and unrecognized but crucial role in the nation’s drama of conscience. Racism took on the symbolic force of an American form of original sin, and as a man chosen to suffer to advance the nation’s spiritual and material well-being, the black American was endowed linguistically with an ambivalent power, like that vested in Elizabethan clowns, Christian martyrs, and tragic heroes.”

Flannery O’Connor’s stature continues to grow, and Edmondson’s short book should not only encourage that growth but insure that it occurs for the right reasons. After Edmondson’s book, there will be little excuse for dismissing—or praising—O’Connor’s stories and novels as exercises in the grotesque for its own sake, or for listing O’Connor among the existentialists, as one of her reviewers did.

Edmondson succeeds admirably in his chosen task of making explicit the vision of the world that Flannery O’Connor dramatized so powerfully in her fiction. Because he confines himself to accomplishing this goal, he inevitably leaves a number of questions unanswered. Which stories does he regard as O’Connor’s best? He offers no explanation as to why “Good Country People,” say, is discussed at length, while the often-anthologized “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is not. Likewise, there is no attempt to place O’Connor in relation to other fiction writers, from the South or elsewhere. Faulkner’s name, for example, does not appear in the index. These cavils, however, do not detract from the quality of what Edmondson does accomplish. One hopes that his achievement will lead others to read and write more about O’Connor, and perhaps encourage even members of English departments to return to the kind of literary criticism exemplified so well in Return to Good and Evil.

The Novelist’s Left Hand
Richard K. Cross


Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis: one can scarcely say at this point who is the more illustrious, father or son. It is clear, though, that time is on the side of Amis fils, who, still in his early fifties, has published eleven books of fiction—among them Money (1984), London Fields (1989), and Time’s Arrow (1991)—and has at the same time established himself as a man of letters in the traditional sense, with such works as Visiting Mrs. Nabokov (1994) and the memoir Experience (2000) to his credit. The War Against Cliché is a garner of Martin Amis’s journalism, the great bulk of it literary. He is an exceptionally penetrating critic and reviewer, who writes a prose that is witty, vigorous, and free of cant.

Starting out thirty years ago with a day job at the Times Literary Supplement, Amis was “very moral when it came to literary criticism. I read it all the time, in the tub, on the tube: I always had about me my Edmund Wilson—or my William Empson.” But the privileged position of literary criticism in British and American culture from the 1940s through the mid-1970s could not last: “it had based itself on a structure of echelons and hierarchies; it was about the talent elite. And the structure atomized as soon as the forces of democratization gave their next
...Literary criticism, now almost entirely confined to the universities, ...moves against talent by moving against the canon." At the end of the day, however, talent will not be denied. Amis is convinced that literature, which remains for him a "body of knowledge" rather than a province of politics, "will resist leveling and revert to hierarchy. This isn't the decision of some snob or belletrist. It is the decision of Judge Time, who constantly separates those who last from those who don't."

No doubt Amis finds it easier to manage this sort of serene assurance than do many of us, since he has his vocation as a novelist to sustain him. The essays and reviews collected in The War Against Cliché, written with the left hand, derive their weight from his experience as a practitioner, and many of those commentators on literature he particularly respects—notably V. S. Pritchett, Vladimir Nabokov, and John Updike—are artist-critics as well. "Most literary criticism tends to point beyond literature towards something else. It points towards Marxism, or sociology, or philosophy, or semiotics," observes Amis in a review of Nabokov's Lectures on Literature (1981). "Nabokov points to the thing itself, the art itself, trying to make us 'share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author.'" Concerning Updike's Picked-Up Pieces (1976), Amis remarks: "At a time when the reviewer's role has devolved to that of a canary in a pre-war coal mine, Updike reminds you that the review can, in its junior way, be something of a work of art, or at least a worthy vehicle for the play of ideas, feeling and wit." Plainly the standard these writers uphold in their criticism is the one against which Amis wishes his own performance to be measured.

