John Gardner: A Tiny Eulogy

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THEORIZING THE TRUE

“The conclusive answering of a question has to do not with the Good but with the True,” Gardner declares. “Whereas we intuit the Good, we approach the unattainable and thus relative absolute ‘Truth’ through reason” (139). To avoid being unfair to Gardner at the outset, let us point out now that he is quick to insist that “truth is not the highest concern of fiction” (141). Nevertheless, one wonders what the point of bringing “truth” into this is. Gardner brings in certain epistemological questions which, unsurprisingly, he does not answer in a satisfactory way. Although he spends little time dealing with the True, he dwells on it just long enough to make it seem like an important category. He defines truth as “that which can be known for certain, an object of reason and analysis” (140). More: “Absolute Truth is all that could be known by an omniscient mind, and insofar as the universe contains voluntary agents and a random evolution of everything from brute matter to conscious thought, Truth is relative in the same manner as is Goodness” (140). Whatever one makes of this, it seems appropriate to say that Gardner’s words imply a variety of enormous presuppositions of the sort philosophers have wrestled with for many centuries, and which he promptly sweeps under
the carpet. Setting aside the question of whether anything “can be known for certain” quite as simply as Gardner assumes, since that is a different debate, there is still the problem of the relativity of a truth that can be known for certain.

What, exactly, does Gardner mean to say here? Perhaps merely that if there is such a thing as absolute truth, we are left with no choice but to have it in incomplete form, since we are not “an omniscient mind” and cannot claim to know everything (let alone anything). Or perhaps Gardner wishes to say that through “reason and analysis” we might come up with our own interpretation of an absolute truth, and that this interpretation could be valid. That Gardner appears to treat absolute truth as a sort of ontological substance is problematic enough, or at least curiously old-fashioned; the matter is not helped by his reckless refusal to argue his way to any position of credibility. By the next paragraph, Gardner has moved on to the idea of mimesis and its relation to truth and to the text. But we should not follow Gardner too eagerly here, and must instead ask about the True: what has it to do with moral fiction, or even with what he calls moral criticism?

For the implication is that the True lies beyond “mere” morality and beyond even subjective experience, relative though Gardner may claim it to be. The True, “that which can be known for certain,” presumably does not center
only on questions of morality; surely it would encompass much more than that. Indeed the True, as Gardner has defined it so far, would appear to lurk hidden in the very energy of human action, informing not just what we can do and know, but more relevantly, what is good and what is beautiful — it should help us decipher in the silence of the universe the judgments that we ought to make in the name of truth.

These are elementary remarks, but they are not even addressed by Gardner in his brief treatment of the True. Instead, having brought into the room this enormous animal, Gardner simply takes us into the next room and resumes his sermon: successful mimesis in art, “accurate imitation of the world” (140), can be pleasurable, he writes, but it is not crucial. He then summons up a distinction that begins, if tentatively, to clarify his position on the True: “when talking about art we use the word truth in two ways: to mean that which is factually accurate or logically valid” — the True as a limit to falsehood, as the perhaps unattainable cure for misinterpretation — and also “to mean that which does not feel like lying” (142). A few sentences later, Gardner simply stops writing about the True. Nevertheless, he has let out a clue: what he is aiming for is not so much “truth” as a state of accordance with what is, but rather a feeling of genuineness, of authenticity. The True, in Gardner’s naively
schematic view, is more than factuality. It is, more archaically, truthfulness. A reader should have a gut impression of having touched upon something fundamental about the world when reading a work of moral fiction. The True is manifested in our intuition that, yes, that is what it’s like, that what we are reading is handling its subject sensitively and honestly. Unfortunately, such a feeling is not enough to warrant bringing all of truth into the debate. At any rate, it is not enough in the sense that linking the True to a gut feeling that something “does not feel like lying” amounts to very little. One suspects that the True ought to have been left out entirely. The problem is that without reference to truth, moral fiction would seem to lose its privileged status. If part of the point of moral fiction is to show us new ways of tackling moral problems and living morally, then surely there are certain standards of morality to which fiction must strive. They may not be absolute in the way that the Ten Commandments are absolute, but nevertheless the fiction championed by Gardner needs a set of standards if it is to strive towards anything except self-reference, self-reference — that is, more than the logic that the fiction itself creates.

Yet perhaps this is the point. Perhaps the True, beyond the mere feeling that something is not a lie (a poetically interesting but in this context useless formulation) amounts, in Gardner’s schema, to a structural limit rather
than anything external to the text. The only way we can salvage the True as defined in *On Moral Fiction* is to qualify Gardner’s claim that the True is “that which can be known for certain, an object of reason and analysis” by adding: in the universe depicted in the fiction. This is a deliberate misreading. Curiously, it is also consistent with other statements made by Gardner in his work. If we accept that moral fiction follows its own rules to the end, or that it is the kind of narrative storytelling concerned with characters in certain situations set up by the author behaving in believable and understandable ways, then the True (as a gut feeling that the story’s progress is “not a lie” and as a reaching towards a kind of absoluteness in humanity’s codes and beliefs) makes some sense. It makes sense precisely as an “untrue truth” or the likeness of verisimilitude made possible by the novel. The True, here, can be seen as that which, in the logic of the fictional universe, seems plausible and realistic even though the universe depicted is a construction. The True, then, makes sense as the uninterrupted flow of what Gardner repeatedly called the “fictive dream” elsewhere.

Fiction as a dream is hardly a controversial notion, but Gardner places such importance on it that it needs to be examined to see if our qualification of his use of the True holds up. In an earlier text intended as a pedagogical exposition of the “art of fiction,” Gardner
claims that in fiction “the writer’s first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened, or to persuade the reader that they might have happened.”\textsuperscript{9} As soon as the reader accepts the terms of buying into the lie, he also consents to dreaming the events depicted as though the dream sprang from within his being. Good fiction writing, for Gardner, is writing that succeeds in maintaining the dream’s hold on the reader until the end. That is good fiction; but then what is moral fiction? In a passage in \textit{The Art of Fiction} anticipating the themes of \textit{On Moral Fiction}, Gardner suggests, “fiction provides, at its best, trustworthy but inexpressible models. We ingest metaphors of good, wordlessly learning to behave more like Levin than Anna . . ., more like the transformed Emma . . . than the Emma we first meet in the book.”\textsuperscript{10} Crucially, he adds: “This subtle, for the most part wordless knowledge is the ‘truth’ great fiction seeks out.”\textsuperscript{11} The truth explored by fiction is not Truth as a general, abstract, impossibly complicated idea, but the unreal and fictionally constructed “reality” of the universe depicted in a novel. We do not know the Truth about this or that, nor can we legitimately speak about the Truth without a variety of complications, but

\textsuperscript{10} Gardner, \textit{The Art of Fiction}, 63.
\textsuperscript{11} Gardner, \textit{The Art of Fiction}, 63.
for Gardner, a well-written novel reveals to us certain structures, rules and “truths” about its characters and situations. The truth inside a novel can thus be explained as the “unwritten” set of codes that make a novel internally consistent on its own and, by extension, rewarding and stimulating and “not phony” for the reader.

If this is a correct interpretation, then yes, the True as Gardner originally presents it in *On Moral Fiction* does have a role to play. It is simply not the role that Gardner thought it was, and sadly that is Gardner’s own shortcoming. We can nevertheless see that the True (as that network of secret rules and compromises dealt with by the author to ensure that his fiction seems convincing even when set in a holiday resort on another planet), even if it is not yet formalized or well enough explored, has a place in Gardner’s system. In the last instance, perhaps it would have been better to call it the Truthful rather than the True.