John Gardner: A Tiny Eulogy

PhilJourdan

Published by Punctum Books

PhilJourdan.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76430

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2651341
Gardner, Art and Philosophy

Whatever moral fiction is, it is clearly not just another way of giving beauty and goodness the same ontological status. At no point does Gardner appear to claim that what is beautiful is by necessity also moral. In fact the purely aesthetic side of art, which according to a commonsense view might be the most important aspect, is sometimes conspicuously missing from Gardner’s argument. He does write of the Beautiful, and we will look later at his treatment of this concept; but for the most part, “Gardnerian” moral fiction prizes something other than beauty-as-such.

“Art probes,” Gardner tells us. “It stalks like a hunter lost in the woods, listening to itself and to everything around it, unsure of itself, waiting to pounce” (9). This probing is key. Serious art, Gardner seems to imply, is trying to find its way in the darkness into which we as a collective have allowed ourselves to slip. “Art is as original and important as it is precisely because it does not start out with a clear knowledge of what it means to say” (13). There is more: “Art, in sworn opposition to chaos, discovers by its process what it can say. That is art’s morality. Its full meaning is beyond paraphrase” (14). One understands, then, that the process is part of the truth of moral art.
When Hegel, in the Preface to his *Phenomenology*, warns against seeing the truth of philosophy as somehow separable from the processes that lead us to it, he is arguing much the same thing, if we substitute “moral art” for “philosophy”: “Whatever might be appropriately said about philosophy — say, a historical statement of the main drift and the point of view, the general content and results, a string of random assertions and assurances about truth — none of this can be accepted as the way in which to expound philosophical truth.”¹⁷ For all of his criticisms of philosophy’s methods, Gardner is a Hegelian in this aspect. “Art,” let us recall, “discovers by its process what it can say,” and, indeed, its full meaning is “beyond paraphrase” (14).

Gardner, however, is unkind to the modern philosopher. “Philosophy is more concerned with coherence than with what William James called life’s ‘buzzing, blooming confusion’” (9). And: “Structuralists, formalists, linguistic philosophers who tell us that works of art are like trees — simply objects for perception — all avoid on principle the humanistic questions: who will this work of art help?” Unfortunately, “The business of criticism has become definition, morality reduced to the positivist

---

ideal of clarity” (17). If fiction needs to be made moral, so does criticism. The two go hand-in-hand. In fact, “like theology and religion,” art and criticism “are basically companions but not always friends. At times they may be enemies” (8). They cannot be separated, but they needn’t always get along.

Thus it would seem that Gardner wishes to do different things in On Moral Fiction. He wants to set a course for fiction writers here; but over there, he has in mind the task of the critic. On one page his goal is nothing less than to slash and burn everything he finds reprehensible. The next page he is less belligerent. His arguments are confused and at time confusing. One suspects, when reading his book for the first time, that Gardner is setting standards he wouldn’t be able to reach in his own work; yet those standards are never explicitly formulated. They are not theorized. This is in keeping with his style, his beliefs and the message of his tract, but it is also a good way to leave a reader frustrated. Perhaps theorizing is totally beside the point — it would, in any case, radically transform Gardner’s message, as one of his subtlest insights concerns the dynamism of the written word. To theorize would be to run the risk of being over-schematic already; in a sense it would be moralistic, a way of universalizing a set of rules for writing fiction that could help us to live morally.
The paradox is that Gardner seems both for and against this universality. On the one hand the values he champions would stand the test of time: true works of art “exert their civilizing influence century after century, long after the cultures that produced them have decayed” (105). This implies a set of standards to which “humanity” might adhere over the millennia. The fate of Achilles or the Karamazovs is, in this view, an eternally relatable fate. Dostoevsky’s Russia is no more, and Homer lived centuries before Aristotle first laid out his own important rules for poetry and drama; and yet, for someone like Gardner, their works have endured because they were moral, because these authors were grappling with eternal truths.

On the other hand, Gardner is not so bold as to write out exactly what an eternal truth might be, what the substance of an enduring work might look like. A universal work might very well follow immutable laws, but these laws are not mere givens. They must be worked towards, on the assumption that with enough intellectual integrity and moral curiosity, their invisible presence will guide the work to its moral beauty. We are back to philosophy; “at its best fiction is . . . a way of thinking, a philosophical method” (107).

Probing and poking at cultural, intellectual and moral values is part of being an artist. Gardner evidently cherishes this aspect of the
human inclination to art. Although there is an understandable prejudice among academics against writing books like *On Moral Fiction* because of their perceived anti-intellectualism, the fact is that Gardner never discourages intellectual or philosophical streaks in novels just for the sake of it. Undoubtedly a careless reading of *On Moral Fiction* could leave someone convinced that Gardner dislikes Saul Bellow and Thomas Pynchon because of their erudition. But that would, indeed, be a careless reading. Ideas are important for Gardner, but they must be used in specific ways. “A really good book tests ideas,” as he says, and the goal of *On Moral Fiction* appears to be to show the best attitude to adopt when testing ideas.

It seems clear that to make sense of Gardner’s book as whole, we need to be clear what he thinks he is saying — that is, to try grasping what moral fiction might have meant to Gardner the renegade theorist-novelist. The difficulty lies in the looseness with which he defines certain terms central to his argument. Yet, because we are set on taking Gardner seriously, we should perhaps attempt to tighten and delimit the concepts he presents as crucial to the message of *On Moral Fiction*. Much of this work will appear to be highly critical of Gardner. However, the criticisms are leveled at

---

the way the message is presented, and not the message itself.