John Gardner: A Tiny Eulogy

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What happens with writers is if you say something bad about them, and it seems wise and fair, their feelings are hurt, but they’re not mad at you because writers are too serious to be mad at you when you tell the truth.

~ John Gardner

INTRODUCTION

A text as baffling as John Gardner’s polemical manifesto, On Moral Fiction (1978), demands attention and forbids indifference. Gardner died young — but he lived long enough to see his career demolished after the publication of

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that hugely unpopular book. He was vilified, attacked from all angles (in literary journals as well as on television channels like PBS), dismissed as a reactionary, and cut off from the literary circles he had once frequented. “I have not developed any enemies that I know of,” he told an interviewer a year before the motorcycle accident that killed him. Yet whether or not he made any enemies, his book was appropriated by unwanted new friends: because of what was considered his highly conservative view of art, Gardner was approached by evangelists like Jerry Falwell as well as the American Nazi Party. To this day he continues to be treated as a hysterical moralist even by otherwise careful critics like Wayne C. Booth. The pity of all of this is that, for its many flaws, *On Moral Fiction* is a book that deserves to be read, to be taken seriously, even to be read morally, as Gardner would have put it. My aim, then, is to accept, however briefly, this neglected challenge, and to take Gardner as he wanted to be taken. If he is doomed to literary oblivion, he has at least earned a proper funeral, attended by one or two friends who tried to understand.

The relationship between morality and art, of course, has been debated in various ways

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3 Gardner, “Interview with the English Department of Pan American University,” 259.

across the centuries, and Gardner’s contribution to the conversation is decidedly old-fashioned. It is also resolutely difficult to make much sense out of this contribution. Doubtless, Gardner is passionate in his insistence that there is an ineradicable link between well-crafted fiction and a kind of heightened moral awareness. The problem, as I see it, is that by trying to be polemical instead of quietly effective, Gardner puts off potential allies and categorically misreads certain other novelists to make a point. He rejects almost all the fiction of his own time (he was working on this text in the mid-to-late 1970s) as somehow too clever or nihilistic or immoral, whatever that term has come to mean by the end of his book.

But suppose there is in fact an important message to be conveyed: that the most enduring works of fiction, those that “mean something” to readers of many generations, are those whose construction entails a kind of moral courage — what then? If most modern fiction is lacking in the way Gardner describes, then what can be done about it? The answer must partly be sought in Gardner’s manifesto itself. It must also come from outside, from a careful preliminary formalization of the argument he puts forth that would resolve inconsistencies or remove them, and ignore the petty name-calling that constitutes whole chunks of the book.

To formalize, or theorize, John Gardner may
be to go against his wishes. Gardner is not a theorist. *On Moral Fiction* makes clear Gardner’s distaste for grand theories that cannibalize other texts for self-confirmation. No room, in Gardner’s view, for critics whose objectives lie in the explanation of literary pyrotechnics. “In all the arts, our criticism is for the most part inhumane,” he claims. “We are rich in schools which speak of how art ‘works’ and avoid the whole subject of what work it ought to do.” 5 The work it ought to do, as Gardner conceives it, is not always clearly explained. “The traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us” (5). These are grandiose words, and it cannot be doubted, on the evidence to be found in the pages of his manifesto, that Gardner is anything but serious. After all, art is “essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy” (6). Gardner is never totally precise in his formulation of what moral art should be, but we know that it “asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution, struggling to keep the mind intact and preserve the city, the mind’s safe preserve.” And lastly: “Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to

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humanness” (6).

What we are left with, by the time the first and most conventionally theoretical section of On Moral Fiction is over, is a collection of aphoristic glances into the eyes of the One True God of Moral Fiction. This is not merely ironic mockery — for it is never quite clear whether Gardner is hiding, in one of his pockets, a secret affinity to God and all that the word entails. Certainly “God” is a character in this book. So is “Truth.” And those other obvious secondary characters, “Beauty” and “Goodness,” also make their appearances. As for the protagonist, we have two possibilities. Either the hero of Gardner’s tale is “Art,” making “Morality” a mere sidekick — or it is the other way around. It is not always easy to tell where the stress falls. Sometimes Gardner seems simply to equate “good art” with “moral art.” Sometimes, however, art as a whole is more like the father of a family of various troublesome or virtuous offspring: the black sheep of cynical postmodernism (Thomas Pynchon), the clumsy but deeply sincere eldest son (William Faulkner), the smart aleck or braggart (William Gass). In this scenario, Father Art is waiting for the prodigal child he has called Moral Fiction, the missing piece of the puzzle that would set the literary world right once and for all. Moral fiction is adventurous, not always obedient, and sometimes disappears from sight. But it is moral fiction that Gardner believes we need.
The purpose of my little “eulogy” is not to do John Gardner a favor and redeem his name. The impetus behind this is a conviction that the criticisms we can aim at Gardner (as a man, critic, novelist, thinker) are all too often diversionary. Nobody needs to approve of his methods or his bullying, or indeed to pay any attention to him as an intellectual at all, so long as his message is taken into account. And his message is a familiar but seemingly unpopular one: “What fiction does at its very best is test out values. . . . A good book leads to a great affirmation.”6 The belief that novels matter, not only as works of art, but also as experiments in which basic values to which we cling can be tested in safety, may seem unfashionable today, but it is a belief full of potential.

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