credit.

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<sup>60</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, pp. 228 & 232. The lines, respectively, are from 'An Arundel Tomb' and '1 September 1939'.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 241.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 240.

Barnes himself, interestingly, enacts a similar undoing of the twentieth century in the final section of his 1998 novel *England, England*, 'Albion'. Here, he imagines a process of de-modernisation through which 'the country's [England's] fretful, psoriatic self-consciousness had finally come to an end'<sup>64</sup>. A pastoral English Eden is impossibly reborn, much to the benefit of his characters' psychic health. Similarly to *Other People*, Larkin's 'MCMXIV', or indeed *Time's Arrow*, artistic refuge from present problems is constructed through a focus on lost innocence, and on art's implicit ability to restore an intuition of this in its audience.

Above all, both *Time's Arrow* and *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* are dazzling attempts at articulating the importance of the unprovable, and the relationship of art to freedom – the legitimacy of the feelings stirred by art, and the inherent worth of our efforts to be honest and to love:

Love and truth, yes, that's the prime connection. We all know objective truth is not attainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what 'really' happened. This God-eyed version is a fake – a charming, impossible fake . . . But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so, because if we don't we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar's version as much as another liar's, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth . . .<sup>65</sup>

We must, to paraphrase Barnes, do what we feel but cannot prove to be right: must wage an incremental war on untruth and amorality which, like Amis's assaults on ignorance and self-deception in *Time's Arrow*, builds its pragmatism upon a bedrock of belief.

<sup>64</sup> Julian Barnes, *England, England*, (London, 1999) –, p. 257.

<sup>65</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, pp. 245-6.

#### **4.iii. Humiliation and *The Information***

Shit, that most central of motifs in *London Fields*, is also a constant presence in *Time's Arrow*, and features above all in its descriptions of Auschwitz-Birkenau – a factory devoted to destruction ‘where shit is constantly mentioned and invoked’<sup>66</sup>. It has, however, a double function in the novel. On the one hand, Odilo’s ceaseless invocations of shit parallel the destruction of the value of life that he participates in – the figurative and literal reduction of people into ash, air, sweat, faeces. It is in this sense that, for all his longings for untainted authority, shit will haunt Odilo for the rest of his life – in the dream that he is ‘he is shitting human bones’<sup>67</sup>; in the termination of the one potentially loving relationship of his adult life with the words ‘Who cares? . . . It’s all shit anyway’<sup>68</sup>; and, in old age, in the inevitable arrival of bodily decay: ‘We really *do* look like shit. Like a cowpat, in fact’<sup>69</sup>. For one who believed in the truth of appearances, the face he deserves has finally arrived. On the other hand, however, shit functions for both Amis’s narrator and his audience as a revelation of those fundamentals to which Odilo is blind – the common, mortal humanity in which every individual shares. The toilet itself, in one of *Time's Arrow's* many Joycean leaps, is a site of creation and wonder: ‘all sustenance, all meaning (and a good deal of money) issues from a single household appliance: the toilet handle’<sup>70</sup>. Rich, poor, gentile and Jew are united in biology and mortality, and this is not necessarily the specious unity of ‘it’s all shit anyway’. Behind the novel’s inverted chains of cause and consequence, we as readers are asked to reconstruct those values Odilo cast off along with his soul – our sense of the ‘gentleness of human flesh’<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, p. 133.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

In a crunching return to the entropy of *London Fields*, however, both *The Information* (1995) and *Night Train* (1997) – the first a study of revenge, the second of self-destruction – trace the ways in which the value of human life, that ‘gentleness of human flesh’ belatedly mourned by Odilo, has been assaulted by the twentieth century. In each case, protagonists struggle to wrest value and sense from a seemingly indifferent, chaotic actuality: in each case, belief in the adequacy of such struggle itself becomes a matter of grave doubt.

*The Information* concerns an entwined pair of almost-twins: the authors Richard Tull and Gwyn Barry, born one day apart and embodying in a distant echo of *Success's* Terry and Gregory the polarities of art and cliché. ‘Good’ art, however, no longer wields the awakening force it possessed in *Other People* or *Money*. It is, rather, suspect in both potency and integrity; a standard Richard is unable either to create or to live up to. In fact, Richard’s most memorable work is an entirely hypothetical one which he and our narrator – a seemingly straight version of Martin Amis – sketch through a number of interjections: a ‘history of increasing humiliation’<sup>72</sup>. This project inverts the idea of technology and knowledge as progress, presenting the last two thousand years of Western history as an incremental assault on the psychic health of the human race. As Richard explains, art and scientific knowledge are inexorably linked by decline:

It would be a book accounting for the decline in the status and virtue of literary protagonists. First gods, then demi-gods, the kings, then great warriors, great lovers, the burghers and merchants and vicar and doctors and lawyers. Then social realism: you. Then irony: me. The maniacs and murderers, tramps, mobs, rabble . . . [explained by the fact that] The history of astronomy is the history of increasing humiliation. First the geocentric universe, then the heliocentric universe. Then the eccentric universe – the one we’re living in. Every century we get smaller. Kant figured it all out, sitting in

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<sup>72</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, (London, 1996), p. 129.

his armchair. What's the phrase? The principle of terrestrial mediocrity.<sup>73</sup>

Much as in *London Fields*, art and science fuse here into a single existential entity, the 'rational' reaction to which is a despairing devaluation of the self – a dark alternative to Amis's hopes for rational self-scrutiny as a route to compassionate and communicative art. For Richard, accumulated experience and information have only served to undermine humanity's sense of its own value, not to mention his own ability to produce comprehensible books. Inevitably enough, Gwyn Barry's triumph in his best-selling book *Amelior* is 'to make the universe feel smaller'<sup>74</sup>, supplying the pornographic comforts of bad art through the pretence that actuality will yield to the most superficial and uncomplicated of engagements. Richard's mission throughout most of the novel is somehow to redress this imbalance, and to be revenged on Gwyn for the living insult to talent and excellence he represents. Needless to say, he is wretchedly unsuccessful.

Amis's relationship with his creation, Richard, is itself a curious kind of twinning. There is so little distance between them they often seem to be taking turns as narrators while listening in to each others' arguments. In one passage, elements of which are repeated almost exactly in Amis's 2001 'Preface' to *The War Against Cliché*, their voices blend beyond distinction as Richard traces the particular agony of being unable to prove that Gwyn's work is no good:

Richard was thinking, if thinking is quite the word we want . . . you cannot demonstrate, prove, establish – you cannot know if a book is good . . . Is 'When all at once I saw a crowd' worse than 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'? (Yes. But it was the better line that contained the identifiable flaw: that *do*, brought in to make up the numbers) . . . Leavis said that while you can't judge literature, you can judge life, so for the purpose of judgement life and literature are the same! But life and literature were not the same. Ask Richard . . . Gwyn was no good. Clearly, but not demonstrably.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 129.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 437.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 136-7. cf. Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché*, p.xv.

Richard is an excellent literary critic, but he is powerless both in the real world and in the world of art: there seems nothing – and especially not the stuff of his life – to which he can appeal. Once more anticipating *The War Against Cliché*, the only thing he trusts as a discerning force is time itself:

Richard, while taking a hearty and uncomplicated please in Gwyn's success, reserved the right to keep it clear that he thought Gwyn's stuff was shit . . . and that Gwyn's success was rather amusingly – no, in fact completely hilariously – accidental. And transitory. Above all transitory. If not in real time then, failing that, certainly in literary time. Enthusiasm for Gwyn's work, Richard felt sure, would cool quicker than his corpse. Or else the universe was a joke. And a contemptible joke.<sup>76</sup>

The points which Amis would make so assuredly in *The War Against Cliché* are, however, as painfully and fearfully troubling in *The Information* as they were in *London Fields*. Time, Richard's potential ally, is also his enemy: the bringer both of present humiliation and of a society which longs to be 'made smaller' by Gwyn's dreck.

Both Richard and *The Information* seem consumed by doubt on this point – because, if people *like* Gwyn's feeble clichés, they must somehow *be* like his feeble clichés. It is a proposition which Richard puts to himself with devastating compactness:

- A. Gwyn's trex was loved by the world; his trex was universal.
- B. The world loved trex; the world was trex.<sup>77</sup>

The fallacy is similar to the claim that 'it's all shit anyway' in *Time's Arrow*, yet the riposte given by *The Information* to such despair is far from assured. If, moreover, we accept that Gwyn is in some ways as much a version of Martin Amis as Richard is – that, as Amis put it in conversation with Will Self, 'both Gwyn and Richard are *me*. One is the over-rewarded side and the other is the whimper of neglect side.'<sup>78</sup> – we

<sup>76</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, pp. 112-3.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 171.

<sup>78</sup> Will Self, 'Martin Amis: The Misinformation' (*Esquire*, April 1995), from *Junk Mail*, p. 313.

face from both sides of the equation the prospect that all literature is a kind of pap, diverting its readers from the business of living.

It is only when, almost 400 pages in, we are finally allowed a glimpse into Gwyn's mind that the full truth about his 'trex' is spelt out. As Gwyn's hubris-inflated thoughts reveal, he is about as distant from the universal as it is possible to be:

Newsprint often told him [Gwyn] that he was the spokesman for the next generation, and even Gwyn could imagine the next generation minding *that* – looking around, and seeing how very few he spoke for, and how quietly.<sup>79</sup>

Confirmation of Gwyn's authentic talentlessness, however, does little to assuage *The Information's* deepest anxieties. Readers are instead left alongside Richard and Martin Amis himself, facing those questions which art seems increasingly ill-equipped to answer with anything comprehensible or bearable:

The information is nothing. Nothing: the answer to so many of our questions. What will happen to me when I die? What *is* death anyway? Is there anything I can do about that? Of what does the universe primarily consist? What is the measure of our influence within it? What is our span, in cosmic time? What will our world eventually become? What mark will we leave – to remember us by?<sup>80</sup>

There is also an unspoken final question, here, echoing within the last word – *why*, *why*, *why*? It is a passage which recalls Hemingway's short story 'A Clean Well-Lighted Place' (1933) in its exchange of God for a blank modern nothing, and in its implicit repeated chiming of this absence:

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanliness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada* [nothing and then nothing and nothing and then nothing]. Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be they name they kingdom *nada* thy will be *nada* in *nada* as it is in *nada*. Give us this *nada* our daily *nada* and *nada* us our *nada* as we *nada* our *nadas* and *nada* us not into *nada* but deliver us from *nada*; *pues nada*.

<sup>79</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 402.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 452.

Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.<sup>81</sup>

Richard is humiliated by the physics and the metaphysics of his times, by Gwyn's worldly triumphs; but he is most of all humiliated by the fear that the hope of leaving some 'mark' within this universe is deluded in every sense. As *The Information's* narrating 'Martin Amis' comments near the start of the novel, while describing himself tracing his initials during a conversation with a child,

I made the signs – the M, the A – with my strange and twisted fingers, thinking: how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know *anything*? When I can't read childish capitals in the apologetic fog.<sup>82</sup>

This is experience in its raw, bewildering form; and, for Richard, the terror of being unable to create art out of it is synonymous with living an intolerably insufficient and unmeaning life:

'I can't give up novels.' [Richard says to his wife, Gina] . . . Because . . . because then he would be left with experience, with untranslated and unmediated experience. Because then he would be left with life.<sup>83</sup>

Art, here, takes on the language of addiction – 'I can't give up novels'. Like Maurice Allington in Kingsley Amis's *The Green Man*, Richard longs for the redemption of the unique; and, similarly to Allington's passion for seduction, there is something essentially puerile about this longing. It is a puerility most evident in the games, both literal and figurative, he endlessly plays with Gwyn (one of the novel's finest set-pieces is Richard and Gwyn's 'triathlon' of snooker, tennis and chess). Theirs is a sibling rivalry in which, as in literature, Richard has all the talent but Gwyn has the world's massed resources, and thus a guarantee of eventual victory. The revenge which obsesses Richard throughout most of *The Information* is thus a supremely losing game (like all revenges), driven by the fantasy of turning back time, in this case

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<sup>81</sup> Ernest Hemingway, 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' from *The Collected Stories* ed. James Fenton (London, 1995) p. 294.