A great majority of the pieces in this collection deal with novelists, only a handful with poets. The most important instance of the latter is "Don Juan in Hull," Amis's 1993 New Yorker essay on Philip Larkin, whose reputation had come under stinging attack in the half dozen years following his death. Amis describes the reception of Larkin's Selected Letters and Andrew Motion's biography (both 1993) of the poet as a moral disaster: "The word 'Larkinesque' used to evoke the wistful, the provincial, the crepuscular, the sad, the unloved; now it evokes the scabrous and the supremacist. The word 'Larkinism' used to stand for a certain sort of staid, decent, wary Englishness; now it refers to the articulate far right.... The reaction against Larkin has been unprecedentedly violent, as well as unprecedentedly hypocritical, tendentious, and smug. Its energy does not—could not—derive from literature; it derives from ideology, or from the vaguer promptings of a new ethos." Poems should be judged solely on their aesthetic merits, in Amis's view, not in terms of their author's personal history. As far as the character issue goes, he respects Larkin's integrity as a human being, blemishes and all: "For his generation, you were what you were, and that was that. It made you unswervable and adamantine. My father has this quality." Martin Amis denies that he has it himself—and certainly his views on many questions differ from those of his father's and Larkin's generation—but, on the evidence of this and other essays in The War Against Cliché, the son is who he is, too.

The work that gives Amis the most trouble is Ulysses (1922). Reviewing the Gabler edition (1986), he acknowledges the novel as "incontestably the central modern masterpiece," and he knows he has no more steadfast ally than Joyce in the war against "inherited, ready-made formulations, fossilized metaphors." In the Nausicaa episode, which Amis characterizes as "one of the greatest passages in all literature," we witness Gerty MacDowell "disintegrating beneath the legacy of stock-response: she is herself a
beautiful sum of clichés. James Joyce never uses a cliche in innocence." And yet Amis cannot give himself wholly to Ulysses. Why? Because Joyce expended his genius, with "crazed superbity," on pleasing himself, taking no thought of the reader: "Academics and explicators like difficult books, and Joyce helped create the industry they serve; with modern geniuses, you must have the middlemen. The reader, I submit, remains unconsulted on the matter.... Joyce could have been the most popular boy in the school, the funniest, the cleverest, the kindest. He ended up with a more ambiguous distinction: he became the teacher's pet." No doubt those of us who work in the hermeneutics industry, Joyce division, should feel chastened. But then Joyce himself has anticipated our situation: who of us, teaching "The Dead," does not experience a sensation of internal bleeding as he contemplates the figure of Gabriel Conroy, notre semblable, notre frère? Amis's uneasiness with Joyce can perhaps be partly understood in light of the fact that many artists find it easier to acknowledge their debts to lesser figures than those they owe the masters, old or new. Why else, for example, did Joyce credit Edouard Dujardin with discovering the interior monologue when the form has more distinguished forebears? Since, as Amis admits, "all artist-critics are to some extent secret proselytizers for their own work," the figures of whom he writes most lovingly are quite naturally those to whom he feels the closest affinity. They are, if not novelists of the absolute first rank, then certainly among the best of their generation. No Little Englander, Amis places three Americans in this category: Bellow, Updike, and Nabokov (the bearer of a U.S. passport at least). Amis is particularly impressive in explaining how Nabokov succeeds in being at once the "laureate of cruelty" and master of an uncommonly rich comic mode: "What makes human beings laugh? Not just gaiety or irony.... Human beings laugh, if you notice, to express relief, exasperation, stoicism, hysteria, embarrassment, disgust, and cruelty. Lolita (1955) is perhaps the funniest novel in the language because it allows laughter its full complexity and range." Comparing himself to Joyce, Nabokov—who was not otherwise remarkable for his humility—acknowledged that "my English is patball to [his] championship game." Amis, here as elsewhere ambivalent toward Joyce, regards this concession as unnecessary. The Irishman he sees as a virtuoso, "crusing about on all surfaces at once, ...maddeningly indulging his trick shots on high-pressure points," while his Russian counterpart is "the more 'complete' player": "Nabokov just went out there and did the business, all liteness, power and touch" ("Nabokov's Grand Slam," 1992).

