

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

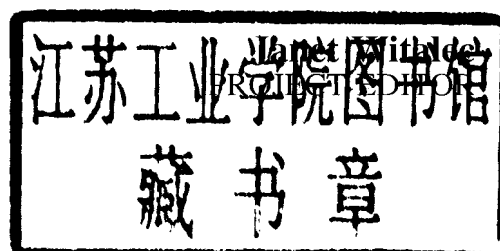
CLC

165

Volume 165

Contemporary Literary Criticism

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 provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors 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 provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *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.

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 authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews 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 general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume 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, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xv

Nicholson Baker 1957-	1
<i>American novelist, nonfiction writer, and essayist</i>	
Christopher Buckley 1952-	76
<i>American essayist, novelist, travel writer, and playwright</i>	
Alistair MacLeod 1936-	95
<i>Canadian short story writer and novelist</i>	
Monika Maron 1941-	141
<i>German novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, and journalist</i>	
Lorrie Moore 1957-	197
<i>American short story writer, novelist, children's writer, and editor</i>	
Elie Wiesel 1928-	246
<i>Romanian-born American novelist, memoirist, journalist, short story writer, essayist, nonfiction writer, children's writer, and playwright</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 355

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 445

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 455

CLC-I65 Title Index 469

Nicholson Baker

1957-

American novelist, nonfiction writer, and essayist.

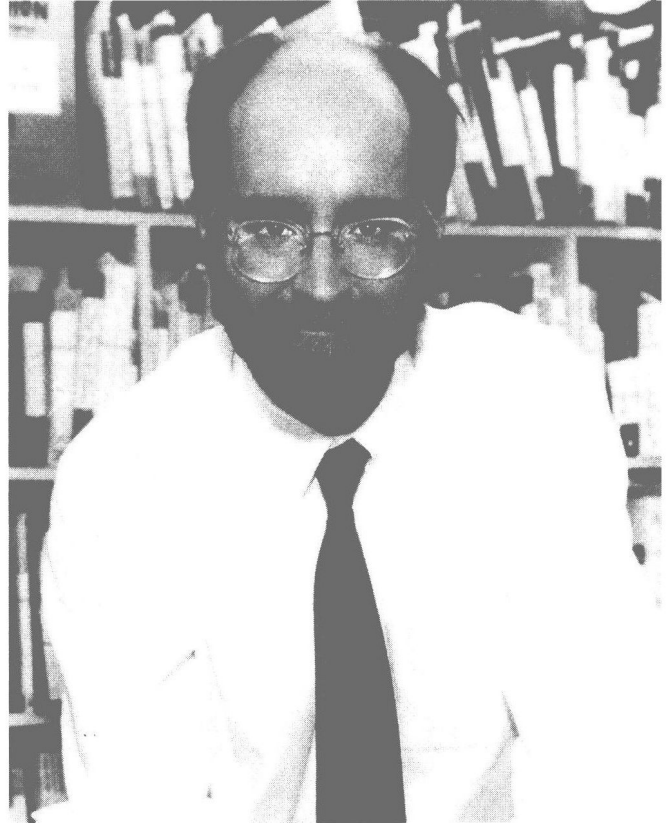
The following entry presents an overview of Baker's career through 2001. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 61.

INTRODUCTION

With the publication of his debut novel, *The Mezzanine* (1988), Baker earned critical appreciation for imbuing the minute trivialities of a modern lunch break with unseen philosophical and personal significance. In subsequent novels, including *Room Temperature* (1990), *Vox* (1992), *The Fermata* (1994), and *The Everlasting Story of Nory* (1998), Baker similarly turned his obsessive, microscopic vision to dissections of parenthood, sexual fantasy, and childhood. Baker has also published an idiosyncratic, self-deprecating homage to author John Updike, *U and I* (1991), for whom Baker harbors a special fascination. During the mid-1990s Baker generated considerable controversy through his condemnation of library policies that dictate the disposal of card catalogs and the wholesale destruction of valuable newspaper collections, as detailed in *Double Fold* (2001).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Rochester, New York, Baker displayed an early interest in mechanical inventions and the arts, a creative disposition encouraged by his parents, who met each other while attending the Parson's School of Design in New York City. Baker began playing the bassoon as a fourth-grader, and his love for music later became evident in his writing. He spent his first year of college at the prestigious Eastman School of Music, where he enrolled with the intention of becoming a composer. However, he changed his major to English and transferred to Haverford College, earning his undergraduate degree in 1980. Baker then went to work on Wall Street, first as an oil analyst, then briefly as a stockbroker. After more than a year in New York City, Baker moved to Berkeley, California, to be with Margaret Brentano, whom he married in 1985. While living in Berkeley, he attended a two-week writing seminar with Donald Barthelme at the University of California. After successfully publishing several pieces of short fiction in the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*, Baker moved his family back to the East Coast, where they settled in Boston. He worked at various temporary jobs as a technical writer and word processor, while continuing to develop his fiction



