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Ethics and Contemporary American Literature: Revisiting the Controversy over John Gardner's

On Moral Fiction

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In 1978, the novelist John Gardner published a rather slender treatise called *On Moral Fiction* in which he claimed that true art must be moral, that little art being produced then was moral and, therefore, that most of his contemporaries were either bad artists or not artists at all.¹ It is difficult to recall a book about literature and/or ethics—at least one written by a novelist or poet rather than, say, by William Bennett—that has been received with so much hostility, especially among other writers and artists. Was the hostile response deserved, or is there, beneath the polemics and diatribes, anything worth listening to in Gardner's call for renewed attention to the ethical obligations and effects of fiction or of literature more generally?

The reactions to Gardner's book largely divided along ideological lines. Some conservatives and neo-conservatives appreciated his basic argument that art must be moral and that most contemporary literature and criticism were misguided, even if they found the book otherwise flawed (see, e.g., Epstein). Most critics and theorists on the left and most of the writers whose work he discussed in the book rejected his arguments with disdain. A special 1980 issue of *Fiction International* included 28 mostly brief, mostly negative, and occasionally scathing responses to Gardner's book by such writers as John Barth, Raymond Federman, Gilbert Sorrentino, John Updike² (although a few less well-known writers and critics did praise *some* aspects of the book). In Barth's own 1980 essay, "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth calls *On Moral Fiction* a "tract . . . an exercise in literary kneecapping that lumps modernists and postmodernists together without distinction and consigns us all to Hell with the indiscriminate fervor characteristic of late converts to the right" (66-67). Many reviewers and most of his peers responded as a group of parents would if their children's teacher had written a book called *The Joys of Pedophilia*. Robert Towers' review in the *New York Review of Books* was titled "Good Grief!" Although Towers does suggest we shouldn't dismiss *On Moral Fiction* altogether, he criticizes "the puritanical strain underlying Gardner's exhortations" and notes that Gardner "flings about the words 'moral' and 'immoral' shamelessly, evoking salvation and hell-fire" (31). Roger Sale's review

in the *New York Times Book Review* was called "Banging on the Table."³ What provoked such strong reactions?

Gardner's book is certainly in the same polemical tradition as Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*, written in 1897 after Tolstoy's religious conversion. Tolstoy, who Gardner discusses, argued that true art must unite all men in "sonship to God and . . . the brotherhood of man" (150, my emphases)—either through affirming these true Christian ideals or through sharing simple, honest human feelings. But Tolstoy was willing to take the consequences of his own theory—consigning his own books *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* to the category of bad art, while raising china dolls (and two lesser, didactic stories of his own) to the pedestal of good art. Gardner's book, on the other hand, was perceived by many as self-serving, a forum in which to criticize his peers and defend his own work (or at least what he wanted his work to be). Ronald Sukenick called *On Moral Fiction* "a sort of advertisement for himself [Gardner]" and thought the best response to the book was to ignore it ("A Writers' Forum," 21). But many "classic" works of literary criticism by practicing writers, such as Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* or Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," can also be seen as primarily explanations, justifications, and/or defenses of the writers' own work.

The hostile tone of many responses to Gardner's book can be explained in at least three ways: 1) his contemporaries took great offense at being called immoral or amoral and thus *bad* writers; 2) many artists, writers, critics, and theorists, find discussions of morality and art quite uncomfortable; or 3) the book is weak, flawed, or stupid.⁴ While there may be some legitimacy to the third of these explanations, I would like to focus more on the first two, since I find Gardner's book flawed but provocative and parts of his argument worth serious attention.

Recent debates about NEA and NEH funding, about public school curricula, about violence and, even worse, talk shows on television demonstrate clearly the dangers of judging art solely by rigid and narrowly defined notions of "the moral." But can one acknowledge the risks of evaluating literary and artistic works solely by their supposed moral effects without assuming that discussions of ethics and literature have no place in discourse, even postmodern discourse, today?

