IS MORAL FICTION THE FICTION OF MORALISTS?

A short essay by Milan Kundera cautions against simple mockery of that old-fashioned (one might say: reactionary) school of criticism capable, for example, of dismissing Madame Bovary as an immoral text. Immoral, that is, because unsafe, not pregnant with uplifting messages about the potential for human redemption. Kundera, a careful craftsman whose experiences with social realism in the arts left him desirous of something more honest and less prescriptive, is well placed to judge the merits of moralism in fiction. He chooses to write on Madame Bovary because although it is a peculiarly immoral (or amoral) text if one reads it for moral consolation, it is at the same time decidedly not a work of nihilism, cynicism or, indeed, profound immorality. However, Kundera does not lampoon the reactionary literati of Flaubert’s time because he knows the transformative power of a truly impressive novel. “Is it really so inappropriate for the most prestigious French critic of his time to exhort a young writer to ‘uplift’ and ‘console’ his readers by a ‘picture of goodness,’ readers who deserve, as do we all, a little
sympathy and encouragement?"  

No doubt Gardner would have been inclined to agree that we all deserve sympathy and encouragement as readers, as human beings; and granting sympathy and encouragement does not have to mean telling people what to do.

When George Sand chides Flaubert (unfairly, one feels) with her condescending assertion that, “Art is not only criticism and satire” — when, that is, the moralist finds fault with a work like Madame Bovary because the work in question resists easy, ready-made moralistic interpretations — that is when Gardner’s thought becomes truly useful. Moral fiction, we have seen, is not the fiction of preachers and soapbox hogs. It does, however, pave the way for optimism and order. Gardner may not have been at his most rigorous in his discussions of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, but his sincerity is beyond question. Art is not only criticism and satire, but neither, at its best, is it insincere, impersonal consolation. It’s easy to suspect, by the end of On Moral Fiction, that moral fiction of the Gardnerian variety is really little more than the kind of writing meant to open up possibilities for the affirmation of love and life. This sounds grandiose, and in a sense it is. It is also one of On Moral Fiction’s most

13 Kundera, The Curtain, 60.
recurrent and important themes. A look at some examples outside of Gardner’s text will show that the life-affirming potential of art, of which Gardner makes a great deal, is not quite so mystical and confused a notion as the tools Gardner uses to explain it.

A simple, effective definition of “moral fiction” does not emerge from Gardner’s text. It is, however, to be found in Kundera’s essay on the novel. It is Kundera who comes a bit closer to showing what moral fiction is. Whereas Gardner invokes the abstractions of the Good and the True and the Beautiful, and attacks other novelists for failing to meet standards he has not clearly set, Kundera’s approach is to show, historically, where “novelistic thinking” took over the writing of fiction and became its own category with its own codes. Flaubert, and after him Musil and Broch, and many others, became novelists who produced novels as art, instead of writers who happened to write novels. They discovered the importance of letting the process of “novelistic thinking” take over. Recall once again Gardner’s remark that “Art, in sworn opposition to chaos, discovers by its process what it can say. That is art’s morality.” Compare that to Kundera’s words:

novelistic thinking . . . has nothing to do with the thinking of a scientist or a philosopher; I would even say it is purposely a-philosophic, even antiphilo-
sophic, that is to say fiercely independent of any system of preconceived ideas; it does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions, it marvels, it plumbs; its form is highly diverse: metaphoric, ironic, hypothetic, hyperbolic, aphoristic, droll, provocative, fanciful; and mainly it never leaves the magic circle of its characters’ lives; those lives feed it and justify it.14

By now it is clear that the type of fiction we are dealing with is born of curiosity and wonderment. The most “Gardnerian” thing about Kundera’s words, however, is not the attitude that is being privileged, but rather the absence of an attitude; the writer must put aside “any system of preconceived ideas” before writing his first word. The implications are many: a writer of fiction should not set out to prove something; he should not use his characters as vehicles for his own prejudices; he should not create situations only to resolve them in his mind before the writing has started; he should not, in short, have a clear idea of what he wants to say in his work, but ought instead to find out what he wants to say. The internal logic of a work of fiction should not depend on its author’s omniscience. In its broadest sense, the task of moral fiction is a negative one: moral

14 Kundera, The Curtain, 71.
fiction avoids bringing the givens of the world into its conception. A story should not, that is, seek from the outset to reaffirm the values we all take for granted.