writing skills. Baker's literary experiments prompted him to consider that his peculiar approach to storytelling would be better served by abandoning traditional plot structure. This culminated in the publication of his first major work, *The Mezzanine*, in 1988. Baker continued to build his literary reputation with his novels as well as his collected essays in *The Size of Thoughts* (1996). During the 1998 Bill Clinton presidential scandal involving Monica Lewinsky, interest in Baker's novel *Vox* soared when it was revealed that Lewinsky had apparently purchased a copy of the book—which centers around a phone sex relationship—for President Clinton. In a 1994 article published in the *New Yorker*, titled "Discards," Baker admonished library administrators for destroying card catalogs, a bibliographic format that Baker views as invaluable accretions of unique, specialized knowledge. Baker has asserted that this knowledge and data is lost in the conversion to electronic databases. Baker subsequently became an ardent advocate for the preservation of deaccessioned library copies of original late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century American newspapers. In 1999 he purchased a

segment of a large newspaper collection auctioned off by the British Library, a sale that he was unable to prevent despite his public activism. He subsequently founded the American Newspaper Repository in a New Hampshire warehouse, over which he presides in an effort to save other newspapers of historical value from destruction.

MAJOR WORKS

Exhibiting an affinity for minutiae and ponderous disquisition, Baker is noted for transforming otherwise banal human activities into finely wrought descriptions of thought and serious consideration. His technique of extreme magnification and loitering contemplation is described as creating a “clogging” effect in his fiction, thus slowing narrative time to a near standstill while retraining the reader’s attention on otherwise overlooked objects and minor events, all presented through Baker’s scrupulous authorial subjectivity. *The Mezzanine*, an essentially plotless, stream-of-consciousness novel, examines in great detail the lunch-hour activities of a young office worker named Howie. His simple lunch—a hot dog, cookie, and milk—and purchase of a new pair of shoelaces are juxtaposed against his reading of a paperback edition of Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*. Baker’s digressive novel contains copious footnotes, some of which are several pages long, while following the ruminations of Howie as he contemplates a variety of everyday objects and occurrences, including how paper milk cartons replaced glass milk bottles, the miracle of perforation, and the nature of plastic straws, vending machines, paper towel dispensers, and popcorn poppers. *Room Temperature*, like *The Mezzanine*, is structured around an isolated segment of time, in this case a period of twenty minutes during which the protagonist, Mike, feeds his infant daughter her bottle. In this compressed time frame, Mike reflects upon his life, moving randomly through his childhood, college days, and tender moments with his wife and their new baby. Baker’s next book, *U and I*, is a genre-defying departure from his previous novels. Ostensibly a paean to John Updike, whom Baker considers his literary mentor though the two have hardly met, *U and I* chronicles Baker’s sincere—and somewhat pathological—admiration of Updike as well as his peevish envy of the gifted older author. In addition to celebrating Updike’s genius and inventing fantasies of meaningful interactions with the author, Baker employs a self-styled form of “memory criticism,” in which he relies on his own—often faulty—memory of Updike’s writings, rather than rereading or studying them in preparation. This method is intended to reveal the essence of the author’s influence without the distorting effects of scholarship.