<sup>82</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 63.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

to that point at which Richard was a published author and Gwyn a literary nobody. It is a rebellion against the 'information' of the novel's title – an attempt to pretend, in the manner of *Time's Arrow*, that time and experience can be subtracted as well as summed – and is as doomed as Richard's dreams of artistic immortality.

For all his failures, however, Richard does find some respite from fantasies of worldly victory. His first epiphany, if it can be called that, comes when he and Gwyn are travelling in a light aircraft during a book-tour of America and get caught in a storm which looks as if it might prove fatal:

It was when the patch of shit appeared on the pilot's cream rump that Richard knew for certain that all was not well. This patch of shit started life as an islet, a Martha's Vineyard that soon became a Cuba, then a Madagascar, then a dreadful Australia of brown. But that was five minutes ago, and no one gave a shit about it now.<sup>84</sup>

The incident prompts intense but wildly different reactions in each man. Back on the ground, Gwyn decides to shed all his pretences of decency, proclaiming a new credo of ugly selfishness:

I'm alive. And I'm going to go on doing what every man would do if he thought he could get away with it. Everything's changed.<sup>85</sup>

As in *Time's Arrow*, shit reveals an essential truth. Just as the stain of fear emerges from the pilot's pristine 'cream rump', so the self-serving baseness of Gwyn's nature emerges from beneath his public persona. For Richard, however, shit reveals something universal. 'Death is good'<sup>86</sup> he finds himself saying to Gwyn: because he, unlike Gwyn, has children and will survive in them; but also because to gaze at death – to gaze at 'the information' – is to see something unifying and certain as well as destructive. Death is, literally, good: it provokes goodness, even demands it, if one begins to listen as Richard tentatively does to what its information has to say. To

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<sup>84</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 381.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid* p. 384.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. 381.

affirm time, then, is to affirm the fact of individual responsibility: the duty of acknowledgement we owe to actuality and each other. It is a Larkinesque insight and, as James Diedrick notes, the final sentence of *The Information* echoes Larkin's equivocal conclusion to 'High Windows':

And then there is the information, which is nothing, and comes at night.<sup>87</sup>

The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.<sup>88</sup>

Amis's words recall both the poise and the tensions of Larkin's poem. We are offered a consolation on the brink of the inarticulate – beautiful, abstracted, and yearning for impossible elsewhere.

Much as in 'Bujak' and *London Fields*, the fresh perspective granted by Richard's relinquishing of revenge is far from a solution to the problems posed by the novel, and the earthly forces of vengeance he has unleashed have a terrifying momentum of their own. Richard's violent plans find their agent in the figure of Steve Cousins, known otherwise as Scozzy or, most appropriately, Adolf; a man with an exponential capacity for violence. He is, like Nicola Six, a nuclear being: one who 'when he started, he didn't stop'<sup>89</sup>, who is 'terrible information . . . like a catastrophic telecast that kept going on for hour after hour'<sup>90</sup>. Steve is an autodidact who 'always had a book with him'<sup>91</sup>, but he is also a profound misreader of both art and life; a man able to endure and even enjoy Richard's tortured texts because, like a black hole, he simply absorbs them into his world of violence. Like vengeance itself, his frame of reference turns all values to equal nothing.

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<sup>87</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 494.

<sup>88</sup> Philip Larkin, 'High Windows' from *Collected Poems*, p. 165, ll. 17-20.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Amis *The Information*, p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

Similarly to Xan Meo confronting Joseph Andrews at the end of *Yellow Dog*, however, Richard eventually gets the joke that is his supposed nemesis. Steve, he realises, has mistaken his own bitter narcissism for a truth about nature – and has nothing to say about anything but himself:

‘You [Cousins] think you’re a frightener. Yeah, you’re really terrifying. All you’ve got to do is fuck someone up. And you even fuck *that* up. You think you’re a frightener and you don’t even frighten me. And what do I do? I review *books* . . . You think you’re some kind of wild boy. Some kind of wolf child. Instead . . . of a fucking dog who, for a while, stopped being a tramp in the city and started being a tramp in the country . . . And what have *you* got to say? What have you got to tell us?’<sup>92</sup>

This is probably the novel’s most convincing response to nihilism: the laughing rejection of its emptiness and reflexivity. Wit and anger flare up in Richard, and the result is both insight and action: a moment in which the power of the destroyer is negated by the simple refusal to accept the anti-logic that everything is nothing just because nothing can be proved.

Shortly after this revelation, Richard decides to cancel the one aspect of his plans that might actually have worked – framing Gwyn as a plagiarist – by turning this into a joke as well, ‘just a little stunt we hatched . . . To see how far it would go.’<sup>93</sup> Then, finding himself the victim of a revenge-plot between his wife and Gwyn, he decides that the only act which might preserve his future with his family is to forgive rather than to reciprocate the past –

[H]e was already rewriting his Profile . . . and working on a way of forgiving Gina. Because if he forgave her, she could never leave him now.<sup>94</sup>

Richard’s motivations are a complex mixture of hope, love, cynicism and fear: a far cry from the purity of Bujak’s decision to ‘start somewhere’. They are also, however, touched by an unworldliness which recalls the abstractions of *Einstein’s Monsters* – a

<sup>92</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 459.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 494.

refusal of pragmatism that cannot but damage their moral import. Most tellingly of all, horror is only avoided at the end of *The Information* by a series of carefully orchestrated coincidences. Steve Cousins, intent on brutal revenge, leads away Richard's son, Marco, only for Marco to be saved at the last minute by the arrival of 'three men'<sup>95</sup> – Gwyn's minders, exacting revenge in turn for assaults on Gwyn. Mindless fate prevails where Amis's character cannot. Richard has arguably become a better, more self-aware person, better able to live his life and love his family, but he has failed absolutely to protect those things most precious to him.

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<sup>95</sup> Martin Amis, *The Information*, p. 493.

#### 4.iv. Suicide and *Night Train*

In *Night Train*, none of the fortuitous coincidences of *The Information* are permitted.

Despair, instead, lies at its heart, embodied in the suicides of two women. Martin Amis has termed suicide the opposite of everything he is attempting to do in fiction – a sudden negation of all those carefully raised stakes –

It [suicide] awakens terror and pity in me, yet it compels me, compels my writing hand. Perhaps because what I do all day and what they do, the suicides, in an instant, are so close to being antithetical.<sup>96</sup>

In *Night Train*, however, there emerges the sinister implication that the sceptical probings of both art and science can be a spur towards death as well as an act of defiance; and that, like the investigation within the novel which ‘only points towards further complexity’<sup>97</sup>, Amis’s art has taken him to the edge of an abyss where no lasting meanings can be credited.

*Night Train*, like *The Information*, approaches the twentieth century from the flip-side of nuclear weapons: the cosmic timescales and unimaginable distances of post-Einsteinian space-time. It is also told, for the first time in Amis’s fiction, through the person of a woman. The opening paragraph gives us some idea of what to expect:

I am a police. That may sound like an unusual statement – or an unusual construction. But it’s a parlance we have. Among ourselves, we would never say I am a policeman or I am a policewoman or I am a police officer. We would just say I am a police. I am a police. I am a police and my name is Detective Mike Hoolihan. And I am a woman, also.<sup>98</sup>

Both gender and syntax are bent around our narrator’s profession, echoing the indeterminacy of her own first name. As the sequence in which these introductions are made suggests, Mike sees herself as a ‘police’ first and a woman second – although,

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<sup>96</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 280.

<sup>97</sup> Martin Amis, *Night Train*, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

as she is aware, she will always remain something of an outsider in the realm of ‘male violence’, violent criminality being overwhelmingly biased (like suicide and police-work) towards men. Among other things, the novel offers an account of the limitations of the roles and registers available to Mike both as a woman and as a ‘police’, twinning her history of struggle and violence with the seemingly perfect but ultimately suicidal life of Jennifer Rockwell.

Like Samson Young, Mike Hoolihan is an American narrator. Unlike him, however, and unlike Amis’s other narrator-protagonists (Charles Highway, Terry and Greg Service, John Self) she does not come at the world from the perspective of an artist, in that her narration is not primarily underpinned by hopes of ‘artistic’ form or insight. In that she is telling her story, Mike certainly exhibits this need; but in both language and deed she is professionally devoted to the unmasking of literal truth (and correspondingly hostile to the idea of making things up). She is essentially a scientist, testing her theories against precisely gathered evidence. Thus, asked to investigate Jennifer’s suicide, she deals – as is her training – in lists and reasoned deductions, attempting rationally to discern what is and is not the case. Her approach to ‘Stressors and Precipitants’ is typical:

Briskly, boldly, this list is headed, Stressors and Precipitants . . .

1. Significant Other? Trader [Jennifer’s partner]. Things he didn’t see?
2. Money?
3. Job?
4. Physical Health?
5. Mental Health? Nature of disorder:
  - a) psychological?
  - b) ideational/organic?
  - c) metaphysical?
6. *Deep Secret?* Trauma? Childhood?
7. *Other Significant Other?*<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Martin Amis, *Night Train*, p. 76.

Mike's career as a 'police' echoes Jennifer's as a cosmologist. Women in the male-dominated professional worlds of policing and scientific research, they are both engaged in the (stereotypically male) pursuit of empirical truths about events. They are also both users of the cutting edge of investigative technology, embodied in the 'striplights and tiles'<sup>100</sup> of the autopsy room as much as in the 'Department of Terrestrial Magnetism'<sup>101</sup>, and both are good at their jobs. Yet both choose to end their own lives, Jennifer by shooting herself three times in the head and Mike – an ex-alcoholic – by heading out as the novel ends for one last, fatal bender. This is the history of humiliation ratcheted up several notches of pain. Within *Night Train*, something seems to have failed disastrously in both the supposed liberation of modern women and the new orders of knowledge made available by modern science and technology.

