

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 62**

Volume 62

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the  
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,  
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,  
and Other Creative Writers



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# Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series has provided readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

## Scope of the Series

*CLC* presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

The present volume of *CLC* includes Martin Amis and Thomas Pynchon, whose novels generate significant commentary and are especially popular among college students; Margaret Laurence, a major figure in Canadian literature; and John Berryman, an important post-World War II American poet whose works are represented in the recently published *Collected Poems*.

Perhaps most importantly, works that frequently appear on the syllabuses of high school and college literature courses are represented by individual entries in *CLC*. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* are examples of works of this stature appearing in *CLC*, Volume 62.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups within the United States.

## Format of the Book

Altogether there are about 500 individual excerpts in each volume—with approximately seventeen excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *CLC* supply them with vital information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations facilitate the location of the original source and provide all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author’s full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. Since *CLC* is not intended to be a



definitive biographical source, *cross-references* have been included to direct readers to these useful sources published by Gale Research: *Short Story Criticism* and *Children's Literature Review*, which provide excerpts of criticism on the works of short story writers and authors of books for young people, respectively; *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches of nearly 97,000 authors; *Something about the Author*, which contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches of writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations and detailed biographies of authors important to literary history; and *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, which offer autobiographical essays by prominent writers for adults and those of interest to young readers, respectively. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.

- A list of **principal works**, arranged chronologically and, if applicable, divided into genre categories, notes the most important works by the author.
- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- A complete **bibliographical citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book follows each excerpt.
- A **further reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors who have generated a significant amount of criticism other than the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. In some cases, it includes references to material for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

#### Other Features

- A list of **Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*** previews the authors to be researched for future volumes.
- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of the volume.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *CLC*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, and *Short Story Criticism*, with cross-references to these Gale series: *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*, and *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which they appear.
- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and

essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the title will also be printed in italics.

- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **special paperbound edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and will be published with the first volume of *CLC* issued in each calendar year. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is disposable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation.

#### **A Note to the Reader**

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

<sup>1</sup>Anne Tyler, "Manic Monologue," *The New Republic* 200 (April 17, 1989), 44-6; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), p. 325.

<sup>2</sup>Patrick Reilly, *The Literature of Guilt: From 'Gulliver' to Golding* (University of Iowa Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 206-12.

#### **Suggestions Are Welcome**

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series.

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# Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*

## To be Included in Volume 63

Christy Brown (Irish autobiographer and poet)—Crippled from birth by cerebral palsy, Brown is recognized for his celebrated autobiography *My Left Foot*, which was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film. Brown also wrote several novels, including *Down All the Days* and *A Shadow on Summer*, as well as numerous volumes of poetry.

Albert Camus (Algerian-born French novelist and essayist)—Awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957, Camus is renowned for writings that defend the dignity and decency of the individual and assert that one can transcend absurdity through purposeful actions. This entry will focus on his novels.

Tess Gallagher (American poet and short story writer)—Gallagher won acclaim for her direct yet subtle approach to family relations and the passage of time in two recent publications, *Amplitude: New and Selected Poems* and *The Lover of Horses and Other Stories*.

Shelby Hearon (American novelist and short story writer)—Described as a “female Larry McMurtry,” Hearon sets much of her fiction in Texas or surrounding locales and presents strong and colorful female protagonists.

Joseph Heller (American novelist)—Heller is a popular contemporary satirist whose provocative blend of farce and tragedy is most often applied to the absurd machinations of large bureaucracies. His entry will focus on his most famous work, *Catch-22*, an irreverent portrayal of American armed forces during World War II.

Elia Kazan—(Turkish-born American filmmaker and novelist)—An award-winning director of such films as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront*, and *A*

*Face in the Crowd*, Kazan also drew attention for several novels he wrote following his film career.

Boris Pasternak (Russian poet and novelist)—Awarded the 1958 Nobel Prize in Literature, which he was forced to decline under political pressure, Pasternak is best known for his novel *Dr. Zhivago*, an account of the Russian Revolution, but is equally respected for his complex, mystical poetry.

Upton Sinclair (American journalist and novelist)—A leading figure in the Muckraking movement, a term denoting the aggressive style of exposé journalism that flourished in the United States during the early 1900s, Sinclair aroused international furor with his best-selling novel *The Jungle*. Exposing exploitative, unsanitary, and hazardous conditions in American meat-packing plants, *The Jungle* is considered an exemplary work of social protest literature.

