

LIFE FOLLOWS FICTION

The commanding axiom of John Gardner's activities as a cultural figure is his assumption that art and life are closely connected. His work is informed by a persistent concern with the quality of life in the second part of the twentieth century. This in itself does not perhaps warrant particular attention. What makes Gardner a special case on the contemporary intellectual scene is the messianic fervor of his pronouncements on art, and the massive importance that he claims for the role of art in his own life as well as in the past and future life of humanity. In an address to the students at Rochester University in 1973 ("Life Follows Fiction"), he made a claim which was later to become one of the leitmotifs of *On Moral Fiction*: "Life follows fiction—never doubt it for a moment. Nothing in the world is more powerful than art, for good and evil" (3). To Gardner, therefore, it makes a world of difference *what* topics art chooses to address, and *how* it dramatizes these topics. This conviction on his part has greatly helped determine the direction of his own fiction, as well as his ventures into the field of aesthetic theory.

The idea that life follows fiction is something which Gardner talks about repeatedly in essays, articles, and interviews. It is not surprising, therefore, that this motif is also subject to fictional treatment on his part. Four stories which address art's potentially *vulnerary function* are "Nimram," "The Music Lover," "Come on Back," and "Redemption." These are all collected in Gardner's last book of short stories, significantly entitled *The Art of Living and Other Stories*, and they show how music and song sustain people in their efforts to cope with death as well as the pull toward nihilism that tends to accompany a heavy sense of loss. In the following I try to explain the author's insistence on such a possibility

in terms of his personal history. In the latter part of the chapter I turn to a more specialized form of the life-follows-fiction idea: Gardner's often repeated assertion that *art instructs*.

1

Nimram is an American conductor of national and international fame who, on his way back to Chicago from a concert on the West Coast, becomes acquainted with a young girl sitting next to him on the plane. It is a stormy night, the girl has never flown before, and in an effort to help her through the ordeal Nimram engages her in conversation. He then finds out that she is suffering from a terminal disease, a fact she handles with courage and grace, largely by recognizing that in her fear and helplessness she is one with humanity at large. She gives words to this realization by appropriating a rather cryptic line often spoken by her uncle Charley: "He says the most interesting thing about Noah's Ark is that all the animals on it were scared and stupid" (23). This comment would appear to suggest a misanthropic reading of the world. Given the context, however, it should rather be seen as a reflection of stoic awareness on Uncle Charley's part. We learn about him that he, too, is dying of a terminal disease. But like his niece he refuses to sink into loneliness and self-pity; his stubbornly cheerful approach to hardships seems to spring from the life-sustaining realization that a sense of frailty and inadequacy is an unavoidable part of the human condition. His trials, then, inspire him not to loneliness and isolation but to a reaching out, a call for togetherness. Thus, in the story the plane becomes a kind of latter-day Noah's Ark. The frail, scared girl and Nimram, at any other time the incarnation of harmonious ease but now haunted by a sense of utter helplessness at the prospect of the youngster's death, become representatives of interdependent mankind: through their interdependence they endow each other's lives with dignity and meaning, however transitory.

Nimram is struck by the contrast between the rich and eventful life he has led and the brevity of the girl's life experience, and he feels "helplessly fortunate and therefore unfit, unworthy, his whole life light and unprofitable as a puff-ball, needless as ascending smoke" (19). Understandable though this response is, the story makes the point that Nimram's sense of guilt is not constructive, nor does it have a basis in fact. The girl learns the conductor's name; upon arrival in Chicago her father tells her that Nimram is

conducting the Chicago Symphony in Mahler's Fifth the following evening, and she goes to the concert with her parents. The concert in a way becomes a repetition of her experience on the plane, suggestive of companionship and togetherness on the grandest of scales. This section of the story is told through the girl's point of view and is thus controlled by her consciousness. In this way the author is better able to convey the uplifting effects of art on the mind of someone potentially ill-inclined to care about art at all. A psychologically sound reaction to the fact of imminent death could have been disillusionment and bitterness. By recreating in vivid and suspenseful images the girl's excitement at hearing her fellow traveller conduct his orchestra, Gardner succeeds in convincing the reader that the girl's enthusiastic response is also sound.

Deftly the author recaptures the marvel of Mahler's Fifth Symphony:

Now his left hand moved and the orchestra stirred, tentative at first, but presaging such an awakening as she'd never before dreamed of. Then something new began, all that wide valley of orchestra playing calm, serene, a vast sweep of music as smooth and sharp-edged as an enormous scythe—she had never in her life heard a sound so broad, as if all of humanity, living and dead, had come together for one grand onslaught. The sound ran, gathering its strength, along the ground, building in intensity, full of doubt, even terror, but also fury, and then—amazingly, quite easily—lifted. (26–29)

This passage is indicative of Gardner's great stylistic potential, recreating as he does the girl's musical experience through onomatopoeic, symbolic, and syntactic means. The description of the orchestra playing, "serene, a vast sweep of music as smooth and sharp-edged as an enormous scythe," not only offers rich musical images, but with the many sibilants creates a musical effect while at the same time reinforcing the central image by imitating with rhythmic regularity the sound and movement of a scythe. The scythe is of course an instrument closely associated with the figure of death, and the image thus creates resonance for the death motif sounded earlier in the story. But death is transcended by the music, by that which is everlasting in art: the ability to unite people in a timeless experience of community. The note of togetherness struck by the Noah image on the plane is sustained by the orchestra's symbolical "scrunching forward and closer together" to

make room for the extra instruments needed to play a Mahler symphony. Then in the music the theme of togetherness is given the widest reference possible by the orchestra's conjuring up a sound so broad that the girl can only compare it to "all of humanity, living and dead" coming together "for one grand onslaught"; the force of that experience is reflected by the sonorous vowel quality and the heavy beat of the last three words of the sentence.