Gardner is right that most critics and theorists, from Plato through the Romantics, have assumed that literature has—or should have—moral effects, even if they've disagreed about what those effects may be. In *The Republic*, Plato argued that poetry was morally corrupting, since it was thrice removed from the truth and fostered emotion rather

than reason. Horace assumed literature could and should teach as well as delight. In *An Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney defended poetry against the charges that had been leveled against it by Plato and by Sidney's contemporary Stephen Gosson. Sidney argued that poetry was the best of all the arts and sciences for moving readers to virtuous action by sweetly revealing the path to it through blending philosophical precepts with vivid examples. Yet Sidney acknowledged that not all poets successfully moved and taught their readers.

The idea that art should both instruct and delight persisted in most literary and aesthetic theory through at least the end of the eighteenth century. Gardner argues that the current critical belief in separating the aesthetic from the moral is traceable to New Criticism, although he briefly mentions Kant in this regard. I think Kant was a pivotal figure in this development. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that the judgment of beauty must be separated from the judgment of the good (and of the useful).⁵ Still, post-Kant, in the early nineteenth century, Romantic poet-critics like Shelley and Wordsworth would argue that poetry could have subtle moral effects through awakening imagination and empathy. But the moral and the aesthetic were severed almost completely with the rise of aestheticism in the later nineteenth century.⁶ The foregrounding of the aesthetic or linguistic rather than the ethical dimensions of literature continued in Modernism and in the various twentieth-century formalisms (although *contra* Gardner, I would argue that New Critics still found "human themes" even in supposedly autonomous verbal icons). Structuralism certainly continued this emphasis on form, structure, and language; some believe poststructuralism led to even further evacuation of moral dimensions from literary theory and criticism.⁷ Criticism in the twentieth century has been much more interpretive and analytical than evaluative (except in the case of book reviews); when value has been an issue, it has been so more often in terms of aesthetics (and sometimes politics) than ethics. And it is evaluative criticism *linking* the aesthetic and the ethical which Gardner hopes to resuscitate (144-45).

Published at the height of postmodernism in literature, the arts, and theory, *On Moral Fiction* could easily be seen as a reactionary text by a writer longing for return to an at least interrupted if not outmoded tradition. Gardner is, indeed, proud to claim he is taking "the traditional view" that "true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it" (5). For Gardner, a literary work that is not "serious and beneficial" is not *bad* art—it is not art *at all* (6). He sees much of the work of his contemporaries, who he claims are often "nihilists, cynics, and merdistes," as tending toward destruction (6), whereas true art must be

"life-giving" (15). And certainly many of his contemporaries had radically different ideas from Gardner's about the relation between ethics and aesthetics. Most postmodernists in the 1970's would have echoed Jerry Bumpus in saying "I don't want to improve people with my writing" ("A Writers' Forum," 129) and followed Vladimir Nabokov in asserting that their books were not didactic and contained no moral messages.⁸

Gardner criticizes not only contemporary writers, primarily of fiction, but also the critics who support them, who chatter about "hermeneutics [sic]" rather than the human (129) or debate the definition of postmodernism while the world goes to hell in a handbasket (7). Some recent movements in the arts (like conceptual art) and most contemporary literary theories "evade or suppress moral issues." Postmodernists, he asserts, "accidentally raise the issue of art's morality and take the wrong side" (55). But now John Gardner comes along, wielding Thor's hammer (the overarching metaphor of the book) to save the day, welcoming the moral back into the fold of critical and theoretical discourse. Since he believes that "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are the fundamental concerns of art and therefore ought to be the fundamental concerns of criticism" (144), it is only fitting that they are his own preoccupations.⁹

Although for Gardner true art is and must be moral, he does not believe it should be overtly didactic—and this is a major point of disagreement with Tolstoy. Gardner asserts that artists who set out with a "predetermined message" are doomed to failure (85). For him, "the morality of art is . . . far less a matter of doctrine than of process" (91). This view seems similar to Shelley's in "A Defence of Poetry" that poetry with an explicit moral *aim* is unlikely to have the moral *effect* that can be achieved through its enlarging of the imagination and thus of the capacity for empathy (328). Art, for Gardner, must discover what it has to say rather than say what it has already discovered (14). For Gardner, propaganda masquerading as literature is just as morally reprehensible as is work that fails to engage seriously any moral issues. True art, for him, explores moral questions but doesn't preach explicit moral messages.

