

## The Anti-Death League

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**Abstract:**

Kingsley Amis was the most prominent literary figure among political, cultural and social polemicists, appealing to the shifting tastes of elite and popular audiences alike. Widely remembered as a compelling person, a man of alarming appetites and energies, or as one of the funniest, cleverest or rudest men that most people had ever met, Amis enjoyed the status of a “celebrity” quoted in newspaper and periodicals, during a time when the devilish machinations of mass media had not yet given rise to the term’s present-day negative or at least pejorative connotations. His work is of vital importance not only for its influence, but for the pleasure it affords, and the breadth and depth of its achievement. As for Amis the man, he was in life as he was on the page: commanding, invigorating, sparkling, and full of esprit.

**Keywords:** ambitious novel, death, pessimism, depressive states, providential love

The *Anti-Death League* was Amis’s longest and most ambitious novel, displaying a complexity superior to the ones it follows and precedes. It was also his darkest, most demanding writing, a combination of what John Press names “the cool sardonic mocker and the serious teacher of literature” (Press, 1963: 196). Anthony Burgess has called the novel “a noble cry from the heart on behalf of human suffering” (Burgess, 1966: 474), and Bernard Bergonzi has described it as “a work of impressive seriousness which marks a crucial point in Amis’s development” (Bergonzi, 1970: 174). The novel is not entirely bereft of humour, but it is humour of a toned down type we are dealing with here, and its mood reflects broad existential concerns such as a sense of despair, an awareness of the absurd, an affirmation of the importance of love, that were only implied in the early novels. Amis himself felt he was articulating a new kind of experience in *The Anti-Death League*, describing it as “a modern gothic novel” that was “the result of realizing that one isn’t going to be young forever, and noticing more and more that there is pain and sorrow in the world” (Salwak, 1992: 143). He further explains:

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I began with thoughts about God and Death. Then there was the idea of the post-war army, with modern weapons. I thought of a sympathetic, humorous treatment of homosexuality – a character with a sense of humour. Somebody told me an anecdote about a rich nymphomaniac who lived in a castle near an officers' training establishment. ... I had the idea of a girl who had always been treated badly by men and how difficult it is for her to agree to be treated nicely by a man. (Pottersman, 1964: 143)

He also visited a mental institution where a friend of his had undergone treatment for alcoholism: a huge Victorian mansion the walls of which were covered with paintings by the inmates. "Paintings of a very disturbing order", he said. "Flowers with animals' heads, laughing lions". It took him eight months to write the novel. "While working out the day's events I'd walk from Maida Vale, where I was living at the time, to Kilburn to buy a packet of cigars. Only a quarter of an hour's walk, I'd have the whole thing clear before I got back" he explained (Salwak, 1992: 144).

The novel presents a large number of important characters: James Churchill, a 24 year old army lieutenant; Catharine Casement, the girl with whom he falls in love; Willie Ayscue, an atheistic army chaplain; Brian Leonard, an inept but dedicated security officer; Lucy Hazell, a nymphomaniac who operates a brothel; and Max Hunter, an army chaplain and unabashed homosexual. The other characters fill in lesser but relevant roles: Dr Best a maniacal psychologist; Captain Deering, military assistant to Brian Leonard and a secret spy; Colonel White, who reads the French existentialists; Jagger, a civilian counterintelligence expert; Venables, a scientist; Ross-Donaldson, the adjutant and a technician of military life, and Moti Naidu, an Indian officer in the British army. An army base in the English countryside, a nearby mental hospital, and a country estate provide the settings. The plot revolves around a secret military project called Operation Apollo, a plan by which millions of Red Chinese would be infected with a plague, and what happens when top-secret information about a deadly weapon is stolen by enemy agents.

The book opens with a very laconic, atypical description of one of the settings for the novel's action, while at the same time signalling that something is wrong in this society and conveying an overall feeling of detachment to the reader:

A girl and an older woman were walking along a metalled pathway. To their left, beyond a strip of grass, was the front of a large high building in grey stone. Reaching its corner, at which there was a pointed turret, brought them a view of a square of grass on which stood a tower like structure

supported by stone pillars. The afternoon sun was shining brightly and the space under the main part of the tower was in deep shadow.

The girl halted. "What's happening?" she asked.