Baker’s next two novels, *Vox* and *The Fermata*, are provocative forays into literary pornography. *Vox* revolves around an extended phone sex call between two single adults, Jim and Abby, who exchange highly explicit sexual fantasies. As in Baker’s earlier novels, time in *Vox* is compressed, in this case limited to the duration of an actual telephone conversation. *The Fermata*, presented as the

autobiography of a man named Arno Strine, takes as its premise the protagonist’s ability to stop time for everyone in the world except himself—the book’s title refers to the musical notation for a pause or hold. Rather than use this suspended period, which he calls the “Fold,” to steal money or possessions, Arno uses it to fondle and sexually exploit women or to write pornography and then masturbate. Though adamant that he is harmless—because he refrains from raping the women outright and because he is clean-cut, conscientious, neat, and well educated—Arno is still a chilling voyeur and stalker. Eventually he finds true love and returns to graduate school, relinquishing his supernatural power over time. In *The Size of Thoughts*, a collection of essays, Baker delves deeply into his preoccupation with triviality, including model airplane kits, nail clippers, and a recipe for a chocolate confection. The volume includes two major essays, “Discards,” Baker’s previously published exposé on the destruction of library card catalogs, and “Lumber,” a lengthy etymological study of the word “lumber.” Together, these essays reaffirm Baker’s belief that the sum of tiny details, often overlooked or ignored by most, is what makes the objects we see and use every day both relevant and meaningful. As Baker suggests, by exploring the connections that form the histories of words, manufacturing processes, or the accumulated knowledge contained in card catalogs, people build understanding and knowledge and thus honor the wisdom of the past. *The Everlasting Story of Nory* describes one year in the life of a nine-year-old girl whose family has moved from California to a small town in England. In company with Baker’s other novels, there is no actual plot but instead the work is formatted as a record of Nory’s thoughts and observations during her fourth grade year. *Double Fold* is a philippic written against the practice in libraries of destroying original documents in order to make them accessible in other ways, such as microfilm or microfiche. A major departure from Baker’s usual work, the book describes his personal and costly crusade to save as many bound, original, complete runs of major United States newspapers as possible. Unfortunately, in the name of creating space on library shelves, many have been pulped or sold to dealers who supply pages for personal birthdays, anniversaries, or other events. Baker singles out the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the British Library, and the libraries of Yale University and the University of Chicago for special criticism and traces the funding for the debacle to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford and Mellon foundations. Baker makes a number of recommendations—portions of which are now being implemented in major research libraries in the United States—and calls into question the current trend of creating digital images of print originals, suggesting that this new technology may lead to the wholesale pulping of the actual books and periodicals.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Baker’s approach to fiction, particularly in *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature*, has been critically acclaimed for its originality and linguistic virtuosity. As critics have

noted, these novels showcase Baker's trademark style: highly descriptive, focused prose; fierce attention to detail; and delight in the odd, the mundane, and discrete slices of time. However, reviewers have been sharply divided regarding the literary merit of his subsequent work. While many commentators have disapproved of *Vox* and *The Fermata* due to their perceived vulgarity, others have found them fascinating, erotic explorations of contemporary, post-AIDS sexual mores. *The Fermata* has been strongly criticized as chauvinistic and dull at best, and insidiously misogynistic at worst, even leading some reviewers to demand a reevaluation of Baker's previous work. Even more sympathetic critics have conceded that, at three hundred pages, Baker's longest work of fiction, the masturbation fantasies of *The Fermata* exceed the reader's patience and interest. Baker's literary experiment in *The Everlasting Story of Nory* has met with mixed reviews. While some found his effort to convey the inner life and experiences of a nine-year-old year girl perceptive and touching, others viewed Baker's project as ill-conceived and tiresomely sentimental. Likewise, Baker's eccentric perspective and unorthodox approach have led to uneven assessments of his essays and nonfiction works. His homage to Updike in *U and I* has been viewed as an engaging and innovative literary autobiography by some, though others have found Baker's use of Updike as a foil for himself egotistical and disingenuous. *The Size of Lumber* has been generally praised for its two major essays, despite the suggested inferiority of the collection's slighter pieces. As with his essay "Discards," Baker's attack on library policy in *Double Fold* has attracted heated debate among librarians, bibliophiles, and scholars. Though undoubtedly winning sympathy and a measure of publicity for his cause, Baker has been criticized for undermining his case by arguing polemically and ignoring the realities of historical inquiry. His fiction has been favorably compared to that of Marcel Proust, Vladimir Nabokov, Richard Powers, and Steven Millhauser.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Mezzanine* (novel) 1988
Room Temperature (novel) 1990
U and I: A True Story (nonfiction) 1991
Vox (novel) 1992
The Fermata (novel) 1994
The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber (essays) 1996
The Everlasting Story of Nory (novel) 1998
Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper (nonfiction) 2001

CRITICISM

Michael Harris (review date 1 April 1990)

SOURCE: Harris, Michael. Review of *Room Temperature*, by Nicholson Baker. *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (1 April 1990): 6.

