

THE COMIC ACADEMIC NOVEL

A. Monnickendam

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

It was the perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems.¹

The title referred to in this quotation belongs to an article entitled *The Economic Influence of the Development in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450-1485*, written by that most famous, but sadly ephemeral of Medievalists, James Dixon, better known to us all as "Lucky Jim". First published in 1954, Kingsley Amis' novel has come to be seen as something of an initiator of a trend: the comic academic novel. In this paper, I intend to discuss the contents and implications of *Lucky Jim* and two other comic academic novels: Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*², and Howard Jacobson's *Coming from Behind*³. We might have thought that the comic academic novel was just another example of that clichéd British characteristic: the ability to laugh at oneself: such laughter might lead on in turn to self-criticism and possible improvement. It is no coincidence that many of the exponents of the comic academic novel are, or have been, teachers. The careers of David Lodge or Malcolm Bradbury need neither introduction nor comment. Howard Jacobson informs us, in the brief biographical notes inside the covers of his books, that he taught at a polytechnic. The seemingly laconic nature of his statement does not prepare us for the bizarre world of Wrotesley Polytechnic. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether such novels just make us laugh, presumably the intention of Tom Sharpe's books, or whether, behind or beyond the laughter, there is an underlying concern for the subjects and institutions which are ridiculed. As we live in an age where governments apparently have little time and less money for the humanities, this question has undeniable pertinence.

University life has quite often been part of the staple diet of that type of fiction which deals with childhood, adolescence and whatever follows. Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*⁴, or the fiction of Evelyn Waugh serve

1.- *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis, London, Gollancz, 1954. This quotation is taken from page 14 of the Penguin edition, 1961, which will be referred to throughout.

2.- London, Secker and Warburg, 1975.

3.- London, Chatto & Windus, 1983.

4.- London, Martin Secker, 1913. Available in Penguin.

as examples. The lesson learnt from these sources is that there are two species of students blooming in the groves of academe: those who have to acquire the gentlemanly accomplishments, such as drinking, losing one's trousers, vomiting and running into debt, and others, whose origins are slightly lower down the social scale, who have actually come to study. In such novels, university life is just one of the stages of life that people have to go through. Events are inevitably remembered with heady nostalgia; memories are centred exclusively on the pranks and antics of days gone by; heterosexual encounters are so few and far between that we probably believe that "Maurice" type exchanges were more the order of the day.

What then is new about *Lucky Jim*? It still retains the idea that university life means Oxbridge. What is novel in this possible precursor of angry young men is that it changes viewpoint. Now it is the teacher who becomes the centre of attention as he looks at, or perhaps down at his students. The idea that *Lucky Jim* is innovationist because it is critical of social realities, is, I hope to illustrate, extremely difficult to uphold. Although there is no overt criticism of academic institutions in the writings of Comptom MacKenzie or Evelyn Waugh, there is certainly a feeling of disquiet, absent in Kingsley Amis.

The hypothesis that *Lucky Jim* is an anti-establishment novel is based on an interpretation of the relationship between Jim and his boss, Welch. Welch is vain; Jim comments that he loves to be addressed as "Professor". He is incompetent, yet highly successful, he has not published, but has not perished, on the contrary, he has been promoted to a position of authority and power; however, he is an awful driver. Worse than this, he is the father of two repugnant and pretentious sons. To cap it all, the large, accommodating house where cultural weekends take place was paid for by his wealthy wife. He has contributed little to life, but received plenty in exchange.

The Welch universe is an uncomfortable place for Dixon. Its habits and demands are perplexing. Even though class consciousness has a part to play, we should never forget that Jim does not know his subject well enough to teach it at university level. In the early pages of the book, Jim struggles to find ways "to secure...the prettiest girls in the class".⁵ A prospective student for Jim's special subject, Mitchie, is feared because "he knew a lot, or seemed to, which was bad".⁶ Jim is worried lest his incompetence be exposed: whether it is a question of pages or penis is open to debate.

It was David Lodge, who, in the closing chapter of *Language of Fiction*,⁷ focussed on Kingsley Amis as a writer worthy of serious attention.

5.- Penguin edition, page 28.

6.- Ibidem.

7.- Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

Lodge argues that Dixon survives by using his inner life, his fantasy and manic desire to imitate others, to compensate "for the unsatisfactory nature of his outer life".⁸ This is most evident in his relationship with Welch. While the latter rambles on, Dixon imagines himself perpetrating acts of violence upon the person of the learned professor. As Lodge explains the climax arrives when inner and outer life merge in the moments when Dixon strikes not Welch, but his obnoxious offspring. Dixon is forced to leave university. We are led to believe that his love life will be healthier, a welcome change from the neurotic advances of his fellow academic Margaret. He will also have a better job in the real world, where people can drive cars.