"That's just the old cat," said the other. "He's spotted something under the tower there, I expect."

A small black cat, crouching quite still, faced the shadow. After a moment, a bird with tapering wings flew out, dipped towards the cat, gave two brief twitters and wheeled back to where it had come from. The girl went on watching.

"Oh, you know what that is," said the older woman. "She'll have got a nest under there, the bird, and she's trying to keep the cat from it. Trying to give him a scare, you see." (Amis, 1987: 11)

Martin Green observes that "This is a prose it seems fair to call Hemingwayesque because of its continuous suggestion that if the speaker allowed himself any expressiveness his voice would rise to a scream" (Salwak, 1992: 145).

The mood that seems to be given off by these first lines is fear – fear of an unseen and unfelt menace that announces its imminence through the hostile and harsh reality that is described. The images of the metalled pathway, the turret, the grey building, the black and deep shadow, the cat, the bright sun, all contribute to the shaping of this hostile and oppressive environment<sup>1</sup>. In the next scene, the focus of the story is shifted from the two women and the black cat to three army officers who are also heading for the hospital and encounter the women on the way there. One of them, James Churchill, is struck by the girl's eyes, which he sees as "sort of blank and frightened". At the same moment a low-flying plane passes overhead, and "Just when the girl turned and looked at the tall young man it was as if the sun went out for an instant. He flinched and drew in his breath almost with a cry. ... It was like the passing of the shadow of death" (Amis, 1987: 12). This experience is repeated when both groups leave the hospital: "Churchill felt a shock, as if the aircraft had again passed between him and the sun" (Amis, 1987: 33).

Catherine takes a part-time job at the village pub in an attempt to recover from a nervous breakdown and to lead a normal life once again. It is here that she and James Churchill eventually meet again.

"I knew you straight away."

She could not stop herself saying, "And I knew you straight away."

"I know." (Amis, 1987: 76)

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<sup>1</sup> Compare also to Franz Kafka's *Homecoming*, where a strikingly similar setting is employed to convey the impression of hostility and imminent danger.

Their encounter seems to be inevitable for both of them – predetermined, one might say – and their relationship begins almost immediately. A few days later we find them strolling through the countryside. James:

looked at her and past her together, so that girl, trees and stream formed a unity. She turned her head and looked at him. He knew for certain that in some way this moment had become inevitable ever since that other moment the afternoon he first saw her when he had looked at a patch of country similar to this one and thought of her. He felt his heart lift. This had never happened to him before, and he was surprised at how physical the sensation was. (Bradford, 2001: 21)

The episode involving the first encounters between James and Catherine was based entirely on the opening months of the relationship between Amis and Jane. The brief moment of eye contact in the grounds of the house is intended to capture the resonances of the Cheltenham Festival where Amis and Jane became aware of their mutual attraction. Their subsequent meetings, unlike those of their fictional counterparts, were planned, but fate seemed to have taken a hand when Hilly and the family disappeared without explanation and Amis found himself back in London with Jane, apparently for good.

Amis told Jane that the central relationship of the novel would be based on theirs and, he read extracts to her even asking her to name one of the characters who would become Catherine Casement, a fictionalised version of herself. Amis chose the name James Churchill. Catherine, like Jane, was first married at the age of nineteen. Both discovered that their husbands, while decent and affectionate enough, had married them because this was what men of their age and class were expected to do. Sex was more part of the established ritual than a reflection of mutual attraction. Both married again, and disappointment was replaced by distress. Catherine's second husband became a self-obsessed bully and would beat her when she refused to conform to his expectations of what a wife should be and do. Although Jane's second husband, James Douglas Henry, was not an abusive brute, his selfishness and lack of consideration for his wife eventually became unbearable to Jane. Catherine's second marriage has caused the nervous breakdown for which she is receiving treatment in the house that provides the setting for the opening episode. James becomes the man who Catherine has always been looking for, and to which she is drawn in a mysterious yet potent manner that can only be described as having to do with fate's superior design. Jane was a stronger woman and she had a much greater confidence in her own abilities than her fictional counterpart. In the early years of their relationship Amis seems to have been truly in love with Jane, something that she would later

express certainties about. The new tone of the love scenes between their fictional counterparts seem to attest to that:

“He felt the sheet on his back and the sheet under his forearms and knees and toes.”  
“I love you,” she said.  
“I love you.”  
“I know.”  
“That’s nice as “I love you” really, isn’t it? As nice a thing to say and to have someone say to you as well. Nearly as nice, anyway.”  
“Have you loved anyone before?” she asked.  
“No. Only been fond of people.”  
“I’ve loved other people. Is that all right? You don’t mind?”  
“There’s nothing about you or that you’ve ever done that I could ever mind.”  
(Amis, 1987: 124)

The positive effects of being truly in love spread out beyond the loved one and this is exemplified in the book by Churchill’s sudden urge to give poor Brian Leonard a birthday present. Churchill “jumped now to the conclusion that there must be less love than there ought to be in a world where so many people went on being nasty to and bored by one another. How many people had the good-nature to love everybody without loving somebody first?” (Amis, 1987: 170).

Death and the threat of death permeate this novel. Near the beginning, a motorcycle rider carrying dispatches dies meaninglessly in a road accident, crushed under a lorry. Corporal Guy Fawkes dies of acute meningitis. At the very end Ayscue’s faithful dog breaks free and runs into the path of a lorry whose “steering failed to respond”. James Churchill, who is struggling to come to terms with his lover’s breast cancer and the perspective of her death, puts forward an explanation which emphasizes the intrusion of fatality in this string of deadly accidents:

You’ve probably heard of these things they call lethal nodes. ... Well, we’re in a lethal node now, only it’s one that works in time instead of space. A bit of life it’s death to enter. The beginning, the edge of the node was when that motor-cycle thing happened. Fawkes was further in. This looks like being near the centre. We’ll know it’s passing over when somebody else goes somebody we know as little as we knew that dispatch-rider. That’ll be the farther edge. I know all this sounds a bit mad. I’m sorry. (Amis, 1987: 194–195)

The characters of this novel display the awareness of suffering born of experience. They are alienated from any supernatural order and tend to become more and more alienated from any normal reactions to life and their fellow human beings. After two failed marriages and several unhappy affairs Catherine realizes “there was nothing about her life that

she liked” (Amis, 1987: 22). James’s disappointing love affairs make him indifferent to emotions and life to the point where he gets through the day’s work by “detuning his heart, screening and muffling its capacities” (Amis, 1987: 36). Willie Ayscuse has lived in torment ever since his wife left him. An unfaithful husband and a possessive lover have compelled Lucy to seek sex without love: “You see”, she tells James, “I suddenly found out that this was the sort of life I liked” (Amis, 1987: 71). A desire to escape love altogether compelled Max to join the army, and in his eyes “All emotional attachments are bad. Get what there is to be got out of somebody without undue effort and then pass on to the next. It’s better for everyone that way” (Amis, 1987: 83). Even Brian Leonard confesses to Lucy that he knows nothing about people.

The main novelty of the *Anti-Death League* lies in its preoccupation with fundamental questions such as the existence of God, the malevolence of this deity and the connection of such views to religion, to death, but also to the acknowledgment of death unsupported by any positive and redeeming religious perception of it. The characters seem to favour the Christian perspective of a benevolent and all mighty God to that of a wicked trickster. This is no hope among these men since even a supposed servant of the church embraces such convictions and views of God and religion as a whole. Ayscuse declares war on Christianity as “the embodiment of the most effectively vicious lie ever told” (Amis, 1987: 266). According to his own confession he joined the Church “to be able to work against it more destructively from within” (Amis, 1987: 266). Whenever he prays it is like “talking into an empty room, into a telephone with nobody at the other end” (Amis, 1987: 303). Sometimes his religious doubts and anger lead to inaction: he refuses to administer last rites to the dying courier because, he explains, there is no reason to suppose that the boy believes in God. He refuses to comfort either Catharine or Max when they need it most because, he says, he does not want to invade their privacy – with the obvious implication that the God he represents is intrusive rather than supportive.

