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John Gardner Considered

Over three years have passed since the author John Gardner died on September 14, 1982. Despite the initial lack of notice (he died the same day as Bashir Gemayel and Princess Grace), Gardner has recently become a small but thriving academic industry. Three books of criticism have been published about him and three more are planned. SUNY Binghamton recently ran an *October Light* festival celebrating the author, and Ballantine Books has reissued most of his works with a unified typeface and graphic art, making the books appear as the “oeuvre” of John Gardner. (Even the manner of his death now causes controversy—see Terence DesPres’ recent essay in *The Yale Review*¹). What does Gardner have that prompts such strong pointed effort? Above all else stands Gardner’s commitment to writing and the belief that the writer *matters*. Rightly or wrongly, Gardner believed that writing, especially making fiction, *made a difference*, and he spent his short career hammering that point home.

Gardner would be worth studying simply as a portrait of the driven artist. He wrote prolifically: ten volumes of criticism, five children’s books, two works of poetry, two collections of short stories, several libretti, and ten novels, as well as giving over one hundred interviews.² Only forty-nine years old when he died, he doubtless would have built an even more prismatic collection had he lived longer. His work showed an athletic, unroutine devotion to fiction and criticism.

But the evaluation of a writer rests on the writing itself; the author must stand or fall on that. Gardner’s writing, for all its bloat, pretention, and smoke, is a writing dedicated to making life worth living and intelligible. What “intelligible” and “worth living” meant to Gardner had much to do with *process*, with *becoming*. In *On Moral Fiction* he argues that the *process* of writing fiction creates a kind of moral goodness because the writer, forced by his craft to keep his intuition and imagination permeable and not linked to any ideology, can catch glimpses of truth that an ideology would override. As one of his characters says in the short story “The Art of Living,” the artist is one who “makes a covenant with ... something that’s *there*, pots and paintings, recipes: the specifics that make things indefinite come alive ... The artist’s contract is, come hell or high water he won’t go cheap, he’ll never quit trying for the best.” Such a process of openness, not only in writing but in approaching living itself, creates the worth that life has to the individual.

The “intelligibility” of life follows from this vision of process-as-becoming. Gardner did not believe that life has meaning in the sense that we can find an answer to “why” it exists, that it can be understood the same way the equation for gravity can be derived from observation. Like Grendel, in Gardner’s book by the same name, we are all nailed to a brutal agnosticism. Yet Grendel argues that it is better to know fully the bitterness, blindness, and absurdity of life than retain the innocence he had at the beginning of the story. Why? Because the despair and pain he felt were *his*, earned by a violent apprenticeship in life which, while it led to no

revelation, did lead to the sort of dangerous vitality preferable to the safe rigor of death. This vitality informs the smile that Sisyphus wears at the end of Camus' essay, the smile of a man who, even though he knows the *futility* of his world, nonetheless knows his world.

For this reason, then - his "message" of the worth and intelligibility of life - Gardner must have attention paid to him. Many today forego any political or moral risk because they believe that the world will soon destroy itself, and taking a risk, which implies a future for the future, comes off as a futile comic gesture in Armageddon's shadow. To them, Gardner's fiction will say that the "art" of living, like art itself, demands risk; only through risk can anyone hope to find something akin to peace with the world and its problems.

And where Armageddon's shadow also outsizes the mundane, makes the apocalypse common breakfast fare, Gardner's fiction champions the "merely human." Though Gardner has often been called a "writer of ideas," his characters are never mouthpieces or allegories or models for emulation. Instead, they are flesh riddled by ideas, compatriots who, in their struggles to understand and triumph, reflect our own similar struggles to shape meaning out of morass. Gardner's characters constantly show us that when we substitute what is most vibrantly human about our lives with cynicism or ideology or bloodless reason, we disinherit ourselves. The world becomes the wasteland we fear because it reflects the wasteland we have become. The "merely human" of Gardner's fiction has the power that E.M. Forster ascribed to Eliot and his "Prufrock": that a poet who, in the midst of World War I, "could turn aside to complain of ladies and drawing rooms preserved a tiny drop of our self-respect, he carried on the human heritage."³ Fiction's obligation, to Gardner, was to know and record the "human heritage" of our lives, not to demean it by demoting it to ideology or manifesto. And an unswerving corollary to this obligation was Gardner's belief that to the extent good fiction forces our humanity on us, politics and morality will be legitimate.

