



## Kingsley Amis Human Behavior

By William Eaton

*Zeteo is Reading*, October 2015

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About two hundred pages into Kingsley Amis's well-known and still wonderful comic novel *Lucky Jim* there is a paragraph that seems to rise above the rest, to take the novel's vision of human behavior to another level, beyond particulars to revelation. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, British musical comedians of Kingsley Amis's generation, had a nice line about how "the purpose of satire . . . is to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and

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cozy half-truth, and our job . . . is to put it back again.”<sup>1</sup> As regards Amis’s work, we might say that it routinely, and, again, quite wonderfully, does this stripping work, but every once in a while—perhaps just once per novel—it’s not just a thin layer that’s stripped off, it’s the whole surface, the whole décor, and we find ourselves temporarily in the woods of human behavior.<sup>2</sup> The shift in register can be startling (or pass unnoticed?). The insight can be much appreciated.

The full text of the *Lucky Jim* paragraph appears in a footnote.<sup>3</sup> I have quoted it many times before in discussions of human agency. Dixon, Amis’s protagonist, feels as if, or recognizes that, the role he has been playing with his ostensible girlfriend has “been directed by something outside himself.” (E.g. by social conventions.) What he says to his girlfriend does not come from “any willing on his own part . . . but out of a kind of sense of situation.”

In *La structure du comportement* (The Structure of Behavior), the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that our putative choices are framed and to a large extent made by a “preobjective” contact between subject and world. The what’s of a particular event and the who’s who are taking part in it are products of their interaction. In one circumstance Oedipus is a violent and powerful man; in another he is a courageous seeker of self-knowledge; in another the grandiose, dismantled self-mutilator. In the paragraph from *Lucky Jim*, words form in Dixon’s mind and he hears himself saying them; he is, as we all are, simultaneously the agent of impersonal forces—of circumstance and situation; of conventions that channel his responses—and a witness to how such forces are expressing themselves through him.

The closing sentence is: “He got up, thinking that he might go to the window and somehow derive alternative speech from what he saw out of it, but before reaching it he turned and said: ‘It isn’t a matter of scruples; it’s a matter of seeing what you’ve got to do.’” We might note first that, like a well psychoanalyzed individual, Dixon’s understanding of his psychodynamics has reached the point where he can work with the forces that are working

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, from the recording *At the Drop of Another Hat* (Flanders monologue leading up to the song “The Gasman Cometh”).

<sup>2</sup> We have not come far from my previous *Zeteo is Reading* (ZiR) post, “Film, Marxism: Tanner, Berger, Jonas,” which began with a quote from the standard translation of *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (The Communist Manifesto): “All that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life.”

<sup>3</sup> *Lucky Jim* (Penguin, 1976; first published in 1954), page 186:

Dixon felt that his role in this conversation, as indeed in the whole of his relations with Margaret, had been directed by something outside himself and yet not directly present in her. He felt more than ever before that what he said and did arose not out of any willing on his own part, not even out of boredom, but out of a kind of sense of situation. And where did that sense come from if, as it seemed, he took no share in willing it? With disquiet, he found that words were forming in his mind, words which, because he could think of no others, he’d very soon hear himself uttering. He got up, thinking that he might go to the window and somehow derive alternative speech from what he saw out of it, but before reaching it he turned and said: ‘It isn’t a matter of scruples; it’s a matter of seeing what you’ve got to do.’

with him. Since he understands that his behavior will be a product of his situation, by changing his situation, he can cause himself to behave in different, if not necessarily predictable, ways. (Similarly, there are psychotherapists and social workers who seek to help their clients—addicts, for example—by changing the situations in which they find themselves, helping them avoid the situations that lead to self-destructive behaviors.)

Secondly, we can read the “sense of situation” and “seeing what you’ve got to do” phrases as expressing a familiar idea: there are times—for example, when intimate relationships have run out of steam—when we have to leave off our ruminating and delaying and take action, do the right thing. (E.g. break off the relationship or propose marriage.) But there is another, more interesting way of reading Amis’s phrase, by putting the stress on the “seeing” rather than on the “got to do.” (Conventions again.) In this alternative reading we do not make choices so much as see the “choices” of which we are the vehicle—choices for which our wills provide fuel, but which are directed by social and environmental forces, some external, some internalized.<sup>4</sup> We can imagine, for example, that our bodies contain within themselves any number of mechanisms—DNA, reflexes, language and the memory it relies on and creates, etc.—and also, somewhat independent of all this, a self, an I, which has a partial view of the operations of all these mechanisms and also a role in the ongoing “conversation.”

