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The Troubles of an Aging Writer in Kingsley Amis's *Ending Up*

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Kingsley Amis began writing the black comedy *Ending Up* in the early 1970s when he was living with his second wife, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard; Howard's homosexual brother, Colin; a painter and friend of the family, Sargy Mann; and his mother-in-law. The house was large and the occupants disparate in character and habits. The idea for the fictional situation emerged from a simple hypothesis: what, Amis wondered, would they all be like in twenty years? Or, more precisely, "What would it be like if we were all old and all, or some of us, handicapped to some degree?" When he told the critic Dale Salwak in 1973 about his work in progress, he stressed that it was not a gerontological study, though the book would feature five septuagenarians as the main characters: "By the end, all five are dead through a series of mishaps. [...] One thing the book isn't going to be is a serious, in-depth etc. study of old age. It's about five particular people who wouldn't be behaving as they do if they weren't old" (Amis 2001, 754). And how they would behave was badly. In his pre-novel notes, Amis catalogued forty-four ways of being annoying and distributed these attributes amongst his characters, who represented five different horrible personalities: a shit, a bore, an egotist, a fool, and a perverse shag (Amis 1973).

Over the last thirty years most critics have seen *Ending Up* as something more than a study of an elderly community that goes awry. It has been read, for example, as a commentary on the human predicament—"Amis's subject is not just old age and decay," for "Old people are old; but they are also people" (Gardner 1981, 100). It has also been called a morality play (Wilmes 1978, 185), a model for a world in which the failure to communicate results in desolation (McDermott 1989, 176), and a book in which death is a thematic substitute for love (Salwak 1992, 194). The consensus view is that the novel was extremely entertaining,¹⁾ but that on a critical level he was concerned with more than old age. When one considers his literary interests at the time, it would not be unreasonable to read it as a work of metafiction. In 1973, in addition to working on the novel, he was rereading Rudyard Kipling for a monograph he would publish two years later. Martin Green has astutely noted a similarity in the two writers' senses of humour, for Amis too "has always played jokes and surprises on the readers, and given them clues" (1984, 156). It is true that *Ending Up* contains more of this type of insinuating,

leading humour than the average Amis book. However the proximity of the novel's composition to that of the monograph suggests deeper connections and in *Rudyard Kipling* Amis's frequent protestations against the shunning of Kipling by the critical establishment are striking. Like Kipling, Amis too was concerned with Englishness and entertaining the reader, and both writers had a superior command of language. He also makes numerous criticisms of Kipling, though, and one is particularly telling. Kipling, he wrote, "developed early and he went off early" (1975, 91). This was a fate that Amis was determined to avoid, and it bothered him that his first novel, published in 1954, was generally considered his best, in spite of the fact that he went on to write over twenty other novels, several of which are far more complex and sophisticated than *Lucky Jim*.²⁾ But many readers and critics insisted that Amis's powers waned after he finished with lucky Jim Dixon and that he was incapable of writing such a funny, entertaining novel again. In a word, he had been lucky once and his luck had run out.

Ending Up is therefore best read not as a study of the attendant troubles of old age, but of the troubles particular to a writer approaching his declining years. Amis did not want to "go off" like Kipling. His opinions on what constituted good and bad writing were always both clear and uncompromising and each of the five characters in the novel represents one of the ingredients in Amis's recipe for writing a good book. The five ingredients are the appropriate use of language; memory; pleasing one's audience; balance; and romantic optimism.

The novel is short, with forty chapters compressed into 176 large type pages and it covers the last three months in the lives of five elderly people who share a house in the English countryside. It begins in October 1973 and ends just after New Year's with the deaths of all five characters within hours in a series of related accidents. Their residence, Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage, is described as "far from a bad place to end up" (12) because it would be worse, presumably, to finish one's life in a nursing home or alone. They have ended up in this communal arrangement, though, due to their mutual lack of money and friends. Adela Bastable and her brother Bernard moved to the cottage with Bernard's former army servant, Derek Shortell, or Shorty, eleven years earlier. Adela, now 73 and a lifelong spinster, runs the household; Bernard, a retired army officer, is a 75 year-old misanthrope who does nothing on account of a bad leg; and Shorty, a spry 71, runs errands and cleans up for the others. George Zeyer, at 70, is the youngest member of the group and its newest arrival. This professor emeritus in history moved in five months earlier, after a stroke left him partially paralyzed and afflicted with aphasia, a condition characterized by the inability to recall common nouns. His connection to the Bastables is through his deceased sister, Vera, who was unhappily married to Bernard. The final member of the household, Marigold Pyke, once a minor stage actress, is a 73 year-old friend of Adela's. Her husband died four years earlier, leaving her alone with little money.

