

Kingsley Amis and the Movement Poetry¹

Marwa Bilal

Al-Ma'moon University College, Department of English, Baghdad, Iraq

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ABSTRACT

The Movement literary movement is known for how it caused so many debates concerning its existence in the 1950s. This is due to the fact that the poetry of this movement is known as a break from the old traditions of poetry and a step toward the Post-Modern themes and techniques. The subject matter of this literary movement is human experience, which makes its poetry more understandable by the majority of people, unlike the difficult language that marked the poetry of the other schools that came before. Thus, it is fair to say that the poetry of the Movement literary movement tackles the socio-cultural matters that dealt with the mass that the post-modern societies faced back then during the 1950s.

Keywords: *The Movement; Kingsley Amis; ordinariness; sarcastic attacks*

KINGSLEY AMIS: BIOGRAPHY AND CAREER

Sir Kingsley William Amis (1922-1995) was an English poet, novelist and teacher. He was regarded as an anti-authority revolutionary to the extent that he was referred to as one of the "angry young men" (Laskowski 83). His financial struggle implanted in him a desire to create a future for himself that no one thought it is possible for him to ever have (4).

Amis attended several schools of grammar, through which he discovered his love for literature and also published his first literary work under the title "The Sacred Rhino of Uganda," which was a fictional work about an adventure that took place within the English Empire (ibid). He then pursued his educational path as a member of St. John's College, Oxford, where he met Philip Larkin, with whom he shared "a love of jazz, a sense of humor, a devotion to the mystery novels of John Dickson Carr" (5). During 1947, Amis's path as a poet started with the publication of his first book of poetry that is entitled *Bright November*, but it did not take the fame he thought it would (44). Amis also published several novels, three collections of poetry, numbers of short stories and worked also as a critic of literary works.

Although he found fame as a novelist, Amis did not stop writing poetry and he joined, with his friend Philip Larkin, a poetic group that is called The Movement, through which he published his poetic collections.

THE MOVEMENT SCHOOL

The existence of the literary schools helps in dividing the literary periods into more classified and controllable units. However, the Movement school, which is known for the controversies that come along with its emergence in the 1950s, appeared more as a trend during the post-war period in England (James 170).

The poets of this school, mostly Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, intend to put themselves at distance with the poetry of the Modern age, which was known for its complex language and themes. The poets of this school, instead, aim to bridge the gap between the poet and the reader that has been widened due to the above-mentioned reason. Thus, one could say that the poets of this school revolt against both the obscurity of the poetry of the Modern age and the

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passionate, romantic attitude of a poet like Dylan Thomas. They aim at being closer to the reader by tackling the experiences of the common life (171).

KINGSLEY AMIS AND THE MOVEMENT POETRY

It is worth mentioning that while most of the Movement poets quit their link with the school, Amis remained as a Movement poet throughout his poetic career. This does not mean that he lacks the development that the other poets were seeking by quitting their association with the school and started pursuing other paths. Instead, Amis developed himself as a poet within the same school by refining its moods and techniques. As a result, "he is the chief practitioner of that new provincialism in English poetry" (Tomlinson 208).

Amis claimed that "... nobody wants any more poems on the grandeur themes for a few years, but at the same time nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or paintings or novelists or art galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems. At least I hope nobody wants them" (Enright 17). This leads a critic like Patricia Ball to refer to Amis's way of writing poetry as "to speak of things as they are- especially the ugly and the horrible" (Moseley 50).

Amis's technique of writing poetry revolves around the ordinariness. This does not mean that his subject matters are shallow, but he tackles the serious matters in a light way. By doing this, Amis tries to befriend the reader so that the later can understand his verse in an easy way. Accordingly, it could be said that Amis did not ignore the status quo of the 1950s, but he chose to deal with it in a way that the reader would not find it difficult to understand what is happening through his verse. The light way that Amis follows in writing his poetry is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "requiring little mental effort; amusing, entertaining." (James 178). This is found clearly in his poem "Radar," which is included in his first collection of poems, *Bright November*. Throughout this poem, Amis appears to praise the inventors of the radar, but at the same time it tackles in a serious way how this invention could make the enemies suffer (Bradley 28):

On the enemy side stood aeries like the bereaved

Who mask their essence with respectable sound;

And Kolster and Dunmore heard their interference,

But it was dismissed for them as a stray effect (Gardner 115).