[In the following review, Harris praises the details and intricate observations recorded in *Room Temperature*.]

Many look but few observe, as Sherlock Holmes noted to Dr. Watson, and a technical writer named Mike, the narrator of [*Room Temperature*, a] short second novel by Nicholson Baker (the first was *Mezzanine*) is definitely one of the observers. Bottle-feeding his six-month-old daughter, nicknamed "the Bug," on a fall afternoon in Quincy, Mass., in the apartment he shares with his working wife, Patty, he asserts that "with a little concentration one's whole life could be reconstructed from any single 20-minute period randomly or almost randomly selected." He then proceeds to prove it.

Without leaving his rocking chair, Mike shuttles back and forth between his past as a precocious kid and college-dorm Romeo and his present as an awed new parent. His mode of travel is the long, intricate sentence, which he views as indispensable for the "careful interpretation and weighing" of "novelties of social and technological life." His fuel consists of details so fine, and so finely observed (whether of nose-picking or model airplanes, the taste of Bic pens or the mutual sounding-out talk of newlyweds, the clucking noises the Bug makes or the shape of a spoonful of peanut butter, which leads him to imagine impishly what his wife, when pregnant, would have looked like in a wind tunnel), that they give off propulsive heat and spurt the reader along with delicious little jolts of recognition.

True, Mike's life is a sheltered one, and Baker is blatantly showing off (like a teen-ager solving quadratic equations while winning a bubble-gum-blowing contest). *Room Temperature* has a smug, *tour de force*-y quality to it. But it also includes some of the tenderest, most delicate interaction between husband and wife, adult and infant, in modern fiction, demonstrating what John Updike, no mean observer himself, meant when he wrote of artists who imitate God. "Details are the giant's fingers. He seizes the stick and strips the bark and shows, burning beneath, the moist white wood of joy."

Julian Loose (review date 19 April 1991)

SOURCE: Loose, Julian. "Odd Couple." *New Statesman and Society* 4, no. 147 (19 April 1991): 34.

[In the following review, Loose commends the comedy and complex ruminations in *U and I*, noting its examination of the rivalry between Baker and author John Updike.]

U and I, an idiosyncratic essay on John Updike (the “U” of the title), is a creepy piece of madness, and its author, Nicholson Baker, an enragingly irreverent smart-ass. If this sounds a little severe, I should explain that these comments come from *U and I* itself. To anticipate criticism is often to disarm it, as Baker knows well (“Who will sort out the self-servingness of self-effacement?”). Yet this is a peculiarly risky book, and some readers may agree with Baker’s assessment of himself as an “enthusiastic, slightly crazed, fringe, no-bullshit idiot-savant”.

For well over a decade, Baker has been obsessed with Updike. *U and I* starts as a kind of elaborate IOU, a tribute to the older author’s protean genius. Baker jokingly terms his impressionistic approach a “closed book examination”, for he draws exclusively on his existing knowledge of Updike’s work (rather less than half of an extensive output). In Baker’s short, hugely enjoyable novels, characters’ thoughts spiral out from some small-scale object (a shoelace, a baby’s bottle) to form self-portraits of unexpected complexity. In *U and I*, his ruminations begin with his feelings about Updike, and the result is an autobiography as anguished as it is amusing. Quite simply, Baker discovers in himself that decidedly non-U emotion—envy.

One awful, bitter realisation fuels *U and I*: “He writes better than I do and he is smarter than I am.” This difficult truth provokes jealous awe (“Clever bastard!”, “He’s a fucking maestro!”), pointed stylistic criticism, and some very funny confrontations, both real and imaginary.

Baker fantasises about engaging his *maitre* in literary conversation during a round of golf (although he can’t actually play). Updike appears to him in a dream as a drunk train conductor, and, back in excruciating reality, Baker button-holes the great man at a Harvard party (Updike politely advises him to keep writing).

Driven throughout by “some grinding gear of self-betrayal”, Baker plays manic court jester to Updike’s unsailable majesty. Inevitably, Baker’s anxieties over literary belatedness are less entertaining than the everyday worries of his fictional protagonists, who fret about nose-picking, using the office loo, and marital intimacy. There is also something exhausting about his insistence on showing us more of himself than we want to see—for example, his welcoming of psoriasis as one more testimony to his likeness to Updike.