No doubt Gardner chose the piece to be conducted by Nimram very carefully. Mahler reportedly intended his symphonies to be self-contained worlds, complete in themselves; they should reflect the confusion, terror, but also the beauty, of life. These are all elements of the girl's life, and the music brings them together and transforms them to a spiritually uplifting experience; the music, like the plane, that twentieth-century Ark of confusion, "amazingly, quite easily" lifts. This part of the experience is given added resonance through stylistic means: a series of short, descriptive phrases reflect the restless searching around of the music.

The conductor's name obviously became more and more important to Gardner during composition, because he first called him Amram, then changed the name to Nimram (Winther 519). Nimram brings to mind Nimrod, Noah's grandson; hence Nimram emerges as a symbol of survival through art. Nimram's life is *not* "unprofitable." He brings comfort to the girl in her distress on the plane, but more importantly he acts as a catalyst in awakening her to the purifying and sustaining force of art; and art, in Gardner's view, is man's most powerful weapon in his struggle against chaos and death.

"The Music Lover" and "Come on Back" deal with the same subject, although without quite the evocative power of "Nimram," partly because after the introductory story the other two seem slightly programmatic. "The Music Lover" tells the story of Professor Klingman, who devotes himself completely to music after the death of his pianist wife. Music is the only builder of meaning that he cares about in his widowerhood, and his rage and despair when on one occasion he is confronted with a contemporary piece in which a cello is sawed in two match Gardner's denunciation of nihilistic art in *On Moral Fiction*. "Come on Back" describes how a Welsh community in the upstate New York of Gardner's childhood combats grief at the death of one of the villagers the way the Welsh have always done: through communal singing.

"Redemption" also belongs to this group of stories which describe and explore the vulnerary function of art. The theme of

this story differs somewhat from that of the other three, but the subject matter is the same: the protagonist seeks consolation in the world of music after the death of his brother. Jack Hawthorne, the protagonist, was driving a tractor when his younger brother, David, fell off and was run over and killed by the cultipacker the tractor was hauling. Driven by guilt and self-hatred, the young boy tries to deal with his confusion caused by the accident by perfecting his skills on the French horn; he uses the horn as a means of escape into self-imposed isolation, withdrawing from his family and any other company.

He is brought out of his isolation when he suddenly realizes that he will never reach the level of mastery of his teacher Yegudkin, a seventy-year-old Russian exile who has played with famous orchestras around the world. Yegudkin now teaches music but also has a set of arrogant values, constantly deriding "the herd" for failing to appreciate music at his own level. When Jack asks Yegudkin if he thinks that he, the student, will ever be able to play like the great master, the Russian scoffs at this foolish presumption. Thus, John Howell points out, Yegudkin, "'beatific and demonic at once,' has paradoxically saved [Jack] from the artistic self-absorption and isolation he has chosen" ("The Wound and the Albatross" 6). After the crucial lesson in which he is forced to recognize his own limitations, Jack's reintegration into society is described in symbolic terms. Rushing to catch his bus back home, he finds that "the crowd opened for him and, with the horn cradled under his right arm, his music under his left, he plunged in, starting home" (48). The young boy has to recognize his own limits; that is, he has to reconcile himself to the fact that the ideal (his aspirations of becoming a great musician) and the real do not always match up. Only by accepting his own fallibility and imperfections can he deal with his own guilt, become reintegrated into the community and be reunited with his family. Jack's clutching of the instrument and musical score in that symbolical final scene suggests that music will still be an important part of his life, but now more in the manner of the other three stories we have been discussing, and not as a means of alienating himself from the community.

"Redemption" warrants close attention for several reasons. The early pages in particular contain some of the most gripping lines that Gardner ever committed. The opening paragraph, describing the accident which killed Jack's brother, is unique in its control and vividness. The ensuing study of the boy's self-loathing and his estrangement from his family moves as if by its own

momentum, wholly logical and with considerable intellectual and emotional authority. Part of the story's attraction, then, lies in the sheer force of the writing that went into it. But even more important are the ways in which it suggests a key to some of the chief motivating factors behind the thematic direction of Gardner's fiction. The story also helps to explain why art has become such an all-encompassing concern for this writer. These points need to be elaborated on at some length.