As Kingsley Amis apparently had many opportunities to appreciate, a good example of human agency, or the lack thereof, is offered by the behavior of men and women who find themselves alone together in intimate settings—on a couch, say. Hormone levels rise (or, in some cases, plummet), and social conventions, public-health warnings, ideas about who “I” am and was meant to be may join the internal conversations. And while this is going on, we are becoming more (or less) intimate with the other person, and we have what may be a peculiarly human capacity: to observe our own behaviors, and even perhaps with dismay, as if we were watching a bad (or good) puppet show in which we ourselves were only marginally involved.

## (2)

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<sup>4</sup> I often eat alone in restaurants, working as I eat, and thus it is for me alone to “decide” where I am going to eat. As I live in the middle of New York City there are many alternatives, which play in my mind as I walk down the street. I think of the food that is offered in the different places, the lighting, how well I may have been able to work at these places in the past, the prices and so forth. It would seem that here is a prototypical example of choosing, for all the choice is insignificant (unless of course the quality and quantity of my writing should prove of great significance!). But, in fact, the process I experience is not one of choosing between these alternatives but rather of *discovering* a fait accompli: discovering where I am going. As I ruminate over the various possibilities, my mind keeps coming back to one. It is as if this one is un-dislodge-able, and thus it becomes clear that this is and has been where I want to go and am going to go. There are sociologists who would identify this as an example of “unconscious choosing.” This seems to me an empty concept (to say that one might choose without knowing on what basis or between what alternatives). But I would certainly agree that in these cases, and in many, many similar ones, my conscious mind is not doing any choosing.

I have set down the above words after having read another Kingsley Amis novel, *Girl, 20*, which is a (at times quite funny) satire of the 1960s in London. Once again I had the sense—on page 121 of my New York Review of Books reprint edition—of a paragraph rising above the rest. The two main characters are Douglas (a diligent classical-music critic) and Roy (a famous, entirely self-involved, radical chic, alcoholic conductor and violinist).<sup>5</sup> Roy is in the process of leaving his second wife and family to shack up with a teenage girl.<sup>6</sup>

The paragraph refers to a taxicab ride, for the length of which Roy is not sitting next to Douglas on the leather seat, but is perched on one of the little fold-out seats, as if he were himself closer to 15 than 60. Douglas, who is also the novel's narrator, is making the obvious arguments against what Roy is planning to do and is hardly going to be stopped from doing. Think of your wife, think of your family, think of how they are going to suffer so that you can have a few moments of fun and of denying your age and mortality—those are the basic arguments. And this is the paragraph (minus its final sentence):

I had had some trouble competing with the noise outside [the taxi], but Roy had taken in every word, his eyes never leaving my face, his head nodding in thought at irregular intervals. Something struck me about his posture on the folding seat; it was uncomfortable, almost studiedly awkward, that of a man perched on a hard chair or a stool while the man talking to him leant back against padded upholstery. That was why he had chosen the seat in the first place, to advertise his humility, to put himself physically in the position of somebody being lectured to by a superior, be seen to be paying close attention—none of it possible with him beside me. My job here, perhaps not only here, was to dish out his medicine and watch him taking it like a man. He had planned to be helped to feel how deeply he was affected by the case against what he wanted to do before going off and doing it anyway.

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<sup>5</sup> It has been proposed that Amis based his Roy loosely on New York conductor and composer Leonard (Lenny) Bernstein. The term “radical chic” was coined by journalist Tom Wolfe, in a 1970 *New York* magazine article [Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's](#). Wolfe was describing what has proved to be an enduring phenomenon: the adoption and promotion of political causes (in the Sixties these were radical ones) by celebrities, socialites, and high society. Unlike dedicated activists, those who engage in radical chic are invested in their causes above all to advance their social standing and self-images.

<sup>6</sup> A joke from a *Big Bang Theory* episode: One of the characters has reportedly gone up to Microsoft entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Gates and has said: “Maybe if you weren’t so distracted by sick children in Africa, you could’ve put a little more thought into Windows Vista.” In *Émile* Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes of philosophers who will love the Tartars to avoid loving their neighbors. In Roy’s case, if he hadn’t been so caught up in making a show of his Leftish sympathies and in pursuit of eternal youth, he might have had more time and love for the people closest to him and, in a sense, for himself. [*The Big Bang Theory*, “The Toast Derivation,” Season 4, episode 7 (February 24, 2011). See also Andrew Hacker’s [The Frenzy About High-Tech Talent](#) (*New York Review of Books*, July 9, 2015), which touches on the tremendous use Microsoft and other high-tech companies make of vulnerable, low-paid immigrant tech workers who are paid about half what “neighbors”—tech workers with American citizenship—might be able to earn. What neither Gates nor Amis’s Roy will be distracted from is how others can be exploited to meet “my” needs, be these for money, social status, sex, an inflated sense of oneself.]