*Night Train*, then, attacks not only contemporary fictions as unsustaining, but also contemporary facts – or the best approximations to fact that humanity has so far made. As in *The Information*, more knowledge proves bad rather than good for all involved. Similarly, professional rigour and honesty end up doing harm to Mike and Jennifer. Mike, determined to get to the bottom of Jennifer's case, finds her clues and deductions incrementally melting away until she is left facing the single fact of despair in a woman who had everything: health, wealth, love, family, a career, a bright future. Jennifer, as we eventually learn, simply decided that there was no reason to stay alive on this earth. Like Conrad's Marlow, sent to Africa by his Company to produce a 'readable report'<sup>102</sup> and desperately trying to wrest a consoling vision from the 'horror' of Kurtz's suicide-by-proxy (the original twentieth century

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<sup>100</sup> Martin Amis, *Night Train*, p. 24.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (Harmondsworth, 1994), p. 101.

literary murder), Mike Hoolihan comes back from the brink to find that all she can do is lie to others in order to protect them. In Marlow's case, the lie is spoken to Kurtz's 'Intended', pretending that the last word Kurtz spoke was 'your name'<sup>103</sup> rather than a whisper of horror. In Mike's case, the lies are spoken to Jennifer's father, a cop himself. She gives him the detective story that never happened – the plot of an alternative novel:

'It all measures up. Your little girl was on a break. No doctor was giving her that stuff she was taking. She was getting it on the street . . . It's a pattern. It's all classic, Colonel Tom. It's a dunker, man. It's a piece of shit.'<sup>104</sup>

Rather than a whodunit we have in *Night Train* a whydunit, at whose centre is the silence of 'something altogether inhuman'<sup>105</sup>. The heart of darkness, as in Conrad's novel, is dumb; like Marlow, Mike finds herself falling back upon those very clichés and narrative expectations her experiences have thoroughly discredited. Jennifer, she realises, anticipated this and has left behind a trail of engineered clues corresponding to the TV-ideal of plain motives and tidy trails:

With TV you expect everything to measure up. Things are meant to measure up. The punishment will answer the crime. The crime will fall within the psychological profile of the malefactor. The alibi will disintegrate. The gun will smoke. The veiled woman will suddenly appear in the courthouse . . . *Jurors* want a why. They want reruns of *Perry Mason* and *The Defenders* . . . They want commercials every ten minutes or it never happened.<sup>106</sup>

Most disturbingly of all, Mike begins to feel that this garbage of clichés and sentiment is no different to what she has been doing all along in her supposedly undeceived, unsentimental investigations – because detail must always be chosen from the store of things that simply are, because it must always be attached to a theory and made to speak. The prospect raised by Jennifer's case is a relativistic despair of the type deplored by Barnes in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*: that, beneath the

<sup>103</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 123.

<sup>104</sup> Martin Amis, *Night Train*, p. 148.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p. 117.

everyday half-truths and illusions of society, there lies only another level of illusion; and that both her and Mike's methods of investigation were equally sentimental and redundant because they were seeking forms and purposes which neither people nor nature contain. Within *Night Train*, then, there is no concept of the value in being 'less deceived'. The only definitive action becomes 'Suicide . . . the night train, speeding your way to darkness'<sup>107</sup>, and the only alternative – as Mike thinks to herself – to remain in a world not good enough for goodness:

I have nothing to tell Colonel Tom except lies: Jennifer's lies.  
 What else can I tell him?  
 Sir, your daughter didn't have motives. She just had standards. High ones.  
 Which we didn't meet.<sup>108</sup>

Mike and Jennifer launch themselves into the only remaining absolute, away from other people, away from the agony of hope.

Of all his narrators, none is more distinct from Martin Amis than Mike Hoolihan. Yet it is difficult to read *Night Train* as a commentary only on the crises of Mike's 'police' language and method, especially when her despair and the despair of the novel so precisely map many of Amis's most serious concerns. This is not to say that the novel is a failure; in an interview for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1990, Amis eloquently defended the darkness of his own work with a reference to Larkin, and a close echo of Larkin's own defence of his pessimism:

The theme that the good is gone is as old as literature. Everything has been cheapened; the accumulation of experience is causing decay . . . I think there's a lot of romanticism in my work . . . but it's thwarted by distortion and perversity, false commercial images in TV, literature, porn. The fact is, my satire wouldn't work if what I'm satirizing were not valued. Like Philip Larkin's poetry, love is conspicuous by its absence.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Martin Amis, *Night Train*, pp. 107-8.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>109</sup> 'Martin Amis: Down London's Mean Streets', Mira Stout interviewing Martin Amis (*New York Times Book Review*, 4 February 1990), online at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

In *Night Train*, however, we do seem to have reached the limits of such satire, and the limits of discernment between what is 'fake' and what is worthwhile. Humour itself is largely absent; humanity, kindness and love are equally spent forces; and the novel's despair suggests fears of the most fundamental kind on its author's part about the ability of any 'made-up' story to reflect meaningfully on society after the course of the twentieth century.

#### 4.v. Recent history: *Experience* and *Koba the Dread*

Martin Amis wrote almost no fiction between *Night Train* in 1997 and *Yellow Dog* in 2003. Aside from the appearance of *Heavy Water* in 1998, which collected a number of short stories written between 1976 and 1997, he instead produced a memoir, *Experience* (2000), a collection of essays, *The War Against Cliché* (2001), and an idiosyncratic book about Stalin, *Koba the Dread* (2002). In 2002, with the benefit of hindsight, Amis commented of this sequence:

In the last six years I've been somewhat reflective and political. I wanted to give myself a political education, learn the categories. Having been apolitical I felt the time had come. I was really just taking stock and having a hiatus. It was slightly to do with my father's death and my sister's death and I didn't feel light enough to go back to fiction. I felt too weighted down.<sup>110</sup>

Much as in the 'Introduction' to *Einstein's Monsters*, Amis's suggestion is that events of large personal import – in this case, deaths rather than births – demanded a fresh political engagement. This time around, however, Amis accuses himself rather than his writing of being 'apolitical', and it is made clear that his 'hiatus' was primarily focused on the inner life rather than on external concerns (like nuclear weapons) to which others must be awakened.

A comparison to Julian Barnes's 'Parenthesis' in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is once again instructive. There, Barnes chooses to make his most serious moral points not only in his 'own' voice but also from that most intimate of environments, the marital bed. Similarly, Amis's strategy from *Experience* to *Koba the Dread* is one of deliberate personalisation – making his own most weighty experiences a bedrock upon which the moral and social questions so bleakly approached by *Night Train* might be debated in other terms. The result is three of Amis's least reflexive and most lucidly public literary performances.

*Experience* is arguably the most appealing and emotionally accessible of all Amis's works, and its mission is as much to inform as to provoke and entertain. Like *Einstein's Monsters*, *Experience* is a book deeply concerned with the insidious force of bad explanations, and it sees Amis asserting control of his own life in the public sphere. His mission, as he puts it, is to replace the "relativists' echo chamber"<sup>111</sup> of the fourth estate with a properly telling account of topics which include his cousin, Lucy Partington's, murder by Fredrick West (Amis passionately rebuts the possibility of West and Lucy having had a sexual relationship<sup>112</sup>), his friendship-ending feud with Julian Barnes over the negotiations for *The Information* (during which Amis left Pat Kavanagh, his longtime agent and Barnes's wife, for the American agent Andrew Wylie<sup>113</sup>), and the controversy surrounding Eric Jacobs's account of Kingsley Amis's death and funeral (which was serialised in the *Sunday Times* without the consent of the family, and without first-hand experience of many of the events described<sup>114</sup>). And, unlike his discussion of history and politics, these are matters which Amis clearly felt able to put on the record in terms of witnessed and irrefutable truth.

*Experience* wears its author's artistic credentials on its sleeve. The book's structure is itself more poetic than novelistic – crammed with allusions, associations and asides – and at every turn it extends its reminiscences into large ideological terrain: the conflicts between prejudice and empathy, between talent and the deforming pressures of envy and regret, between innocence and experience. *Experience's* readers are not so much offered life as art, as art as an indispensable (if imperfect) tool for making sense of life. Much as in *Time's Arrow* a very Biblical

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<sup>110</sup> Martin Amis, speaking to William Georgiades in 'A Chat with the Novelist' (*The New York Sun*, 4 November 2003), online at <http://www.wgeorgiades.com>

<sup>111</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 376.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, pp. 247-9.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, pp. 373-379.

dualism is never far from the surface of Amis's prose, and its moral and didactic force is similarly in evidence. 'Experience' itself is introduced as 'that miserable enemy'<sup>115</sup> – a demon to be battled – while it is to Milton that Amis turns for his most heightened descriptions of innocence and its redeeming force:

Innocence and nakedness, like Adam and Eve, used to go hand in hand. 'With naked honour clad / In naked majesty, seemed lords of all,' writes Milton in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* . . . Astoundingly, we still glimpse something of this in ourselves, every year. On holiday, whether in Nalisea or in some brochurish 'paradise', we go through the motions of feeling less ashamed of our bodies . . . in the little Eden of the seaside.<sup>116</sup>

Echoing Larkin's praise of 'the miniature gaiety of seashores'<sup>117</sup>, this is one of Amis's most telling descriptions of what the 'best self' might look like. He invokes an unashamed, unjudging sensibility brought somehow intact from childhood into adult life, unfallen like 'the little Eden of the seaside' or, indeed, like the narrator of *Time's Arrow*.

This is, for Amis, a sensibility awakened in marital and familial love, against which is ranged throughout *Experience* the monstrous, violating figure of Fredrick West, 'childkiller, seeder of nightmares'<sup>118</sup>. Amis's West, like his Stalin in *Koba the Dread*, is a living embodiment of the darkest aspects of the human and of a world which Amis suggests has grown inexorably bleaker during his own lifetime –

Innocence attracts its two main opposites: experience and guilt. *Nuditas virtualis* attracts its theological counterpart, *nuditas criminalis*. The paedophile, for example, wants more from children than their physical beauty; the paedophile is so interested in violation that only children will do. I was young, and the world was younger, almost unimaginably younger. And yet there always are these enemies, who see innocence and need to do something to it.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience* p. 36.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 133-4.

<sup>117</sup> Philip Larkin, 'To the Sea', in *Collected Poems*, p. 173, l. 4.

<sup>118</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 171n.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p. 135.

The tangible reality of evil in Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers* is, again, a not-so-distant parallel. Mentioned by name just eleven times, West nevertheless broods behind much of *Experience* like Satan fresh out of Milton's hell: both a terrifying testament to human capacity for evil, and a moral mutation against whom innocence and virtue shine all the more brilliantly:

My family cannot understand the extraordinary collision that allowed him to touch our lives, and I have no wish to prolong the contact. But he is here now, in my head; I want him exorcised. And Fredrick West is uncontrollable: he is uncontrollable.<sup>120</sup>

Not to be outdone, Satan himself gets a mention in a passage discussing suicide:

. . . the Devil is *not* a gentleman. The gentle *do* come to grief. And when Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, sets out from Pandemonium (abode of all demons), this was his mission: 'To waste His whole creation',<sup>121</sup>

'The gentle *do* come to grief': this is Amis's bleakest and most irrefutable assertion in *Experience*, and it explicitly echoes a poem of his father's, 'A.E.H.', which half-way through the book he quotes in full:

Flame the westward sky adorning  
Leaves no like on holt or hill;  
Sounds of battle joined at morning  
Wane and wander and are still.

Past the standards rent and muddied,  
Past the careless heaps of slain,  
Stalks a redcoat who, unbloodied,  
Weeps with fury, not from pain.

Wounded lads, when to renew them  
Death and surgeons cross the shade,  
Still their cries, hug darkness to them;  
All at last in sleep are laid.

All save one who nightlong curses  
Wounds imagined more than seen,  
Who in level tones rehearses  
What the fact of wounds must mean.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 71.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p. 281.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

Glossing this as a ‘poem I memorised at eighteen and still have by heart’<sup>123</sup>, Amis comments after the final stanza simply ‘And what the fact of wounds must mean, of course, is that God is absent, or immoral, or impotent’<sup>124</sup>. It is a conclusion whose import resonates behind all of *Experience* – that, if there is to be any earthly good, it can be underwritten by nothing beyond our own actions and experience.