Gloria Steinem (American nonfiction writer and editor)—Among the most well-known leaders of the contemporary feminist movement, Steinem cofounded *Ms.* magazine and wrote essays that influenced the personal and political lives of many women. Her best-known works include the essay collection *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* and her feminist biography of Marilyn Monroe.

Tom Stoppard (English dramatist)—A leading playwright in contemporary theater, Stoppard examines moral and philosophical themes within the context of comedy. Often described as “philosophical farces,” his plays frequently draw upon Shakespeare’s works to examine modern concerns, as in his his acclaimed work *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which will be the focus of Stoppard’s entry.

## To Be Included in Volume 64

Anna Akhmatova (Russian poet and translator)—Banned from publishing in the Soviet Union virtually her entire career, Akhmatova is nonetheless considered one of the premier Russian poets of the twentieth century. This entry will feature criticism on Akhmatova from the 1980s, when much of her previously unpublished or untranslated works appeared in various English-language collections.

E. M. Cioran (Rumanian-born philosopher and essayist)—Cioran is considered a formidable successor to the nihilistic tradition of thought espoused by Friedrich Nietzsche. In his philosophical essays, Cioran employs irony and elegant, aphoristic prose to explore such themes as alienation, absurdity, history, God, and death.

Jules Feiffer (American cartoonist, playwright, and novelist)—Feiffer brings to his plays and fiction the rueful scrutiny of middle-class idealism that characterizes his widely-syndicated cartoons. In his plays, Feiffer blends farce and satire with black humor to examine the psychological and social conditions of modern life. The entry will include criticism on his most recent play, *Elliot Loves*.

Ken Kesey (American novelist and short story writer)—Kesey is considered a transitional figure linking the Beat generation of the 1950s with the counterculture movement of the 1960s. This entry will focus on his experimental novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, an important work of contemporary American literature.

Hanif Kureishi (English playwright, screenwriter, and novelist)—Kureishi gained international recognition with the screenplays *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, which examine racial and class conflict in present-day London. His first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is a semiautobiographical account of a British Pakistani coming of age in the 1960s.

Philip Larkin (English poet and critic)—Among England's most popular and respected post-World War II poets, Larkin wrote witty, self-deprecating verse addressing such topics as love, loneliness, the passage of time, and contemporary life. The entry will focus on the posthumously published *Collected Poems*, which contains his best-known verse as well as many previously unpublished works.

Peter Matthiessen (American novelist, nonfiction writer, and short story writer)—Matthiessen is a naturalist who writes with compassion and conviction about vanishing cultures, oppressed peoples, and exotic wildlife and locales. His recent works include *On the River Styx and Other Stories* and *Killing Mr. Watson*.

Vladimir Nabokov (Russian-born American novelist, poet, and essayist)—Recognized as one of the greatest literary stylists of the twentieth century, Nabokov investigated the illusory nature of reality in his fiction. By emphasizing stylistic considerations over social and political issues, Nabokov championed the primacy of wit and imagination. The entry will focus on his notorious novel *Lolita*, which satirizes American culture and values.

Tom Robbins (American novelist and short story writer)—Robbins is acclaimed for his wildly playful, metafictional novels that advocate nonconformist behavior to overcome the absurdity of existence. This entry will include criticism on his latest novel, *Skinny Legs and All*.

Tobias Wolff (American short story writer and novelist)—A prize-winning author, Wolff has garnered praise for his stark portraits of ordinary lives. Although he depicts characters of diverse ages and backgrounds, Wolff is perhaps best known for his early stories about Vietnam veterans. This entry will provide an overview of Wolff's career, including his most recent work, *This Boy's Life*.



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# Martin Amis

1949-

(Born Martin Louis Amis) English novelist, critic, short story writer, editor, scriptwriter, and nonfiction writer.

Regarded as an outstanding novelist, Amis satirizes the scabrous excesses of youth and contemporary society with an irreverent and incisive wit similar to that of his father, author Kingsley Amis. Employing fast-paced prose infused with contemporary slang and profanity, Amis portrays characters who are obsessed with sex, drugs, violence, and materialistic pursuits. Like such satirists as Jonathan Swift and Angus Wilson, with whom he has been compared, Amis is widely regarded as a moralist whose novels admonish the vices of his age. Jerome Charyn commented: "Amis is so horrified by the world he sees in the process of formation that he feels compelled to warn us all about it."

Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, concerns a young man's passage from adolescence into adulthood. The protagonist, Charles Highway, an egocentric English youth on the eve of his twentieth birthday, relates his misadventures in graphic, humorous detail. Most critics found this work skillfully written but were impressed, as John Mellors noted, "more with promise and felicities en route than with achievement." Amis's second novel, *Dead Babies*, is a black comedy about a group of deviant youths who gather at a country home for a weekend of sex, drugs, verbal abuse, and physical violence. Rejecting the political idealism widespread among youth in the 1960s, Amis's characters revel in decadent behavior.

Amis's next novel, *Success*, centers on the relationship between two cohabiting foster brothers, one aristocratic and one working-class, and their comparative degrees of social, economic, and sexual success. The upper-class brother's fall and the proletarian brother's rise have prompted critics to interpret this novel as an allegorical commentary on the decline of traditional British social order. *Other People: A Mystery Story* is an ambiguous tale in which Amis relates the dual experiences of Mary Lamb, an amnesiac, and the wayward Amy Hide, who may represent Mary's former self. Naive and disoriented, Mary wanders innocently into London in search of her previous identity only to discover anew the complexities of contemporary society.

*Money: A Suicide Note* has been praised as Amis's best work. This ambitious and complicated novel explores such topics as greed, excess, self-destruction, cultural deprivation, sex, and love. Through satire Amis exposes the incessant debaucheries of John Self, a producer of commercials who is preparing to direct his first major American film. Using metaphor, allegory, caricature, and a cast of eccentric characters in an intricately designed plot, Amis delineates the surrealistic and squalid urban existence of his comic hero. Jonathan Yardley noted that Amis "has created a central character of consummate vulgarity and irresistible charm," adding that Self "emerges



as one of the indisputably memorable, not to mention haunting, characters of postwar fiction."

*London Fields*, set in 1999 against a backdrop of impending environmental, economic, and military disaster, is a satirical novel that enlarges upon themes examined in *Money*. This work focuses on Nicola Six, an amoral, self-destructive woman whom many critics identified as the personification of the death of love. Nicola seduces two men—a repugnant petty criminal and a simple-minded, affluent family man—with the hope that one will submit to her demands to kill her. She confesses her sordid adventures to Samson Young, a terminally ill American writer who has come to London with the intention of overcoming his writer's block and finishing his murder mystery novel before he dies or, as Amis insinuates, the planet expires. In a manner common to much postmodern fiction, Amis ambiguously suggests that the characters of *London Fields* may actually be creations of Samson Young. Using what some critics deemed overwrought symbolism, Amis links Earth's physical deterioration with humanity's spiritual and moral decay.

Amis's only volume of short fiction, *Einstein's Monsters*, comprises an essay on the consequences of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation and five parables concerning

life before and after nuclear holocaust. While critics generally disputed Amis's contention that the sense of malaise prevalent in contemporary society results from nuclear weapons proliferation, they nevertheless noticed a broader, more generous emotional range in this collection. Amis has also written *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America*, a compendium of essays that address literary and cultural issues in America. Included in this collection are profiles on Saul Bellow and Gloria Steinem and articles on AIDS and evangelical Christianity.

(See also *CLC*, Vols. 4, 9, 38; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 65-68; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vols. 8, 27; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 14.)

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### NOVELS

*The Rachel Papers* 1973  
*Dead Babies* 1975  
*Success* 1978  
*Other People: A Mystery Story* 1981  
*Money: A Suicide Note* 1984  
*London Fields* 1989

### OTHER

*The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (essays) 1986  
*Einstein's Monsters* (short stories) 1987

### Richard Poirier

[The pieces collected in *The Moronic Inferno*] include mere snippets, like a note on the resurrection of *Vanity Fair*, or on William Burroughs ("most of Burroughs is trash"), or on Kurt Vonnegut. There are more extensive review-interviews of writers, such as Gore Vidal ("I cannot get through Vidal's fiction") and of film directors, such as Brian De Palma (his films "make no sense") or Steven Spielberg. There are news-story commentaries, on "The Case of Claus von Bulow" and on "The Killings in Atlanta", where Amis discovers that the Peachtree Plaza Hotel is "a billion dollar masterpiece of American efficiency, luxury, and robotic good manners". And there are predictably disapproving reports on Jerry Falwell's evangelical Right and on Hugh Hefner and his Key Clubs, which have since been banished from the Playboy empire. The best items are the sensitive and well-researched "Double Jeopardy: Making Sense of AIDS" and "Gloria Steinem and the Feminist Utopia". The book begins and ends with obsequies to Saul Bellow. "Saul Bellow", we are assured, "really is a great American writer."