Gardner argues that art can be moral in several ways: by holding up models of virtue and of decent behavior, by celebrating life's potential with a vision rooted in love (which, for him, Toni Morrison and John Irving do), by clarifying life, by humanizing its readers, by designing "visions worth trying to make fact" (100). Moral art must affirm life and reveal a path to a better possible future.

Many of us might be sympathetic to such general principles. It would be nice to have more truly life-affirming, even inspiring fiction, movies, television shows—even if we also want to maintain a place for work that mocks or rages against life. Gardner says true morality consists of “life-affirming, just, and compassionate behavior” (76). Few would dispute the desirability of such behavior, although many would and do debate how such terms as “justice” should be defined—and by whom—and not everyone would include “love of country” along with “honesty” and “moral courage” on a list of fundamental moral values (42). But, as Hume said of taste, few would dispute the general principles but many would dispute their application to particular cases (212-13).

Although much of *On Moral Fiction* lays out Gardner’s philosophical views on art, morality, truth, and beauty, a significant portion of it is devoted to illustrating his claim that our age is one of at best mediocre and at worst bad art, literature, music, philosophy, criticism. Tolstoy had made many of the same points about *his* age, and used Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and his own *Anna Karenina* as examples of such bad art. Gardner provides some examples of bad art that are less absurd but still highly debatable.

Gardner argues that most contemporary writers of fiction either merely hold a mirror up to life with no effort to change it—and he cites Donald Barthelme as probably the best writer of this type (79-80)—or they advocate specific social justice goals that will cease to be meaningful once they are achieved. Gardner sees E. L. Doctorow as a writer of this second type, one who ignores the “permanently moral” while focusing on transitory social or political concerns. But Gardner uses as an example of such a “temporary” concern “social justice for particular minorities.” Given the persistence of racism for centuries, it seems that working against racism is an integral part of a *permanent* moral concern with justice, rights, compassion, etc.—not a “dated and thus trivial” goal, as Gardner claims (77-78). Given that he sees racism as trivial and concern with “women’s liberation” as propaganda (39), it may not be surprising that Gardner’s pantheon of writers who express true moral values—and are therefore read and admired for many generations—consists of (mostly) dead white males: Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, etc.

Unlike these great writers of the past, most writers of the 1970’s, and especially the postmodernists, are neither good nor true artists, according to Gardner. He argues that the work of Robert Coover and William Gass “will die quickly, of pure meanness.” Most of the work of Thomas

Pynchon and John Barth "will die of intellectual blight, academic narrowness, or fakery" (94).

Gardner does suggest that in *Chimera*, Barth at least "comes through as a loving, optimistic man" even though the book is flawed by its "underestimation of women" and its author's "egoism." Gardner says that "an odd thing about Barth is that he always seems to know what's wrong with his fiction but never fixes it" (95). A piece like Barth's "Life-Story" illustrates this problem, Gardner says, as it self-reflexively comments on both the need for and the futility of trying to avoid endless self-reflexiveness (95-96). Yet, one could argue that this double gesture of both bemoaning and illustrating the inability to transcend one's own discourse, is just what the story is *about*—about the power and limits of fiction, language, and understanding. And an awareness of such power and limits seems integral to ethics, insofar as ethics concerns the subject's relation to the other.