But *U and I* appears less of an oddity in the context of American confessionalism, especially when set against Updike’s own autobiography, *Self-Consciousness*. Here, Updike also discloses an early “frantic ambition and insecurity”, a sense of “the self-serving corruptions of fiction”, and, strikingly, describes his own memoirs as “shabby” and “scab-picking”. Baker, elsewhere so alert to self-deception, apparently overlooks how *U and I* strives to outdo its precursor in relentless truth-dealing. In the end, though, it is hard not to warm to such candour. The tragicomedy of literary rivalry has never been expressed so nakedly, or so well.

Galen Strawson (review date 19 April 1991)

SOURCE: Strawson, Galen. “Writing under the Influence.” *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4594 (19 April 1991): 20-1.

[In the following review of *U and I*, Strawson objects to Baker’s egocentric view of literary interpretation and his erroneous assessment of John Updike.]

U is for Updike, and *U and I* records Nicholson Baker’s admiration for the man and his writing. The psychopathology of his relation to Updike is fairly remarkable, and the book raises some familiar questions about the phenomenon of literary influence. It is written in free fantasia form, and it may be an act of love. But it is also highly ambivalent, and it is astoundingly egocentric. This explains some of its insights as well as its remarkable implausibilities: both are the products of an intense narrowness in the beam of Baker’s attention.

Early on in *U and I* he announces that he has read considerably less than half of Updike’s writings, and declares his intention not to read any more until he has finished the book. He proposes a new critical genre which he calls “memory criticism”: he will respond only to what he remembers (or usually misremembers) of Updike without any refreshment. In this way, he believes, he will discover the true trace that Updike has left in him, undistorted by scholarship; for he wants “to represent as accurately as I can what I think of Updike when he comes to mind not when I summon him to mind.”

This is a very attractive project, especially since Baker has a promisingly imperfect memory (in the printed text he follows misremembered quotations with the correct version in square brackets). But he doesn’t really carry it through; the *I* engulfs the *U*. In the end, *U and I* is almost all about Baker. He has very little of interest to say about Updike, over and above a number of routine and carefully styled remarks about his adjectival resourcefulness and his part in the completion of the “sexual revolution” (Updike being the “first to take the penile sensorium under the wing of elaborate metaphorical prose”, and to bring “a serious, Proust-Nabokovian, morally sensitive, National-Book-Award-winning prose style to bear on the micromechanics of physical lovemaking”). For the rest, the book is nearly all Baker—his likes and dislikes, his treasured limitations, his microfastidiousness, his sense of his own creepiness, his amazing ambition (*naked* doesn’t convey it; it is *flayed*) and his terror of originality-impugning influences, of contagion by other people’s adjectives and images.

So Updike is not really Baker’s subject. But he is still his vehicle. Baker doesn’t really believe in (male) friendship, still less in friendship between writers. Nevertheless he likes and admires this “senior living writer”. He does so because he thinks Updike is a genius, but also because Updike is alive, male, heterosexual and a sufferer from

psoriasis—in short because he has a lot in common with Baker. Baker finds he prefers to read what Updike wrote when he was Baker's age or younger, for then he was even more like Baker than he is now, and therefore more interesting to Baker.

This is perhaps the most extraordinary thing about this book. Baker suggests that he cannot really hope to understand anyone who is not pretty much like himself (alive, male, heterosexual, etc). He insists on this constriction in his powers of sympathetic and imaginative identification, and then assumes that it is universal—rather as people assume that their experience of sexual matters is universally shared (at least by members of their own sex). It is tempting to suppose that he is influenced here by his knowledge of the philosophy of science, and of the Kuhn-Feyerabend doctrine of the radical “incommensurability” (or mutual unintelligibility) of succeeding scientific theories. For such a doctrine easily encourages a general scepticism about our capacities to understand people different from ourselves. Be that as it may, his conviction that this is our shared predicament resounds through the book.

The problem shows right at the beginning. Baker wants to write about a living writer because he thinks we can't really take dead ones seriously. We patronize them; when we write about them we reveal how “alien and childlike the shades now are to us”, however recently they have died. “Posthumously their motives become ludicrously simple . . . all their emotions wear stage makeup. . . . We can't really understand them anymore.” And, as for humour, all we can generally do is “laugh politely whenever we sense . . . that a dead person is trying to be funny”.

