Toward the very end of his life, Gardner tried to water down the passion with which he’d written *On Moral Fiction*, as if embarrassed by his earlier enthusiasm. He eventually summed up his entire position very simply:

Every time a really good movie comes along . . . everybody starts imitating the hero. . . . If the hero or the central character in a novel is a whiner who can’t get out of bed, who sees nothing but evil in the world, who thinks everybody is a hypocrite, and so on, the people who imitate him are going to destroy themselves because they are wrong about reality. I think that presenting sort of noble models of behavior, which is not to say perfect people . . . you give people a model for their own lives, for their own feelings.28

The pity of this is that although Gardner can sound like a “whiner” himself, someone “who thinks everybody is a hypocrite,” the most salient parts of *On Moral Fiction* are not only

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28 Gardner, “Interview with the English Department of Pan American University,” 260.
inspiring and encouraging, but also deserving of a wider audience, an audience that Gardner’s didactic books, like On Becoming a Novelist, still occasionally find. Gardner, in On Moral Fiction, works against himself, and his enthusiasm and optimism get ignored along the way. The book, once so controversial, is now as good as out of print, and many of the authors Gardner picked on when he was writing it (Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Coover, even John Updike and William Gaddis) seem to have faded from critical attention significantly. Perhaps this should teach us how crucial it is to be humble, the way Gardner was not. More generously, we could say that Gardner misunderstood his audience and his audience misunderstood him. There must be some truth to this — the example of Wayne C. Booth would demonstrate it. But the ultimate test of Gardner’s vision is the lasting appeal of the novels written as if according to his standards. These are bizarre and powerful and memorable in their own right, and Gardner’s greatest contribution might very well be his idiosyncratic understanding of what makes them so strong.

But perhaps the sincerest thing that I can do for Gardner here is to acknowledge his influence on me. That is what he would have wanted, anyway: for people to “get it” even if he hadn’t articulated things particularly well. On Moral Fiction, so far as it is remembered from time to time, will remain a troubling book for
many people — but once in a while he will appeal to a young novelist in a profound way, far more profoundly than those who ridicule Gardner might suspect. It remains a wordless thing, of course. Take away the Good, the True, the Beautiful and all of that pseudo-theorizing and you are left with an experienced, flawed novelist asking people to remember to like life, and to like people. It isn’t fashionable, but it’ll do.