Such an underwriting is exactly what *Experience* seems to be most interested in – offsetting despair with those hard, local facts that bind individuals to each other and to their world. As Amis puts it in his discussion of the literary form he labels ‘higher autobiography’,

. . . in a world becoming more and more this and more and more that, but above all becoming more and more *mediated*, the direct link to your own experience [is] the only thing you could trust.<sup>125</sup>

Here, Amis suggests, is a technique of artistic renewal fit for the twentieth century: an intense, eloquent, undeceived relationship with individual experience able to recover lasting values by shedding the dross of ‘mediation’. It is, predictably enough, in Saul Bellow that he offers the example of this form’s perfection. Bellow, he argues, has created a literature able to speak of ‘the self from the perspective of the soul, the permanent soul’<sup>126</sup> – a phrase at once ringing with Biblical weight and difficult to paraphrase into anything not entailing notions of an afterlife. Amis, presumably, is addressing the idea of those underlying ‘human values’ familiar from his father’s and Larkin’s work; yet the terms of his praise for Bellow suggest a different note in this programme, of faith and yearning for faith, which sits uneasily against its intention of stripping away false consciousness.

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<sup>123</sup> Martin Amis *Experience*, p. 169.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 176-7.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

*Experience* itself seems concerned with two souls rather than a soul, and specifically with the permanent souls of Martin and Kingsley Amis. As Martin acknowledged in May 2000,

I think I always unconsciously knew that I would have to write about my father simply because of the rarity of our case . . . It feels like a book about my father. I felt it come upon me after he died, perhaps in the year between his death and the memorial service. A great deal of energy went into just formalising that, and not much work was possible. But I was thinking in the back of my mind, 'Well, now's the time to begin this.'<sup>127</sup>

Almost uniquely, in fact, *Experience* is a book by a son replying in kind to his father's legacy – able to say both 'my [Martin's] wishes are your [Kingsley's] wishes, and I am you and you are me'<sup>128</sup>, and 'What a lot of books you wrote, Dad, and what a lot of work you did. *These* are your last words. . . . All this is you and is the best of you, and it is still here and I still have it.'<sup>129</sup>. It is both a celebration and an act of belief, and it explicitly links literature and love as twin testaments to the best and most enduring aspects of the human. As Amis comments in his 'Postscript, describing a conversation with David Partington (Lucy Partington's brother) about the near-impossibility of coming to terms with her death:

I felt then that atrocity does this; when you are close in, as he [David] is, the task is not to accept but simply to believe. Atrocity defies belief but it also *persecutes* it, demanding something that can never be freely given: one's assent. Lucy Partington was my mother's sister's child. She was my cousin, not my sibling, not my daughter. I have never been told to believe something really unbelievable, just the usual articles of faith for a man of fifty (and they seem unlikely enough): that the parents are going, the children are staying, and I am somewhere in between.<sup>130</sup>

The task Amis sets himself in *Experience* is, again, one of belief. He asks himself, and his audience, to believe in the 'usual', the compassionate, the local; and to believe

<sup>127</sup> 'All about my father' – Martin Amis in conversation with Alan Rushbridger, (*The Guardian*, 8 May 2000), online at books.guardian.co.uk

<sup>128</sup> Martin Amis, *Experience*, p. 364.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p. 346.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 371.

in these things in the face of the appalling, the irrational, and the evil. If, *Experience* suggests, your own life and the relationships that define it can be sufficiently grasped, the rest may follow: the ability to speak of human values in the face of atrocity, and to awaken the permanent soul in the face of impermanence.

*The War Against Cliché* in many ways offers a sustained expression of this faith, gathering from almost thirty years of Amis's criticism the examples of others' lives and art in a demonstration of the sufficiency and the endurance of human struggle: a task in which, as discussed in my second chapter, it is at once magnificently eloquent and fundamentally conflicted about the import of twentieth century history. *Koba the Dread*, Amis's sequel to *Experience*, sets out to provide the null hypothesis – anatomising in Stalin a monstrous life and the monstrous values over which it presided. Like *Experience*, *Koba the Dread* is both a sustained exercise in tone and a resolutely particular account, refracting through the lens of Amis's life those topics he regards as central to the 'terrible news about what it is to be human'<sup>131</sup> brought by the twentieth century: Stalinism in Russia, the deaths of the 'twenty million' that resulted from Stalinism, and the willed and continuing blindness of much of the West to these events (glossed on the inside cover of my edition as 'the central lacuna of twentieth-century thought: the indulgence of Communism by intellectuals of the West'). Amis's ambitions as a moralist and an awakener have never been more clearly stated.

*Koba the Dread* makes no claims for itself as original historical research. Instead, much of its interest lies in the figures from Amis's intimate circles who populate its first and final sections, sandwiching a one-hundred-page 'short course' on Stalin himself. Amis fills out several of the relationships described in

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<sup>131</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread* (London, 2002), p. 92.

*Experience*, with subjects including Christopher Hitchens, Julian Barnes, his recently-deceased sister Sally, his wife and ex-wife and children (briefly) and the academic and historian Tibor Szamuely, who was a house-guest of Kingsley Amis's after his flight from the USSR. Above all, it is the figures of Kingsley Amis and of Robert Conquest who dominate. Amis's opening sentence invokes Conquest as a presiding moral force –

Here is the second sentence of Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*:

We may perhaps put this in perspective in the present case by saying that in the actions here recorded about twenty human lives were lost for, not every word, but every letter, in this book.

That sentence represents 3,040 lives. The book is 411 pages long . . . <sup>132</sup>

By the end of the next page, Amis's sense of debt to Conquest – as a uniquely important voice on the Soviet Union and as an exemplar of unvarnished honesty – has been quite clearly spelled out. 'There is only one book on this subject [the 'terror-famine']: Conquest's. It is, I repeat, 411 pages long.'<sup>133</sup> Conquest is, for Amis, an explicitly fatherly figure – a contemporary and close friend of Kingsley's for many years, a regular visitor to the 'fascist mansion'<sup>134</sup> of the Amis abode – and he plays a central role in *Koba*'s attempt to oppose individual, loving relations and the integrity of individual voices against propaganda and political fictions. Towards the end of *Koba*, in an open letter addressed to 'Comrade Hitchens!', Conquest is described after a recent stay with Martin Amis and his family, still joking around the table even in Kingsley's absence –

I laughed for so long that he [Conquest] got going too; as it subsided he took off his glasses and removed a tear with his little finger. I think I reminded him

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<sup>132</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 3.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13. It seems strange that Amis finds nothing incongruous in his amusing and sustained labelling of his father's house and gatherings as 'fascist', despite devoting some of the following page to the thesis that 'it has always been possible to joke about the Soviet Union, just as it has never been possible to joke about Nazi Germany' (*Ibid*, p. 12). He does, of course, write 'fascist' rather than 'Nazi', but the substitution would surely make little difference. And has he never heard of *The Producers*?

of Kingsley . . . More curiously, he reminds *me* of Kingsley. Because he is really *terrifyingly* unchanged, isn't he? Remember in the *Letters*, when Kingsley and Larkin have been exchanging sincere and eloquent complaints about old age, and Kingsley says incredulously that 'Bob just goes on as if nothing has happened'? . . . When you see them next, give them my love and say that I'll be over in June.<sup>135</sup>

Directly equated, both Conquest and the later, post-Communist Kingsley emerge as figures of considerable force – politically incorrect, even reactionary, but consistent in their wit, affection and faithfulness to the best aspects of human nature.

Politically and morally, *Koba the Dread* brings to a head the memorialising of Kingsley Amis begun by *Experience*, and it finishes with a 'letter to my father' in which Martin praises the moral transition made by Kingsley in his move away from Communism:

. . . when you [Kingsley Amis] threw in your lot with the agnostics, the gradualists (and also found another ideology: anti-Communism), you aligned yourself with those who have *more* faith in human nature than the believers. More faith in – and more affection for. Enough. And now the happier ending [and he goes on to detail something of life with his own children and extended family].<sup>136</sup>

Amis's message is clear and completes the movement begun by 'Thinkability' in *Einstein's Monsters*: beneath the superficial differences of his and Kingsley's generations there lies a shared literary and moral project, predicated upon insight into a human nature grossly misrepresented by both Communism and contemporary Capitalism. Implicitly, also, the ideological stance of *Experience* is extended into the realm of the political – that it is in the local virtues of love and friendship rather than the larger demands of 'the believers' that hope for a properly 'human' future resides.

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<sup>135</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, pp. 247-8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 274-5.

Christopher Hitchens, replying to his own 'letter' via the *Guardian* in September 2002, draws attention to one of the central problems with *Koba the Dread's* strategy of personalisation:

My sympathy [for Amis's aims] is tinged with annoyance . . . What did you [Amis] imagine would happen if you elected to write on such a Himalayan topic, and then pygmified it by addressing so much of it to me? If you remember, I did try to warn you about this over a year ago. I find myself embarrassed almost every day at the thought of an actual gulag survivor reading this, or even reading about it, and finding his or her experience reduced to a sub-Leavisite boys' tiff, gleefully interpreted as literary fratricide by hacks who couldn't care a hoot for the real subject.<sup>137</sup>

As Hitchens suggests, a literary programme bolstered by faith in the talent of others is one thing, but the self-referentiality of such a programme becomes disconcertingly 'pygmifying' when the subject switches to the region of the actual, and to the deaths of many millions.

More bluntly than Hitchens, Orlando Figes attacks a general absence of decorum in *Koba the Dread's* autobiographical equivalences. Questioning Amis's assumption that the sincerity and honesty of his personalising approach necessarily render it adequate, Figes argues that:

. . . it is not the history section of this book which really stinks, but the egocentric way in which Amis tries to link the fate of Stalin's Russia with his own experience in the personal sections. I don't mean the self-indulgent, boring discourse with Kingsley Amis and Christopher Hitchens . . . I mean the passage where Amis equates his own grief at the (natural) death of his sister, tragic though that was, with the suffering of the millions in the Soviet Union . . . The true subject of his book is not Stalin, nor even his victims, but Amis the would-be historian, Amis brooding on the suffering of the world from the safety of his home.<sup>138</sup>

There is justice in these accusations. Amis gives us his style, his taste, his life, the experiences of his reading – yet, without disputing the eloquence of the results, the

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<sup>137</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Don't Be Silly.', (*The Guardian*, 4 September 2002), online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk).

<sup>138</sup> Orlando Figes, 'A Shocking Lack of Decorum' (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 2002), online at [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk).

presence of so much *him* at times sits very uneasily against the larger events discussed. Amis's account is marred, for example, by passages such as the comparison of his daughter's tears with the suffering of prisoners in a Stalinist prison:

. . . she embarked on a weeping fit that began at the outer limit of primordial despair, and then steadily escalated . . . After an hour I was relieved by the nanny I had summoned from her home . . . 'The sounds she was making,' I said unsmilingly to my wife on her return, 'would not have been out of place in the deepest cellars of the Butyrki Prison in Moscow during the Great Terror. That's why I cracked and called Caterina [the nanny].'<sup>139</sup>

As Figes notes, the difference between connection and equivalence needs to be scrupulously maintained. Amis's life is certainly linked to the history of the Soviet Union, and teasing out such connections is proper and valuable literary work: but drawing uncritical parallels can only efface that sense of difference integral to any proper weighing of events.