The reader soon realizes that, aside from their health troubles, there is something very wrong with each of the characters. According to the author's pre-novel notes, Bernard is the designated shit. His

former brother-in-law, George, does not consider him a “proper man” since he only married Vera because a senior military officer was expected to have a wife and to cover up a scandalous homosexual affair with Shorty. A recovering alcoholic, Bernard has not had a drink in fifteen years. When the novel begins, he has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer and given three months to live. He keeps the news to himself and, though he is his usual sardonic, curmudgeonly self for two-thirds of the book, his spirits rise for a ten day period after the doctor tells him he may resume drinking. At the end of this period he gives up drink because he no longer derives pleasure from it, and descends into a pessimistic gloom. Privately Bernard asks himself why he is incapable of being nice and decides: “Because, today or yesterday or longer ago, he had stopped bothering to pretend to himself that he was different from what he had always been” (36). As his surname suggests, Bernard is a bastard, and in his dying days he devotes himself to playing malicious pranks.

The fool is Shorty who is perhaps in the best health, suffering only from incontinence and alcoholism. He and Bernard are recognizable splinters from the persona of Kingsley Amis. The author’s perceived misanthropy is well-documented, summarized by one critic in the following way: “Amis is misanthropic, hypochondriacal, mean-spirited, hypercritical, and hypocritical; and he has been a notorious philanderer. In other words, not a very nice chap. By comparison Philip Larkin was a Boy Scout” (Wright 1996, 452). Shorty offers a reminder of Amis’s appeal as an entertainer. As Clive James stated, “Amis’s mimicry is not quite in the same league with that of Peter Sellers as to accuracy, but the mind and invention behind it make it a feast for the Gods. He is a brilliantly entertaining man” (1974, 21). Unfortunately, Shorty lacks an audience and since no one else wishes to be amused by his accents, one-liners, and deliberate spoonerisms he spends most of each day talking to himself while working his way around the property, completing his chores and moving from one hidden bottle to the next. By early afternoon, he is usually falling down drunk. When the village doctor arrives at the cottage to conduct physicals, he asks Shorty how much he drinks each day and is told, “About a bottle a day,” to which the narrator helpfully adds, “There were in existence, after all, bottles that would hold the true amount” (84).

The bore is the retired historian George Zeyer. He is confined to his second-floor bedroom and only makes occasional appearances in the living room because he must be carried up and down stairs. Aphasia has rendered him a conversational challenge, as an early exchange with Bernard and Shorty reveals:

“Did you watch, you know, the thing on the switching it on last night?” asked George.

“The television. Yes, we did,” lied Bernard swiftly. “All evening.”

“In that case you missed a most fascinating programme on, ah—that gadget there.” George indicated the wireless set on a small round table to the left of his bed. “A play about one of these ... Some chaps had missed their, anyhow they all had to wait in this, er, and one of them had lost

his thing you have to show when you leave a country, at least another chap had lifted his, um, where he kept the” (24)

When his ability to access nouns unexpectedly returns, he is still a bore, for he feels compelled to catalogue everything in tedious detail in apparent compensation for the previous six months. His explanation to Bernard of the importance of laughter is typical: “A sense of humour is more precious than pearls or rubies or any number of motor-cars or luxury yachts or private aeroplanes or castles” (144). The two female characters, Adela and Marigold, are notable for stinginess and egotism respectively. Aside from her fading memory, Marigold is in good health. She has delusions about the significance of a minor acting career and employs what is described as an aging trick in hiding her inner condition—advancing senility—with her outer appearance. She is seventy-three, though she thinks she can pass for sixty and the narrator explains that this is another of her delusions: “in fact, she looked a very, very well-preserved seventy-three, with short white hair carefully blonde-rinsed, a figure still recognizably female, bright grey eyes, a lined mouth” (29). Her egotism is symbolically represented by a linguistic quirk of inventing prettified expressions. Boots become “bootle-pootles,” thanks turns into “tunk-a-lunks,” and an attractive couple in Marigold’s lexicon are called “Mr. and Mrs. Trackle-Packles.” What began as a young woman’s ploy to attract male attention has hardened into an irritating habit. Like Bernard and Shorty, Marigold and Adela are constitutional polar opposites, with the latter’s grim realism checking the former’s idealized visions of the past. Amis intended Adela to be the perverse shag who insists on telling people what they already know and not telling them what they want to know. Her tightfisted economizing is justified by the group’s limited financial resources, but it is also symptomatic of her emotional condition. She suffers from a weak heart, but even more from the realization that she will pass her entire life without ever having experienced romantic love. “She had never been kissed with passion,” we are told, “and not often with even mild and transient affection” (13).