Love, which is one of the prominent themes in Romantic poetry, is tackled in Amis's poem "Bread and Breakfast," through which he deals with how the reality of love, which is supposed to be ideal and real, is now changed since people start using it as a way to fulfil their sexual needs:

But love, once broken off, builds a response

In the final turning pause that sees nothing

Is left, and grieves though nothing happened here (Álvarez 19).

Yet, Amis's use of love as a prominent theme in his "Bread and Breakfast" does not negate the idea that he stood in another poem against Shelly, one of the prominent figures of Romantic poetry. This is shown in his poem "Ode to the East-North-East by East Wind," which seems as a mockery of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." Unlike the pessimistic tone of Shelley's poem, Amis's poem begins in an ironic tone:

We know, of course, you blow the wind mills round,

And that is a splendid thing to do;

Sometimes you pump up water from the ground;

Why, darling, that's just fine of you (Amis 54).

Thus, it is fair to say that this poem is a criticism of Romanticism and its followers. Amis once claimed that "the virtue ... of the anti-romantic view of life" is that "it expresses itself in ways which appeal to humor as well as reason" (Amis 832).

Another poem is based on criticism, which is found in his collection *Collected Poems*, and it comes under the title “Beowulf.” Throughout this poem, Amis criticizes the works that are based on superheroes. Beowulf is the protagonist of the poem and who appears to lose all kind of pleasure in life because he is interested in heroic ideals:

Someone has told us-this man was a hero
Must we then reproduce his paradigms,
Trace out his rambling regress to his forebears (Álvarez 85).

Despite of the fact that most of Amis’s poems in his *Bright November* are imitative; however, his style and form are too obvious to the reader. He describes his early works as “full of energy and also full of vulgarity, crudity and incompleteness. And later works are more carefully finished, and in that sense better literary products. But ... there is often a freshness that is missing in the later works. For every gain there is a loss. I think it events out in that way” (Plimpton 182). This is shown through the difference between “Radar” that belongs to *Bright November*, which is his first collection, and “Beowulf” that belongs to his *Collected Poems*, which is one of his latest collections of poetry.

Amis continues his mocking attacks of the Romantic view in his two volumes *A Case of Samples* and *A Frame of Mind*. For instance, he has a whole poem in his *A Frame of Mind* that comes under the title “Against Romanticism,” which actually speaks for itself. Another poem that belongs to the same collection is under the title “Aiming at a Million,” through which he attacks the high flying of a person and the poem is concluded with:

None outgrows dying,
But height is the end of growing.
A lot is better than nothing (Amis 50).

Amis’s sarcastic attacks are continued in his poem “Lesson,” through which he tackles the vulgarity of the academic institutions, universities and schools, where students feel nothing but boredom in a place that does not encourage them to even work after finishing their lessons:

Therefore let all who teach discard their pride,
That anything is learnt except to please;
When fingers touch, or how love’s names are said,
Like any lessons, change with time and place (Amis 30).

Amis’s sarcasm is affected by ‘Cultivated philistinism,’ ‘outrageous views,’ ‘insistent lowbrowism’ and ‘anti-intellectualism,’ which always encourage him to provoke a reaction from the reader. He actually enjoys those sarcastic attacks to the extent that he confessed it once in a conversation with Harry Ritchie saying “I enjoy annoying people” (183).

It sounds clear that Amis’s style of poetry is not an allusive one. Instead, he depends on simple words and his language is not highly poetical. This is shown clearly through the usage of ordinary subject matters that is related to the daily concerns of the reader. Thus, it could be said that Amis as a poet fits the definition of the poet set by William Wordsworth as “a man speaking to men.” Amis himself has summed up his achievement as a literary figure by mentioning that “what I was doing was knocking British-anti- American and I thought, put all the old arguments into the mouth of a very unsympathetic character. I thought this was quite a good way of showing up all those British attitudes. But I must have muffled it somewhere along the line” (Amis 182).

CONCLUSION

The literary works, especially poetry, of the fifties are marked by their new moods and visions. This is shown through the appearance of the new literary movement that came under the name The Movement. One of the prominent figures of this literary movement is Kingsley Amis, whose poetry depends mostly on being close to the reader so as to make the later able to understand the subject matters easily. This is due to the fact that the poetry of the previous eras was marked by its difficult language that could not be understood by the majority of people. Accordingly, it could be shown throughout this paper that Amis depends many times on sarcastic attacks in writing his literary works. He believes in the ordinariness that could bring poetry closer to the reader unlike the sophisticated, difficult to understand poetry of the previous school that was meant mostly for the elite. Thus, it is fair to say that the poetry of this movement is a reaction against the complexity and the mysticism of the previous schools.

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