If we leave off our analysis here, we might come to the conclusion that *Lucky Jim* and its hero's departure for a better life are meant to be read as a forthright criticism of an anachronistic institution. People like Welch cannot drive cars because they, and the world they rule and inhabit, are behind the times. As this world cannot tolerate either intruders or any other threat, Jim is expelled. This seems to me to be an incomplete and highly unsatisfactory reading. Can we really conclude that Jim is somehow heroic, in the traditional sense? I have already pointed out that one of the reasons for Jim's discomfort is that he does not know his subject. Perhaps he is not quite an impostor, but he is something not unsimilar. Furthermore, it is revealing that the sections of the book which deal most directly with university life are to be found either near the beginning or the end of the novel; these are also the sections Lodge quotes from. What lies between these sections, that is to say the meat of the book, is a tale of blunder and farce (Jim burning the bedclothes, Jim impersonating other people over the telephone and so on) which illustrates how a grammar school boy who went to a red brick university has no place in the Oxbridge, "Merrie England" world.

We can identify Welch and his circle as members of the Merrie England world whose cultural values are clearly not shared by Jim. This is most evident when Jim is invited by Welch for one of his cultural weekends, during which he narrowly escapes being unmasked. He has assured Welch that he can read music, after a fashion, and play a musical instrument. A set of fortunate circumstances prevents the truth from being known. To avoid exposure and to escape from the horrendous singing of madrigals, Jim retires to a pub for the rest of the evening. Malcolm Bradbury proposes that the novel presents, side by side, the cultural values of two classes. Jim's alternative is summed up as consisting "of the good simple things... like girls, money, drink, and a sturdy language that is not laid upon us by our betters".⁹

8.- Page 254.

9.- See the title essay of *No, Not Bloomsbury*, London, Deutsch, 1987. It is a collection of Bradbury's critical essays.

Curiously enough, Jim's realisation that the pub is open half an hour longer than expected, giving him more much sought after drinking time, is expressed in terms which have more to do with aesthetics than alcohol:

A dreamy smile stretched his face in the darkness as he savoured again in retrospect that wonderful moment at ten o'clock. It had been like a first authentic experience of art or human goodness, a stern, rapt almost devotional experience.¹⁰

Such a reading leads inevitably to the conclusion that Jim's triumph over Bertrand, first in obtaining the job the latter so much desired, and second, in winning over the affections of Christine, illustrates how the old must give way to the new and the stale give way to the vigorous. However, there are two serious obstacles. In the comic tradition, it is fate rather than individual effort that brings about success. Christine and Jim are brought together as a result of a misunderstanding about the railway timetable. This is why Jim is so lucky, Fortune smiles on him and makes up for his clumsiness. If Jim represents new cultural values, what exactly are they? What validity do they have? It is surely preposterous to argue that solitary drinking and bar billiards are the answer to soporific singing.

It all boils down to the question of what is being made fun of and for what purpose. *Lucky Jim* laughs lightly at the eccentricities of upper-middle classes and at academic institutions but is less tolerant toward the follies of its hero precisely because the world Jim comes from is shown to be incapable of producing any valid alternatives. These "good simple things" are consequently good for Jim and his peers because they can offer nothing else or rather nothing better. Ignorance of history is accepted, or at least tolerated, in the case of Welch, because his social class is the repository of certain values; it is unacceptable in the case of Dixon because his class is seen to have no cultural values whatsoever. Welch might have difficulty in changing gear or overtaking, but he and his class remain, culturally, in the driver's seat.

My conclusion must therefore be that *Lucky Jim* reads in favour of and not against Jim's expulsion. Each and every reader of the novel is entitled to agree or disagree with this interpretation. Nevertheless, I would like to forestall some of the possible objections. Kingsley Amis' political affiliation is quite a long way to the right. This, coupled with a relentless misogyny and pessimism make his more recent novels such as *Jake's Thing* (1978), *Stanley and His Women* (1984) or *The Old Devils* (1986) occasionally unpalatable. Therefore, I could be accused of reading backwards: that is to say reading this early novel through the social and political perspective of the more contemporary Amis

10.- Page 54.

novels. I hope to have convinced some people that *Lucky Jim* is, judged without reference to the other novels, cynical and perhaps reactionary, lacking that strident antiestablishment feeling so often attributed to it.

The History Man moves us on twenty years. Oxbridge is no longer the centre of attention. Perhaps its Dons are still dedicating their time to Medieval shipbuilding techniques and it had not yet become the receptacle for worn out revolutionaries seeking the ultimate recognition. Academic life, meaningful academic life, now goes on in a modern concrete and glass university which shares many of the (architectural) features with the university of East Anglia, where Malcolm Bradbury lectures. Historical forces have determined that Jim Dixon's successors occupy positions of power, at least in fiction.

It is difficult to know how many of the allusions to *Lucky Jim* are conscious or unconscious, but the similarity of both protagonists' background is surely intentional, and the number of other similarities is quite high. Howard Kirk has taken over a position of authority that previously belonged to the inhabitants of the Welch universe. Indeed, his surname, Kirk, the Scots word for church, is an indication of the reverence, respect and fear he commands. As Howard informs the repugnantly conservative student Carmody, for all intents and purposes he is sociology, he is the ultimate authority. In *Lucky Jim* we are told very little about the hero's background. This might seem odd, as it is surely the source of Jim's inability to behave properly in the academic world. Yet, at the same time, divagation of such information would change the novel into something other than the comic and Jim Dixon would become something other than a clown. Bradbury, on the other hand, gives us a detailed account of Howard's early years as a timid student, in the second chapter of the novel, in which the alternation between humour and seriousness leans clearly towards the latter for the only time in the book, even if this will last only a few pages:

The Kirks, both of them, grew up, in a grimmer, tighter north, in respectable upper working-class cum lower middle-class backgrounds (Howard will gloss this social location for you and explain its essential ambiguity); and, when they first met each other, and married, some twelve years ago, they were very different people from the Kirks of today: a timid, withdrawn pair, on whom life had sat onerously.¹¹

This quotation illustrates Bradbury's narrative technique. We are told about the couple's past, then various details are glossed on the viewpoint of modern man, hence the parenthesis and lots of commas. It becomes clear that

11.- Arrow edition, London, 1975, page 18.

the explanations have other functions than merely informative. Howard, "the history man", has to pattern his youthful experiences. They cannot be rubbished or dismissed; they have to fit in with his deterministic views. We might also feel that Howard, like us all, often feels the need to justify episodes in his life which at some moment might embarrass him through their apparent innocence and incompatibility with his present beliefs. However, there are moments when we ask ourselves if these interpolations are always necessary. Do they not just interrupt the flow of the narrative? We know what Howard's comments would be anyway. Perhaps the answer is that we are taking the whole thing seriously and thus forgetting the basically comic nature of the book. In this particular case, if we read the second chapter too seriously we would have an altogether different novel. It would be hard to read the paragraph where Howard pokes a sausage around his dinner plate, just after discovering his wife has had an affair, in a non-comic context.

Bradbury gives us a vivid picture of university life in the seventies. To some his picture might seem just laughable and to others unbelievable. To those who studied in such a university it is a clear example of social realism. We can believe that a department can condemn the visit of an Eysenck-like academic named Mangel who has not been invited, we can believe that the more available and attractive girls can sleep their way to a good degree, we can believe that confessions and the real business of life are conducted in the university bar. What holds the book together and makes it a novel is the foregrounding of two conflicts which Kirk is at the centre of: his battle to have Carmody expelled, and his relationship with his wife, Barbara.

Let us first look at the Carmody affair. It might seem odd to us, accustomed to seeing Britain ruled by a Conservative government since 1979, to realise that in the seventies the Conservative student (that is to say someone with party political loyalties) was an uncommon sight on liberal university campuses. Between the progressive teacher and unfortunate student friction develops into warfare. Kirk arrives for a sociology seminar in which Carmody will take the lead. The subject will be "Theories of Social Change". By making Carmody late, Bradbury gives us the chance to hear what kind of an individual this oddity is: at the same time our expectations are increased. The general opinion is that he is "appalling"¹². The references to his dress and appearance, his public school background, as well as the comment that he is "preserved in some extraordinary pickle, from the nineteen-fifties or before"¹³ lead us to believe that he is as out of time and place as Dixon. George, the most royalist of the names, is a relic from the Welch universe in the wrong university in the wrong decade.

12.- Page 130.

13.- Page 131.

Carmody has spent rather a long time preparing his paper. He enters the room weighed down with books and notes. His firm anchorage in Gutenberg's invention in a post-McLuhan teaching climate is thus made conspicuous before he has opened his mouth. He is not permitted to do that until he has been forced to answer what Howard hoped would be a rhetorical question: "... are you proposing to read all that?"¹⁴ (*That* the paper George has presumably spent rather a long time preparing.) Howard's acceptance of modern views is made clear in his admonition:

I asked you to go away and read their works... and then to make a spontaneous verbal statement to this class, summing up your impressions. I didn't ask you to produce a written paper, and then sit here with your head hanging over it, presenting formalized and finished thoughts. What kind of group experience is that?¹⁵

(The *works* are those of Mill, Marx and Weber.) The students, being nice, democratic people at heart, take a vote and decide to let George go ahead. He does not get very far. Feeling victimised by Kirk, not only in class, as in this incident, but also in the marking of his written work, George appeals to the university complaints procedure, which contains a reasonable clause allowing a student to have his work re-assessed by another teacher. However, so great is the hostility between teacher and student that Howard refuses to accept this: to do so would be to put his professional judgement in doubt.

George is clearly a very unsympathetic character. The other students cannot stand him, and he makes no attempt to be sociable, to be part of any "group experience". We come to believe that the unpleasantness that George exhibits is matched and overshadowed by Kirk's ceaseless aggression. When Howard starts to attack George, the student's initial reaction is that of silence. Eventually, they come to contest Howard, because he has gone too far: one even calls him a sadist. George might always be late, might read when asked to discuss and discuss when asked to read, yet as the novel progresses, we begin to feel that Howard's belief in progressive academic methods does not concern his own affairs or students. Freedom begins outside his class. In a "group experience" a veteran teacher can easily persuade or bully students who know little of the subject in hand. There is no indication that the other students have been asked to do the reading. Their thoughts are as yet unformed, and Howard wants to form and formulate. It should escape no one's attention the ironic tone Bradbury uses when Howard talks about the impossible summer quest: to summarise the works of Mill, Marx and Weber.

14.- Ibidem.

15.- Pages 131-132.

The reader gradually learns that the believer in democratic teaching methods is at heart dictatorial, and this attitude can lead him to assure Carmody that he **is** sociology. Neither should we forget that Howard's interest in Carmody is not solely that of academic purism. Through him, Howard wishes to enter the thoughts and body of George's tutor, the sweet Miss Callendar.