The centrality of "Redemption" has to do with the fact that it is one of Gardner's most strongly autobiographical pieces of writing, exploring artistically an event which left an indelible mark on him as a person and as a writer. The key event—the accident—is lifted straight from Gardner's personal history, with only a few changes of incident and names.¹ The scene was to play itself over and over again in his mind several times a day up to the writing of the story. (It was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1977; the accident involving the death of Gardner's brother took place in 1947.) After he had written about the accident, Gardner stopped having the flashbacks, he says, confirming D. H. Lawrence's dictum that one sheds one's illnesses in art. The suicidal feelings Jack develops in the story are also true to Gardner's own experience, as witnessed, for instance, by the strongly autobiographical "Stillness" section of the posthumous work *Stillness and Shadows*, and the reason that the boy's father gives for not taking his own life—"the damage his suicide would do to his wife and the children remaining"—is the same one Gardner himself has offered for not giving in to his own suicidal inclinations. Like Jack, Gardner played the French horn, and the Eastman School of Music that Jack attends on Saturday afternoons is the one Gardner went to for his music lessons.

But the main impulse behind "Redemption" is not strictly autobiographical. We know that Gardner used writing much the same way that Jack Hawthorne used his horn, as a means of escape and as a way to combat confusion and despair. Art "made my life," Gardner has said, "and it made my life when I was a kid, when I was incapable of finding any other sustenance, any other thing to lean on, any other comfort during times of great unhappiness" (Singular 39). It seems obvious, therefore, that when Gardner claims that art has the power to console, his prime authority is his own personal history; one of his chief purposes in writing these stories must clearly have been to awaken others to the potentially beneficial effects of art.

What is of greater interest to us here, however, is the extent to which the excruciating experience of accidentally killing his brother has affected his own writings. One should tread cautiously here and resist the temptation to establish the kind of relationship between Gardner's life and his art that Phillip Young sought to set up in the case of Hemingway, arguing that the direction of Hemingway's art, in terms of theme as well as of artistic technique, was determined by his continuous struggle to cope with the psychic effect of the physical wounds he received in the course of a turbulent personal history. Nevertheless, there is surely a large degree of truth to Edmund Wilson's claims about the relationship between the artist and his works:

The real elements, of course, of any work of fiction, are the elements of the author's personality: his imagination embodies in the images of characters, situations, and scenes the fundamental conflicts of his nature or the cycle of phases through which it habitually passes. His personages are personifications of the author's various impulses and emotions: and the relations between them in his stories are really the relations between these. (176)

Gardner has himself insisted on the close relationship between the art product and the personality of the artist: "The tensions we find resolved or at least defined and dramatized in art are the objective release of tensions in the life of the artist" (*OMF* 180-81).² One is therefore perhaps justified in pursuing the Hemingway parallel at least part of the way. The tensions that his childhood experiences engendered in Gardner evidently never lost their grip on him. As late as 1979 he stated: "You keep violently fighting for life, for what you think is good and wholesome, but you lose a lot. I think all my struggles toward anything worthwhile are pretty much undermined by psychological doubts. But you keep trying" (*Singular* 38). Thus Heraclitus's old maxim—"the way up is the way down"—truly holds for Gardner. This is a fact to bear in mind when assessing the existential seriousness of his life affirmation. There is nothing facile about the basic optimism that controls his books. Gardner was intimately acquainted with personal despair, and as we shall see, his affirmations take into account a number of the major arguments that are traditionally advanced to support a pessimistic view of reality.

The paradigmatic nature of "Redemption" can hardly be

exaggerated. Jack Hawthorne's self-hatred is generalized into a hatred of the total creation, man and animal. This attraction toward an absurdist view of the world (the motivating force behind Jack Hawthorne's and—presumably—Gardner's suicidal inclinations) is explored again and again in Gardner's fiction.³ It is usually yoked with an absolutist approach to man and life, a failure to reconcile the discrepancy between the real and the ideal, and the failure to accept human fallibility, which characterizes Jack Hawthorne's initial response to the death of his brother. I am, of course, not suggesting that in everything Gardner writes lurk the shadows of his brother's death. But the frequency with which Gardner returns to situations and characters which allow him to explore this kind of tension attests to the biblio-therapeutical nature of his writings, as well as to the formative importance of the accident described in "Redemption." This is not to say that Gardner's fiction is narrowly confessional, representing a constant and obsessive picking of the scab over the wound caused by his brother's death; that would in the end have rendered his novels and stories trivial. What saves his fiction from triviality (in the sense of it being overly private) is the fact that in his personal traumas Gardner has discovered a paradigm, or a metaphor, for what he regards as the central illness of recent Western culture: the inclination to keep peering into the abyss, "counting skulls," losing oneself in a fashionable attraction toward despair.

In these four stories the answer offered to this type of dilemma is of a very general kind: art has the power to console provided one is receptive. It is probably no coincidence that for his exploration of this very general idea Gardner chose to focus on music, an art form which is almost totally abstract, speaking primarily to our emotions rather than to our intellect. But any art will not do for Gardner. When art moves into the sphere of ideas, for instance in the form of literature, it has to meet certain requirements in order to have the life-giving effect that Gardner thinks it can and ought to have. This is where his concept of moral fiction comes in, and a central axiom of this theory is the idea that *art instructs*.

2

The obvious starting point for a study of Gardner's theoretically developed views on the role and nature of art is *On Moral Fiction*. The publication of this collection of critical essays established Gardner as something of an enfant terrible in the world of

contemporary American letters. Stephen Singular characteristically entitled his profile of Gardner "The Sound and Fury over Fiction"; the reviewer for the *New York Review of Books* captioned his report on the book "Good Grief"; Dick Cavett promptly summoned Gardner to his television studio to have him expound on his ideas.