GARDNER'S "MESSAGE"

Orwell noted in his essay "Inside the Whale" that "it is always a writer's tendency, his 'purpose,' his 'message,' that makes him liked or disliked."⁴ Gardner would approve, for while technique, as he said in *On Moral Fiction*, "helps the writer to check himself and zero in on truth," the important job is to produce writing that, "for its time ... clarifies life and tends to improve it."⁵ Let me focus on Gardner's message.

Critics have divided Gardner's fiction into three phases: a very early phase, which produced *The Resurrection* and *Nickel Mountain*, a maturing phase out of which came *The Sunlight Dialogues* and *The Wreckage of Agathon*, and a late phase - *Grendel*, *Jason and Medeia*, *October Light*, *The Art of Living*, *Freddy's Book*, and *Mickelsson's Ghosts*. Reading the books in these groupings shows a changing view of the world from, roughly, a pastoral world, with a romantic acceptance of death and a poetic gloss on despair and defeat, to a world both comic and tragic in its arbitrary working, a world where the quest for "the meaning of life" had a venomous nobility to it.⁶

In the pastoral world of the young Gardner, life, despite its evils, plays a benign game. James Chandler, the leukemic philosopher of *The Resurrection*, asserts that the world causing his body's purposeless dissolution is "the world one must affirm, the buzzing, blooming confusion itself."⁷ Chandler holds no rage against the dying of the light. Similarly, Henry Soames, in *Nickel Mountain*, makes the same ungrounded affirmation in the final chapter of the book. He

and his son are watching an elderly couple disinter their boy, who had died fifty years earlier from an errant lightning bolt, and who now is to be laid with them when they die. The senseless tragedy, the almost defunct people glazed with despair, Henry's own approaching death, elicit from Henry no anger, no trembling. The deepest well from which he can draw is that his wife and son, after he dies, will "be heartbroken for a while, as he'd been heartbroken when his father died, but would after a while forget a little, turn back to the world of living, as was right."⁸ This touching faith in the graciousness of the universe comes very close to "sentimentality" as Gardner himself defined the word: "an attempt to make the reader cry without giving him a good clear reason for crying."⁹

The next phase of Gardner's work, however, became more daring, both in style and narrative. A nasty brutishness has barged into the universe, and the universe, now a tyrant, not a father, requires rebellion, not respect. Where once zephyrs travelled we now find farts, whistles, leers, and, most of all, doubts. An increased desperation haunts this middle phase of Gardner's fiction as his characters become less able to trade on their convenient illusions. But perhaps "desperation" is not the right word, with its suggestion of abandonment. Gardner never simply abandons his characters to wander blinded, Oedipus-like. What he does is bring them closer to their own humanity, force them to stop looking to the gods for redemption and start the harder business of redeeming themselves. While the possibility for redemption is *always* there, it is never assured, as it was for earlier characters like Henry Soames. It is our responsibility, acting against the backdrop of a deserted universe, to make everyone "one of our number."¹⁰

This tense balance Gardner brings to his later fiction is not so much a tension between the individual and an abstract "world," as between the individual's awesome capacities for self-destruction *and* self-delusion *and* love *and* forgiveness. Gardner, at this point, has become less the "writer of ideas" and more a miniaturist of chameleon human beings. One can, of course, only speculate how Gardner would have grown and changed as an artist, but there is no reason to think he would have abandoned the path he had set for himself: shocking his characters (and his readers) out of thinking themselves residents in a beneficent universe and throwing them back into the messiness of their own lives to find their own levels of forgiveness and co-operation.