Of course, from the 'Credentials' Amis lists on the second page onwards – 'I am a fifty-two-year-old novelist and critic who has recently read several yards of books about the Soviet experiment'<sup>140</sup> – it is made clear that we are reading not so much about the Soviet Union as about an individual's personal, indirect experience of it. In fact, much like 'Thinkability' in *Einstein's Monsters*, *Koba the Dread* is above all an account of reading, and of Martin Amis's horror at the cumulative contents of what 'several yards of books about the Soviet experiment' tell him about other people, both those intimately known and strangers. Literary criticism is never far from the surface of Amis's prose. The character of the 1917 revolution itself is traced not to necessities, to rational insight or to the arguments of Marx, but rather to the reductive appeal of bad art:

It fills you with extraordinary torpor to learn that Lenin read Nikolai Chernyshevsky's insuperably talentless novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1863)

<sup>139</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

*five times* in one summer . . . With its didactic portrait of the revolutionary New Man, its ‘russification’ of current radical themes, and its contempt for ordinary people, ‘Chernyshevsky’s novel, far more than Marx’s *Capital* supplied the emotional dynamic that eventually went to make the Russian Revolution’ (Joseph Frank).<sup>141</sup>

Similarly, in his assault on Stalinism, Amis explicitly links the languages of bad art and of ideology as forces preying upon the most vulnerable and base aspects of the mind. Offering simplifications, denials and clichés, behind which deeply immoral assumptions are able to operate unchallenged, in his analysis they constitute a central part of the Bolshevik’s ‘war against human nature’<sup>142</sup>: a willed reduction of thought and interaction to the most shallow and unexamined of routines. Amis’s own language, both implicitly and explicitly, sets itself up as the opposite of this – as a guardian of our better ‘nature’, and of those relations and consequences the Bolsheviks were (in his analysis) determined to deny.

When discussing ‘the great intellectual abasement’<sup>143</sup> of Western figures after the War (including his own father) in their allegiance to Russia, it is the appeal of the language of Stalinism that Amis finds hardest to understand. He discusses James Fenton’s Communism, incredulous that of all people a poet could admire this ideologically charged diction – ‘I thought, he must hate the *language*, the metallic clichés, the formulas and euphemisms, the supposedly futuristic and time-thrifty acronyms and condensations’<sup>144</sup>. Stalinist language, and the language of Russian Communism in general, represent for Amis a concerted effort to ‘break the truth’<sup>145</sup>: not so much the literal truth as the moral truths enshrined in a commitment to

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<sup>141</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 27.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

consequence and responsibility. He sees Communism reducing communication to terms which make a nonsense of all value and argument:

The dictatorship of the proletariat was a lie; Union was a lie, and Soviet was a lie, and Socialist was a lie, and Republics was a lie. *Comrade* was a lie. The Revolution was a lie.<sup>146</sup>

In these terms, the failures of both the young Kingsley Amis and James Fenton are failures of criticism and of reading – of succumbing to the reductive appeal of ‘formulas and euphemisms’ and self-justifying bad art – while the older Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest have learned to identify the authentically ‘human’ tone of good language. It is the central argument of *The War Against Cliché* writ large, and presents both a powerful and a troubling prospect, not least, as James Diedrick notes, in the implication that

. . . he [Martin Amis] has achieved a state of wisdom that his father only arrived at after years of ignorance, and that Christopher Hitchens . . . has not yet fully attained . . .<sup>147</sup>

Amis’s attack on Trotsky’s *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1930) is typical, arguing that it –

. . . is a valuable historical document, but it is worthless as history, as historiography, as *writing*; truth, like all other human values, is indefinitely postponable. After a while the reader is physically oppressed by the dishonesty of his prose.<sup>148</sup>

Trotsky’s work is, for Amis, unfaithful to the complexities of individual experience, and to the principles of sanity, self-knowledge and empathy. Yet, in setting out to illustrate the interconnectedness of language and events, *Koba the Dread* flirts with the dangerous suggestion that history can be debated and judged by the same standards as literary texts – not to mention its own fierce confidence in Amis’s infallibility as a reader. Deliberately and eloquently, *Koba the Dread* gives us history

<sup>146</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 258.

<sup>147</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, pp. 191-2.

<sup>148</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 47.

as literary criticism: a history in which the insights of talent are the highest and most hopeful form of truth. To be authentically talented is, for Amis, to be right about human nature and human experience, in the same way that to write well is to be fully, properly moral. Similarly, a failure of human values is also a failure of talent and of style –

Stalin hated intellectuals too, but he cared about what we call creative writing and had an uneasy feel for it . . . He didn't understand that talented writers cannot go against their talent and survive, that they cannot be engineers. Talentless writers can, or they can try . . . <sup>149</sup>

As Paul Flowers points out in his review 'The Evil of Banality', Amis's acknowledged role as a reader rather than a researcher should have bred more caution in the simple matter of facts, and of words as facts; especially as, having neither travelled to Russia nor learned to read Russian, his access to sources and to linguistic nuances were necessarily limited:

It is plainly untrue that Lenin 'outlawed' the trade unions (p238). Search closely but you'll not find any statement like '*unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader' in Lenin's *State and Revolution* (p114). What Amis is citing — almost certainly at second-hand, like so much of his quoting of Soviet leaders — is a mangling of Lenin's subsequent work *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, which talks of '*unquestioning subordination* to a single will' — note: no mention of 'the Soviet leader' . . . <sup>150</sup>

Flowers's account is itself considerably marred by an obfuscating attention to detail, but his objections to Amis's indirect use of sources remain an important warning. The nuanced, self-aware voice of Amis's criticism is in its assaults on ideology driven within *Koba the Dread* towards a disconcertingly ideological extremity; and his willingness to commit what S.A. Smith calls in *History Today* the 'basic mistake of

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>150</sup> Paul Flowers, 'The Evil of Banality – Martin Amis Discovers Josef Stalin', (*New Interventions*, Volume 11, no. 1), p. 24.

engaging in stylistic analysis of texts in English translation'<sup>151</sup> is an index of this imbalance.

In 1993, writing about Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*, Amis discussed 'the carapace of verisimilitude that Spielberg needed to allow him artistic passage to the Holocaust'<sup>152</sup>. Historical data often seems to function in this way in *Koba the Dread* – as a 'carapace', giving necessary form but only meaningful as a result of the 'art' it contains. In fiction, text is the primary reality: in history, texts are evidence, useful only when read against their own distinct historical existences. *Koba the Dread* seems to have only an intermittent interest in this distinction, with the result that, while Amis's ability to communicate horror and anger invariably convinces (and is extraordinarily powerful) his analyses often do not. In particular, his comments on Stalin's motivations and on the nature of Communism and Stalinism – surely central to a book titled *Koba the Dread* – are psychologically pedestrian and prone to unilluminating literary parallels:

And that is how Stalinism is perhaps best represented: as a series of rushes of blood.<sup>153</sup>

The Great Terror was an emanation from Stalin's body. Its source lay in the effort of the mind to overcome the evidence of the gut.<sup>154</sup>

For Stalin, power was a thing of the sense and the membranes. And he invariably sought the upper limit.<sup>155</sup>

Stalin felt that reality was obedient to his will; like King Lear, he thought the thunder would peace at his bidding.<sup>156</sup>

Art as a guide to life, here, simply lacks the specificity to ring true. We do not feel Stalin's humanity, his existence as a man among men. Instead, much as in *Time's*

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<sup>151</sup> S.A. Smith on *Koba the Dread*, in *History Today* (September, 2002), p. 89.

<sup>152</sup> Martin Amis, on *Hollywood vs. America* by Michael Medved (*New Yorker*, May 1994), in *The War Against Cliché*, p. 13.

<sup>153</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 121.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, p. 198.

*Arrow* or *Experience*, we are asked to subscribe to a bipolar model of demons and innocents, within which Amis gives us Stalin as a monstrous aberration safely outside the realm of the 'human'. It is a model of humanity internally divided, between body and soul, between the 'reptile brain' and the higher mind, and between matching ideological extremes:

Marxism made wholly unrealistic demands on human nature; Nazism constituted a direct appeal to the reptile brain.<sup>157</sup>

Lacking both the supple fictional apparatus of *Time's Arrow* and the nuanced self-revelations of *Experience*, in *Koba the Dread* this becomes a model of exclusion, division and rejection, and its flaws are the flaws of Amis's worst critical and creative lapses.

Writing in 2004 in the *London Review of Books* on Stanley Milgram's famous psychological experiments<sup>158</sup>, Jenny Diski discussed the twentieth century's preoccupation with exploring its own wickedness. Noting that the Enlightened project of mastering man's destructive impulses through reasoned policy and technological innovation seemed in tatters even by 1945, she comments that:

After the Holocaust, man's capacity for cruelty no longer seemed to be something to do with the remote past and its lack of indoor lavatory facilities or comprehensive schools, but was what our own parents were capable of doing.<sup>159</sup>

Martin Amis's shocked sense of what his father was complicit in as a member of the Communist party is a version of this concern. Amis's preaching of close reading as a

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<sup>157</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 85.

<sup>158</sup> Conducted in New Haven, Connecticut in 1961. Milgram sat his (almost all male) subjects at a fake 'shock machine', with switches labelled from 15 to 450 volts, and then simply 'XXX', and told them they were participating in a 'Memory Project', testing a person in an adjoining room and punishing wrong answers with escalating shocks. Under pressure from a 'scientist' at their side, 65 per cent of subjects were prepared to administer the highest level shock several times, despite the screams and protests of their own 'subject'.

<sup>159</sup> Jenny Diski, 'XXX', on *The Man who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* by Thomas Blass, *London Review of Books*, 18 November 2004, vol. 26 no. 22, p. 10.

sure defence against complicity in oppression seems, however, little more in *Koba* than a reinvention of the Enlightened myth of ‘reason’ inexorably overcoming base impulses. If, as Amis argues, bad art and bad language prey upon the ‘bad’ aspects of the self, and the solution is an oppositional focus on the ‘fully human’, the problems posed by moral weakness remain themselves intractable: we are no closer to an idea of humanity which tolerates fallibility as well as embracing excellence, or to an account of that perversity and double-mindedness which allow people to act wrongly in full knowledge of the right. The Stalin of Amis’s model is a monster of ignorance and reptilian self-indulgence, his capacity for evil straight out of the Old Testament; lacking any sense of his rationality, his intellectual process or his beliefs, we ultimately lack any insight into the relationship between his actions and the actions of those who colluded with or permitted them.

Discussing the Communists’ suppression of religion, Amis argues that the gravest flaw in their strategy stemmed from a failure to realise that religion was not a simple matter of ignorance and illusion: that it is, rather, intransigently and integrally human –

. . . religion is also human nature. One recalls John Updike’s argument: the only evidence for the existence of God is the collective human yearning that it should be so. The war against religion was part of the war against human nature, which was prosecuted on many other fronts.<sup>160</sup>

Two different senses of ‘human nature’ – the ideal and the totality – openly clash in this proposition that religion is properly ‘natural’ in a way that Communism is not; and *Koba the Dread* refuses to accept that Communism, Nazism and the actions of Stalin himself are related to ‘human nature’ in its total sense just as surely as religion. To be human is to be capable of these things, not because of a lack of Enlightenment,

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<sup>160</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 31.

but because of a common humanity which encompasses weakness, perversity and cliché as surely as it encompasses art, insight and the pursuit of moral truth. As Diski bleakly concludes her essay:

Civilisation depends on most of us doing what we are told most of the time. Real civilization, however, depends on Milgram's 35 per cent who eventually get round to thinking for themselves.

