

A Comedy of Conscience: Kingsley Amis's *That Uncertain Feeling*

The early novels of Kingsley Amis remain remarkably funny. The little criticism these playful volumes have received treats them as satirical social commentary; the Angry Young Man controversy, Amis's own willingness, from the start, to step forward as a social critic, the novels' setting in the trenches of class warfare—all have led to the belief that Amis is a satirist. On the contrary, I would argue, Amis's depth-charges are still potent because these novels possess a larger comic structure and vision, incorporating satire and farce as surely as Amis's literary hero, Henry Fielding, did in *Tom Jones*.

Amis's best, and best-known, comedy is his first novel, *Lucky Jim* (1954): there, as in *Tom Jones*, the hero's vital energies finally triumph over the fossilized and hypocritical forces that would repress him. The second Amis novel, *That Uncertain Feeling* (1955), also possesses, I think, a much more intricate plot and a much more ironic kind of comedy than its critics have allowed. The acid candor of its first-person narration tricks us: we feel such immediate sympathy with the struggling young librarian who is the narrator and protagonist that it is easy to miss his increasing self-deception. Take the question of the plot. William Van O'Connor begins his account of the novel with a plot summary:

John Lewis, his wife Jean, and their two children live in an unattractive second floor apartment in Aberdarcy, Wales. Lewis and Jean were raised in the lower middle class but are university educated. He has a job in the local library. Elizabeth Gruffyd-Williams, a member of the moneyed community, takes a fancy to Lewis and eventually they "do it." Jean recognizes the situation and tells him that hereafter they are married in name only. *Through Elizabeth's intervention with her husband Vernon the sub-librarianship, a substantially better job, is offered to Lewis.* He declines it, resigns from the library, and moves his family to the town Fforestfawr, where he and Jean had grown up; he takes a job in the office of a local coal company.²

The italicized sentence contains an apparently minor inaccuracy, one shared by almost all published criticism of the novel.³ The mistake is understandable, since Lewis, for most of the novel, makes it himself. Elizabeth has been the aggressor in their relationship, as O'Connor says, and from the start she has dangled before Lewis the influence that she has over her husband and that he, in turn, has over the committee deciding the promotion. But, near the novel's end, immediately after their affair has been consummated, she tells Lewis that he owes her no thanks; her husband has fixed upon him as the successful candidate for reasons of his own: "No, Vernon made up his mind last week that you were to get it. I just rang you up to make an excuse to talk to you. I will say this for my husband, he can always get what he wants. And you needn't thank me for it, either. That's the funny part. No, he just hates old Rowlands' guts. And the thing that would annoy Rowlands most would be having you as his second in command. So you're going to be his second in command."⁴

Elizabeth does indeed reveal "the funny part" of the plot; her disclosure is stressed by the placing of a chapter break immediately after it. But Lewis does not find it at all funny: he realizes that he has fallen into a trap that Elizabeth had set for him. She has implied all along that her husband, who

tolerates her open and frequent affairs, is a weak fellow completely under her control—the traditional cuckold, in fact. Lewis chooses not to recognize what has become increasingly apparent to us—that Gruffyd-Williams is a homosexual.

An earlier conversation with Elizabeth as the affair gets under way shows how Lewis's conscience forces both of them to make much ado about nothing:

"I've had a chat with Vernon and he's going to back you for this job you're in for."

"O God, why did you have to tell me that?"

"What do you mean? Aren't you bucked?"

"Look . . . I want to get the job all right, but I don't want to get it like that."

"Like what?"

"You know what I mean . . . just because he knows me . . ."

"But he doesn't know you, does he?"

"Well, because you know me, then."

She looked at me with her tortoise-shell-colored eyes. They were the sort sometimes loosely referred to as bloody great lamps. She said: "It's got nothing to do with that, you sap. This isn't Chicago. Not that it would matter, anyway, as far as I can see. But Vernon's only backing you because if you're appointed, then old Rowlands will . . ." She hesitated in a way I was later to remember, continuing: "He'll have the best man for the job, you see. They've been going through the applications. You're the best on paper and all you have to do is to see you don't let yourself down at the interview." (p. 143)

This conversation, which Lewis has good reason to remember later, reveals how Elizabeth adjusts her tactics to meet the demands of Lewis's strong conscience and of his equally strong sense of his own dignity.

