John Gardner: A Tiny Eulogy

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Writers of Fiction and Writers of Criticism

Important theorists of the novel who are also practicing novelists have, in general, tended to downplay the intellectual aspects of writing in favor of the “organic” or holistic side of creative composition. Gardner is not the only fiction writer who shared strong views on what writing is and should be, and if he is still a bit notorious today, he is not regarded as particularly influential in comparison, say, to Henry James. And yet, James was in various ways strikingly similar in his views on the purpose of fiction to Gardner. He, too, found a certain intellectualizing tendency on the part of critics to mar the effect of well-written fiction; a century before Gardner he was already insisting on the necessity of an “organic” form in the novel: “I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks . . . . A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.”18 Like Gardner, James prioritized the act of creation, with its

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18 Henry James, qtd. in Peter Rawlings, American Theorists of the Novel (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23.
multiplicity of explorations and dead-ends, over
the simple transmission of a message, which
can so easily be “moralistic” and hence, in
Gardner’s distinction, decidedly not “moral.”

“There is one point at which the moral sense
and the artistic sense lie very near together,”
James writes. “That is in the light of the very
obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work
of art will always be the quality of the mind of
the producer . . . . No good novel will ever
proceed from a superficial mind.”

The tone of this declaration, along with the implicit disdain
for “popular” literature — all of this brings to
mind On Moral Fiction. And if James rejects the
“dull dispute over the ‘immoral’ subject and the
moral,” this needs to be understood in its
context. He developed his most trenchant
criticisms of the moral/immoral distinction in
response to the prescriptive and influential
essay by Walter Besant, “The Art of Fiction,” in
which Besant declared that fiction ought to
have “a conscious moral purpose” —

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19 James, qtd. in Rawlings, American Theorists of the
Novel, 25.

20 Henry James, “Preface to The Portrait of a Lady,”
in The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry
James (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011),
45.

21 Walter Besant, qtd. in John Goode, “Walter Besant
and Henry James,” in Tradition and Tolerance in
Nineteenth Century Fiction, eds. David Howard, John
ambiguous wording, but given that Besant insists on proper art being “governed and directed by general laws”\textsuperscript{22} we can be sure he is not in agreement with James and Gardner on the need for an “organic” development of a novel. That there are no clearly delineated solutions for moral problems to be found in fiction is a recurring argument made by many important fiction writers; James is just one of the most outspoken of these.

This line of thinking recalls Gardner’s (and Kundera’s) emphasis on the probing nature of fiction. As we have seen, what Gardner calls “moral fiction” is at its barest simply the kind of fiction that opens up moral questions without attempting to answer them from the start. It probes; it follows the rules it set out for itself instead of following the normative, common sense moral commandments of the society from which it emerged. Though this is a loose and not extraordinarily useful definition, it points to an attitude common to many novelists and strangely lacking in many critics who are not practitioners of fiction; the attitude of “knowing that you don’t know” and being content to discover what you have to say through your writing, instead of writing because you already know what you wish to say.

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\textsuperscript{22} Besant, qtd. in Goode, “Walter Besant and Henry James,” 256.
It is a decidedly unacademic way of doing things, and that must surely be one of the reasons texts like *On Moral Fiction* prove inspiring to novelists but not to critics. David Guterson, Raymond Carver, Lore Segal, John L’Heureux and many other novelists have paid tribute to Gardner (a quick glance at the blurbs on copies of Gardner’s didactic books makes this clear), but few professional literary critics have done the same.

Perhaps Albert Camus was playing the role of the “serious novelist” when he said in an interview, “I don’t claim to teach anybody! Whoever thinks this is mistaken. The problems confronting young people today are the same ones confronting me, that is all. And I am far from having solved them.”\(^{23}\) This kind of modesty may well seem a tad disingenuous to a critic like John Krapp, who argues that, “Camus cannot sincerely evade complicity in the morally instructive dimension of his work,”\(^{24}\) but Camus is only joining the chorus of fiction writers whose interest is in asking questions, not forcing answers. This is not a difficult concept to understand, but it seems deeply problematic for critics in that it both oversimplifies the many processes going on in a “literary text” (James’s novels are not as “easy


\(^{24}\) Camus, qtd. in Krapp, *An Aesthetics of Morality*, 76.
to read” as one might assume from his comments on the need for an intuitive, organic flow in fiction) and it confuses the task of fiction in general by submitting it to a loose set of criteria based on whether it preaches or just suggests. In the end, when a novelist like Gardner sets out, paradoxically, to preach about the need for fiction that does not preach (but which still has a moral intent), he is laying bare a problem that seems insoluble. He is tackling, in a slightly naïve and overbearing way, the issue of what art should be doing to its audience — an issue that very few people agree on. That is why the false modesty of Camus’s comments can still seem convincing, or why the vague and untheorizable, unprescriptive essays on the craft by Henry James and others are never completely satisfying. Gardner may have gone about things in a heavy-handed and even boorish manner when he released On Moral Fiction, but the controversy it provoked reveals a deep unease in literary criticism with the incompatibility between what an author sets out to do and what a text becomes in the hands of the critic.

It is an enormous topic, and in the end it is of course not the only reason On Moral Fiction has been relegated to the dustbins. Gardner raised big issues, and although he dared to tackle them in his book, he did not succeed in convincing his critics that he was anything more than an apologist for a certain literary
conservatism. Even Wayne C Booth, whose work on the “ethics of fiction” sometimes shares a great deal with Gardner’s thought even if he seems to downplay this, limited his commentary on Gardner to pithy remarks: “It is clear that the only acceptable fiction will be whatever meets his announced moral standards. He always implies that one might arrive at his secure judgments by the same logic with which he defends them, as if working out a simple implied syllogism.” \footnote{Wayne C. Booth, \textit{The Company We Keep} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 54.} This is not a fair assessment of \textit{On Moral Fiction}; it ignores the very heart of Gardner’s message — that there is no clear-cut, logical way to arrive at moral judgments in literature. These judgments must be arrived at, quite tentatively, through a process that involves writer and reader, character and plot, particular and universal. If it were a matter of syllogistic deduction, the very process of fiction would be a non-art, a scientific method.

Gardner’s argument, which is unquestionably confused in places, is still not so stern and uncompromising that Gardner ought to be lumped in with Plato and other “overtly ethical critics” who, “having experienced some offering that feels unquestionably threatening or harmful to the spirit,” try “to damn it as the
unfailing source of artistic evil.”26 This is caricature. There is little that can legitimately be considered normative in what Gardner is saying. Yet if there is such a limited understanding of what he is saying, then the fault must lie with Gardner as well. On Moral Fiction would, I think, have benefited from some prolonged and serious analyses of at least three or four works of fiction; furthermore, it might have been wiser on Gardner's part to avoid such a polemical tone. As Foucault puts it, the polemict

proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for truth, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful and whose very existence constitutes a threat.27

Gardner fits this description in some of On Moral Fiction’s less nuanced passages, and if we choose to ignore this problem, we do so in the

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26 Booth, The Company We Keep, 51.
know ledge that Gardner, who championed taking the greatest care when structuring a book, and who insisted on the need to respect one’s characters at least during the act of writing, often failed to take his own advice in the moment of giving the advice. He, too, caricatured all the William Gasses and the John Barthes with whom he took issue. He, too, sometimes reduced his literary adversaries to stick figures and straw men. *On Moral Fiction*, according to the definition set forth in it, is not written very morally.