Many readers begin to feel that George's claim that Howard victimises him is justified. Howard seems to be a repugnant fellow who shows little concern for his students, family or friends. This example of modern man is really little more than an egoist at heart. If the novel engages our sympathy, we surely hope that Howard will get his come-uppance. But Bradbury will not allow this to happen. Not only will Howard find a place in Miss Callendar's bed, but Carmody will be expelled from university. This situation is not resolved by direct confrontation, but by a highly unconvincing method. Carmody has taken photographs of Howard's amorous exploits, and more or less accuses Howard of letting females sleep their way to good marks. The situation is generally interpreted as blackmail, and Carmody is forced to leave the university. Howard's position is reinforced.

This has always seemed to me to be a perplexing, if not unsatisfactory way to tie up events. If we believe that there are serious issues at stake here, those concerning teaching, the realities of modern university life, the respective roles of teacher and student, the parameters of the student/teacher relationship, the viability of a liberal education, this twist in the plot is irritating. This previously unmentioned perversion of Carmody serves to tie up the loose ends of the plot, but for little else. It is as convincing as the miraculous appearance of Dame Fortune in an eighteenth-century novel. However, if Carmody has his sinister side, and Howard has his sinister side too, the book likewise ends on a strangely sinister note. The final scene is set at another of Howard's parties. The academic year has started again, and the same combination of fixtures and eccentrics are drinking or smoking themselves to happiness or oblivion. An apt scene, we might believe, to end a comic account of modern life. People like Carmody might come and go, but that great British institution, the party, must go on. Then we read:

Barbara ...has put her right arm through and down, savagely slicing it on the glass. In fact, no one hears; as always at the Kirks' parties, which are famous for their happenings, for being like a happening, there is a lot that is, indeed, happening, and all the people are fully occupied.¹⁶

Barbara, like George, is a victim of her husband's megalomania, but unlike George, she is a person who attracts rather than repels sympathy. We should

note that the emphasis on the self-willed nature of injury conveyed by the words "through...down...savagely slicing" is particularly gruesome; it is also a repeat of the opening scene when Howard's best friend, if indeed he has any, did exactly the same thing. Most people read *The History Man* as a comic novel, and either ignore, more or less, these notes of disquiet, or see them as somehow anomalous in a comic novel.

In a long interview with John Haffenden¹⁷ Malcolm Bradbury goes over many of the problems he faced when writing *The History Man*. He remarks that he initially favoured the rise of radicalism that began to make its presence felt in universities in the 1950's. In English departments, the moral quality that Leavis and Leavisites felt so necessary in literature had turned into rigid conservatism. Bradbury then goes on to explain that he still feels sympathy for certain aspects of the radical movement. We could, perhaps, as a result of this statement, speculate that the academic aims and structures of Bradbury's fictitious university are perfectly sound. I, for one, would love to be able to make second and third year classes a real "group experience"! It is Howard who exploits the situation and it is therefore he who is at fault, not the system.

Such a comfortable analysis begins to run into trouble the more one identifies Howard with a movement. It becomes difficult to separate him from his radical aims. As I have mentioned, Kirk uses Carmody as a way of getting to Miss Callendar, a "nice" person and eventually seduces her. Bradbury comments:

In a sense Howard Kirk's victory is a defeat for all those somewhat more sympathetic characters in the novel. Annie Callendar is likeable in the way Victorian fictional heroines are likeable, exactly like that, because that's where she comes from. But her values are hard to sustain in the late-twentieth-century world as Howard Kirk defines it. For me, in some sense, Howard Kirk *was* history, marrying himself to the flavour of the age far more powerfully than any of the other characters. And I think he would still be so.¹⁸

It should be clear from the tone and content of this passage that the novels has rather ambitious aims, consequently at certain moments of the interview, it seems difficult to realise that we are being informed about a comedy. Both Howard and Annie come to represent certain cultural values: Howard new ideas, and Annie, stale old liberal humanism. Bradbury is aware that he has made his victor an unpleasant individual, and insists that the seduction "is a logical outcome".¹⁹ Bradbury himself realises that Annie's capitulation will

17.- John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, London, Methuen, 1985.

18.- Pages 36-37.

19.- Page 41.

make the reader uncomfortable, but that as an author, to allow her to resist indefinitely would be untenable. The reason why such resistance is impossible is that Annie's way of life is one "she knows must be smashed."²⁰ The use of "smashed" needs comment. It suggests violence and obliteration; there will be nothing left. The image of her as a sweet, tender woman likewise reinforces the idea of violence. Inevitably, we have to come to the conclusion that Kirk will steamroll his way on. No one like Carmody or Callendar will be able to stop his progress. The fact that his female victims, that is to say Annie and his wife, are both caring and sympathetic people, features Howard himself lacks, underlines the idea that he represents what the future has in store for us. Howard's allegiance is to history, not to people.

Bradbury defines his novel as "a comi-tragedy"²¹. If a tragi-comedy is a comedy with tragic overtones, taking Shakespeare's last plays as examples, a tragi-comedy usually ends, if not necessarily happily, at least peacefully. What is a "comi-tragedy"? A tragedy with comic overtones? A tragedy that threatens to become a comedy? It is not my intention to play a game which searches for a definition, my more modest quest is just to put forward the serious nature of the novel. Could we go so far as to call it gloomy? Bradbury's comment that he himself would have preferred not to have written in Annie's capitulation leads us to the conclusion that he has himself surrendered to historical inevitability. In other words, the liberal element of the humanities, so clearly demonstrated in his own critical works, has a limited shelf-life.