But that, too, is a lazy, sentimental attitude. The 65/35 split between the compliant and the resistant is just another version of good and bad, and leaves us essentially ignorant and free to declare our particular righteousness.<sup>161</sup>

For all the personalising force of its readings and its urgent call for critical thought, *Koba the Dread* is shot through with this sentimentality.

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<sup>161</sup> Jenny Diski, 'XXX', *London Review of Books*, 18 November 2004, vol. 26 no. 22, p. 8.

#### **4.vi. Patterning the present: politics, journalism and *Yellow Dog***

It is instructive to consider *Koba the Dread* in the context of several of Amis's political essays from 2001. On 18 September 2001, Amis wrote for the first time on the September 11 terrorist attacks on America, in an article for *The Guardian* entitled 'Fear and Loathing'. An intense need to assert the moral force of writing and its adequacy to great events is fully in evidence. Amis's words demand empathy, demand horror, demand soul-searching –

Even the flames and smoke were opulently evil, with their vampiric reds and blacks. Murder-suicide from without was now duplicated within to provide what was perhaps the day's most desolating spectacle. They flailed and kicked as they came down. As if you could fend off that abysmal drop. You too would flail and kick. You could no more help yourself than you could stop your teeth from chattering at a certain intensity of cold. It is a reflex. It is what human beings do when they fall.<sup>162</sup>

Despite the expected flashes of verbal excellence, the essay's effect is a mixed and far from triumphant one: its generalisations stentorian ('Terror always has its roots in hysteria and psychotic insecurity . . . Mothers and fathers need to feel that they can protect their children . . . On the US-led side, then, we need not only a revolution in consciousness but an adaptation of national character'), its conclusions vague to the point of indecorousness ('Our best destiny, as planetary cohabitants, is the development of what has been called "species consciousness" . . . During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness . . .'<sup>163</sup>). James Diedrick is quick to identify and to criticise such tendencies, and his analysis – conducted in the spirit of Amis's own most rigorous criticism – is worth quoting at some length:

. . . when Amis turns to nonfiction and assumes the voice of cultural sage . . . his trademark voice and charged language are often inadequate or inappropriate . . . The portentous and overreaching "Fear and Loathing,"

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<sup>162</sup> Martin Amis, 'Fear and Loathing' (18 September 2001, *The Guardian*), online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

published just one week after thousands died when passenger jets slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, is a particularly egregious example. Verging on self-parody, Amis describes the collapse of the towers as “the apotheosis of the postmodern era,” declares in a bizarre neologism that the glint of the second plane was “the worldflash of a coming future,” and sums up the damage with glib machismo: “Manhattan looked as though it had taken ten megatons.” He also genuflects before two of his favorite American novelists (Saul Bellow and Don DeLillo) before placing a final seal of pseudo-significance on his ruminations, recording the date of the attack as “the eleventh day of the ninth month of 2001 (the duo-millennial anniversary of Christianity).”<sup>164</sup>

As Diedrick highlights, Amis is so keen to demonstrate a style adequate to great events that he overreaches, seemingly devoted to the ideal of an essay adequate to world events to the exclusion of a humane tone.

Amis has written on the events and aftermath of September 11 several times, and the principled, demanding tone of his best criticism repeatedly seems to falter in the face of this topic. ‘The Voice of the Lonely Crowd’, published in *The Guardian* on 2 June 2002, makes similarly uncomfortable reading to ‘Fear and Loathing’. In it, Amis’s summary of the global political situation adopts a bizarrely gothic tone of horror. In the same vein as his analyses of Stalin, Amis depicts the political world after September 11 as an arena devoid of causes, motivations or intellectual complexities:

September 11 was a day of de-Enlightenment. Politics stood revealed as a veritable Walpurgis Night of the irrational . . . The conflicts we now face or fear involve opposed geographical arenas, but also opposed centuries or even millenia. It is a landscape of ferocious anachronisms: nuclear jihad in the Indian subcontinent; the medieval agonism of Islam; the Bronze Age blunderings of the Middle East.<sup>165</sup>

This is high-impact prose, but it scarcely presents an accurate or illuminating view of the world. Amis condenses an entire religion into two words (Islam = ‘medieval agonism’), compresses three hugely complex and interrelated sources of instability

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<sup>164</sup> James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 4; cf. Martin Amis, “Fear and Loathing”, *The Guardian*, 18 September 2001, online at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>165</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The voice of the lonely crowd’, *The Guardian* (1 June 2002)

into a depthless, ferocious global ‘landscape’ (the India/Pakistan nuclear standoffs, the whole of the Middle East, all of Islam), and decides that politics no longer has a meaningful rational content – before leaping into the assertion that ‘Religious belief is without reason and without dignity’<sup>166</sup>, thus establishing all kinds of religion as the polar opposite of the literary dignity he himself intends to preach. This done, the essay moves to five paragraphs of Amis’s own religious history (‘I gave a school speech in which I rejected all belief as an affront to common sense. I was an atheist, and I was 12 . . .’<sup>167</sup>) and his thoughts on literature’s guardianship of a proper attitude towards existence.

The most central problem is again one of rationality, and Amis prefaces the paragraph above with several revealing observations.

On any longer view, man is only fitfully committed to the rational - to thinking, seeing, learning, knowing. Believing is what he's really proud of . . . True, novelists don't normally write about what's going on; they write about what's not going on. Yet the worlds so created aspire to pattern and shape and moral point. A novel is a rational undertaking; it is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason.<sup>168</sup>

As well as charting the extreme ambivalence of his praise of ‘belief’ elsewhere, Amis’s comments place his art and his times at violent loggerheads: the one committed to ‘thinking, seeing, learning, knowing’, the other seemingly sinking into a slough of unfounded faith and ignorance. Amis’s essay presents a world in which sane, rational public spaces – both figurative and literal – seem to have been entirely forsaken, supplanted by a toxic combination of ancient irrationalism and cutting-edge technology: ‘a landscape of ferocious anachronisms’.

There is much to admire in the passion of Amis’s assault on those who claim to have final answers to the universe, but the faults of ‘The voice of the lonely crowd’

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<sup>166</sup> Martin Amis, ‘The voice of the lonely crowd’, *The Guardian* (1 June 2002).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

are similar to those of Larkin's 'Homage to a Government' and similarly disturbing. Complaint can only assert positive values when it has both integrity and conviction, and Amis's praise of literature is as badly served by his crude broadsides against religion as Larkin's strictures against materialism are by his political sloganizing. Amis's scorn and pessimism fail to convince, and his statement that 'Belief is otiose; reality is sufficiently awesome as it stands'<sup>169</sup> evades discussion of even the impressionistic evidence of the rest of his essay – that 'reality' clearly seems insufficient to very many people, and insufficient in a manner unlikely to be wholly remedied by the auspices of literature. Amis's line on religion is also questionable both of itself and in the light of his own argument in *Koba the Dread*, that 'religion is also human nature'<sup>170</sup>. When it suits, it seems, religion is profound and beautiful; but when it defies Amis's version of 'common sense' it is to be feared and dismissed along with other 'bad' ideologies. Even more so than in *Koba the Dread*, there is something strangely ideological and abstracted about Amis's homages to individualism and the evils of ideology, just as there is something troubling about attempts to write sanely and humanely on present horrors which themselves deplore the present in the most sensational and distinction-effacing of terms.

Against this intensely politicised background, *Yellow Dog* marks a return to the dark comedy of *London Fields* or even *Money*: a satire on familiar themes (tabloid journalism, pornography, the upper classes, professional criminals) with a familiar exuberance to its linguistic games and grotesque protagonists. Yet *Yellow Dog* also represents arguably Amis's greatest feat of fictional organisation to date: a patterning of twenty-first century British against a global background of both escalating licence (in matters of sex and shame) and escalating violence (in the complementary matters

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<sup>169</sup> Martin Amis, 'The voice of the lonely crowd', *The Guardian* (1 June 2002).

of dogma and ideology). Its three interconnected plots – and a fourth series of events involving the crash of a doomed commercial flight – take place in a parallel present England, and culminate in a number of violent collisions, both literal and metaphorical, through which appropriate rewards are meted out: death or disfigurement to the bad, redemption or the prospect of redemption to the good.

The first and most central plot follows Xan Meo, consummate modern father, husband and minor celebrity, as he is sent backwards in evolutionary time by a blow to the head, administered by a couple of heavies from his father's criminal past. The 'noble and delicate powers'<sup>171</sup> of his enlightened self are replaced by something of the blood – the violent misogyny of his immediate ancestors, and the deeper primitive instincts this violence evidences. Xan's struggle to 'grow up' for a second time is echoed by the other two main plots, as the daft but likeable King Henry IX of England tries to overcome the scandals surrounding a video of his daughter being seduced by a concubine, while tabloid journalist Clint Smoker fuels his own and others' puerility through the unremitting squalor of his life and work. Along the way, we meet aging cockney hard-man Joseph Andrews (blackmailer of the King and, as it turns out, Xan's biological father) and porno superstar Cora Susan (Xan's would-be seducer and, as it turns out, the daughter of his dead sister). As the novel ends, Xan has begun to win back the trust of his wife and children, King Henry has decided to abdicate in order to give his daughter the chance of a proper life, Clint Smoker has been blinded, Joseph Andrews has been killed, and Cora Susan has quit porno in the hope of having a family of her own. Everything, almost uniquely in Amis's fiction, is in its right place; and yet the result, for all its expected passages of brilliance, is a curiously unsatisfying and patchy read.

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<sup>170</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*, p. 31.

As prefigured by *Experience*, ideas about family and children feature heavily in *Yellow Dog*. To be like a child, in this novel, is a good thing only if you actually *are* a child. At a prison riot, the inmates take a ‘drunkenly childish delight’<sup>172</sup> in their own obscenities and violence, regressing not so much towards childhood as towards the infancy of the species itself -

. . . [the rioters] reminded him [King Henry] of primates, more specifically the Barbary apes – tailless macaques – he had leerily eyed on the Rock of Gibraltar in the course of a recent cruise: the hopping and capering, the squatting and teeth-baring, the picking, the *scratching* . . . And these monkey-grunts, poundingly concerted, reminded him in their turn of an international football match he had attended five years ago . . .<sup>173</sup>

Actual children – and Xan Meo's two daughters in particular – have nothing in common with this savagery. They are instead, as in *The Information*, reservoirs of ‘innocuous libido’, safely and wholly innocent for as long as they remain on the far side of the puberty from which King Henry’s daughter, Princess Victoria, is so fatefully emerging. The Fall, in *Yellow Dog*, is explicitly a fall into sexuality and into gender – an unleashing of those parts of our biological heritage still dormant in children – and Amis gives us a contemporary Britain sinking incrementally deeper into the indulgence of its animal elements. As he commented in interview in 2003:

In *Yellow Dog*, it’s the sort of unembarrassed nature of pornography that I’m getting at. Along with other failures of modesty in the contemporary landscape. For instance, the mobile phone, and the new democracy of the midriff. And reality TV shows and all the rest of it. The loss of inhibition is so complete and, as it were, effortless, that it makes me feel – every now and then and not for very long at a time – like a sort of medieval puritan.<sup>174</sup>

The society Amis evokes is at once highly sexualised, technologised, and infantile – one in which puberty initiates the triumph of the ‘idiot child’ within and the death of

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<sup>171</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog* (London, 2003), p. 14.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, p. 127.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, p. 126.