There were several reasons for the minor literary tempest stirred up by the publication of *On Moral Fiction*. What initially attracted most attention was Gardner's harsh attack on a large number of his fellow writers for producing art which is "trivial or false." In Gardner's view they either "pointlessly waste our time, saying and doing nothing, or they celebrate ugliness and futility, scoffing at good" (16). The list of writers whom Gardner denounces is long and includes most of the names that make up the literary establishment of the 1960s and 1970s. His criticism of these writers takes on a number of forms, but in every case it boils down to their failure to write "moral fiction." Some, like John Barth, are guilty of "fascination with the ugly, the disgusting," and they are interested mainly in literary game playing (94). Others, like William Gass, put too strong an emphasis on "texture," striving to create linguistic sculptures. For Gass, as Gardner reads him, communication is secondary; what matters most is the writer's capacity to produce interesting language. Still others, like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., are clever novelists, but Gardner finds that they do not care enough about the characters they create and therefore are unable "to take any bold, potentially embarrassing moral stand" (89).

On Moral Fiction is in many ways an unfortunate and unsatisfactory book. Part of the problem has to do with tone; the book is too fiercely polemical, so much so that it runs the risk of turning attention away from Gardner's key ideas. Barth has pointed to this weakness: "He's banging his betters over the head with terminology and, when the smoke clears, nobody is left in the room but Mr. Gardner himself" (Singular 15). In his book Gardner offers a justification for the aggressiveness of his message. The artist "ought not to be too civilized—that is to say, too meekly tolerant," he asserts in the chapter entitled "The Artist as Critic." *On Moral Fiction* demonstrates fully that there is much that he finds wrong in contemporary art, and the following statement seems to explain why his book took on the tone that it did: The artist "should defend—with dignity but as belligerently as necessary—the artists whose work he values and attack with equal belligerence all that he

hates" (147). But surely judgment is also essential if a debate is to be meaningful, and belligerence must not be allowed to replace careful reasoning. One cannot help but think that Gardner's cause would have benefitted from less stridency of tone, especially since many of his dismissals of other writers are not based on careful analyses of their works but on very sweeping generalizations. It does not strengthen his case that some of his readings are very careless, even to the point of being misreadings.⁴ What Gardner risked in couching his arguments in such bellicose terms was a hasty dismissal of his book and *all* its views.

This is not the place to engage in a debate over the present state of affairs of American letters; however, no student of Gardner's own fiction can afford to go lightly on *On Moral Fiction*. There are good reasons for arguing, as Uta Janssens does, that the chief value of the book lies in the insight it offers into Gardner's own artistry (291). There is a very direct correlation between Gardner's deliberations on literary theory and his own artistic practices. Even though *On Moral Fiction* is not in itself a successful theoretical work, we must nevertheless take time for a rather full discussion of the chief tenets of that book, since they offer key insights into the compositional methods that helped shape Gardner's art. The bold outlines of Gardner's artistic program as it is developed in *On Moral Fiction* can be sketched out rather easily because the most salient points of his thesis are reiterated with great vigor throughout the book: art *instructs*; moral art *affirms* life and *offers models* for emulation; and the morality of the *writing* of fiction resides in the *truthfulness* with which the artist engages in *the creative process*. What tends to get lost in the flak of Gardner's rhetoric are the finer nuances and modifications of these roughly hewn statements. Further modifications appear in interviews given after the publication of *On Moral Fiction* and in those fictions of his (most notably "Vlemk the Box-Painter") that deal expressly with matters of art, as well as in the writings ensuing from his medieval scholarship. What emerges from a collocation of these many sources is a coherent and many-faceted system of artistic beliefs which directly influenced his own artistic practices.

"Art instructs," Gardner asserts in Part 1 of *On Moral Fiction*, in a section entitled "Premises on Art and Morality." "Why, one may wonder, would anyone wish to deny a thing so obvious?" (39). In one of its formulations this dictum might be amended to read: art cannot help but instruct. "After Marlon Brando appeared in *On the Waterfront*," Gardner maintains, "an entire generation

took to slumping, mumbling, turning up its collar, and hanging its cigarette casually off the lip" (107).⁵ A literary example is Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, the publication of which reportedly spurred a series of suicide cases throughout Europe (15). Even though he fails to produce examples of similar effects achieved by contemporary art, Gardner posits a correlation between what he feels to be the predominant intellectual and spiritual climate—a climate marked by "hate and despair and indifference, violence for its own sake, sex as a proof that love is an illusion" ("Life Follows Fiction" 3)—and the cultural manifestations of the times, as instanced by the ruling taste in television, film, and literature.

In "Vlemk the Box-Painter" he offers a fictionalized version of this argument.⁶ Vlemk, like artists of Samuel Beckett's mettle, for whom "the worst the universe can do becomes normative" (*OMF* 22), paints a series of pictures of the Princess. In these pictures—"reality boxes" he calls them, because everything Vlemk paints, he paints on boxes—he sets out to pursue the Princess's "worst potential," and the result is a number of pictures in which her potential states of ruin are depicted. When the Princess sees the pictures, she is impressed by their "honesty" and by Vlemk's ability "to see life as it was" (*AL* 206), mistaking his projection of dark possibilities for the real thing. She embraces this new vision of herself, thereby fulfilling Vlemk's prophecies. After a night of debauchery, she ends up in the gutter, and when the box-painter finds her there the next morning, "she looked, right down to the last detail, like a certain one of the cruel, bitter pictures he'd made of her" (216). The version of reality that for a brief spell the Princess commits herself to brings destruction rather than the life enhancement that Gardner is convinced *moral art* can bring.