I am well aware that many fans of the novel who are reading this essay will be repeating to themselves that this is a basically comic novel. Consequently, the ideas I put forward are a result of reading in too much, looking for evidence where it is not to be found. Let us notice that in the last quotation I used, Bradbury emphasises "the marriage" between Howard and history. Bradbury emphasises that this is not a ceremony that took place in such and such place at such and such a time, Bradbury finishes his sentence with the words "he would still be so". This *so* refers back to history. It implies that Howard's mixture of idealism and opportunism would allow him to carry on, and that the climate, the historical situation, the present situation, would not have altered. It will surprise no one that *The History Man* received quite critical reviews from the left. For the left, Bradbury had recognised the way universities had developed, but his decision to create such a despicable character as Howard and put him in the vanguard of the radical movement, demonstrated both Bradbury's dislike of radicalism and his firm adherence to liberal humanities. I have already shown that Bradbury was not hostile to radicalism. To what extent

20.- Page 40.

21.- Page 35.

The History Man is a tragedy or a comedy is open to question, but it is surely a novel written by a man worried by a historical process.

I should not leave this section of my enquiry without considering Barbara's fate. She seems to share many of Howard's ideas. Indeed, rather than just talk about things, she actually practices what she preaches by being actively involved in community work. As the novel progresses, we come to believe that she is not happy in her marriage: the attempt to be so overwhelmingly modern is beginning to get her down. Whether this prepares us for the novel's final scene or not is another question. Her action is undoubtedly part of the tragedy that Howard causes. Bradbury comments:

Yes, Barbara *is* in a sense the hidden central character of the whole novel. If it's a tragedy, the tragic heroine is Barbara. But the point is that her story is not fully represented until you think about it when you've put the book down -and then it's possible to discern what it might have been. I think she's very important indeed. But although she is deliberately not foregrounded, that doesn't mean that the book isn't substantially her story.²²

Whatever we might make of this paragraph, it is evidently not a model of clarity! It contains a lot of structures that lead to no conclusion. Barbara is central, but at the same time "hidden" and central only "in a sense". Then, what follows is a conditional sentence which ends in an oblique "might have been". Next, we are told that Barbara is "important", but presumably not important enough to be foregrounded. Bradbury finishes off with two double negatives in the last clause. It is surely presumptuous to try and work out what lies behind this series of perplexing statements. I believe that Bradbury himself is not sure of what he has done. Like John Fowles, an author Bradbury refers to in this interview, he has experienced a creative process in which characters escape the control of the writer and books seemingly acquire a life and dynamics of their own.

Readers of *No, Not Bloomsbury* will know that Bradbury makes great claims for the comic tradition in the English novel whose origins are to be found in the work of Fielding. One brief quotation from the book, which is in fact a quotation from Kingsley Amis, sums up why comedy is so important. It can express "a moral seriousness that could be made apparent without evangelic puffing up."²³ This view has immediate relevance to *The History Man*. Bradbury has tried to express his worries through comedy. Such a neat conclusion to this section of my essay cannot go uncontested. We should remember Bradbury's definition of his novel as a "comi-tragedy", in other

22.- Page 41.

23.- Page 210. The novel in question is *I Like It Here*.

words, things are so seriously wrong that they turn out badly²⁴. Finally, it is perhaps significant that after writing *Eating People is Wrong* and *The History Man*, Bradbury does not return to the university as a subject. His academics are shown against other backgrounds. It is not really surprising.

Coming from Behind was first published in 1983. The background material, as in the other novels, is clearly contemporary, though what makes this particular book interesting is that it describes a much larger cross-section of British life than *Lucky Jim* or *The History Man*. In the earlier novels the range of characters is quite restricted, they rarely come from outside a reduced circle of people. This is the clearest in the depiction of students and teachers, they seem to be either of one type or its opposite. This third novel is set not in a university, as its characters are well aware, but in a polytechnic. This institution is not in a pleasant seaside town, as is Howard Kirk's temple, but in a rather unpleasant place called Wrottesley, somewhere in the Midlands. What is rotten in Wrottesley? As far as Sefton Goldberg, the chief character, is concerned, just about everything. He would agree with the porter he meets on his return to Cambridge who states that "It's a shit heap".²⁵ Jacobson's creation is well aware of his Jewishness, which gives the novel a *Herzogian* tilt. Sefton is a little bit younger than Bellow's hero, but Shefton is not running away from success but from failure. He, as he defiantly declares on an application form, has not published anything, at least not in the way that curriculum compilers and readers would find acceptable:

...if I have lectured, have I not (in that fullest sense) published? if I have enlightened a few have I not contributed to the knowledge (knowledge *felt* rather than merely acquired of the many) and if I have at all times distinguished and discriminated have I not *lived* those articles which I have only by the most literal interpretation of the word writing not written?²⁶

Sefton is capable of verbal acrobatics beyond the ken of another non-publisher, Welch. Herzog wanted to get away from the pressures of life for a while. He also wanted to be out of the arms of the willing, expert and luscious Ramona, for a brief period, anyway. Sefton has had a little success in academic life and not very much with his sex life. His most stable relationship is with a woman who already has an official boyfriend. Like Herzog, Sefton is troubled about his sexuality, but this time it is a case of lack instead of surfeit.