Yet to put it this way is to say that Gardner, in this late phase, retains some of that sentimentality of his earlier fiction, and this would be false. When Gardner kicked out the gods and made his characters depend upon one another, he knew that without the gods, without their paternalistic assurance that life means something, those contradictions and exaggerations of life, the fundamental absurdities that otherwise could be explained away, would sit down next to us at the banquet and steal our food. Gardner's redemptions in this late phase never evict these gluttonous guests, they only hold them at bay to provide breathing room. The ineluctable edge of bitterness that life carries comes from knowing that these guests will, in the end, eat everything, including us.

What is one to do in the face of this double-bind: damned if I do live, and damned if I do not? Gardner's answer: Fight back. Gardner, knowing full well the dangers of lunacy and suicide, nonetheless has his characters struggle against the abyss in order to maintain some modicum of goodness, or sweetness, or, at the very least, some cohering picture of the self. That this is so in Gardner's fiction is not surprising because it grows out of his conception of what fiction is and ought to do. The narrator in *Jason and Medea* asks, "Is nothing serious?"¹¹

- and is answered by James Chandler of *The Resurrection*: “the true meaning of human adaptability is man’s power to find, despite overwhelming arguments, something in himself to love” (115). While it may be true that nothing is serious, the asking of the question is a serious endeavor and constitutes the beginning of the search for meaning. Gardner’s fiction merges the corrosively absurd with the commandment to love in order to instruct people, in a wholly undidactic way, that the search for meaning begins and ends in the dangers and possibilities of their lives.

GARDNER AS A CRAFTSMAN

In the first chapter of *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner shoots out pronouncements on art like a crap-shooter on a roll. Art, by turns, asserts, rediscovers, gropes, combines fancy and judgment, and values chance. This line of argument is fairly well summed up when Gardner announces that “art builds; it never stands pat; it destroys only evil,” and this fairly well sums up the self-proclaimed purpose of Gardner’s own fiction.

Yet, as Gardner also intelligently notes, “the artist who begins with a doctrine to promulgate, instead of a rabble multitude of ideas and emotions, is beaten before he starts,” even if he’s writing about the sacred doctrine of art. Nothing can be as tedious as a manifesto, or a piece of “art” which is simply a manifesto in drag. Gardner had more than a “message” in his work, more than a brief for the ways things ought to be. He complemented the complexity of his vision with an earnest attention to the craft of writing. Like Henry, the old actor in *The Fantasticks*, he knew how to “dress the stage.”

Gardner not only created new forms of fiction, as in *Grendel*, to handle what he wanted to say, but also revived all manner of other fictional forms: the epic poem, Platonic dialogue, pastoral novel, the framed novel in the manner of *The Scarlet Letter*. His settings are as often in the mythic past as they are in everyday America, and in such books as *The King’s Indian*, he mixes the locales, giving us in one book a realistic story about a small-town minister, the fairy tales of Queen Louisa, a Poe-ish horror story, and a Melvillian epic on the high seas. Gardner called this blending of space and time, of the old forms with contemporary notions, the “poetic mosaic” or “interlace,” a tradition in which the artist weaves old materials together for a new aesthetic purpose.¹² As Gardner said in an interview, “My subject really is (as one critic once mentioned), human history - the conflict of ideas and emotions through the ages.”¹³

Thus Gardner tried to expand the consciousness of his readers by placing them simultaneously in ancient and modern times, using each to activate and illuminate the other. By doing this he hoped his art would create “a vision of life-in-the-twentieth-century that is worth pursuing,” a vision that would help people “hunt for positive ways of surviving, of living.”¹⁴ And Gardner worked out this vision for his readers through an acutely visual poetic prose.