Amis knows how to appreciate finely wrought miniatures—Pritchett's stories, for example—but he reserves his full admiration for artists who paint on large canvases. Joyce-as-benchmark surfaces again in a review of Updike's Rabbit at Rest (1990); of the sequence of Rabbit novels, Amis remarks: "They span thirty years and 1,500 pages.... It is as if a double-sized Ulysses had been narrated, not by Stephen, Bloom and Molly, but by one of the surlier underbouncers at Kiernan's bar. What Updike is saying—or conclusively demonstrating—is something very simple: that the unexamined life is worth examining, that indeed it swarms with instruction and delight. Among prose works which address the American century, Rabbit has few obvious betters. The Adventures of Augie March. Probably Lolita.

Amis's regard for Nabokov has already been addressed. His passion for Bellow's fiction runs deeper still. Here are representative aperçus from an essay on Augie March (1953) first published in the Atlantic Monthly (1995):

Literary criticism, as normally practiced, will get in the way of a novel like Augie March.
...[T]he book is very vulnerable to the kind of glossarial jigsaw-solver who must find form: pattern, décor, lamination, colour-scheme. But that isn’t how the novel works on you.... An epic about the so-called ordinary, it is a marvel of remorseless spontaneity. As a critic, therefore, you feel no urge to interpose yourself. Your job is to work your way round to the bits you want to quote....

This is an extraordinarily written novel. There are mannerisms or tics in the way the words squirm up against each other.... It is a style that loves and embraces awkwardness, spurning elegance as a false lead, words tumbling and rattling together in the order they choose.... Style is morality. Style judges.... Things are not merely described but registered, measured and assessed for the weight with which they bear on your soul.

Augie March, finally, is the Great American Novel because of its fantastic inclusiveness, its pluralism, its qualmless promiscuity. In these pages the highest and the lowest mingle and hobnob in the vast democracy of Bellow’s prose.

While Bellow himself does not regard Augie March as a fully realized work of art, he does see it as the novel in which he succeeded in extricating himself from the taut formalism, the Flaubertian pursuit of exactitude, that characterized his first two books and a breakthrough to a more elastic fictional mode, one capable of registering and exploring a wider range of experience. It is just this sort of scope and depth that Amis seeks in his own art. His estimation of Bellow’s fiction beyond the novels of his middle years—Augie March, Herzog (1964), and Humboldt’s Gift (1975)—the works Bellow aficionados tend to single out for praise—remains extraordinarily high. As an earnest of his respect and affection, Amis dedicated his novel Night Train (1997) to Bellow and his wife, Janis. Of The Actual (1997), Amis observes: “The desire for vatic speech is undimmed, yet no riffs, no party pieces, accompany it. Bellow’s prose remains a source of constant pleasure because of its manifest immunity to false consciousness.” He declares Bellow’s most recent novel, Ravelstein (2000), “a masterpiece with no analogues. The world has never heard this prose before: prose of such tremulous and crystallized beauty.” Those inclined to despair over our literary culture, and over literary criticism in particular, can perhaps take heart; here at least we have a novelist—two novelists, if we include Bellow—who believes in the opposite of false consciousness (we may as well call it truth) and beauty of a distinct order.

“As a literary journalist, John Updike has,” declares Amis, “that single inestimable virtue; having read him once, you admit to yourself, almost with a sigh, that you will have to read everything he writes.” I would say the same of Martin Amis.

The Metropolis of Ancient Egypt
KEVIN R. C. GUTZMAN


In Antony and Cleopatra, William Shakespeare immortalized the ancient Egyptian metropolis, Alexandria. For most contemporary Americans, if ancient Alexandria is anything, it is either the site of Shakespeare’s tale or the setting for the on-screen love affair between Richard

Kevin R. C. Gutzman teaches in the Department of History at Western Connecticut State University.