So far, we have seen that the novel contains a trap into which Lewis and many of his readers fall; explaining why and how this trap operates requires some patient untangling. The plot of the novel is an inventive adaptation of the double plot of traditional comedy: the hero is concerned to win the right girl and to gain the right estate or position in society. Just as, say, Congreve's *Mirabell* or Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Jim Dixon must defeat their enemies on two fronts, so Lewis is simultaneously fighting for a better job and for success in his sexual life. Such a double plot guarantees the fast-moving, intricate action essential to comedy; in turn, that kind of action forces our response to become detached and contemplative, so that we may see the emerging patterns in all that is happening.

And herein lies the novel's ingenuity. In *Lucky Jim*, Amis kept his two plots separate: Jim's job-problems and his girl-problems are kept in counterpoint and meet only in the climactic scene, Jim's lecture. But here the two plots develop within one relationship, Lewis's affair with Elizabeth, and it is this fusion of interests in Elizabeth that makes Lewis's confusion possible.

Surprisingly, it turns out to be job worries, and not problems in love, that make his world go around. For Lewis enters into adultery with Elizabeth assuming that it will bring him the promotion which will enable him, his wife, and their two children to move out of their dingy, crowded flat. He has little trouble resisting Elizabeth's flagrant availability and subsequent pursuit of him—until she tells him, at the party to which she has brought him, that her

husband is on the Libraries Committee: "He asks my advice about a lot of things, you know" (p. 46). Lewis does feel the stirrings of lust when he first meets Elizabeth, but, as he immediately explains, his attitude to this "old and hateful excitement"—the uncertain feeling of the title—is, as usual, amusingly contradictory: "In the preceding years I'd spent a good deal of time and energy in courting and avoiding that excitement" (p. 13).

It is only when Elizabeth adds financial benefits to her blandishments that Lewis begins to reel. Ironically, though, Lewis does not allow himself to think of his pursuit of Elizabeth as an attempt to win the promotion. This is the reason why an overheard phrase of her husband's, "that librarian fellow of Elizabeth's" (p. 119), is so galling and recurs again and again in his thoughts (pp. 140, 157, 158, 180, 201). The calculating librarian, not the adulterer, is the label that stings. To the degree that the novel is satire, its target is the post-Lawrence exaltation of sexual self-expression as an ultimate value: a little lust goes a long way in veiling Lewis's motives.

Why would his conscience not allow him to admit to himself what he is doing? He does not want to gain the promotion unfairly, as he eventually proclaims; he also has scruples about using Elizabeth and, even more, about being used by her as little better than a male prostitute. But the most important cause of his self-delusion is his knowledge that his cringing, irritating fellow worker Ieuan Jenkins and Jenkins's even more cringing and irritating hypochondriac of a wife need the promotion more than he does. Jenkins, after all, is in his late forties; Lewis is only twenty-six. And, like Margaret in *Lucky Jim*, the Jenkinsees play shamelessly upon the hero's sensitive conscience. As a result, Lewis must think of his passion for Elizabeth as an all-consuming fire: he learns to ignore the deep liking he has for his own wife (whom he finds much more attractive) and Elizabeth's obnoxious qualities—her schoolgirl slang, her stupidity, her bullying of her social inferiors, even her histrionics in his arms ("I desire you utterly. . . . I want all your desire" [p. 113]).

Lewis is fated to learn and grow after, if not through, the Lawrentian consummation of their passion on a moonlit beach. Elizabeth evidently decides that her young moralist has committed himself sufficiently to remain hers even with his blindfold removed, and Lewis now discovers, in the passage cited above, that he has been deceived—that he has been the dupe of Elizabeth and his own ambition, that he has not gained the promotion as a result of his sexual prowess, that, as John Hurrell has pointed out, his "debates with his conscience turn out to be academic after all."⁵

But his conscience, the distorting agent in all his delusions, now shows itself to be the agent of renewal as well. Not only does Elizabeth's disclosure jolt him into seeing the moral chaos into which he has drifted; he also realizes that now he owes her nothing: he is free, according to the sense of fair play which persists even in his adultery, to end their relationship as he would not have been had she won him the promotion. He realizes that it is Jean he loves and wants, and that it is not too late to return to her; the job, for which adultery was to be the price, now seems a cheap price to pay for a dignified conclusion to the adulterous relationship.