Gardner's emphasis on art's suitability for instruction places him squarely in a tradition that goes back to Sir Philip Sidney and Horace. M. H. Abrams usefully dubs the ruling concept of this tradition "the pragmatic theory," inasmuch as its adherents tend to look at the work of art "chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done," judging the value of any work of art "according to its success in achieving that aim" (15). The central conceit of "Vlemk" is a picture real enough to speak, and *The Defense of Poesie* is the most likely source: "Poesy...is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture; with this end, to teach and delight" (414). Samuel Johnson's famously clipped admonition in

"Preface to Shakespeare" states the instrumentalist precept in its most concise form: "The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing" (73).

Even though the pragmatic tradition in England was more or less eclipsed by the advent of Romanticism and Romantic criticism, its precepts to a certain extent still influenced the thinking of European artists like Goethe, Balzac, and Tolstoy. In the twentieth century, however, the call for an art whose aim is to educate its audience seems very much to have become a minority position. True, D. H. Lawrence claimed for the best novels the status of guides on how to live, but as David Lodge reminds us, Lawrence's views went against "the grain of modernist orthodoxy" (121). Lionel Trilling points out that already by the nineteenth century the intellectual authority of the pragmatic theory was at an end, "although its social authority was still very commanding." From the vantage point of the late 1960s he is led to conclude that "the idea that literature is to be judged by its moral effect has virtually no place in critical theory." But he hastens to add: "In actual critical practice, however, it has a quite considerable vitality" ("What Is Criticism?" 67).

Lionel Trilling has himself on occasion expressed views that reveal a fondness for a pragmatic concept of art.⁷ So did F. R. Leavis,⁸ and Wayne C. Booth has also spoken up for a response to literature which brings to bear "judgments of *ends* as well as means" (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* 378; my italics). Booth's recent book, *The Company We Keep* (1988), develops an extended case for a theory of ethical criticism. Much of what is generally referred to as Marxist literary criticism also of course advocates an instrumentalist approach to literature, as do several contemporary Afro-American writers, but one would probably have to conclude that outside these circles, the position of Leavis, Trilling, and Booth is a lonely one in contemporary letters.

John Gardner was, at least in one of his moods, clearly bent on reviving the pragmatic theory. I say "in one of his moods" because his emphasis shifted; his very pointed defense of an instrumentalist view in some contexts was toned down and modified in other contexts. However, some of his pronouncements in *On Moral Fiction* and elsewhere would appear to place him squarely in the camp of Sidney and Johnson: "Moral art in its highest form holds up models of virtue" (82). True art "designs visions worth trying to make fact" (100). "I agree with Tolstoy that the highest purpose of art is to make people good by choice" (106). "I believe absolutely that art always affects life" (Harvey 77).

These views inform Gardner's own fiction. The role he gives to the Shaper in *Grendel* conforms with his ideas in *On Moral Fiction*. Grendel, the nihilist monster, is for a while sorely tempted to believe in the visions of life celebrated by the Anglo-Saxon scop:

It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as lights to land-dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. It came to me with a fierce jolt that I wanted it. As they did too, though vicious animals, cunning, cracked with theories. I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable. (55)

But Grendel is convinced by the dragon's arguments that the Shaper's vision is all illusion, and he succumbs to the temptation Sidney takes issue with in his *Defense*: the temptation to see poetry as "the mother of lies" (438).

Grendel is one of several Gardnerian characters who have great trouble reconciling the real with the ideal; another one is Uncle Charley in the story entitled "Come on Back." Charley was endowed with a very good tenor voice when he was younger, never missing a *Cymanfa Ganu*, one of the many songfests of that part of New York State where Gardner grew up. When he loses his voice because of age, Charley becomes bitter, and his mother explains why: "Singing's got its place. But a body can get to thinking, when he's singing with a choir, that that's how the whole blessed world should be, and then when he comes down out of the clouds it's a terrible disappointment" (*AL* 250). Charley's kinship with Grendel is revealed in his interpretation of the meaning of the traditional Welsh name *Buddy*: "Means 'the poet.' They used to set great store by poets, back in Wales. Only second to kings—maybe not even second. Same thing, kings and poets. Different kinds of liars" (264).⁹ Having avoided the songfests for a number of years, Charley finally goes to one; the contrast between the beauty of Welsh choir singing and his rather shabby everyday existence becomes too much for him and he takes his own life. Grendel and Charley both fail to appreciate Sidney's—and Gardner's—idea that the value of art lies not in its ability to describe things as they are but in its capacity for celebrating man's possibilities. Presumably, Grendel would have responded less scornfully to the kind of art which

Gardner indicts in *On Moral Fiction*, an art which reflects and reinforces an absurdist view of existence, an art in which "the cruelest, ugliest thing we can say is likely to be the truest." Gardner's key metaphor for this kind of art is that of man staring into the abyss, "counting skulls." But, he warns, "the black abyss is merely life as it is or as it soon may become, and staring at it does nothing, merely confirms that it is there" (126).