<sup>174</sup> Martin Amis, interviewed for *The Nerve* in 2003 by Philip Higgs, online at [http://www.nerve.com/screeningroom/books/interview\\_martinamis](http://www.nerve.com/screeningroom/books/interview_martinamis)

that other child, innocence. This is the flip-side of his horror at the politics of irrationalism and ‘medieval agonism’, and recalls Larkin’s ‘M1 café’ in its disgust at the ugliness, indecorum and avariciousness of new democracy.

For Xan Meo, having painfully climbed his way out of his father’s past and out of his matchingly ‘animalistic or even prehistoric’<sup>175</sup> first marriage, the most painful discovery is that even these apparent awakenings – representative of those liberated, ‘modern’ attitudes towards sex and marriage achieved in the 1960s – were a false dawn. Genes cannot be so easily escaped, and through the agency of ‘male violence’ he falls again, via an impossible-to-anticipate encounter with male violence paralleled by Ian McEwan’s 2005 novel, *Saturday*<sup>176</sup>. It is a fall embodied in Xan’s exile from female company:

And now? Now he was living with a man – himself: he felt denuded, and hideously revealed. Xan didn’t know the lines (and, in his present disposition, would have rejected them as unmanly), but he was sharing Adam’s agony, after the Fall: ‘. . . cover me, ye pines, Ye cedars with innumerable boughs, Hide me . . .’ He had fallen.<sup>177</sup>

Once again, Milton shows Amis the way. Xan’s pain is, it seems, as old and bitter as sin itself, but now there is no Eve to take his hand. Instead, he is imprisoned in an ugly reformulation of promiscuous bachelorhood, with all of its incompleteness and regression and none of its comforts. Injury has brought Xan into full awareness for the first time of both the biological lines etched into his being and the degree to which his society remains in thrall to these supposedly outgrown impulses. The pained conclusion of his ‘hideously revealed’ self is that he is, on his own, wholly inadequate to the business of being fully human.

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<sup>175</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, p. 66.

<sup>176</sup> In which a chance scrape on the road brings privileged neurosurgeon Henry Perowne and his family into contact with the criminal violence of Baxter, a disturbed, aggressive young man with whom they appear to share nothing beyond a coincidence of time and geography.

<sup>177</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, p. 212.

Such is the life, denuded of females and family, that Clint Smoker lives all the time. We first meet Clint as he compiles a photocaption for a page of the *Morning Lark* – Keith Talent's tabloid of choice and the stage on which Clint practices his art. His piece is a porno-worthy compendium of dead puns, and a virtuoso piece of parody on Amis's part:

'The Duke of Clarence played Prince ChowMein last night, *writes* CLINT SMOKER,' wrote Clint Smoker. 'Yes, Prince Alf wokked out with his on-again off-again paramour, Lyn Noel, for a slap-up Chinese. But *sweet* turned to *sour* when photographers had the sauce to storm their private room. Wan tun a bit of privacy, the couple fled with the lads in hot pursuit – we'll cashew! What happened, back at Ken Pal? Did Alf lai chee? Did he oyster into his arms and give her a crispy duck? Or did he decide, yet again, to dumpLyn (after he'd had seconds)?<sup>178</sup>

Clint's puns are the sworn enemies of wit: a sequence of noises designed to turn the world into the formulae of tabloid print. As even he realises, something is very wrong with this. Much like the violence and lusts his profession feeds, Clint's language jolts through a series of 'category error[s]'<sup>179</sup> – paralysing non-sequiturs of wit and feeling. 'What *used* to be funny? . . . What's funny now? And is it *still* funny?'<sup>180</sup>, he finds himself wondering through the slew of quips and quotations that are his linguistic consciousness. The answer, in Clint's case, is that nothing is funny any more: he inhabits a realm of nihilistic witless flippancy, in which his increasingly desperate efforts at encountering the opposite sex only push him further in the opposite direction –

He [Clint] knew that the distance between himself and the world of women was getting greater. Each night, as he entered the Borgesian metropolis of electronic pornography – with its infinities, its immortalities – Clint was, in a sense, travelling towards women. But he was also travelling away from them. And the distance was getting greater all the time.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>178</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, p. 22.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

Appropriately enough, 'k8', Clint's email correspondent and potential paramour throughout *Yellow Dog*, herself turns out to be little more than a series of reflexive textual jokes (and only one integer away from being a dog herself): a creature, like *Money's* Fielding, neither male nor female, and certainly nothing like even the most depraved of Clint's fantasies.

Between the covers of the *Morning Lark*, however, every game is taken as earnest, and everything is always banally the same – unreal, unthreatening, understandable in the most primitive regions of the mind:

There was of course hardly any news in the *Lark*, and no global cataclysm had yet had the power to push the pinup off the front page. Even the vast sports section did little more than print the main results; the rest consisted of girls climbing in and out of the kit of famous football clubs, girls chronicling their one-night stands with famous footballers, early and reckless photographs of models who were married to or living with famous footballers, and so on . . .<sup>182</sup>

Like Gwyn Barry's *Amelior*, the *Lark* deals in generalisations that are the very opposite of the universal – which speak authentically for no-one. Pondering the 'eternal predicament of erotic prose'<sup>183</sup>, Clint himself senses just how isolating this pandering is. The letters sent in by 'wankers' (as readers of the *Lark* are called, without a spark of amusement) are 'impenetrably solitary'<sup>184</sup> because they are connected to nothing outside of themselves, while the *Lark* itself is an isolating mistress, enslaving its manufacturers into a calculated spurning of actuality. Amis and his readers are back within the closed circles of *Money*, but the brash American future is now the mundane present, playing itself out against a darker global stage.

Clint, whatever potentials he may once have had, now has a thoroughly tabloid mind: he is constantly formulating 'general' truths out of his own battered insecurities and dressing them up in science or art. Women, above all, get this treatment: 'Birds

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<sup>182</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

want tall nippers: Darwin and that',<sup>185</sup>. There is no interest, here, in truth or the actual. Troublingly, however, Amis seems himself at several points in *Yellow Dog* to experience the same confusion of the universal with the generalised, of comparison with equivalence. When, for example, Xan is tending to his daughter Billie after she has been to the toilet, Amis comments 'he knew, he understood, why some animals licked their young clean'<sup>186</sup>. The assumption is presumably that this invocation of the 'animal' transforms Xan's rather banal insight – that the act of cleaning is also an act of love – into a profound comment on the nature of human parenting. Its essential banality, however, remains untouched by this dressing. Similarly, as Xan lies in bed one night, the thought comes to him that:

You can live as an animal lives, and he thought he knew, now, why an animal would eat its young. To protect them – to put them back inside.<sup>187</sup>

We are presumably supposed to see Xan winning his way through to a more profound understanding of his own 'animal' nature, and thus to the prospect of a more robust self-knowledge than his earlier enlightenment. His new wisdom, however, feels questionably wise on several levels – especially when Amis begins to extend these animalistic explanations to all areas of his characters' behaviour. There is the moment, for example, when Xan manages to resist the advances of Cora Susan; a resistance inspired, Amis suggests, by his unconscious recognition of their blood relationship:

That's what a good caveman is meant to do, isn't it? When he hears the snap of a twig, the breath of an animal or enemy . . . The desire to reproduce meets its counterforce, which is the desire to go on being alive.

Something very ancient but much less primitive also constrained him. She [Cora] was familiar, intimately familiar; in both senses she was already-seen. He didn't know it, of course, but the face behind her face was that of his *mother*. And his sister, and himself.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, p. 104.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, p. 247.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

The tone echoes the worst elements of *Koba the Dread's* and *Time's Arrow's* analyses of 'reptilian' Nazism, and the simplicity and determinism implied by Amis's analysis sit uncomfortably against both his depictions of his characters' intellectual struggles and his own satirical assaults on tabloid journalism.

The nadir of this trend can be found in the letters which Xan and his wife, Russia, exchange in exploration of their changed relationship. Russia begins the process with some strained generalisations on a biological theme:

Your attitudes and opinions aren't attitudes and opinions any more [in his injured state]. They're beliefs, and primitive beliefs at that. If, today, you were to show me around your past, as you once did five years ago, you wouldn't be showing me Kropotkin's clubhouse on Worship Street, or Mother Woolf's spieler, or the pub called the World Upside Down. You'd be showing me your cave – or your treetop.<sup>189</sup>

Xan responds in kind some hundred pages later:

General thoughts are not my strength, but here's a general thought. Men were in power for five million years. Now (where we live) they share it with women. That past has a weight . . . As if through a trapdoor I dropped into the past, and we shared that disaster. Still, we should acknowledge the weight of it, the past. Unconsciously, and not for long at a time, men miss women being tractable, and women miss men being decisive; but we can't say that . . . It would be surprising if women weren't a little crazed by their gains in power, and if men weren't a little crazed by their losses. We will argue about this, I hope, and you will win . . .<sup>190</sup>

His pontifications culminate outside of the epistolary mode with some 'avuncular advice', to be imparted to Cora Susan at a later date:

He'd say [to Cora]: 'It sounds soft, and trite – but have a baby. When I look at you I always look for your children. That's what your breasts are looking for too: they're looking for your children. So get Burl Rhody [a fellow actor] to knock you up, and then spend all your money on help.' Or something like that.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, p. 244.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, p. 209.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, p. 307.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, p. 335.

Rather than authentic insights into the basics of human nature, the effect Amis's analyses create is that of a pseudo-scientific reformulation of his own longstanding fears: that the disintegration of the traditional structures of society have unleashed the negative biological tendencies these structures once kept in check, and that modern intellectual processes (like Xan's initial enlightenment) are woefully inadequate to the task of self-control. As Christopher Tayler has noted in the *London Review of Books*, it was

. . . a tactical error – to say the least – [for Martin Amis] to choose as a commanding trope for 'the universal' an area in which the border between history and nature is so sketchily mapped and so vigorously contested.<sup>192</sup>

It is the uncomfortably crass theorising of the 'reptile brain' all over again, and like Martin Amis the historian, Martin Amis the anthropologist cuts a far less impressive figure than his incarnations as critic and novelist.

*Yellow Dog* wraps together an astonishing number of familiar Amis threads: the death of motivation, the problems of evil and violence, the inflammatory effects of pornography and cliché, the momentum of the unfettered pursuit of profit, the clash between genders and between innocence and experience. Especially in its final sections, however, the effect is too often that of a closed system – an overtightening of connections which locks characters into set discourses on gender, innocence, the animal, and the lurid horribleness of the present. Even Xan's condition, we are told when first he awakens in hospital,

. . . felt like the twenty-first century: it was something you wanted to wake up from – snap out of. Now it was a dream within a dream. And both dreams were bad dreams.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Christopher Tayler, 'High on His Own Supply' on *Yellow Dog* by Martin Amis, *London Review of Books*, (11 September 2003).

<sup>193</sup> Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*, p. 37.