Gardner does allow that a few of his contemporaries are, indeed, moral writers. John Fowles is one of the few well-known recent writers of whom Gardner approves. Even though Fowles' work is often self-conscious, Fowles has convictions and so does his work, Gardner feels. Gardner also praises John Cheever, although not as fervently as he does Fowles, for caring about his characters and his readers, and for having an affirmative vision. Yet Updike, who explicitly addresses moral and religious concerns, is less successful, Gardner says, since he writes stories and novels that are "too much like sermons" and not enough like art, which, he says, must have "an essential and radical openness to persuasion" (99).

Some writers have enormous talent but do not direct it toward the right ends, Gardner believes. William Gass, for instance, has the ability to create vivid characters, to "engage both the reader's emotion and intellect," but his work, in trying to "prove a theory" of language, winds up emptying everything out of his work but language (68). Gass and other postmodernists, who, Gardner claims, are concerned with language over all else or use literary language that is opaque, show a lack of concern for readers, as well as for morality. Such writers are "more in love, on principle, with the sound of words . . . than with creating fictional worlds" (71). Gass, while "the best of [this] lot," is, nonetheless "stubbornly unreadable" (70).

A more readable—perhaps even *too* readable—postmodernist fiction writer is Kurt Vonnegut, who, Gardner claims, has "moral energy" but is too world-weary and uncommitted to maintain it. Gardner criticizes Kurt Vonnegut for not caring "enough about his characters to use

them as anything but examples in a forced proof" (85). The characters exist as a vehicle for the novelist's message, not, Gardner says, "as subjects for the artist's open-minded exploration of what he can honestly say" (85).

Gardner cites as an example of Vonnegut's cold-heartedness his frequent use of the phrase "so it goes" in *Slaughterhouse Five*, whenever a death (literal or metaphorical) occurs; Gardner is especially troubled by the use of the phrase in reference to the American fire-bombing of Dresden (87). Yet, I see *Slaughterhouse Five* as a critique of the passivity—in the face of horror and death—exemplified by both its main character, Billy Pilgrim, and the Tralfamadorian space aliens Billy either visits or invents, whose saying this is.

Writers, as Gardner often seems to forget, don't always *advocate* what they *represent*. Even though "so it goes" is said by Vonnegut's narrator (who seems to be a minimally fictionalized version of himself), this refrain may not reflect cynicism or cold-heartedness, but rather a *critique* of these. Vonnegut has written in defense of *Slaughterhouse Five* after it had been burned in a North Dakota school furnace, that his works "beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are" (*Palm Sunday*, 6). Readers may argue about whether this goal is sincere or successfully achieved, but Gardner does not even consider the possibility that "so it goes" is used ironically or to achieve a moral effect.

Gardner contrasts these immoral or amoral contemporary writers with the great canonical writers of the past—Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Melville—whose works persist because they are grounded in a moral vision. Such works, he says, "exert their civilizing influence century after century" (105). But Gardner believes that in our own century, because of the unhealthy influence of Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, Wittgenstein, literary theory and criticism (from New Criticism through structuralism and poststructuralism), we have little art or literature that can celebrate life or lead us toward virtue. In part, this is because we live in an age of disbelief; for Gardner, it is difficult to take a properly moral view of art if one does not believe in God or at least in some non-theological foundation for moral values. Gardner is probably right that "most [many?] contemporary writers are hesitant to speak of Truth and Beauty, not to mention God—hesitant to speak of the goodness of man, or the future of the world" (38). Many of us living in the postmodern age are less confident about the existence or meaning of these things than Gardner is, but that does not mean they have ceased to be concerns.¹⁰

For Gardner, the current climate of moral relativism and skepticism makes bad art inevitable, plentiful, and nearly victorious in its eternal struggle with good art (6). Gardner does not advocate outlawing or banning bad art, "since morality by compulsion is a fool's morality" (105-06). Instead he wants critics and artists to expose and reveal the badness of bad art and to discuss the need and criteria for good, moral art—as he is doing in this book. Gardner is issuing a call for writers to rethink the goals of their work and for critics to consider not only aesthetic, linguistic, or political aspects of literary works but also, and most importantly, their ethical dimension.