Gardner gives us a vision of *his* ideal artist in "John Napper Sailing Through the Universe," a story which, by Gardner's own admission, spells out his "fundamental theory of art" (Harvey 81). In his youth John Napper had painted what in "Vlemk" are called "reality pictures," "dark, furious, intellectual, full of scorn and something suicidal. Mostly black, with struggles of light, losing" (KI 124). But then, "at the edge of self-destruction, John Napper had...jumped back. He would make up the world from scratch: Let there be light, a splendid garden. He would fabricate treasure maps. And he'd come to believe it. How could he not, seeing how it lighted his sad wife's eyes?" (133). Napper had done what Jonathan Upchurch of "The King's Indian" is on occasion able to do: "I gaze at the dark Satanic mills... I shake my head. They vanish" (242). The old artist has not done away with uncertainty—a concern which, as we shall see, is present in much of Gardner's fiction—but he has refused to let himself be dominated by it. In Gardner's own explication: "John Napper...knows and teaches one important truth...: nothing exists for sure, until we make it; don't sit staring at the abyss, then. Make!" ("A Writer's View" 23).

In its simplest and barest form the effect Gardner is after is the one he describes in the early pages of "Vlemk the Box-Painter." The picture Vlemk paints of the barmaid is "a lie, a fraud, an outrage" because in it he has wilfully improved upon nature, making the fat and ugly woman quite beautiful (AL 160). The "unreality" of the picture notwithstanding, it soon begins, in true Sidneyan and Gardnerian fashion, to work its desired effect: the barmaid becomes "increasingly similar to the fraudulent painting" (161). This, then, is the aesthetic mechanism that Grendel fails to observe in his spyings on the Shaper and Hrothgar's court. He rightly finds that the scop's idealized version of Hrothgar's deeds is a lie, an illusion; but he is wrong in concluding that the Shaper's poetry, therefore, must be spurned. Even though Hrothgar and his men fall short of the ideal that the Shaper holds up for them, his poetry nevertheless has the effect of making them *try* to realize ideals. Through the acts of heroism and sacrifice to which

the Shaper's poetry inspires them, Hrothgar's kingdom prospers.¹⁰

Gardner's advocacy of the pragmatic theory is a sustained and detailed one, then, informing his theoretical as well as his fictional work. But this is not the whole story; Gardner has on occasion modified his views. Before we turn to a discussion of these modifications, however, it may be of interest to observe that Gardner indicates great sympathy also for the other half of the Sidneyan equation, the call for an art which delights. His responsiveness to this concept helps to explain the aura of fantasy which envelops his fiction. "I really do believe that a novel has to be a feast of the senses," he told the *Paris Review* interviewers, "a delightful thing." This attraction to fictional forms which engage the imagination as fully as possible lies behind his declared disenchantment with strict realism; he feels that in writing realistic fiction too much creative energy is spent providing details which are not essential to the book's vision. His penchant for fantasy also helps to explain the genesis of much of his fiction. The *Beowulf* story, for instance, was ideal source material for him, he says, because of its powerful visual images, what with meadhalls, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon (Ferguson et al. 43-44). Gardner also partly attributes the appearance of so many grotesque characters in his work to this wish on his part to put on a good show, because "a circus needs some very funny characters." He calls this a "Walt Disney effect" (Christian 28). The allusion to Disney is significant, since Gardner has pointed to a willed cartoon effect in a good deal of his fiction, a conscious blend of exaggeration and comedy, which is meant, presumably, to engage the reader's imagination and help bring about that "willing suspension of disbelief" on which many of his aesthetic effects depend. Two characters that Gardner has identified as cartoon figures are Grendel, a monster, and Clumly, the Chief of Police in *The Sunlight Dialogues*, whom Gardner describes as "hairless, with a great big nose and perfect teeth.... Nobody ever looked like that" (Bellamy 174). The list could be extended considerably: John Horne in *The Resurrection*, Agathon in *The Wreckage of Agathon*, the Sunlight Man in *The Sunlight Dialogues*, Henry Soames and the Goat Lady in *Nickel Mountain*, Dr. Flint and Wilkins in "The King's Indian," Freddy and Bishop Brask in *Freddy's Book*, and Arnold Deller in "The Art of Living," to mention only the most conspicuous ones.¹¹ A sense of comedy and an acceptance of human fallibility are important elements of Gardner's overall vision, and the fact that in his circus shows the spotlight persistently veers—as if by its own volition—

to that part of the ring where the clowns huddle together contributes emotionally and intellectually to the building of that vision.