24.- Discussed by Bradbury in a short essay entitled "Campus Fiction" in *No, Not Bloomsbury*.

25.- I will use the Black Swan 1984 edition for quotations. This one from page 200.

26.- Page 149.

What is rotten in the state of Wrottesley? First of all, we should note that the three novels I have chosen to analyse move from one representative academic establishment to another. (Dear reader, did you nearly read *down*?) We have gone from Oxbridge to a "new" university to a poly. What has really gone down, if that is the right word, is the importance of liberal studies. The sweet Miss Callendar surrendered her honour to historical (male) forces. These forces also destroyed her subject, as she knew it and taught it. Bradbury's worries about the direction university life was taking would be justified if the academic world really is as Jacobson paints it. In Wrottesley Poly, in the *centre* of England, English has disappeared. It is now part of something called "Twentieth-Century Studies". The change is more in name than in form, "to meet the Polytechnic's stringent requirements of relevant contemporaneity".²⁷ De-coupling has also taken place, and the really important part of English, EFL, has become, as Jacobson so wryly christens it: The Department of Modern Languages for Business.

Sefton's time is taken up with the writing of application forms for jobs of any sort in any place outside Wrottesley Poly. Haunted by memories of sunny Australia and bronzed female bodies. Sefton cannot accept that life, as liveable concept, can be lived out in such a wet and miserable place as the centre of England. Sefton's wanderlust set in as soon as he arrived, consequently his lodgings still have the look of temporariness: books are still tied up in bundles, his socks and suits have not been put away in drawers or cupboards: this transience has now lasted five five years. So desperate has he become that in the opening pages of the novel we see our Jewish intellectual hero applying "for the position of Head of Pastoral Care at the Church of England College of Agriculture at Bath".²⁸

While reading such a novel as this, it is easy to precipitate oneself and jump to conclusions through the understandable strategy of identifying a character with a cause or with a writer. Jacobson is well aware of situations and interpretations of this kind. At one moment, when Sefton is involved in a heated argument with the language department staff, he is reminded that their ire is directed solely against him as an individual, rather than his department. Sefton's *crime* has been to park his car in the language department's section of the car park. This invasion of territory, a metaphor for whatever we may desire, was caused by Sefton's being unable to find space in his department's allotted area. Sefton's car windscreen is covered with gummed labels reminding him of his trespassing. The ensuing argument deals with subjects like elitism in literature, its unscientific nature, then suddenly it becomes

27.- Page 37.

28.- Page 13.

personal and Goldberg is accused of being a "fucking clever cunt".²⁹ Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that there really is no room for Goldberg or literary studies in the modern carpark of the academic world and that the novel will deal with problems that affect Goldberg as an individual and liberal studies as a whole.

Goldberg's desire to leave is increased when he learns about the reorganisation of the Poly. Various departments will be rehoused, and Twentieth-Century Studies will move to a stand in the local football stadium. In answer to any objections, Sidewinder (as in missile), the polytechnic's director, ripostes:

..good teachers could teach anywhere. But that if it was to be a question of insult, the football club might well consider itself to be the aggrieved party. It did, after all, boast an international reputation, whereas the department -he begged to be corrected if he was wrong.. enjoyed a more modest fame.³⁰

Sidewinder is undoubtedly an academic who accomodates himself in the Thatcher era, whereas Twentieth-Century Studies, despite its name, lives behind the times. Furthermore, Sefton's department is the only one that can be moved:

You're the only one that will fit. All the others need equipment and laboratories. There isn't the room. You don't need anything.³¹

There is nothing to be done but accept the winds of change.

Goldberg becomes involved in the twinning of the Polytechnic with Wrottesley Rovers. Being the expert on the long novel, he is given the task of reading a novel which is highly unlike Dostoyesky, Proust or Thomas Mann. It is written by Wrottesley star Kevin Dainty, and is entitled "*Scoring*"³². When Sefton has finished reading this pulp novel he places it on his bookshelf, Dainty comes just before Dante. He has been instructed to like this novel because Sidewinder has suggested that there should be "enthusiasm" within the faculty for such literature. Dainty before Dante! That is the priority modern education demands!

29.- Page 72.

30.- Page 54.

31.- Page 143.

32.- The Collins *Cobuild English Language Dictionary* gives twenty variations for *score*. Goldberg believes that life has been unfair to him. All his friends and possible rivals have succeeded in publishing, in teaching and their love life. He has yet to score his first goal, so to speak, in any activity. Both the literal meaning from sport and the many metaphorical variations pivoting around the idea of success become a paradigm which reinforces the situation.