One can invoke the good, the true, the beautiful even in a largely secular world, Gardner argues. Art, he believes, should convey the good, the true, and the beautiful, even though these are not "things that exist in the way llamas do, but values which exist when embodied, and, furthermore, recognized as embodied" (133).

One of the more valuable parts of Gardner's argument is his claim that these values are neither absolute nor relative. Instead, they are what he calls "relative absolute values," a phrase which seems oxymoronic but is not. This notion is one that I found intriguing when I first read the book a decade ago and still find useful today.

Gardner's notion of "relative absolutes" is, I would argue, not so unlike the concept used by a far trendier (and smarter) theorist, Judith Butler: "contingent foundations." For Butler, traditional (non-contingent) foundations (such as theological or philosophical grounds for moral value claims) "function as the unquestioned and the unquestionable within any theory." Yet, even from her deconstructive perspective, "the point is not to do away with foundations, or even to champion a position that goes under the name of anti-foundationalism," but rather to "expose the foundational premise as a contingent and contestable presumption" (7). Elsewhere, I have used the term "good enough" foundations (borrowing D. W. Winnicott's term for mothers) to suggest that there may be foundational claims, especially for ethics, that are always subject to scrutiny and even revision, but can still serve as grounds for action. Such a "good enough" foundation for ethical practice might include a "belief in love or justice as goods even if their status as goods cannot be philosophically demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt" (Edelstein, 14). For Gardner, the relativity of "relative absolutes" is in relation to all of human history—someday, other absolutes could prevail. But many of us see such relativity (or the contingency of foundations) as a function of *space* as well as time—reflecting the positions, the cultures, and the identities in which we dwell.

Gardner doesn't despair that good, true, beautiful, *and* moral art is possible in the world we now inhabit. He cites some contemporary writers—John Fowles, Grace Paley, Charles Johnson and others—who do seem to search for truth—and Toni Morrison, for whom love is central.¹¹ But, Gardner argues, if, under the influence of postmodernism, most writers continue to foreground language, texture, structure, while backgrounding plot and especially character, and if critics continue to praise these writers, then literature will fail to achieve its potential as a moral force.

Even though Gardner seems to hold a basically mimetic view of literature, for him, as for Aristotle and Sidney, literature need not show how things *are* but “how things ought to be” (Gardner, 16). It should ask moral questions, even if moral answers aren't always available. Gardner believes that the “present scarcity of first-rate art does not follow from a sickness of society but the other way around—unless, possibly, the two chase each other's tails.” The mutually influential relationship between the arts and society is certainly more complex than Gardner's metaphor suggests. For Gardner, though, artists seem to have a sacred duty to heal society—and it is *his* duty to remind other artists of this obligation.

Gardner is “convinced that, once the alarm has been sounded, good art easily beats out bad” (126), and his book is supposed to be this wake-up call. And, indeed, since *On Moral Fiction* appeared, there has been renewed attention to ethics in/and literature and critical theory. In the last ten years, we have seen the publication of books such as Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: The Ethics of Fiction*, Tobin Siebers' *The Ethics of Criticism*, J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*, and David Parker's *Ethics, Theory, and The Novel*.¹² Gardner may have anticipated this important renewal of interest in ethics even if, in 1978, he was a lone voice crying in the wilderness (as I think he perceived himself). Yet, his book is substantially different from these later ones in that his seeks to prescribe how creative writers themselves *should write*; even when these more recent books are being prescriptive rather than descriptive, their primary audience is readers and critics, who are accustomed to arguing about how one *should read*. Perhaps because of both its tone and its timing, *On Moral Fiction* has not played a significant role in recent theoretical discussions of literature and ethics, even though it has some valuable ideas to contribute to such discussions.

Perhaps Gardner's book was widely decried and has since been largely ignored not only because of his harsh judgments of his peers and his era, but because of his limited vision of what moral fiction is.