Amis used these five characters to represent not only personal irritations, but to explore his own anxieties about maintaining his literary powers. Each character clearly represents one of the key principles in Amis’s artistic master plan. In order to continue writing at a high level, he believed that it was necessary to maintain control over language, tell new stories, and to entertain the reader while offering a balanced, hopeful perspective. After showing how these principles are represented in the cast of *Ending Up*, this paper will look briefly at how Amis’s late novels stands up to his own criteria.

First, the importance of appropriately and skilfully manipulating language is underscored by George’s nominal aphasia. He minds the loss of his mobility less than his inability to express himself. “The gift of language is a very precious thing,” George declares once his powers have returned. “After all, it’s what differentiates us from the animal kingdom.” This is the voice of Kingsley Amis,

the author of *The King's English*, a guide to the proper language use published posthumously in 1996. In this guide, Amis declared that nasty people could be divided by their speech habits into two categories: berks and wankers. Those who wish to belong to neither category must endeavour to use language properly.

Through Marigold, Amis expounds the significance of memory. Senility robs her of the illusion that she is a functioning member of society with a wide network of friends. Once she discovers that she has been sending people the same letters on consecutive days—that she is repeating herself—she stops corresponding. Being able to remember is an essential part of Marigold's social networking; for a novelist, the ability to draw on a bank of experience and knowledge is the basis for creation. It is also essential for a writer as prolific as Amis to remember what he has written so that he avoids unintentionally recycling scenes, characters, and anecdotes. In part, fear of repetition led Amis to experiment with different genres, writing ghost stories, detective novels, and science fiction. He also assumed the perspective of a woman at least twice and attempted a novel with a homosexual protagonist and narrator. There was no surer sign that a writer had “gone off” than to discover that he had told the same story. An examination of the novels Amis wrote during the last twenty years of his life, from 1975 to 1995, shows that only his final novel contains both mnemonic and linguistic errors.³⁾ In *The Biographer's Moustache*, the story of a verbose, snobbish (and long out-of-print) writer alternately assisting and hindering his biographer, Amis seemed at times to take on the characteristics of his protagonist. Instead of simply saying that a character had a bad case of gas after drinking cheap wine, the 72 year-old Amis wrote: “An internal twinge smartly followed by an eructation reminded him of the unpleasant wine he had earlier drunk and so of its provider” (1995, 23). Amis also criticized unintentional repetition—the novelist Jimmie Fane uses the word “adscititious” twice in five pages (144)—then commits the same blunder by having two different female characters use the cliché “blue moon” within a span of eight pages even though they are not even speaking with each other (114, 122). While the novel is interesting and deserving of more serious critical attention, Amis's wordiness and unintentional repetition are signs perhaps of the approach of creative senility.⁴⁾

The importance of entertaining one's audience, the third ingredient in Amis's recipe for literary success, is conveyed through Shorty, who entertains himself in lieu of possessing an audience. The others consider him a drunken buffoon and ignore his jokes. While his ability to laugh at himself is admirable—Bernard makes him believe that he has wet himself by pouring hot urine over his trousers while he is sleeping, but Shorty is hardly bothered—Amis always contended that a writer without an audience ought to find another profession. For this reason he was a virulent opponent of arts council grants.⁵⁾ The key to maintaining a readership was, as he said in a 1975 interview, to keep the reader's attention, thus he claimed, when writing, to always try to “visualize [the reader] and watch for any signs of boredom or impatience [...] flit[ing] across [his] face” (33). Even in his declining

years, Amis never completely lost his audience for had no trouble publishing and his books all made money.⁶⁾