Grendel probably reflects best his desire to present through language both “the real and the real transmuted.”¹⁵ In *Grendel* he hones an incisive epigrammatic language that reflects the deadly keenness and ferocity of Grendel’s world. In this story, the epic of *Beowulf* related from the monster’s point of view, we see Unferth, protector of the king Hrothgar, standing in the presence of Beowulf: “with his head bowed, eyes mere slits, clamped mouth hidden where his moustache overlapped his beard. Bitterness went out from him like darkness made visible” (83-84). Beowulf’s bear “stirred, restless, irritable, like the young king’s anger removed to the end of a chain” (86). Later, when Grendel is filled with wrathful despair, Gardner’s language

sings out in ironic eloquence the desperation Grendel feels: "(Thus poor Grendel! anger's child, / red eyes hidden in the dark of verbs, / brachiating with a hoot from rhyme and rhyme)" (97). The Shaper's young assistant "hears the harp behind closed eyes [while] the October hills in his calm mind run wolves" (98). And Gardner even mimics the kenning of the Anglo-Saxon poetry when Grendel sees himself as an "old hellroads-runner; earth-rim-roamer" (101).

Yet language was not, and could not be, everything. As he said in a celebrated conversation with William Gass, language "exists to make a beautiful and powerful apparition," not just to paint "pretty colored walls."¹⁶ And to Gardner, characters roundly fleshed with clear and truthful language were what pulled readers into the "continuous dream" of fiction and made the fiction worth reading. The writer's business, Gardner said, is to "make up convincing human beings and create for them basic situations and actions by means of which they come to know themselves and reveal themselves to the reader."¹⁷ When the writer does this well, the reader can vicariously act out the trials of the characters and learn from their failures and successes particular attitudes, opinions, assertions, and beliefs. Fiction written in this way, with strong language creating strong characters, "helps us know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations."¹⁸

Gardner's books abound in finely formed characters who stick tenaciously to the reader's mind and engage the reader's sympathies. One small passage in *The Sunlight Dialogues*, a description of Millie Hodge (*nee* Jewel), wife of Will Hodge, Sr., the Sunlight Man's brother, shows Gardner's gifts at work. Millie is a rapaciously egotistical woman, unwilling to give, and in the end incapable of giving, love to anyone because she has defined the world for herself only in terms of what it can give her. As her name indicates, she has a mineral soul, and Gardner captures this quality emphatically when she receives the news of her son Luke's suicide:

"I'm sorry, Millie," [Will, her husband] said. That was all. The connection broke. She listened to the wind, and there were no ghosts' voices now. No time for fantasy. The house was empty. She turned mechanically away from the phone. The room was cold, for the hot summer had at last broken, and autumn was descending in a rush, as always in Western New York. She drew the ragged old red and purple afghan from the couch and wrapped it around her shoulders. She stood at the window with her arms crossed over her bosom holding the makeshift robe in place. Stony Hill [the Hodge family estate] was burning, a red glow northeast of [Attica] prison's white light. She stood looking. Her arms were white, her elbows like daggers. Her eyes were like emerald, her lips like amethyst, and in her mourning she was beautiful again; she was calm as a stone. (714-15)

Notice the choppy jog of the opening sentences, as well as their lack of depth, paralleling her refusal to feel grief and responsibility. The rhythm is broken only at the sentence about coming autumn and one notices suddenly how closely the coming of autumn and winter reflects the crystallization of her own soul. Donning a ragged royalty with the faded afghan, she views a kingdom edged by fire and imprisonment. But it is all outside her now, alien and distant. She does not react to her son's death, to the destruction of her family's estate; she merely stands looking. And the last two sentences have that sense of toting up, as if Millie is no more or less than that list of both literal and metamorphic images, topped off by the final clause that has the finality of a sinking stone.