The reasons Lewis gives Elizabeth for his renunciation of both her and the job are amusingly high-minded: "One of the things I feel rather strongly about is fiddles. You've got no right to feel like that about a thing if you let fiddles go on when they're ones that happen to work in your favor" (p. 205). Lewis now thinks he can have his cake and eat it, too: he returns home, elated

by a moral triumph on top of his sexual one, and tells Jean the whole story of his relationship with Elizabeth. Jean, unable to appreciate his sacrifice, sees only a double defeat, not double triumph: he has shattered their marriage bond, but his scrupulosity has denied them the new job they need so badly.

It is only at this point that Lewis sees fully what he has been doing. Jean has retired for one last time to their bedroom and he sets about making cocoa for two as a gesture of reunion, when Lewis suddenly bolts in despair out onto the empty city streets. Though running away violently and aimlessly, he is striving in his mind to grasp and face the truth about his own actions, and he finally does: " 'Poor old Elizabeth.' Making all that fuss about the job had just been an excuse. 'Excuse, excuse, excuse,' I muttered. I hadn't been able to face going on seeing her. 'Coward,' I tried to call out, 'coward' " (p. 225).

When he does get back, Lewis finishes making the two cups of cocoa and goes in to ask Jean to join him in a common fight to save their marriage. We do not hear what Lewis tells Jean, but we gather from the final chapter that he proposes to give lasting form to his sense of renewed community—embodied for him in the help he had just given in the street to Ken Davies, the drunken son of his working-class landlady—by giving up his library job and returning to live with his father in his home town. This ending is much less sentimental than it might seem: Lewis and his wife flee, not because they have found Elizabeth and her set corrupt, but because they have both realized that the careless rich have had the power to corrupt them. This new and sober honesty with himself is displayed when Lewis quickly leaves a cocktail party where he has met a restless wife who provokes, once more, that uncertain feeling: he simply avoids, rather than courting and avoiding, the old and hateful excitement.

If, as at the end of traditional comedy, we feel that the situation has returned, dance-like, to what it had been at the outset, we also feel that this comic recurrence allows us to gauge essential changes in the main character and in his relationships. Lewis has finally given proper use to his bristling wit and introspective insight. Like the heroes and heroines of traditional comedy, Lewis prides himself on his intelligence and yet has to endure the humiliation of catching himself being thoroughly obtuse. But he has the wherewithal to triumph over his own vanity: if the woman he walks off arm-in-arm with at the end is his wife and the mother of his children, if, like Shakespeare's Benedick and Beatrice or Austen's Emma Woodhouse, his dignity is a little the worse for wear, the happy new community at the end derives from his own inner renewal. And his strong Protestant conscience is the source of that renewal: the same power that forces him to justify his corruption with face-saving delusions also gives him the courage to see that he has been a coward and to do something about it.

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NOTES

¹David Lodge, in his chapter on Amis in *The Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), is the one critic to approach Amis in these terms.

²*The New University Wits and the End of Modernism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), p. 94. The italics are mine.

³James Gordin, for instance, refers to "the better job he got through his affair with Elizabeth" (*Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962], p. 39). Richard Chase speaks of "the promotion . . . wangled for him by Elizabeth" ("Middlebrow England: The Novels of Kingsley Amis," *Commentary*, 22 [1956], p. 265). John Hurrell, whose essay is cited below, is the only critic I have read who avoids this inaccuracy.

⁴*That Uncertain Feeling* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), p. 203. Subsequent citations from this edition are given in the text.

⁵"Class and Conscience in John Wain and Kingsley Amis," *Critique*, 2 (Spring-Summer 1958), p. 49.