There are more ways for a novel or story to be moral, to have moral effects, than Gardner considers. Jonathan Baumbach, in his critique of Gardner, suggests that "the job of moral fiction . . . is to make large demands on the reader, to create experiences that trouble his most cherished preconceptions, that allow him no easy gratifications, that extend his intelligence and enlarge his capacity to feel" ("A Writers' Forum," 6). Many contemporary works (e.g., *Lolita*, *Beloved*) raise ethical questions even if they don't provide definitive answers, and encouraging readers to ponder ethical issues can itself have an ethical effect. Postmodern fiction can, even through its language and form, also have ethical effects. Self-reflexive fiction can encourage readers to think deeply about reality, subjectivity, and alterity; even deeply textured work like Nabokov's or Gass's can defamiliarize language and perception and thus make us more fully aware of ourselves and of the world.

Works that deal with gender or race need not be "propaganda," as Gardner thinks they are, but can—through plot, character, style—engage, as Gardner thinks all moral fiction should, "universal" concerns (love, kinship, death). But many recent writers also manage to retain and celebrate particularity, historical specificity, and thus avoid the effacement of difference, the mistaken identification of the particular (e.g., maleness, whiteness) with the universal. Through exploring both difference and commonality, many contemporary writers can provide a new vision of ethics based on respect for the other (and the otherness of the other). Many contemporary writers may share Shelley's view of how literature can be moral—by developing the imagination and thus the capacity for empathy and love. I think of recent novels like Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* and see that life-affirming, aesthetically successful (and also politically engaged) fiction is possible and that there is an appreciative audience for it—even if some of us *also* value Barth or Barthelme.

Gardner's philosophical analyses of goodness, truth, beauty, and morality may be imperfect. Gardner may rely on pre-postmodern assumptions—universality, essentialism, and foundationalism—rather than trying to engage seriously and then refute postmodern critiques of these. But we don't need to throw Gardner's baby (concern with ethics) out with the bathwater (the polemics, diatribes, and flawed judgments in *On Moral Fiction*). Nor do postmodernists need to throw the baby (ethics) out with the (Enlightenment) bathwater. Even postmodernists might embrace, in daily life if not in theoretical treatises, Gardner's notion of morality as "doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted" (23).

Who among us doesn't want the world to be better? Why shouldn't literature have a role to play in helping us move toward this better world? For Gardner, art has an obligation to affirm life, to convey the good, true, and beautiful because "it is civilization's single most significant device for learning what must be affirmed and what must be denied" (146). Like Plato, Gardner believes literature has enormous power; unlike Plato, Gardner argues that this power can be used for good. It may be self-delusion to believe in literature's power in an age when television, video, cinema, and CD-ROM's have much larger audiences than do works of literature. But if so, it is a widespread delusion among those of us who devote our lives to literary study and/or creation.

On Moral Fiction may have been overly gloomy about the state of contemporary arts and theory. It may also have been nostalgic for a lost golden age of moral fiction and moral criticism. Yet, paradoxically, perhaps it was also ahead of its time. The "high" postmodernism Gardner decried—that of Barth and Barthelme, endlessly self-reflexive, ironic, playful—has been supplemented if not supplanted by a postmodern "literature of replenishment" (Barth) that is more politically and socially engaged but still innovative (e.g., the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, or Sandra Cisneros in the U.S. or the work of Milan Kundera, Gabriel García Marquez, Angela Carter abroad). Gardner's own ethical gesture may have been publishing a book that, because of or in spite of the widespread negative reactions to it, helped to revive interest in the intersections between literature and ethics, word and world.