Gardner's strong advocacy of an instrumentalist approach to literature is toned down in some contexts and modified in others. It seems clear that in *On Moral Fiction* (which contains his most sustained defense of the art-as-instruction concept) the polemicist got the better of the careful analyst and literary theoretician. One point which is bound to have irked many readers is Gardner's clarification call for an art which "holds up models of virtue" (82). In our antiheroic age, such a statement is likely to cause embarrassment rather than enthusiasm. But models of virtue are not the same as paragons of virtue. Gardner's statement is tempered by his warning that these models must not be "cheap or cornball models of behavior" (18-19). They may be heroic models "like Homer's Achilles or models of quiet endurance" (82). The Homeric precept notwithstanding, a glance at Gardner's own fiction reveals that his heroes lean toward the quotidian rather than the Homeric: the timid but loyal Pecker in *The Wreckage of Agathon*; the Clumlys in *The Sunlight Dialogues*, confused but honestly struggling for ethical coherence in their lives; the "reformed" Jonathan Upchurch in "The King's Indian," who eventually decides to settle for a life of "discipline" in Illinois rather than pursue the monomaniacal philosophical quest of Dr. Flint; and Sally and James Page in *October Light*, who conduct their tragicomic battle of opinions with the shrewdness and stubbornness of Vermont farmers.¹²

In the *Paris Review* interview (Ferguson et al.) Gardner offers a welcome qualification of the idea of models. He breaks the concept of moral fiction down into three forms. The first and highest form is the one I have described already: virtuous models are held up for emulation. But Gardner here also fully accepts "indirect" models. One finds these in what he calls "negative moral fiction, or moral fiction in the tragic mode, where you want to be different than the protagonist—you want to be better."¹³ An example of such a protagonist is Macbeth. Then there is what he calls moral fiction of the third degree,

wherein alternatives don't exist. Not for fashion's sake or for the cheap love of gruesomeness, but from anger and concern, you stare into the smoking volcano.... That doesn't tell you what you should do. It doesn't tell you, I don't want to be like that. But it makes you understand and, understanding,

hunger for a world not like this. It's obviously the least uplifting of the three kinds of moral fiction, but it's morally useful. (Ferguson et al. 73)

These are indeed important modifications on Gardner's part, and one can only regret that he failed to elaborate on these ideas in *On Moral Fiction*.

Gardner has said that although his purpose in writing "Vlemk the Box-Painter" was to work out in fictional form the key ideas of *On Moral Fiction*, he found that in the process of writing he was forced to modify some of his earlier views (Winther 520). What he may have had in mind is a shifting of priorities, away from a fiction which holds up models of conduct to a favoring of art which emphasizes the need for truthful exploration. In *On Moral Fiction* he places about equal weight on these two functions of art. Alongside his persistent call for instruction, there is also a repeated warning against a didactic, or moralistic, fiction "in which the writer knows before he starts what it is that he means to say and does not allow his mind to be changed by the process of telling the story." Moral fiction "communicates meanings discovered by the process of the fiction's creation" (107-8).

Vlemk, as he emerges at the end of the story, would seem to qualify as a moral artist in the sense that he fulfills the demand for truthful exploration in art. When he first paints the Princess's picture, his painting proceeds in accordance with Gardner's description of how the true moral artist works. The object is now not to produce a model of virtue, as he was to do in painting the barmaid's picture, but to give a true representation of reality, never cheating in the creative process, because only by capturing the very essence of the Princess can he make the picture speak. But *because* he works absolutely truthfully, setting down the Princess's features exactly as they appear to him, he discovers that she is not as beautiful as he had thought her to be. The completed picture, therefore, is not the picture of ideal beauty that he had expected to paint; there are "lines suggesting a touch of meanness in her character" but lines of "kindness, too; generosity, a pleasing touch of whimsy" (AL 149).

In his efforts to bring the Princess, now the Queen, out of the state of despondency that the reality boxes—those artistic visions of her worst potentialities—have brought her to, Vlemk decides to try the barmaid effect on the Queen. Knowingly sacrificing his gift of speech forever, he paints over the speaking picture, producing a

painting which to him seems to be "exactly like the Queen except with none of her faults" (232). But this time the intended instructional effect fails. The Queen does not respond to the picture as a representation of her possibilities; instead she is awed, much in the manner of Grendel and Uncle Charley, by the discrepancy between the real and the ideal:

"When I saw the new picture, after you'd made it perfect, I saw with terrible certainty how far I was from the person I imagined myself.... Seeing the disparity between what I am and what I wish to be, I have come to the only happiness possible for such a wreck as I am, the sad joy of the old philosophers who at least 'knew themselves.'... That...is why I can no longer go on living and have purposely declined to this pitiful state." (237)

Both the Queen and Vlemk are wrong, of course. In painting over the speaking picture Vlemk had not changed it enough to deprive it of its ability to speak. Even when he thought he was idealizing the Queen, he was still giving a representation of her true nature, because otherwise, by the story's logic, the picture would have been silenced for ever. The fact that the picture *appeared* more beautiful only suggests that he had come to love her with her perfections *and* imperfections. The speaking picture's scheming ways, which are then also the Queen's ways, have not been mended; the picture pretends, for instance, to have become muted, to better manipulate and keep control over situations. But these blemishes only add to the Queen's charm, infusing the story with a welcome touch of humor. Since the format of the story is the fairy tale, there is the obligatory happy ending. The Queen's life is saved through Vlemk's sacrifice and comical love, and the Queen is finally able to accept her own less than ideal state.

The need to accept one's own fallibility is one of the most important thematic concerns of Gardner's fiction, and in "Vlemk" the tension which results from a juxtaposition of the real and the ideal is resolved in such a way as to favor an emphasis on self-acceptance rather than self-improvement. In this story, therefore, the predominant aesthetic code is less that of Sidney, with his call for artistic presentations of what ought to be, than the code of, say, the Gawain-poet, whom Gardner lauds for his handling of the King Arthur legend: "The concern of art is never with 'what ought to be,' in Sidney's phrase, but with the tension between what ought

to be and what *can* be.... In short, a wise medieval poet...tests ideals against the possible" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Notes* 21-22). This tension is present in Gardner's fiction prior to *On Moral Fiction*, and it is therefore not surprising that it should reassert itself when he undertakes to test his aesthetic theories artistically, as he does in "Vlemk."