It should become clear that Jacobson's sweep is much broader than we have so far encountered. The comedy in the novels of Amis or Bradbury is, if we can accept the generalization, lighter. In the case of Jacobson, it is apparent, right from the outset, that the comedy in *Coming from Behind* is much more sinister. Amis uses the university as a background for a comedy about social differences. Bradbury satirises a new breed of academics while demonstrating disquiet with new historical forces, but Jacobson goes further. Not only does he comment on Amis and Bradbury within the novel, a subject I shall turn my attention to later, but tackles the basic question Bradbury did not. For Jacobson it is not just a question of who rules in a university but a question of what liberal studies or humanities are meant to do in this day and age. We are not going to find an (acceptable) answer along the lines of Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture*,³³ which endeavours to point out the importance of liberal studies as a tool to widen horizons, and, basically, to enable us to become better people. We will also see that those qualities which Leavis and his followers considered so important, moral perception and the humaneness of humanity are but two examples, have not been replaced by others, but by nothing at all. Jacobson's angst is the product of the way the humanities are treated in contemporary Britain.

Who is to blame? Who is responsible for this degradation? Jacobson's novel contains many critical accounts of contemporary life and beliefs. There are no shortage of punk or cyberpunk novels which do the same. Pete Davies' apocalyptic novel *The Last Election* (1986) turns Big Brother into Nanny and suggests that Margaret Thatcher will rule for ever. It is surely simplistic to cast (all) the blame on her. British universities have undergone severe cutbacks in funding since 1979. But Britain is a parliamentary democracy with a cabinet system rather than a presidential one. The catch-phrase "Thatcher's Britain" needs to be handled with care for a number of reasons. In the first place, it assumes that one politician's power is so immense that it dictates the state, wealth, health and ideology of a whole country. It would be interesting to know what Karl Popper would have to say on the subject. In the second place, it is an extremely vague concept. It allows everyone to find a culprit who takes on rather abstract features, as if we were talking about fate or destiny or predestination. The catch-phrase presupposes that economic structures are subservient to political ones: this is a highly naïve assumption. Finally, it assumes that few people want Thatcherism. This is not true, as election results show. The phrase should surely become "Britain's Thatcher", as her ideas are representative of many other people's.

33.- London, Secker & Warburg, 1966.

The root causes can be identified much nearer home. What was previously English studies has become split into Twentieth-Century Studies and the Department of Modern Languages for Business (I have already mentioned the argument and antagonism between Sefton and the language teachers). It should be clear from the incident in the car park that policy dictates have given EFL an importance that liberal studies might have had at one time, but will not have again in the foreseeable future. The idea of moving out is reinforced by the move to the football stadium, i.e. out of the academic compound. Sidewinder's ballistic name underlines his bellicose aggression. It is true that at first appearance the other members of Sefton's department are a rather unattractive collection of dowdy English people. Yet one, the feminist Cora Peck, will become a successful poet and television personality, and another is a jet-setting academic who spends a lot of his time abroad, meeting people of such renown as Kurt Vonnegut. This, in turn, might imply that Wrottesley is just a halfway house, which would emphasise the role of polytechnics as second class universities. This might be true, but there is a lot more to it than that. The answer lies in the figure of Sidewinder. He is a modern administrator, and we could argue that he simply carries out orders, though this novel suggests he determines their content. Jacobson believes, if I read the novel correctly, that the university community as a whole, including the governors who are civic dignitaries, sees little point in funding something of as little apparent use as Twentieth Century Studies. Furthermore, the alliances made between career appointed administrators and teachers whose work they favour, in this novel Modern Languages for Business, mean the cornering and virtual extinction of departments out of favour, Twentieth Century Studies. Policy is decided by those who no longer believe in the validity of intellectual pursuits, their only creed is economics. Twentieth Century Studies must demonstrate it can form part of the new structure. Whether the ultimate responsibility is Mrs. Thatcher's or Sidewinder's is an interesting question, but has as little possibility of resolution as anyone trying to discover whether the chicken or the egg came first. The academics who succeed are precisely those who find alternatives outside the teaching world: the more successful they are, the less time they spend teaching. Sefton's failure in life is demonstrated by the fact that he dedicates his time solely to teaching.

I have mentioned that *Coming from Behind* alludes to the other academic novels. This is most evident in its closing chapters. It would be feasible to say that *Coming from Behind* has several endings. This ultra modern tendency allows Jacobson to, amongst other things, ape the conclusion to *Lucky Jim*. Jim, we remember, fails in his attempt to deliver his Merrie England lecture with sufficient dignity. Sefton will have to deliver a funeral oration for Kevin Dainty. Whilst hang-gliding in the company of

Sidewinder, Dainty, Icarus-like, "just dropped out of the sky".³⁴ Twentieth-Century Studies are really relieved when Sefton informs them that he fell from "High enough".³⁵ Sefton as the only member of staff who is familiar with "*Scoring*", the novel, will have to pay tribute in front of a capacity crowd and the television cameras when Wrottesley play their next home game. It will be a mega event. The supporters (note the difference between the audience in *Lucky Jim* and their cultural values compared to the Wrottesly audience, in the centre of England, and their cultural values) sing the traditional fans' songs and listen to a few short speeches. When it is Sefton's turn to speak, the supporters are fed up. They have had enough of ceremonials and things that last longer than a television advert. When Sefton, wearing his Cambridge University blazer, is about to begin, he is greeted by words such as "Anyone for tennis?...Wanker...Nancy boy!...Off! Off! Off!".³⁶ The whole thing dissolves into riot. The humanities might have a voice, but no one wants to listen, no one, at least, in the world that the humanities was supposed to be twinned with. There is not any real need to comment on Jacobson's dealing with English working class behaviour, as seen through Sefton's eyes. It is much more eloquent to contrast it with Bradbury's comment on *Lucky Jim*, which I quoted from several pages back, when he talks about "the good simple things.. like girls, money, drink, and a sturdy language that is not laid upon us by our betters".³⁷

Sefton's out of date views on cultural values have left implanted in his memory an almost idyllic view of Cambridge life. In moments of despair, this is understandable. In moments of lucidity, Sefton also remembers the lack of girls, the eccentricity of the Dons, and an ingrained anti-semitism. As luck would have it, Sefton's application for a Disraeli Fellowship is accepted, so he eagerly awaits the opportunity to return.