Perhaps Baker should sit down and laugh with some millennially defunct author like Aristophanes. But this might not work for him, because he is truly strange. Once a remark of Samuel Johnson's made him laugh out loud, and he became confused: he was sure that “Johnson had to be alive somewhere, right then, in seclusion, forgotten by reporters, in order for his words to have made so direct a connection with me.”

Why can we only understand the living? Baker says it is because the living “are always potentially thinking about and doing just what we are doing: being pulled through a touchless car wash, watching a pony chew a carrot, noticing that orange scaffolding has gone up around some prominent church”. And this makes it seem that his central point is simply that the general surroundings of the living may be very familiar to us, so that their experience is truly comprehensible to us. But in fact this is not his point. For one can find this familiarity equally in the writings of the recently dead, and they are already lost in alienation and childishness *just by being dead*. It is mere aliveness that matters to Baker, the awareness that the author is travelling through time together with Nicholson Baker, now and now and now. Only on these terms can he really understand the author, or so he says.

This looks like another bizarre manifestation of Baker's ego. For most have no sense that their understanding of a work is predicated on the continuing heartbeat of its author. Nor do they find that their understanding of the dead is restricted to the recently dead. They read Ovid or Jane Austen with an understanding grounded in a common humanity. Baker obviously has some sort of emotional intelligibility in mind when he talks about understanding, for when it comes to other sorts the author of *Genesis* seems pretty accessible; but so far as emotional understanding is concerned, many find no deep difference between John Updike and Saint Augustine—some connecting more easily with the latter than with the former.

It is true that there is a kind of Quaintness Effect that can interfere with one's reading of someone like Chaucer, and emotional understanding of long-dead authors may be partial simply because they are culturally remote. But it may also be total in parts, given the great constants in human life and nature. When Malory's Guinevere gets angry with Lancelot, there is nothing we do not understand. Bakerian “incommensurabilists” may dismiss this as illusion, but they will be wrong. Nowhere does the line between the living and the dead seem of less importance than in literature. Baker may be right that critics tend to write differently (he thinks “patronizingly”) about the dead. But the principal explanation of this is not that the dead are infantilized by death. It is simply that when one writes about the living one writes with the awareness that one's subject may read what one writes. And this is a significant constraint for some, whether or not it affects their critical judgment.

Baker is weird about aliveness, then (it isn't as if he feels anything as simple as Gorky, who said that he was not an orphan on the earth so long as Tolstoy was alive). The fact remains that he wants to write about living Updike, Updike *vivax* (he would like him to be immortal). And of course this is a reasonable project. But why Updike? Well, it isn't just that you have to be alive in order for Baker to appreciate what you write. You have to be Baker-like, Baker-friendly, for he is incapable of being truly persuaded by anything anyone else says unless he feels that the person in question has some special connection with himself. If he is to be convinced by a proposition, he has first to feel “that someone like me, and someone I like . . . and who is at least notionally in the same room with me, does or can possibly hold it to be compellingly true. . . . Before you can accept it as true, you need to have the sensation, the illusion, that something is said directly *to you*, or that the idea has occurred to someone who resembles you enough to serve as your emotional plenipotentiary.” Baker's own book provides a direct counter-example to this, however; for the emotional distance and distaste which many will feel on reading *U and I* will not prevent them, if they have any sense, from acknowledging that he can be exceptionally acute.

As for the case which Baker considers—the case in which feelings of spiritual affinity do occur: here it seems that Baker has things exactly the wrong way round. For

normally it is the sense that what is said is true that comes first: it is this that may lead one to feel that one is in emotional affinity with the author. But Baker's ego problem blocks this possibility. He has to have a *prior* sense that the author, X, is speaking directly to him, and resembles him enough to serve as his emotional plenipotentiary, before he can really make contact with X or take anything that X says as compellingly true. It follows that it must be other features of X that confer emotional plenipotentiary status on X—eg, X's being male, heterosexual, middle-class, psoriatic, and so on. It is not clear how much is needed, but without a sufficiency, Baker *non capisce*.