Notes

1. Gardner had been working on the book slowly for many years, even before he became known as a novelist. Several sections of it had been published already—one even in *Critical Inquiry* in 1977.
2. Frederick Exley's judgment there was the most damning and the most succinct: "John Gardner is full of shit" ("A Writers' Forum," 10).
3. For an overview of critical reactions to *On Moral Fiction*, see Cowart (15-19), who describes them as "a chorus of denunciation" filled with "contumely from the parties judged, anger and near hysteria on the part of their apologists" (17, 15). See also MacCurdy, who provides both an analysis of critical reaction and a history of Gardner's work on the subject of moral fiction. MacCurdy suggests that *On Moral Fiction* "colored everything Gardner published afterwards, as well as the critics' responses to it"; reviewers often criticized his later work "either for being too didactic . . . or for not following his critical theory" (136, 139).

4. Clausen notes that "discussions of literature and ethics make most contemporary critics squirm in their chairs. The largely dismissive response that greeted John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* when it came out in 1978 was a notable example of this unease" (1).

5. Gardner briefly responds to Kant's argument for the disinterestedness of judgments of beauty by claiming that "art . . . is not independent of all interest but beyond all interest" (162).

6. Yet, Vladimir Nabokov claims that even Oscar Wilde, an exemplary aestheticist, was among those who "were in reality rank moralists and didacticists" (*Strong Opinions* 33).

7. Some, especially recent, poststructuralist literary theory and criticism does engage ethical issues, even though such work does not ask the same questions nor arrive at the same conclusions that Gardner does. See, for example, Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*. Cf. Harpham, esp. 387-94.

8. See, for example, Nabokov's assertion that he "has no social purpose, no moral message; . . . I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions" (*Strong Opinions*, 16). This is a view he reiterates in many of his infamous forewords, and in the Afterword to *Lolita*, in which he contrasts his own views with those of "John Ray, Jr.," the "editor" he created for *Lolita*. Ray praises the book's "ethical impact" and "general lesson" (7); in the Afterword, Nabokov argues that, "despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow" (316). Palmer suggests that Gardner's book is a "defense of the tradition for which John Ray is an ironic spokesman" (162); Gardner himself criticizes Nabokov for being concerned with "aesthetic bliss" over all else. Yet, Nabokov's views of the relation between ethics and aesthetics are more complex than they might appear. For instance, in his *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov claims that "a major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter" (5), and elsewhere he accurately prophesied that future critics would find him "a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity . . . and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride" (*Strong Opinions* 193).

9. Of course, one could easily turn Gardner's ethical standards back upon this book itself. Written by someone who advocates love, kindness, and respect for others, this is often a remarkably ill-tempered, judgmental, and dogmatic book (even though at times it is also impassioned, eloquent, and wise). In one rather overwrought passage, Gardner criticizes "our schools thrown up like barricades in the way of young minds, our brainless fat religions, . . . our ritual of fornicating with all pretty or even horse-faced strangers" [unless "we" are women]; he claims that we "praise debauchery as pluralism" (100).

10. And many of us would want to expand one of these concerns to "the goodness of men and women" or "the goodness of human beings." This common problem—using the male as generic but also as normative and universal—suggests some of the reasons why contemporary theorists, especially feminists, have been skeptical of

traditional ethics, with its universal subject and universal principles. See Harpham for a brief overview of such critiques (387-89).

11. Morrison and Johnson are among the very few writers of color Gardner even mentions (and Morrison and Paley are among the very few women); perhaps Gardner praised Johnson not so much because he is a fine writer but because Johnson had been his student. (Thanks to Aldon Nielsen for pointing this out to me.)

12. As Steven Connor points out, Parker's book "opens with a rhetorical gesture that has become conventional in the new literary ethics, by claiming to be breaking an almost total silence about ethical matters in literary theory. At the same time, and with unconscious irony, he points to and associates himself with the veritable clamour of other critical voices calling for a return to ethical thinking," such as Booth (25). Booth is the only one of these critics to discuss Gardner's book, although only briefly. Booth argues that Gardner's ideas about how fiction can be moral or have ethical effects are limited and that his suggested method for evaluating moral fiction is simplistic and reductive.

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