He is shocked to find out that there are other candidates. What makes it worse is that some of them are his ex-students, and one, committee member is a woman he had made love to on the floor of his office, at the University of Woolloomoolloo, New South Wales. These reminders of the past make him aware that time is catching up on him (at the age of 35). The scenes which follow are extremely humorous. They recount the dinner at the hall, pork is served, the characteristics of the Masters, like Woolfardisworthy, pronounced Woolserly, the antics of the churchmen, how Sefton finally swallows his drink to the toast of "Church and Queen", and so on. It is familiar territory, which makes especially comic reading for those acquainted with the solemn

34.- Page 240.

35.- Idem.

36.- Page 245.

37.- See note 9.

machinations described in C. P. Snow's *The Masters*³⁸. By a series of twists and turns, Sefton will eventually get the fellowship. He is not a particularly impressive candidate, but the college does not have sufficient money to advertise again.

The other ending of the novel is not in Amis but in Bradbury territory. Jacobson will not allow Sefton to leave Wrotesley without attending an academic party. In the eighties, parties of the Kirk mould, controlled, but with a small dosis of anarchy, do not seem to be of such importance as in other decades. We are given a picture of a motley crew having a reasonably pleasant time. The satire is, again, as acute as ever. The party, as seen through the eyes of Goldberg, is just another peculiarity of a peculiar race, the English middle classes, and after all is said and done, it is just a harmless affair. A Wrotesley party can never have the importance of a Kirk party for the simple reason that teachers in a Jacobson novel do not have the importance they would in Bradbury's world. Everyone is in awe of Kirk, students, teachers and administrators. In Jacobson's world no teacher could possibly be so important: it is the administrators who strike fear into the hearts and souls of the academics.

What are we to make of the novel's conclusion(s)? The final page has a sting in its tail, which I will not reveal. We have a Jewish academic installed in Holy Christ Hall. He has eventually been able to leave the dreary Midlands town. We have come full cicle, from the expulsion of a misfit, Jim, to the arrival of another, Sefton. Jacobson allows Sefton to stay at Cambridge because it is the only place where someone of his views, his views on liberal studies, can feel safe. I emphasise the word safe, rather than happy or comfortable. The peculiar habits and views of the establishment, the Welch universe, would not permit happiness or comfort for an outsider. Goldberg, to use a non-Jewish metaphor, has retired to the academic monastery. Both Bradbury and Jacobson are aware that there are two systems of university education, Oxbridge and the rest, and it is exactly because the rest have demonstrated themselves to be unsavoury places for teachers of liberal studies, that Sefton's exit has to lead him back to Cambridge. The anachronism has become appealing.

Such an analysis must leave us with the conclusion that the anachronism is not only Oxbridge, but liberal studies in the modern age. This is the question that Bradbury veered away from but Jacobson meets head on, not only in *Coming from Behind*, but in his later novel, *Peeping Tom* (1984) and in his Australian novel *Redback* (1986). In these novels, Jacobson will analyse and mock the effects of post-structuralism and feminism on the

38.- London, Macmillan, 1951.

humanities. In this first novel, Jacobson toys with the ideas without fully developing them. It is this willingness to confront the real issues at stake in the academic world that make him such a stimulating author.

In my concluding paragraph, it is not my intention to come to a series of seminal statements about the state of the academic novel. The type of book we have been discussing should have dissuaded us from such grandiose undertakings. My reading of *Lucky Jim* will not please those people who have found it such an entertaining anti-establishment novel. I am not saying that it is not a comic novel, I just do not think that enough thought is given as to what is being laughed at. *The History Man* is many people's favourite academic novel. I hope that my emphasis on the sombre side will now add another dimension to people's reading and enjoyment of the novel. To many, Jacobson will be a new name. He is a very fine writer, with a future, luckily outside Wrotesley or Cambridge. I have not had time to pay attention to his wit, that combination of humour and intelligence, almost Swiftian in intensity, but managing to remain more humane. It is easy to say that the comic academic novel is contemporary, humorous and whatever. This is true, but rather meaningless as there have been contemporary comedies since the novel started. The appearance of comic academic novel demonstrates a deep preoccupation with cultural values, which is one reason why the campus moves from background to foreground. The crisis in British Universities and the radical changes that the Conservative government have introduced into education make such novels increasingly relevant: they really touch nerves. The irony behind the despondent academic novel is that the writer finds himself, by the mere act of writing, always on the losing side. The novelist cannot simply take refuge in the fact that he is writing fiction, he must either laugh or cry, and he laughs, knowingly.