His perspective on religion and the Almighty obviously shapes his view on death since this is a fundamental component of any religious belief. He insists that “to believe at all deeply in the Christian God, in any sort of benevolent deity, is a disgrace to human dignity and intelligence” (Amis, 1987: 266). However, he acknowledges the usefulness of faith in the face of evil and destruction:

I realized that not wanting to see these things as they are, which most people don’t, doesn’t necessarily make them completely stupid or insensitive or not frightened of life and death. Christianity’s just the thing for people like that. A conspiracy to pretend that God moves in such a mysterious way that

asking questions about it is a waste of time and everything's all right really. I joined that conspiracy. (Amis, 1987: 267)

For Max Hunter and James Churchill, too, no assertion about God's laws or innate human dignity can withstand the practical impact of their own lives. After Guy Fawkes dies, Max writes a poem against God [To a Baby Born without Limbs], organizes the Anti-Death League, uses a nuclear rifle to demolish St Jerome's priory, and vents his sarcasm on the chaplain. These are all superficial activities, to be sure, but nevertheless a way "of voicing some sort of objection. Plus a bit of revenge thrown in", as Max puts it. Even Jagger reveals that he, too, has "got it in for God" since the death of his daughter from leukaemia a year previously. James, on the other hand, cites Max's alcoholism, the courier's death, Operation Apollo, and Catharine's cancer as his excuses for retreating from a world which has "gone bad". In his view God "invented every bad thing we can know or can imagine... Only sad or frightening things ... seemed to have the power that joy ought to have" (Amis, 1987: 36). He retires to his bed in a cataleptic state.

Bernard McCabe argues that "in a sudden shift of focus we are pushed beyond the here and now to find that the ultimate enemy is God. In *The Anti-Death League*, God gets the sort of treatment that Professor Welch gets in *Lucky Jim* ... a sustained offensive" (McCabe, 1976: 68). John Pazereskis concurs that this is a novel about "a malevolent God" (Pazereskis, 1977: 32).

Richard Bradford argues that it is "not, as many have seen it, a bizarre atheistic polemic. Its broader target is the human propensity for systematic explanation" (Bradford, 2001: 53).

For most of the protagonists of the book, faith is not an option since faith requires accepting God and life, regardless of its miseries as they are without undertaking the impossible task of trying to find a satisfactory explanation for God's actions and their often negative effects on human lives. Even if it means deluding yourself, faith is something you either accept without asking questions or you become confronted with a purposeless world one that eventually condemns you to boredom, depression and a general loss of hope.

About twenty years after *The Anti-Death League* Amis would write: "I know well enough by this time that belief does not come by looking for the answers to questions. Faith is evidently not an explanation or a discovery but a gift." Pondering what a world without religion would be like and on the effects religion has on those who chose such of perspective he concludes: "a world without religion in it would nevertheless be as sad and dreadful a place as a world without art" (Salwak, 1992: 147).

The one exception to this sad and dreadful condition is Moti Naidu. His role throughout the novel is that of a detached observer who makes penetrating comments on the people around him. Although not the author's voice, he does function as a moral presence that serves to correct the spiritual deprivation of his peers and, according to Amis; he is the one character he most admires in the novel. Moti's perception of the world is clear and confident, without the despair and terror that the other characters experienced when contemplating the development of their own lives so far and the tragic aspects of human existence. Moti disapproves of actions which come from despair and the lack of direction in life. A life without hope, and purpose, a situation after all imposed by the characters on themselves, is a coward's choice since a balance is required in order to fully appreciate life in all its complexity. This means also accepting death and resisting the temptation of condemning God for the intrusion of this inescapable fact of human existence into each individual's life. Death seems pointless and unfair and when confronted with it people normally react by attacking God or faith for having to deal with this situation which is after all a fundamental component of every living thing. Against actions born out of despair and selfishness, Moti urges his listeners to embrace the ideals of responsibility, common sense and simple decency:

There are no bad things in the world. ... Even what might seem to us most horrible can be rendered endurable by wisdom. (Amis, 1987: 268)

If you make God responsible for situations, you're not responsible for how you should behave in them. But if you love even one other person you must be responsible for this. (Amis, 1987: 86)

I dislike hearing James's romantic sentiments trampled underfoot in this manner. It's right and proper that a young man should hold these views and be respectful towards womankind and so on. (Amis, 1987: 83)

Death's nobody's enemy. Your enemy's the same as everybody else's. Your enemy is fear, plus ill feelings, bad feelings of all descriptions. Such as selfishness, and not wanting to be deprived of what comforts you, and greed, and arrogance, and above all belief in your own uniqueness and your own importance. All these bad feelings come from considering yourself first (Amis, 1987: 268).