It should be noted that the modified version of the "art instructs" thesis which Gardner seems to have arrived at in "Vlemk" does not represent a drastic reversal of his previous stance. The modification should most properly be conceived of as a *shifting of priorities*. The value of the kind of art symbolized by the barmaid's picture is not denied by anything that happens in the story, but it seems to be relegated to a less prominent position. The story's leitmotif is undeniably the speaking picture with its thematic implications. There is furthermore a higher valuation of the artistic motivation behind the Princess's picture than that which lies behind the picture of the barmaid. In the latter instance the motivation is the same as the one which directs the Shaper's art in *Grendel*; in that work, too, the benevolent effect of holding up virtuous models is demonstrated, but just as Vlemk paints the barmaid's picture to get free wine, so the Shaper works for money and fame. Gardner has characterized the Anglo-Saxon scop as a "wonderful hack" (Winther 520), and that is precisely the role that Vlemk performs vis à vis the barmaid. "Vlemk the Box-Painter," then, ultimately celebrates the artist who explores truthfully, and the artist who limits his role to a mere designer of visions—like Vlemk in his early career, when he "edited Nature" (146)—is assigned to a somewhat lower, but still highly honorable, position.

Gardner thus seems to place art as process of discovery over art as instruction in the Sidneyan and didactic sense of that term, and that fact might serve to make his theory of art intellectually more palatable to a contemporary audience. Did not T. S. Eliot, that high priest of modernism, claim that a poet "does not know what he has to say until he says it" (98)? But a widespread and ready acceptance of Gardner's aesthetics is hindered by his insistence on an art which affirms life. It would seem that Gardner has placed himself in a theoretical bind here. On the one hand he calls for a fiction which "seeks to improve life" (*OMF* 5), a fiction which presents "eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference" (18). At the same time moral art

is not didactic because, instead of teaching by authority and force, it explores, open-mindedly, to learn what it should teach. It clarifies, like an experiment in a chemistry lab, and confirms. As a chemist's experiment tests the laws of nature and dramatically reveals the truth or falsity of scientific hypotheses, moral art tests values and rouses trustworthy feelings about the better and the worse in human action. (19)

This two-partite definition of what constitutes moral fiction—it is life-affirming *and* it states whatever the artist discovers that he can say in the process of writing—raises a problem which Gardner never defines and therefore does not address directly. If we stay with the chemistry metaphor, the problem could be stated this way: chemists sometimes help build life through their discovery of life-giving medicines, but chemists have also produced napalm and nerve gas. In both cases they reveal "the truth" rather than "the falsity" of "the scientific hypotheses" concerning the proper combination of substances for the production of these chemical compounds. Put differently: how is Gardner's definition of moral art to deal with an artist who in his writing is absolutely honest to his perception of the world, but finds that there is nothing which he *can* affirm? John Updike's response to Gardner's call for moral fiction probably expresses what many feel when they come upon Gardner's theories for the first time: "'Moral' is such a moot word. Surely, morality in fiction is accuracy and truth. The world has changed, and in a sense we are all heirs to despair. Better to face this and tell the truth, however dismal, than to do whatever life-enhancing thing [Gardner] was proposing" (Singular 15).

To say that Gardner has not addressed this dilemma directly is not the same as claiming that he has no answer to it. Gardner's predicament is not unlike that which Marxist literary critics have had to face in squaring the artistic demands of mimesis with the desire for proper ideological instruction in art. His way of solving the problem is furthermore strangely analogous to that of the Second Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union. Whereas the First Congress (1934) had demanded of Socialist Realism "truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development...combined with the task of ideological remoulding and education of the working people in the spirit of Socialism," the Second Congress (1954) ruled that it is sufficient to ask that literature give truthful representations of reality. If Marxism is right in its analysis of historical development, then proper instruc-

tion will follow as a necessary consequence of these truthful representations.¹⁴

Similarly Gardner seems to hold that if only the artist takes care to represent human nature truthfully, then he cannot help but affirm life-enhancing values; man is a civilized animal, and it is through cultivation of certain "eternal verities" that he has been able to build a civilization in the first place. A truthful representation of man, therefore, cannot help but note his civilizing inclinations. Artistic exploration will also find in man a leaning toward disorder, and, as we shall see in a later chapter, Gardner's fiction is strongly animated by an acute awareness of the tension which is generated through the continual battle between the forces of order and disorder. But the fact that civilizations have been built proves that in a perspective which includes the Devonian fish, the forces of order have held the upper hand. In Gardner's view, this evolution is not a blind one; it is the product of a series of conscious choices on the part of man, and the root impulse, in spite of many false starts and aberrations, has always been to further what Chaucer called the "Commune profit." The evolution of civilizations could only have taken place if guided by *rational morality*. Gardner's conviction that there is such a thing as rational goodness lies behind his concept of morality, and this concept in turn informs his call for moral fiction, as regards his insistence on both instruction, or life enhancement, *and* exploration.