Ultimately Gardner's power as an author comes from his acute ability to weave his poetic language into characters who are then woven into narrative structures that gather force because of juxtaposition, echoing, and rhythmic intertwining, in much the same way a poem assumes power from its patternings. In all his fiction Gardner tried to illustrate the advice he

gave to young writers: “One way or another, all good writing achieves some kind of gusto ... Whatever fire the presentation may have comes from harmony or indivisibility of presentation and the thing presented.”¹⁹ This means that a fiction writer must learn that language is “finally subservient to plot and character.”²⁰ Gardner was uneven in how well he put his principles into practice. Gregory Morris, in his study of Gardner’s fiction, fairly states that of the ten novels Gardner wrote, three will be significant examples of twentieth-century fiction; the rest will live on as near-misses or undervalued minor works.²¹ Yet through all of Gardner’s books one can see him working out his belief, as he stated in an interview:

fiction, to be good, always has to be about the particular, ... and at the same time it has to have universality. You get universality partly by resonance, by tying your story to a myth, as in *Ulysses*. Another way you get resonance and get away from the specific, the particular, is to take several characters with parallel situations and show slight differences in effect ... [This is] the technique of Jane Austen or Henry James, where you have parallel figures who, together tell you the larger truth.²²

It is fitting that Gardner’s posthumous works have been books about the craft and difficulties of writing, for they accumulate what he had been accomplishing with all his work, that is, to show that being a wordsmith was a moral, legitimate, necessary vocation and required great sacrifice and patience. As he said in *On Becoming A Novelist*, “spending a lifetime writing novels is hard enough to justify in any case, but spending a lifetime writing novels nobody wants is much harder.” Gardner knew very well, as he said in an interview, that “it’s probably true that writing doesn’t change much, that lives aren’t wildly altered by novels, although lives are sometimes saved by novels, but generally fiction doesn’t have that much effect.” Nevertheless, he continues, “when you’re a writer you have to pretend, believe that writing has an enormous effect. You have to convince yourself that every story you write is something wonderful.”²³ The “something wonderful” of Gardner’s writings is his effort to offer reasons for embracing life. He knew full well that death would triumph, yet he also knew that in life’s battle there would be understandings and victories that make life worthwhile, if not eternal. These victories are what he tries to harness in his work so that we may be drawn away from despair and provided “with the flicker of lightning that shows us where we are.”²⁴

NOTES

1. Terence Des Pres, *The Yale Review*, Summer 1983.
2. John M. Howell, *John Gardner: A Bibliographical Profile*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980.)
3. Quoted in “Inside the Whale,” *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letter of George Orwell*, Vol. 1, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), p. 523.
4. *Ibid*, p. 505.
5. John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), p. 132, 133.
6. Joe David Bellamy, *The New Fiction: Interviews With Innovative American Writers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 191.
7. John Gardner, *The Resurrection*, (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 226. Subsequent references in this text to this edition.

8. John Gardner, *Nickel Mountain*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 304. Subsequent references in text to this edition.
9. Ed Christian, "An Interview with John Gardner," *Prairie Schooner*, Winter 1980/81, p. 91.
10. The phrase comes from *The Sunlight Dialogues* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 739. It is pronounced by Fred Clumly, the Sunlight Man's antagonist, as he hears of the Sunlight Man's death. It indicates Clumly's recognition of the essential "boundedness" of each to each. (Subsequent references in text to this edition).
11. John Gardner, *Jason and Medeia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 467.
12. Per Winther, "An Interview With John Gardner," *English Studies*, 1981, p. 512.
13. Paul Ferguson et al, "John Gardner: The Art of Fiction LXIII," *Paris Review*: Spring 1979, p. 63.
14. *Ibid*, p. 46, 47.
15. John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 117; John Gardner, *Grendel*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981). Subsequent references in text to this edition.
16. Thomas LeClair, "William Gass and John Gardner: A Debate on Fiction," *The New Republic*, 10 March 1979, p. 33.
17. *Art of Fiction*, p. 15.
18. *Ibid*, p. 31
19. *Ibid*, p. 124
20. John Gardner, *On Becoming a Novelist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 10.
21. Gregory Morris, *A World of Order and Light: The Fiction of John Gardner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 228.
22. Winther, p. 516.
23. Christian, p. 86.
24. *On Moral Fiction*, p. 16.