Moti embodies to a great extent a sort of wisdom and balanced attitude towards life and death discernable in eastern religious and philosophical thought and in this sense the indication that he is a Buddhist is neither coincidental nor devoid of importance for understanding the character and his relationship with the other characters. While the others present a nihilistic, specifically western



view of the world, one in which the world seems devoid of meaning, purpose, Moti serves the purpose of balancing this perspective and counteracting it with the specifically eastern spirituality and respect for the workings of this world and the intrinsic meaning of life and death. Death is not only unavoidable and serves a purpose; it is also necessary and should be accepted as the inseparable conclusion to life.

Although his point of view is not necessarily religious but compatible with religion, Moti provides a counterbalance to the pessimistic views most clearly propounded by James, a character who seems consciously intended by Amis as a contrast to Moti. He is the one character who seems to be fully satisfied with life and who presents no dysfunctional symptoms in his relationship with his peers. Except for Catherine, he is the most sensitive and thoughtful person in the book, one who considers not just himself but all those he meets.

Despite the characters' pessimism and the occurrence of deadly accidents throughout the novel, the tone of the *Anti-Death League* is far from prevailingly negative. Amis is always on the lookout for the intrusion of comic elements into the sad and oppressive world he has created. Although death is felt and experienced by his characters, the comic dimension of any situation is still present although in a much more discreet manner than in his earlier novels. Perhaps what Amis is trying to do is to make us remember that there is a relationship between tragedy and comedy: "When people are dying, you can't really grin and be wildly amused but there are bound to be some funny things in it" (Salwak, 1992: 149).

Brian Leonard is basically a comical character and there are plenty of scenes in which he is involved and which should produce laughter, often at Brian's expense. Amis wrote that "Brian is my favourite character in the book because of his naiveté. He is a chivalrous fool" (Salwak, 1992: 149). He is the camp's intelligence officer and primarily his job is to catch presumed spies. He is foolish and overly trusting of the wrong people. His psychological approach to counter-espionage, along with his vanity, requires that he continuously reveals what his mission is, rather than hiding it. Ironically his incompetence is the main reason his superiors chose him for this job. In the end he learns that he has been used by British intelligence and that instead of being the pursuer of the spies, he was in one sense the bait and in another sense, the unwilling collaborator. In the novel Leonard is set against the odious doctor Best. The clash between these two characters provides comedy very similar to the one in *Lucky Jim*.

Dr. Best is a psychiatrist at a nearby hospital who has treated both Max Hunter for alcoholism and Catherine Casement for madness. He believes that the troubles perceived by people are not real and his view

on the human psyche is a reductionist one. According to him Max Hunter's problem is that he is a repressed homosexual even though his sexual orientation is known to everyone and is openly acknowledged, and as for Catherine Casement, her real problem is that she is a lesbian. At one point he almost rapes Lucy Hazell, and then assigns her discomfort to her own sexual shortcomings. The doctor's cruelty and total lack of ethics both as a man and as a psychiatrist are emphasized by his medical practices that instead of seeking to alleviate the patient of his suffering and trying to cure him, accelerate his mental disintegration:

That was done by one of our paranoiacs, as occupational therapy originally.

It worked very well from that point of view, in the sense that as soon as he'd finished it his personality suffered rapid and complete disintegration. We couldn't allow him anywhere near a chisel now. ... Long before the human mind became an object of scientific study it was recognized that abnormal mental states were highly communicable, not to say contagious, and I've often admired the instinctive good sense of those early practitioners who, without any body of theory to assist them, knew empirically that, by throwing together raving lunatics and those who were merely disturbed – as in Bedlam and other such mad-houses – they were encouraging the latter type of patient to make his psychic shift and bring the real nature of his illness into the open. (Amis, 1987: 153)

Best is one of the worst characters in Amis's fiction, the first of his portraits of dangerous and abusive psychiatrists, a fundamentally amoral character who is limited in intellect and has no real consideration for his fellow human beings. Instead of using his knowledge and the authority emanating from his chosen profession to do good and significantly change the lives of those who are his patients for the better, he uses his power for abuse and destruction. James Churchill calls him "probably about as bad as a man can get" (Amis, 1987: 228). He is eventually identified as the Chinese spy, beaten up and arrested, even though, he is in fact innocent.