However, the final two ingredients—balance and hope—are absent from some of his much-maligned late novels. Amis had always been careful not to tip the scales too far for or against a particular character or position. Perhaps the best example of Amis’s scrupulous attempt at maintaining balance is found in Patrick Standish, the protagonist of *Take a Girl Like You*, a 1960 novel. He is handsome, well-spoken, and amusing, but also morally corrupt and he commits one reprehensible act after another. The reader is encouraged to like him, but ends up condemning him for his actions and feeling slightly guilty for having been charmed by him. Bernard Bastable serves as a reminder of the necessity of maintaining balance. He does not have any attractive points and, though he is dying of cancer, his sickness of the soul manifests itself in attacks on others. In Amis’s more successful novels, the recurring message is that hope emerges from love. His sardonic protagonists remain open to, and optimistic, about life because of romantic love. They may chase other women, but they are essentially romantics who believe in love’s transformative powers. Amis would, however, write two novels which are seriously diminished by a lack of balance and hope—*Jake’s Thing* in 1978 about an impotent university professor, and *Stanley and the Women* in 1984⁷⁾, which focuses on a man with a vicious and insane wife. These novels were not well-received as critics perceived that both the author and his heroes, having suffered through difficult personal relationships, had given up on life. In both books contemporary England was depicted as bleak and constricting. It may have been, but Amis’s failure to please the majority of his critics and readers was clearly due to misremembering his own formula for literary success.

In conclusion, the reason Kingsley Amis did not “go off early,” like Kipling, was because he was so determined to avoid this fate, just as those who fear the physical effects of aging may embark on serious exercise regimes and follow strict diets. This may delay the aging process outwardly, but it requires discipline.⁸⁾ In *Ending Up* Amis did not consciously present the reader with his recipe for creative success. But in showing what can and will go wrong with life through five irritating septuagenarians, he created a cast of characters who represent the the absence of the most striking characteristics of Amis’s successful fiction. The monograph on Kipling encouraged him to think about literary longevity and to wonder if perhaps he too would “go off” early. What has been termed in this paper Amis’s determination to stick to his creative formula is actually an acute awareness of the needs of his audience. It is this awareness that was probably most helpful in delaying the effects of the aging process, though serious creative cracks are visible in his final novel, *The Biographer’s Moustache*.

Footnotes

- 1) The view of Amis's friend, the poet John Betjeman, is representative. He wrote to Amis on 26 June 1978 to say that *Ending Up* "is a book to make one want to cut one's throat before getting old. It is your best. Marigold is particularly awful. Do you think everyone's like that four? I suppose most of them are" (Amis 1978, Henry E. Huntington Library).
- 2) In an interview conducted shortly before his death, Amis objected to the tendency to focus on both his first novel and his well-known private life: "People say I drink a lot," protested Amis, "but I'd like to say I have written these books too" (Amis 1995, Curmudgeons, 27).
- 3) Critics were quick to pick up on these and other errors. David Sexton wrote of Amis's comedic sentences that "their fatigue is infectious" (1995, 6) while Jenny Turner concluded that "*The Biographer's Moustache* finds itself a good half century out of date in the very week of its publication" (1995, 2).
- 4) These problems might also be blamed on Amis's proof-reader. His first biographer, Eric Jacobs, revealed that he fulfilled this function for *The Biographer's Moustache*:

Kingsley asked me to read the typescript of *The Biographer's Moustache*. [...] Kingsley only wanted me to search out obvious bloomers. Had he changed the colour of someone's eyes between chapters, or perhaps their names? He was beginning to worry about his previously unimpeachable memory. I was happy to help. That's all. (2000, 5)
- 5) Amis's correspondence and essays contain numerous references to the detrimental effect of arts council grants. He maintained that artists incapable of capturing an audience ought to seek another profession. See the 24 April 1984 letter by Amis in praise of poets past who depended on sales rather than grants to survive (Amis 2001, 973).
- 6) Consider too Neil McEwan's remark that Amis is original and "has written entertaining fiction for twenty-five years without repeating himself and without losing interest in the technical side of imaginative prose" (1981,78). Karl Miller, writing after Amis's death, provides an even more convincing testimonial to Amis's staying power: "His novels were, on balance, and if anything, even better late than early. His talent held up because it helped to hold *him* up" (1998, 43).
- 7) It should be noted that even when Amis was at his creative worst, many critics grudgingly admitted that he was still an entertaining writer. In a cursory discussion of the novel *Stanley and the Women*, Blake Morrison noted: "The ideas are few, thin and objectionable. But there remains in him some power--more characterization and mimicry than plot--to entertain those who think very differently from himself" (1984, 8).
- 8) Many commentators have noted that Amis strove to be entertaining not only in literature but in person, and that this continued until his death. David Yezzi writes: "Amis was extremely fearful of losing his ability in old age to drink and laugh and be with friends" (2007, 32).

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