This passage does not rise to the level of analysis that the paragraph from *Lucky Jim* does. It simply reminds us of how complex (and conniving) human beings can be. It reminds us, too, of the futility of a lot of the serious conversations we have and of the fantasy that there's any kind of direct connection between ethical ruminations and behavior. (An addict may be helped by being guided away from situations that lead to self-destructive behaviors; he probably cannot be helped by being reminded that drinking or drug-taking or skirt-chasing is not good for him.) That the modern human being has a super-ego that is often chattering to him or her about behavior, that seems true enough. And when our ids are feeling the wind in their sails, our chattering super-egos need to be dealt with in clever ways so that they don't get in the way of our doing what we're going to do in any case.

### (3)

This piece has now done what it was going to do, which may be summarized as: (1) noting this interesting aspect of Kingsley Amis novels; that each seems to have its one special paragraph; and (2) offering *Zeteo* readers the fruits of two of these paragraphs. (The *Zeteo* project is becoming quite simple, which hardly means easy. We would call attention to the riches of texts and sights and sounds and of being in dialogue with these phenomena. We speak, too, after Baudelaire, of finding the eternal in the passing show—"de tirer l'éternel du transitoire".<sup>7</sup> The analogy of climbing a ladder comes to mind. A ladder that goes straight up into the air, and with each *Zeteo* piece starting on the bottom rung and—courage and rewriting notwithstanding—ascending perhaps only a rung or three. As Eliot put it, "there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."<sup>8</sup>)

All this said, however, I would allow the present piece to close with some—if not cozy, still reasonably familiar and witty—half-truths. That is, I would quote from a few of *Girl, 20*'s less exceptional, but still amusing moments. These are rooted in the quite straight Douglas's refusal to embrace the self-enamored euphoria of the Sixties.<sup>9</sup> With Roy, Roy's teenage girlfriend, and Roy's twenty-something daughter, Douglas goes to a discotheque. Douglas narrates (and I note that *Girl, 20* was first published in 1971, when the phenomena described seemed quite new):

A girl clad in a piece of silk measuring at least eighteen inches from top to bottom appeared through the gloaming and gave out sheets of vellum which

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<sup>7</sup> [Le Peintre de la vie moderne](#), Section IV, « La modernité, 1863.

<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," V, [The Four Quartets](#).

<sup>9</sup> The limitation of *Girl, 20* is that Douglas is not only the straight man but seems a voice, too, for the novelist's own views of Sixties fads and attitudes. In a more ambitious novel there would have been an ironic distance between Amis and his narrator, so that we could better appreciate not only that Douglas was out of step, but that his own sacred cows were as udderless as those of the people around him. As these other people have gotten lost in Sixties enthusiasms and alienation, Douglas, in another novel, might have seemed more lost in his traditional values and seemingly more-self-willed alienation.

I took to be menus. I peered hard at mine, polished my glasses on the paper napkin provided, peered again and made out phrases . . . One day, I foresaw, eaters-out, if any, would need a more than nodding acquaintance with Braille as well as lip-reading. . . .

Half a minute later we were on a small dance floor . . . . The majority of couples were performing at rather than with each other, making rope-climbing or gunshot-dodging motions with an air of dedication, as if all this were only by way of prelude to some vaster ordeal they must ultimately share.

And then there's the passage, more savage, when the composer's wife goes to confront the new, teenage girlfriend. The wife is, of course, in a pitiful position. "I beg you, I implore you to think about it," she says to the girlfriend. "I shared Roy with his first wife for two years, and believe me it's not so bad. You could—"

One of the girlfriend's responses is to strip off all her clothes, to show that she has a more attractive, more youthful body than the become-middle-aged second wife. "You're not . . . capable of loving!" the wife yells.

"Maybe I'm not," the girlfriend says. "You could have a point there. . . . But anyway, it doesn't matter, that side of it, does it? Whatever I'm like he prefers me to you and that's why he's leaving you and going off with me, and that's all there is to it. He wants to and I want to, so that's what we'll do."

One of the more-enduring Sixties' values. (Indeed we hardly needed any Sixties to arrive at this ethical jumping-off point.)

## Image

*Swingeing London 67 (f)*, painting, 1968-69, by British artist Richard Hamilton. In the collection of the Tate in London. Hamilton based this work on a photograph, appropriated from a newspaper, showing Mick Jagger handcuffed to the art dealer Robert Fraser. The photograph appeared following their appearance in court on drugs charges.