The "really" is quite unnecessary since, so far as Amis's reading has taken him, all other American writers are more or less bushleagued. The book's title is from a phrase in Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (Bellow himself found it in Wyndham Lewis) and Amis's use of it, which is much broader than Bellow's, is a clue to his rather awkward, retrospective ambitions for this collection. The title encourages one to suppose that a reportorial assignment has

somehow been transformed into a cultural one, without any intervening effort at rewriting or rethinking. And yet he admits that nearly all of the pieces "were written left handed", not by choice, that is, but at the request of various editors. No wonder he himself betrays some uncertainty about the results. First we're told that he had been asked on a couple of occasions "to write a book about America"; then, that in going over his selected journalism he discovered that "I had already written a book about America"; then that he is giving us merely "a collection of peripatetic journalism", and finally, having imposed on it so portentous a title, that the title does not in fact refer to America. "The moronic inferno is not", he says, "a peculiarly American condition. It is global and perhaps eternal. It is also, of course, primarily a metaphor, a metaphor for human infamy: mass, gross, ever-distracting human infamy."

Amis is a very OK writer, but he shouldn't expect his prose to carry that kind of baggage. He tends to chug and wheeze with incremental repetitions whenever it occurs to him that he ought to be solemn. . . .

The trouble is, Amis doesn't seem to have much fun on his visits. One inferable reason is that he has yet to master a requirement of good cultural reporting: that you must learn how to enjoy a lot of things you disapprove of, and that you have to find out why some other people seem to enjoy them instinctively. There are, inevitably, figures whose delight in themselves is contagious, like Steinem, Capote and Vidal, though even in these cases Amis has to be pulled into the party, and he manages so successfully to resist the charm, energy and audacity of Norman Mailer that he is left only with personal abuse:

In the United States, provided you are Norman Mailer, it seems you can act like a maniac for forty years—and survive, prosper and multiply, and write the books. The work is what it is: sublime, ridiculous, always interesting. But the deeds—the human works—are a monotonous disgrace.

Why so heavy a hand? The fact that the "human works" conspicuously include nearly a dozen bright, healthy and happy offspring, all of them devoted to a father who remains friendly to their various mothers, is the kind of factor Amis is so determined to miss that he shouldn't have brought the matter up in the first place.

Bellow might have told him that it is always dangerous to try to be interesting when you are insufficiently engaged in a personal way with your subjects. In one of his better moments (*Salmagundi*, No 30, Summer 1975), Bellow allows that,

if I were terribly moralistic I would scold everyone about this: that people do feel that there's something wrong, unappetising, unappealing in the ordinary—that they have to do something supererogatory, make themselves appeal; that the world is very boring, that they, themselves, are very boring and that they must discover some way not to be.

While Amis the journalist cannot afford to be boring or bored, he never wants to let himself go, to risk the self-exposures of an unguarded liking for something other than the monumental. Deeply hostile to artists who willingly put themselves forward in their work, like Philip Roth, Woody Allen and Mailer, he is a sort of neo-

classicist manqué, distressed by a force of monstrosity, appetite and vulgarity which he calls "America". In Florida he boasts, "drop me down anywhere in America and I'll tell you where I am: in America"; while in the New York of Gloria Steinem he complains that "as soon as you leave New York you see how monstrously various, how humanly balkanised America really is". Nice thing about America, you can say anything you want about it, even if it's contradictory. "American novels are big all right", he tells us in the opening piece on Bellow, "but partly because America is big too", a bromide discarded long since by anyone who has bothered to ask himself why, in that case, *Middlemarch* and *Ulysses* are not small. On his visit to Palm Beach ("Never in my life have I seen such clogged, stifling luxury") he drives inland and discovers himself "immediately confronted by the booming chaos of middle America", a transition achieved less, I suspect, by driving than by typing. If wearing name tags has to be mentioned in the Ronald Reagan piece, what can be said about them? Obviously, that this is "something that Americans especially like doing", and if nothing else can be made out of the conviviality of the news-cameramen on the campaign plane, then why not propose that "their laughter, like so much American laughter, did not express high spirits but a willed raucousness". Enough, I say, of this willed raucousness! If, as he proposes in "Mr Vidal: Unpatriotic Gore", "humorless people . . . include a great many Americans" who none the less obligingly laugh a good deal, then Amis's style seems to me better suited to them than to his compatriots, with their more cagey risibility. Anyway, Americans "tend to reduce argument to a babble of interested personalities". And so it goes. Hugh Hefner's alleged confusions of money and sex, consumerism and need, is "a very American mix", while euphemisms represent "a very American dishonesty". And when evocations of America are not put to work in place of a more personally engaged attentiveness, the function is just as glibly assigned to the easily maligned Sixties: "the usual rag-bag of Sixties sophistries" or "the Sixties, that golden age of high energy and low art", though, as it happens, it was a triumphant decade in American painting (which is mentioned not at all), in fiction (notably with Pynchon, who is referred to once) and in poetry, with Lowell, Bishop and Ashbery, to name only a few who are not mentioned anywhere in the book.