What can one say? Kant pointed out that “the dear self is always turning up”, but this is not accurate in Baker's case, because a thing can't be said to turn up unless it can be at least momentarily occluded. He does sometimes try to talk about non-Bakerians, for example when he makes some uneasy remarks about the pre-eminence of women and male homosexuals among novelists, and expresses his relief that Updike is heterosexual, since it proves that male heterosexuals can do it too. But when he ventures out of the Bakery he relapses into overstrenuous, hortatory, adolescent essay form. Proposing that Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* was an influence on *Lolita*, he goes on:

Nabokov must have noticed how the undisguisedly gay angle of attack lit the old, overnovelized mores from new angles, and that a similarly reawakened sense of nanomanners might result from a fictional situation whose raking unthinkableness stirred his own endocrines more.

And continues:

Of course, Edmund White's apostrophe to the narrator's boyfriend's bottom . . . would not have been possible without Updike's wide screen description of a neighbor's pussy; but nonetheless it is the homosexual novel right now, perhaps to an unusual degree, that seems to be driving us all toward advances and improvements.

Baker can do better; he can handle a heavily sub-claused 300-word sentence with some skill, and the lumpishness of much of the writing is probably intentional (it seems designed to give a sense of conversational spontaneity). There are good phrases among the writerly duds (where he has been too assiduous in his I-never-use-*Roget's-Thesaurus* pursuit of some “refulgent dinglebolly of an adjective”), and there are moments of humour, as when he imagines playing golf with Updike. He has some good remarks about what happens when “constitutionally un-gross people” try to be gross, and sometimes he is even winning in his admiration for Updike, his exhibitionistic fealty, his quasi-comic self-abasement. But—and Baker, who has quite a lot to say about reviewers and reviewing, knows the limited-praise-followed-by-“but” device, and has probably anticipated the whole set of possible reviews of this book in some detail—it is rare to find a book in which the complicitous, as-you-know-and-I-know tone is

adopted so often, and with so many “of courses”, in cases where what is said seems to be so plainly false. Even his literary judgments in passing seem startlingly off-beam. Updike's routine use of the routine phrase “consorts with” makes him despair of writing as well as him, and the sentence he offers as an example of Updike's “terrifying mastery” (“In its residue of bliss experienced, in its charge of bliss conveyed, *Glory*, measures up as, though the last to arrive, far from the least of this happy man's Russian novels”) just seems unfortunate.

Baker's main subject is being a writer, and his chillingly cosy “we writers” manner is hard to stomach. His clubby nudging is unrelenting as he moves among the authors (the heroes, the *hypocrites écrivains*, the friends who cannot really be friends because they are rivals, and the rest of the “frumpy gathering of professional scribes”). He knows his manner is unattractive, and comments on his “oddly smartass tone”, but his self-awareness does not redeem him. At the same time, he has quite a lot to say about the littlenesses of the writing life (in passages that are somehow of a piece with his rhapsody on nose-picking in his novel *Room Temperature*), and he is interesting on the choice between a simple and a mannered style, and on the way in which excessive commitment to the one may later propel a writer into the other.

But it is his terror of influence and self-repetition that rises to dominate his discussion of writing (he can't bring himself to read *The Anxiety of Influence*). Although he is still young, he is already worrying about the “management” problems posed by his past vocabulary. How do you keep track? How do you deal with the “overfertile sump of your past usages”? Baker's own novels are on computer disk, so that he can run a word-search to see if he has been overusing a word like “armature” or “florilegia”. But how can he be sure that he has remembered to check all the words he needs to check? At this point—such are the ways of “memory criticism”—the therapist in Updike's story “The Fairy Godfathers” fails to come to his mind: “You spend so much of your own energy—he smiled—avoiding repeating yourself.”

Baker is also on permanent alert for the influence of others. His image-detection systems are constantly scanning for surreptitious incoming. Most of his miscellaneous reading is prompted by the need to check that what he has written doesn't overlap with what he has read. One of his fundamental principles is apparently resumed in the phrase “Updike already used it and . . . it is [therefore] off-limits”. But it doesn't have to be Updike, it could be anyone, and it is an interesting question where the word ban begins. “Now” and “because” are presumably safe from Updike-appropriation—together with “go”, “ball”, “see”. Adjectives are potentially more vulnerable, although “big” and “green” seem reasonably uncontaminable. But nothing—is really safe: at one point Baker is possessed by the idea that the phrase “seem to remember” is now peculiarly Updikean. And then he confesses that the word “seem” is even on its own so treacherously alluring an