Some interesting parallels can be drawn between the evil doctor and the clumsy Brian Leonard. Both of them exhibit an acute lack of real insight when it comes to other people and the exertion of their own professions. Almost invariably Best's patients are diagnosed to be latent homosexuals even when they are obviously openly gay and this automatism of thought leads us to the conclusion that the doctor is intellectually limited on the one hand, and on the other hand manifests a deep rooted tendency to ridicule and debase his patients. For his part, Brian is suspicious of everybody, except the real spy, for whom he provides easy access to his secret papers. He relies as blindly on the

jargon-filled technical manuals of phylactology as Best upon his psychiatric journals.

The main stylistic innovation in the novel, and a clear departure from Amis's previous work, is the dynamics between horror and laughter, and the way each is used to emphasize the other by contrast but also by a necessary cohabitation. Sometimes disturbing scenes are alleviated by the portrayal of random and predominantly cheerful activities. The discussions regarding death, evil, and insanity in the first three scenes are followed by the humorous scene of Brian dressing and preparing for his day's routine. During the testing of an atomic rifle, news of Catharine's malignancy and of Brian's exasperating search for a spy is counter pointed by doctor Best's comic hide-and-seek game and by Ross-Donaldson's game of piquet while drinking champagne. A light-hearted moment with Max in the hospital is followed by a depressing scene between doctor Best and Catherine.

Despite its overall gloomy and depressing atmosphere the novel ends on a lighter tone and several positive events provide some basis for hope. James does not despair and dies and Catherine's cancer is curable. The evil Dr. Best is defeated. Brian loses his job, but he wins the love of Lucy, thus making up for all the humiliation he experienced earlier in the novel. The clergyman without faith, no longer thinks of prayer as a telephone call to nowhere, and during a visit to Lucy's library, he has the good fortune to find the lost score of an eighteenth-century English composer named Thomas Roughhead. Willie assembles a trio and prepares to give the first performance of the piece 150 years after its composition. And the fearful plan called Operation Apollo by which millions would be infected with a disease combining the contagiousness of pneumonic plague with the agonies of rabies is a hoax as well. Although the complex issues related to God, religion, death and morality are not solved; Amis nevertheless concludes his novel with the resurrection of hope and optimism in the troubled lives of his protagonists.

*The Anti-Death League* is one of Amis's most controversial novels. Over the years since its publication it has been variously denounced as "trashy", philosophically soft, "querulous and shrill", so featureless as to merit only a "resounding yawn". However in the majority of reviews it has also been defended as a successful work: balanced, profound, thought-provoking. Martin Green calls the book "important in Amis's career" because of the "major themes" it tackles:

Those themes can be defined as anger at death and suffering; rebellion against God and against any scheme of ideas which offers to explain the universe and its moral economy; and feeling for the beauty and pathos of those

structures in which men huddle together to create the order and kindness they fail to find outside – notably the army and the church. (Salwak, 1992: 152)

James Giding, on the other hand, argues that:

The novel lacks Amis's usual sense of unity and deft skill. At times, in the depiction of the love scenes, the novel is simply sentimental. At other times, it becomes just a defence of the establishment as the surest way to handle the complexities and mysteries of death. What sense of violence is left over, not assimilated into the perspective of the novel, spins out into characteristic farce at the end of the novel. (Salwak, 1992: 152)

The serious themes that Amis treats in his novel represent a decisive step forward in his career as a writer but also mirror a profound crisis Amis was going through at that time, a crisis born out of change. He changed his relationship to Hilly with the one to Jane. Although the tender, almost providential love between Jim and Catherine is a homage to what he was experiencing in those initial moments with Jane, the characters' pessimism, their lack of direction and their nihilistic attitude towards life and God, as opposed to Moti's balanced views and his optimism, reflect Amis's own contradictory emotional and mental states at that point. The depressive states, accompanied by a tendency towards the suppression of vitality (brought about by a fundamental and irreversible change in his life) are eventually counterbalanced by a celebration of existence and of optimism, fuelled by his love for Jane.

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