I'm not suggesting that a survey is the answer; rather that Amis's rhetoric and buzzwords exist in default of a willingness to find what he might have looked for. There is instead a kind of tightness and huffiness, issuing in such phrases as "our present permissiveness about turning tragedy into entertainment"—even though that seems to some of us what much literature tries to do—in the course of making a quite misleading point about so-called "non-fiction fiction". The trouble, so he opines, is that "what is missing . . . is moral imagination, moral artistry. The facts cannot be arranged to give them moral point." . . .

Except at points in the Steinem, the AIDS, and the Vidal pieces, it is mostly impossible to find in Amis's style those local, intimate, inquisitive reactions that might complicate the settled opinions of the communities for which he writes. He would like to suppose himself exempt from the criticisms he makes of Joan Didion, and for the reason that he assumes that what he calls "literature" is on his

side, though I'm afraid he has a way to go. "Probably all writers", he remarks,

are at some point briefly under the impression that they are in the forefront of disintegration and chaos, that they are among the first to live and work after things fell apart. The continuity such an impression ignores is a literary continuity. It routinely assimilates and domesticates more pressing burdens than Miss Didion's particular share of vivid, ephemeral horrors.

This is the familiar voice of a contemporary cultural conservatism trying to enlist a literature whose inner turmoils it fails and does not want to comprehend. There is, besides, a conspicuous inability in the book to elicit such literary continuities as might have allowed Amis some better sense of the American scene and the American writers he visits. It isn't necessarily that he needs to read more, though that wouldn't hurt in the case of authors he discusses, but that he needs to discover *how* to read the complicated inflections I mentioned at the beginning. This is true especially of Bellow's novels. Their distinction resides not in what Amis calls their "High Style . . . and exalted voice appropriate to the twentieth century", a formula not only at odds with the actual experience of reading Bellow but so gaseous as to be applicable to any ambitious writer of any time. Bellow is most alive precisely in his capacity to extemporize a style in which ordinary slang, coterie usages, the vulgarities, provincialities and waywardness of speech continually work against the pontifications of characters like Mr Sammler and Herzog, and in a manner contrived to redeem them. This is the sort of responsiveness, nuance, and play that Amis hasn't made his own, not yet anyway.

Richard Poirier, "Conservative Estimates," in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4346, July 18, 1986, p. 785.

### Sven Birkerts

*The Moronic Inferno* has as its points of entry and exit a review and a profile of Bellow, which is fitting in view of the fact that Bellow is one of the very few writers we have who has tried to sustain a panoramic, eagle's-eye view of our social landscape. The other 27 items break down pretty evenly between profiles of popular, middlebrow, or overrated American writers (Capote, Roth, Mailer, Vidal, Heller, Vonnegut, Burroughs, Updike, Didion, Theroux, and Talese) and chat-pieces on various prominent—and obvious—extrusions from the collective national psyche (von Bülow, De Palma, Presley, Reagan, Falwell, Steinem, Spielberg, and Hefner). In addition, there are bits of reportage on the Atlanta killings, Palm Beach, the evangelical right, *Vanity Fair*, and, yes, AIDS.

Looking at a culture from without has certain advantages. The observer (most of these pieces were written for the English journal of that name) can command some of the anthropologist's detachment, for one thing. He also has a tonal freedom denied to the native—he can sneer, mock, and condescend to his heart's content. Amis avails himself of all three options, most liberally of the last. Any American who has traveled abroad will recognize the friendly, bemused, confidential manner. And though Amis is clever enough to point his attitudes out even as he indulges them