Relegated to the status of a 'bad dream', the present is put outside the realm of the rational: it is instead a case of violent injury, to be resisted and, ultimately, to be awoken from (ideally into the little Eden of the family). This is not the language of telling satire – it is, rather, a language allied to programmatic comeuppances and to lecturing conclusions, and it assaults a world in which it seems possible to acknowledge the potency of the irrational self only at the cost of faith in the permanent soul. Love, similarly, is permitted as a salvation in *Yellow Dog* only at the most pre-conscious of levels – an impulse not so much eternal and ennobling as exclusive, allowing us to turn our backs on the mess humanity has made of its planet, but unable to restore faith in society or in other people beyond our most intimate circles.

Amis sends Xan Meo to purgatory, where he becomes able to acknowledge both his own and his society's buried pasts. Neither his enlightenment nor his cod-anthropological language, however, feel like robust tools for the telling of contemporary truth. *Yellow Dog*, similarly, is a novel of polarity and exclusion – of myth and comeuppance – and one which melds many of Larkin's and Kingsley Amis's lesser tendencies: towards simplifications, contempt for the present, and a fearful unwillingness to credit moral insights with any resilience in the face of worldly trauma. It remains to be seen what Amis's next projects – a collection of two short stories<sup>194</sup> and a novella due in late 2006 under the title *House of Meetings*, and a novel entitled *The Pregnant Widow*, due in 2007 – will yield. The notion of a

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<sup>194</sup> Both stories have already appeared in print: 'In the Palace of the End', which details a day in the life of a double to a Saddam-Husseini-like dictator, in *The Guardian Review*, 17 April 2004; and 'The Last

contemporary world in thrall to infantilism and irrationalism, however, seems at the moment to be casting an especially long shadow.

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Days of Muhammad Atta', which details the last days of one of the September 11 hijackers, in *The New Yorker*, 24 April 2006.

## Conclusions

On 7 November 2003, Martin Amis was answering questions for an online discussion hosted by the *Washington Post*. *Yellow Dog* had appeared earlier that Autumn to mixed, and in places violently hostile, reviews, and he seemed in an uncharacteristically melancholy frame of mind. Asked about that most central of Amis themes, the literary legacy, his reply suggested a curious mixture of faith in the enduring value of the good and a severe lack of faith in the staying power of his own literary mode:

The fact that the real action starts with your obituaries is a satisfyingly symmetrical fate, because you won't be around to witness the response, one way or the other. It keeps you honest. But I'd like to be remembered as someone who kept the comic novel going for another generation or so. I fear the comic novel is in retreat. A joke is by definition politically incorrect – it assumes a butt, and a certain superiority in the teller. The culture won't put up with that for much longer.<sup>1</sup>

Amis laments the failure of that value most central in his, Larkin's and his father's work: discernment – the assumption that it is possible to apprehend values larger and more lasting than any merely individual taste, and that humour is at its best a discerning moral act. The exchange continued,

**Carole Burns:** Do you think that's [the retreat of the comic novel] related to why reviews of your books recently have been so vitriolic? . . .

**Martin Amis:** Partly. I have been outflanked by the culture. I am now seen as a drawling Oxonian, and a genetic elitist, who took over the family firm. People subconsciously think that I was born in 1922, wrote *Lucky Jim* when I was 7, and will live for at least a century. This feels odd to me, because my father was a [sic] "angry young man" and helped democratize the British novel. I'm not a toff. I'm a yob.<sup>2</sup>

Amis's anger at his audience's 'subconscious' assumptions explicitly links his and his father's lives and work, and draws a clear line between good and bad versions of

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of 'Off the Page: Martin Amis', a discussion hosted by Carole Burns for *The Washington Post* (7 November 2003, 13:00 E.T.). Online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

democratization. The contemporary ‘culture’, with its pathological hatred of all notions of superiority and its knee-jerk accusations of elitism, is clearly a bad thing, while Amis’s and his father’s efforts as ‘yobs’ to bring an unaffected but intellectually incisive literature into the public sphere are clearly a good thing. Once again, we see two different senses of the ‘common’ in open conflict – on the one hand the insidious clichés that are commonly said in order to mask deeper connections, and on the other hand the emancipatory force of common truths expressed in a lucid, public language. Despite his best efforts, it is a balance that Amis clearly feels has swung in the direction of cliché.

Returning for a moment to Larkin’s work suggests a number of useful clarifications. In accepting (as all three authors under discussion in this thesis do) the non-existence of God, Larkin’s work makes uncertainty and mortality the bases of its hopes for compassion and decency. Certainty, conversely, is the enemy: a lying confidence in clichés and abstractions which entails retreat from others and the actual into various kinds of self-indulgence. The value of becoming ‘less deceived’ thus resides in asserting one’s common humanity through the carefully qualified limits of knowing and feeling, through the ability to be both stoical and self-mocking, and through local acts of preservation and creation. Against these objectives are ranged the ‘thinness’ of the present and what this implies of the human – a society in which both literal and linguistic spaces for properly insightful thought seem damaged and marginalized. With faith in God gone, moreover, faith in the twentieth-century-human is a far harder thing to come by; and, alongside its quest for public eloquence and integrity, Larkin’s work exhibits a tendency to take refuge in clichés and myths of its own – the yearning for a lost Eden; a despairing contempt for the present and for the evils of modernism.

In 1959, during his brief stint at Princeton University, Kingsley Amis gave a series of lectures for the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism on the topic of Science Fiction, subsequently published in 1960 as *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*. In the context of both Martin Amis's and Larkin's most bitterly expressed fears for the present, it is interesting to look at a passage towards the end of this book, in which Kingsley explores the curious mixture of enthusiasm and concern underpinning his fascination with Science Fiction:

The lesson to be drawn from the more imaginative science-fiction hells . . . is not only that a society could be devised that would frustrate the active virtues, nor even that these could eventually be suppressed, but that there is in all sorts of people something that longs for this to happen . . . [an] eager denial of mind, this longing to abandon reality via mechanical wonders . . .<sup>3</sup>

In his recognition that the relationship between technology and mind is one that might rewrite the basic contracts of society and morality, Kingsley Amis comes very close to the tone his son would strike in *Invasion of the Space Invaders* some twenty-two years later. The lesson to be taken from the best Science Fiction (like jazz, an authentically popular form) is, it seems, at least as equivocal as democratization's other consequences – and is one centred on the strange relationship between virtue and constraint, the 'active virtues' being achievements which paradoxically demand restraint or even inaction, similarly to Amis's praise elsewhere of surrender above will. 'Hell' itself in *New Maps of Hell* often comes dressed like the contemporary 'paradise'<sup>4</sup> of contraception and guilt-free sex detailed in Larkin's 'High Windows': its 'wonders' able to delight and liberate in a manner previously unknown, but also (like desire itself) to deform and fragment human experience. The freedom from old custom and dogma granted by modernity is thus at once empowering and morally regressive: as Martin Amis's John Self discovers in *Money*, the 'invader . . . swathed

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<sup>3</sup> Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (London, 1961), pp. 111-12.

in spools and printouts'<sup>5</sup> can be a demon far harder to battle than the bodied Satan of 'before'.

Even the act of reading Science Fiction is described by Kingsley Amis as an 'addiction' which, 'as is the way with addictions . . . is mostly contracted in adolescence or not at all'<sup>6</sup>. There is something almost pornographic, Amis suggests, in its appeal – and in Science Fiction's reifications of deep-seated desire we see something very close to the 'natureless'<sup>7</sup> world of Larkin's quotidian hells: the 'M1 café'<sup>8</sup> and its blindly avaricious new generation, 'The Building'<sup>9</sup> and its sterile re-writing of life and society's most fundamental moments, the culture in which all we can hope to leave our children 'is money'<sup>10</sup>. For Kingsley Amis, these were fears to be written out; for Larkin, they were to be contained and resisted; for Martin Amis, they could only be addressed by seeking critical and moral continuities with those born on the far side of the century's evolutionary firebreaks. In each case, however, their fears reflect the fundamental ways in which the twentieth century appeared to have impacted upon not only society but also what it was possible to believe of people as self-determining moral agents.

Much like his engagements with modernity and the twentieth century, Martin Amis's debts to Science Fiction are worn still more overtly than his father's – in the short stories of *Heavy Water* and *Einstein's Monsters* especially, but also in the central conceits of *London Fields*, *Time's Arrow* and, more distantly, *The Information* and *Night Train*. Like his father's, Martin Amis's is a debt and an enthusiasm touched with distrust, centring on that fine line between the mapping of human nature

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Larkin, 'High Windows', in *Collected Poems*, p. 165, l. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Amis, *Money*, p. 330.

<sup>6</sup> Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Large Cool Store', in *Collected Poems*, p. 135, l. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Going, Going', in *Collected Poems*, p. 190, l. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Building', in *Collected Poems*, p. 191.

in all its perversity and polarity and the indulgence of the human tendencies towards nihilism and fantasy. This, perhaps, suggests a concern more fundamental than any other in Amis, Amis and Larkin's works: that their limits as readers inscribe their limits as authors, and that the impossibility of proving one text to be truer or more lastingly 'human' than any other renders their project of discernment and 'human values' merely another kind of wishful fantasy, no better than the inadequate assumptions and dictions they so brilliantly ridicule in others.

Returning to the interview with which these 'Conclusions' began, it is clear that reconciliation with his times is not a feature of Martin Amis's tone any more than it ever was of Larkin's or Kingsley Amis's, and that his own model of literature remains one of great continuities and themes rather than fragmentary movements. He has, as he puts it, kept the project of discernment and resistance going 'for another generation or so'. Yet the atmosphere conjured is of a combat whose ultimate outcome can only be the defeat of those on the side of 'superiority', and alongside them the very idea of a living, literary tradition. The imagery of 'retreat' also returns us to Martin Amis's idea of the 'war against cliché' and of the literary arena as a combat zone – a version of Milton's war in heaven, with the forces of light and darkness lined up on either side. Such a formulation is perhaps the necessary burden of moral engagement: the belief that, beyond the 43 per cent right and the 45 per cent right, there is a 99 and even a 100 per cent to be won if only sufficient insight and articulate force can be brought to bear. Or, as Larkin suggested, we can and must aspire towards those statements of which it can be said 'I think it's all perfectly true. I can't see how anyone could possibly deny it, any of it . . . .',<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Homage to a Government', in *Collected Poems*, p. 171, l. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Larkin, *An interview with John Haffenden*, in *Further Requirements*, p. 53.

The problem with a fallen and godless world, of course, is that if there is to be a battle for the souls of mankind, all the absolutes now appear to lie on one side of the equation. Hell is there to be mapped, while Heaven – as, perhaps, has always been the case – is only the intuition of an impossible elsewhere. It is perhaps the greatest gift of Philip Larkin's, Kingsley Amis's and Martin Amis's work that, in the best tradition of 'rational light', they so fiercely transform this transience into tenderness, wit and wisdom: that they speak in a common tongue of the debts owed to common mortal flesh, and of the evils to which an unexamined life necessarily capitulates. Their gazes, however, turn equally towards the broken images which once promised far more than this, and to those present forces which cannot but suggest that common flesh is more ruled by its needs, desires and 'denials of mind' than by its capacities for love and goodness.

## Bibliography

This bibliography is divided into two sections, of primary and secondary works. Additionally, each section has been sub-divided between the three principal authors, followed by all other authors in alphabetical order.

Entries are given in the format: Author. *Title* (Date of first publication is given in brackets in the case of primary works only). Place of publication of edition referred to in this thesis: publisher of edition referred to, date of edition referred to.

Secondary works relevant to more than one author are repeated in each relevant section. All online references are accurate as of 1 April 2006.

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